



Social Reform and Women's Movements in India in the 19th and 20th Centuries: The Long March

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Abstract

The paper highlights the centuries of patriarchal domination over women in Indian society and the efforts over the 19th and 20th centuries to liberate and emancipate the women from oppression. The role played by eminent social reformers and progressive thinkers has been analysed as well. The chronological assessment of the legal measures brought about to protect women and the challenges faced in their implementation in pre independent and post-independence eras have been scrutinised. The emergence of women leaders and prominent role of associations and feminist movements in the 20th century and their achievements have been analysed in the light of subsequent social reform and new legislations. The ideas of women's liberation and equality at home, work and in civil and political sphere has undergone changes in India albeit at a very slow and painful pace. The emergence of space for women to discuss their problems and issued has slowly emerged and India has a long way to go to address all of them in a fair and liberal environment.

Key words: Patriarchy ,social reform, women's movements, legislations, feminism

“Women will work out their destinies—much better, too, than men can ever do for them. All the mischief to women has come because men undertook to shape the destiny of women.” “Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them. In matters concerning them, who are you?”

-Swami Vivekananda

The Indian socio political and economic landscape has always been biased towards patriarchal instincts and women have consistently borne the brunt of discrimination and marginalisation for several thousand years. Ever since the Vedic times when women were deified and worshipped as *Shakthi* the position of women in Indian society has consistently degenerated and been reduced to merely that of chattel or property. The shadow of the male in the society was constantly engulfing her in the form of father, brother husband or son and the woman never enjoyed a singular or independent existence of her own.

The structural and post-colonial theories begin with the material and ideological dynamics of colonialism within which the idea of Indian feminism has been shaped. In the last 6 decades of feminist activism in India there have been concerted and persistent efforts to challenge the 4,000 years of patriarchal order and domination. Some of the main achievements of these women’s liberation and activist campaigns were the questioning of male domination within the family , critique and analyse the systematic and continuous violence against women, , gender relations and restrictions imposed within kinship, religion, society and the State.

This essay seeks to draw a timeline of the emergence of Indian feminist movement and the theoretical context as well the socio-political framework in which such efforts had to evolve and develop. The Indian scenario was further complicated by the presence of the most dominant social forces in the form of caste and religion which further accentuated the marginalisation, More recently towards the end of the 20th century within the transformed context of globalization the place of the Indian woman is in a state of flux as she tries to challenge the existing structure while empowering herself economically and thereby asserting her identity

Therefore in order to evaluate the position of women in India today it is necessary to first look at some of the fundamental changes that occurred through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in particular the nationalist and independence movement. These movements and struggles and the consequent changes they brought about in India have significantly and strongly altered women’s position in society.

The 18th and 19th centuries often witnessed the Indian woman as a victim of patriarchal and religious control. The women’s movements began as a social reform movement in the 19th century and was spearheaded by the intellectual stalwarts of those days. Inspired and motivated by the European ideas of rationalism and progress, the Indian social reformers tried to create a rational and modern Indian society which would be both progressive and modern yet rooted in Indian tradition.

However, one of the major challenges that modern Indian thinkers and progressive social reformers had to confront was the opposition from the conservative and orthodox forces within Indian society. They believed that the Indian woman's position had been carved out of the cultural practices over hundreds of years, traditional rituals and customs and her identity was largely defined by the scriptures and *Hindu Dharma* and *shastras*.

Any liberal proposition put up by institutions like the Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj were vehemently opposed by the orthodox Hindu groups who pleaded with the British not to permit such changes that were being pushed by those who had no knowledge or scant respect for the Hindu religion or its scriptures. Standing tall against the conservative power centers of the Hindu society were the Indian Renaissance heroes like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and others were those who fought battles within their own religion and community to work for the upliftment of women, their self-sufficiency, prosperity and empowerment .

Raja Ram Mohan Roy the most prominent and ardent leader of this reform movement was successful in trying to introduce legislations for the abolition of sati but not before gathering enough evidence from the scriptures that Sati was not compulsory. Ram Mohan Roy was greatly influenced by western modern thought and stressed on rationalism and modern scientific approach. Ram Mohan Roy's understanding that the religious and social degeneration of the Indian society needed to be curtailed and that unless women were freed from inhuman forms of oppression like illiteracy, child marriage, sati , the Hindu society could not progress. He founded the Atmiya Sabha in 1815, the Calcutta Unitarian Association in 1821, and the Brahma Sabha in 1828 which later became the Brahma Samaj. He campaigned against the caste system, untouchability, superstitions and use of intoxicants. He was well known for his pioneering thought and action on the emancipation of women and especially on the abolition of sati and widow remarriage.

The others famous social reformers included Ishwara Chandra Vidyasagar , whose contribution towards changing the status of women in India is outstanding. His study of ancient texts convinced him that the status of Hindu women of his time was not sanctioned by the scriptures and was because of the existing power relations in the society. It was the result of his untiring struggle that the then Government of India passed the Widow Remarriage Act in 1856. From discrimination to deprivation, these widows were subjected to severe restrictions and had to dress in plain white cotton sarees and remain with their shaved off heads.

Ishwar Chandra fought tirelessly for the cause of women's education and vigorously challenged the barbaric practice of Child Marriage. He founded nearly 35 schools for girl children throughout his home state of Bengal and with the sole purpose of making women self- sufficient and feeling empowered.

Swami Dayanand Saraswathi who founded the Arya Samaj was yet another social reformer who stressed on the importance of education of all children and preached respect and equal rights for women. Born in Gujarat in a well to do family he practised the life of an ascetic and travelled extensively especially in the

Himalayas. He wished to reform the degenerating Hindu society and restore it to its ancient glory. He founded the Arya Samaj on April 7, 1875. Through this reform movement, he stressed on One God and also opposed the multiplicity of castes. He appreciated the need for education and he went about establishing Vedic schools for the education of girls and boys of all castes. His institution the Arya Samaj pioneered a prolonged movement against untouchability, protection widows, upliftment of destitute women and advocated the dilution of caste differences.

Keshab Chandra Sen was initially a follower of the Brahmo samaj and later due to his leanings towards Western ideas and philosophies and Christian values he drifted away from the Samaj as well as some of his peers and started his own Indian Reform Association. He preached against child marriage and advocated widow remarriage and inter-caste marriages. He was also instrumental in getting native marriages legalised.

Swami Vivekananda was amongst the popular of emerging intellectuals and he was considered a visionary and a great reformer who was extremely charismatic and attracted hundreds of followers. He stood tall amongst the galaxy of Indian reformers and thinkers and was respected world wide for his views and speeches as influenced by Ramakrishna Paramahansa who became his guru and he travelled all over India and the West. He founded the Ramakrishna Mission in May 1897 and he strived to work against superstitions beliefs and advocated the upliftment of women's position in society. Vivekananda firmly believed in the equality of all people and encouraged moral and physical strengths and aspired for an egalitarian society.

All of these leaders and many more less known intellectuals and social reformers provided leadership to the women's movement by openly acknowledging and pointing out to the degraded position of Indian women. They began a critical appraisal of Indian society in an effort to create a new social structure devoid of existing social aberrations like casteism, polygamy, sati, child marriage, illiteracy and many others, all of which they believed were impediments to progress of women.

As a result of the decades of persistent struggles and demands from the social reformers and rights advocates, several legislations were passed during the British rule in India. The policies of the British in the beginning of 19th century helped in abolition of social evils prevalent at that time but gradually led to the degradation of the socio-religious fabric of India since they were mainly focused and based on Western ideals, perception and attitude.

Some of the major evils that threatened the existence and dignified livelihood of women were female infanticide, Dowry, Sati, Child Marriage, enslavement of women and the ill treatment and suppression of widowed or destitute women. These issues were addressed by relevant legislations that emerged as a result of the hard work and prolonged struggle of the Indian social reformers. These issues needed a deeper and in-depth analysis to understand the sad plight of Indian women in the past centuries.

The practice of female infanticide was very common among upper class Bengalis and Rajputs who considered females as economic burden. It was noted among members of a Rajput clan by Jonathan Duncan,

then the Company Resident in Jaunpur district of what is now the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. The Bengal Regulation Acts of 1795 and 1804 were passed that declared the killing or murdering of a female infant as a crime and an illegal act. This led to the passing of an act for the prohibition of female infanticide known as Female Infanticide Prevention Act, 1870 (Act VIII of 1870). The act made it compulsory for parents to register the birth of all children and provided for the surveillance and monitoring of the female child for some years after birth especially in those areas where this custom was very much prevalent.

However it is not a practice that was prevalent only in earlier centuries but it continues till date despite so many liberal ideas having emerged, Female foeticide is a development that emerged in the latter part of the 20th century when by the late-1980s and the early 1990s, ultrasound techniques gained popularity throughout India and the practice of female foeticide soon spread to hospitals all over India. This practice was opposed by some activists, and Indian government passed the Preconception and Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act, 1994 making sex-selective abortion illegal. The *Beti Bachao* and *Beti Padhao* policies of the present government are also looked upon as gender sensitive initiatives for the protection of women.

The Abolition of Sati was influenced by the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the British Government decided to abolish the practice of Sati or live burning of widow and declared it as culpable homicide. The Regulation of 1829 was applicable for the first instance to Bengal Presidency alone, but was extended with slight modification to Madras and Bombay Presidencies in 1830.

The practices of permitting or allowing the Hindu widow's remarriage was one of the primary agenda and goals of the Brahma Samaj. Women were married off at the very tender age of nine and ten and if they lost their husbands at a very young age they were forced to live a cruel and deprived existence for the rest of their lifetime. The orthodox Brahmins used to force the widows to tonsure their heads and wear white sarees or dress like a sanyasin and even certain types of food were not given to them. They were not permitted to attend any auspicious occasions and were often confined to their homes. There were a number of steps taken to promote widow remarriage by establishing women's colleges, universities, associations and preaching of the Vedic stand on widow remarriage. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar played a very significant role in ensuring the rights of women to remarry.

Amongst the foremost of social evils affecting women is the issue of Child Marriage and this led to a campaign against it. The efforts for the prohibition of child marriage came about through the *Native Marriage Act* (Civil Marriage Act) of 1872, a legislative action for the prohibition of child marriage but which had very limited scope and application. In 1891, B.M Malabari's efforts bore fruit when the Act of the Age of Consent was enacted which prohibited the marriage of girl child below the age of 12 years. Finally after Independence, the *Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act* made further changes in the age of marriage, for girls- 18 years and boys 21 years.

The social reform movements of the 18th and 19th centuries had prepared the way for the next wave of protests and emancipation movements for liberating the women of India.

This phase was an amalgam of the nationalist struggle for independence from British rule while also fighting for the rights of women. The intertwining of the freedom movement and the women's movements brought to the forefront the role of women in the freedom struggle. It also set the stage for the political and economic empowerment apart from the domestic and social spheres. There were several women's Movements that were a part of the Nationalist Movements. One of the striking features of this phase of struggles for liberation of both the nation and womanhood was that it witnesses large scale participation of many women belonging to the middle class. Several Indian women of the late 19th and early 20th century had started taking part in the political activities.

Even prior to the birth of the 20th century, Pandita Rama Bai started the Sharda Sadan (1892) in Poona. Pandita Ramabai was born as Rama Dongre in a Marathi Brahmin family in 1858. Her father was a Sanskrit scholar and Ramabai learnt Sanskrit from him initially. Ramabai and her brother travelled far and wide and throughout the country making her a famed scholar as far as Bengal. The University of Calcutta invited her to give a lecture and also awarded her the title of 'Pandita' because of her mastery and erudition in Sanskrit.

In fact on account of her fame, academic repute and scholarship in the Vedas the famous social reformer Keshab Chandra Sen gave her a copy of the Vedas. As a mark of her forward and liberal thinking she married Bipin Behari Medhvi, a Bengali lawyer and being from different castes and communities it was a bold move for that era and times.

Pandita Ramabai founded Arya Mahila Samaj (Arya Women's Society) as she was highly inspired and influenced by the ideals of the Brahmo Samaj and other social reformers. The purpose of the society was to promote the cause of women's education and to free women from the oppression of child marriage. The purpose of the Society was to provide education to women and to discourage and fight against the practice of child marriage.

Pandita Ramabai was a women's rights & education activist and was a pioneer in the education and emancipation of women in India. In 1882 when the British Government appointed a commission to look into the matter of education Pandita Ramabai deposed before the commission and she made several recommendations like appointing women school inspectors and also suggested that Indian women be taken into medical colleges since women doctors were needed to treat women in India.

The efforts to emancipate women and encourage their all round development especially in education and medicine won the attention of the British Sovereign Queen Victoria and it led to the establishment of the Women's Medical Movement by Lady Dufferin.

Distance and new places did not deter Pandita Ramabai from exploring new avenues and she chose to pursue medicine in Britain and she also travelled to the United States. In the meanwhile she converted to Christianity and it naturally provoked criticism in the conservative Indian society that her organisations were focussed on conversion rather than true liberation. The British government presented her with the Kaiser-i-Hind medal in 1919. Ramabai died on 5 April 1922 and in October 1989, the Indian government issued a commemorative stamp in her honour.

The liberal egalitarian ideology under the British Raj created conditions for a social awakening among Indian women. Several women's associations came into existence both at regional and national levels. Banga Mahila Samaj and the Ladies Theosophical Society functioned at local levels to promote modern ideals for women. Shri Mahipatram Rupram Anathashram in Ahmedabad (1892), Shri Zoroastrian Mandal in Bombay (1903), Bharat Mahila Parishad (1904), Bharat Stri Mahamandal (1909), Maternity and Child Welfare League in Baroda (1914), Bhagini Samaj in Poona (1916) all were established and worked with the particular objective of improving women's lives.ⁱ

These regional organisations were followed by national organisations like Women's Indian Association (1917) and The National Council of Women in India (1920). Until the year 1919, the national movement was limited to the urban upper class and it was only later with Gandhi's entry into the national movement that large scale participation of the masses began to take place. Protests, satyagrahas and many new political developments and women's participation in the National movement went hand in hand. All India Women's Conference (1927) and Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust.

Post-independence the focus was largely on women's empowerment and it has been defined as "the process of challenging existing power relation and of gaining greater control over the source of power" (Batliwala, 1974)

The enabling of women to gain equal access to and control over the material and human resources was seen as a part of the process. The freedom and autonomy that they wrest from existing male hierarchies and acquiring the roles that challenge male dominance was considered as a form of empowerment. Women's rights activists felt that empowerment and leadership was possible by those women who not only survived the harshness of their own subjugation but also transcended their subjugation it was only through empowerment that women could maintain their strength in the face of obstacles and challenged from religion, work space and and contribute better towards the empowerment of all women.

Women's movements can be termed as conscious and collective movements that try to deal with a set of problems and needs specific to women. These needs or problems are, in turn, created by a socio-cultural system that categorically puts them at a disadvantage in comparison to men. Feminist philosophies in India led to the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes. Despite originating in the West, feminism

is manifested worldwide and is represented by various institutions committed to activity on behalf of women's rights and interests.

Women's movements were conscious and collective movements that tried to alleviate the problems and needs specific to women (Desai 1996)ⁱⁱ. The nationalist movement saw the clubbing together of freedom of the country and the freedom of women simultaneously and drew spontaneous response from large sections of women and even few groups of men.

The post - Independence period however saw a lull in the struggle for Women's rights.. According to Vina Mazumdar,ⁱⁱⁱ after Indian independence, 'for all practical purposes, the women's question disappeared from the public arena for over twenty years'. Vina Mazumdar was an activist with leftist ideology and who believed in the slogan '*Stree Swadheenta Zindabad*' (Long Live Women's Freedom)'. She was involved in India's freedom movement and later went on to become an academic and writer and she also rose to the position of Member Secretary at the Committee on the Status of Women in India. While she was a part of the Drafting Committee of the "Towards Equality Report" published in 1975, she and her colleagues like Kumud Sharma, Leela Dube and a few others realised the need to build a collective consciousness for improving the status of women in India^{iv}

The birth of the new women's liberation movement lay in the radicalization and leftist developments of Indian politics in the late sixties. The rebellious mood of the youth, poor peasants, marginal farmers, educated dalit and tribal men and women, industrial working classes found its expression in the formation of innumerable special interest groups addressing themselves to the needs and demands of the local masses. The birth of new socio-political movements due to widespread poverty and unemployment and the consequent disillusionment with government's development policies India saw a series of struggles and peasant movements in the early 1970s such as the anti-price-rise agitation in Bombay and Gujarat between 1972 and 1975 and the Chipko Movement which began in 1973.^v

Of particular importance to the women's movement were the agitations such as the Shahada Agitation and the subsequent formation of the *Shramik Sangatana* in the 1970s comprising of of the Bhil (tribal) landless labourers who rose against the exploitative landlords which was triggered off after the rape of two Bhil women.

The Indian women's movements worked towards two goals i.e primarily the liberation or uplift of women, and reforming social practices so as to enable women to play a more important and constructive role in society; and secondly to garner equal rights for both men and women, that could imply an extension of the civil rights enjoyed by men in the political, economic and familial spheres to women also.^{viii}

The context of the 1960's and 70's was one of economic hardships, price rise, unemployment and hoarding and black marketing which led to the quick spread of underground movements and the Naxalbari movements. The Indian middle class was in a state of great angst and simmering with anger and discontentment. This made relevant the Structural oppression theories that portrayed women's oppression and

inequality being a result of capitalism, patriarchy, and racism. The protest movements of the subaltern masses had taken militant paths guided by different political ideologies. In 1974, in Bihar in the name of *Sampoorna Kranti* or Total Revolution under the leadership of a Loknayak Jay Prakash Narayan and while it seemed a clarion call for political change it paved the way for many changes. This historic demand revolutionised the thinking of the development workers about responsibility of the state at the time of economic crisis^{viii}

The UN Declaration of 1975 as an International Women's Year provided the much needed succour to the still weak voices of feminists in India. This was the period of the Emergency Rule in India and around the time the Emergency was lifted in 1977, several women's groups had raised their voices over democratic rights and issues. The press and the media which were gagged during the Emergency rule were now free after the imposed silence of nearly two years and began openly documenting and reporting in the press about the atrocities committed against women during that period.

The period of economic crisis and drought led the women activists and women intellectuals in many Indian states like Maharashtra to become involved in progressive movements and they formed a united front called Anti-price rise Women's Committee and organised direct action against the culprits who created man-made scarcity of essential goods. Black marketing and hoarding were rampant and in order to overcome these unfair economic practices, several hundreds of poor and lower middle class women joined the struggle under the leadership of seasoned and able women from the left and socialist background.^{ix}

Popular women's movement leaders like Mrinal Gore, a veteran Socialist leader and also member of the Indian parliament led the struggle for social reform. Similarly Ahalya Ranganekar one of the founders of "Parel Mahila Sangh" in 1943, which later became "Janwadi Mahila Sangh", the Maharashtra state unit of the All India Democratic Women's Association was at the forefront of demands for women. She later became the national working president of the AIDWA and in 2001, she became its patron. She was elected corporator of the Bombay Municipal Corporation for 19 years from 1961 onwards. Ahalya was also a popular leader of the CPI (M) and also led several trade union movements.^x

Other popular women's activists like Tara Reddy and Manju Gandhi also gained popularity of the masses as a result of their success in reaching out to women of different class backgrounds. During this period a conference of Women's Liberation Movement Coordination Committee was convened in Pune and this succeeded in generating a mass interest and had an even larger socio-political and cultural base. Women from all walks of life including young educated women, feminist writers, teachers, working class women, those from the unorganised sector, *devdasis* and even tribal women participated in the meetings and discussions and put forth their demands.

Across the length and breadth of the country several women's organisations began to emerge such as The Stree Mukti Sangathana^{xi} in Bombay and Progressive Organisation of Women in Hyderabad which were formed in 1974.^{xii} Similarly in Delhi, a new form of leadership among women evolved from the radical

students' movement and the democratic rights movement. These were independent, self-determining democratic movements, which questioned all hierarchical structures.

The economic, social and political crises, along with corruption, drought, unemployment, deprivation and impoverishment of the rural poor led to the youth who were disgruntled and disappointed with the hunger and poverty to respond strongly with protest. Widespread and open discontent was expressed in violent action and consolidation of the action developed into powerful organisations throughout the country. These movements raised a number of diverse issues such as land-rights, wages, employment, security at work place, water availability, destruction of nature, oppression and exploitation of Dalits and the working masses. The significant achievement was that several women from all walks of life participated in these struggles enthusiastically and provided creative and sustainable solutions.^{xiii}

During the 1980s, the issue of women's oppression was depicted not only in discussion forums, but also was widely reported in the press and the media and even in films. The status of the Women's Committee appointed by the Government of India released a voluminous report in 1974. This report called 'Towards Equality' was prepared by the scholars with an interdisciplinary perspective and was presented in the Parliament of India, where it received a tremendous response from the decision-making bodies, the state apparatus and the print media.

Shocking description of Indian women's reality, which manifested in declining sex ratio, very high rate of female mortality and morbidity, marginalisation of women in the economy and discriminatory personal laws were some of the major highlights of the report. Nevertheless, the report failed to throw any light on violence against women in the civil society and by the custodians of law and order. One of the important movements was the Anti Rape movement: Women's rights movement in India gained a national appeal with an anti-rape movement in 1980. Its origin lay in the excesses committed by the state repressive machinery during the Emergency Rule in India from 1975 to 1977.

The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, 1956, The Maternity Benefit Act 1961, the Muslim Women (Protection of rights on divorce) Act 1986, The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act 1986, The Provisions of The Protection of Women From Domestic Violence Act, 2005, The Sexual Harassment Of Women At Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition And Redressal) Act, 2013, The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 are some of the prominent legislations that have been enacted to protect the rights of women in India^{xiv}.

Thirty years of campaigning demanding the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence resulted in an Act in 2005. Similarly struggle against pre-birth elimination of girls resulted in the legislation of the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technique Act (2002), Public Interest Litigations to deal with sexual harassment at workplace filed by the Non-governmental organizations resulted in the Supreme Court Directive for the act on Prevention of Sexual Harassment At workplace, 1997.

Contemporary India is witnessing several new legislations and gender-based policies such as Anti Rape laws, laws against domestic violence and sexual harassment at workplace and POCSO. Prof. Vibhuti Patel has clearly pointed out that there is a distinctive feminist space that has emerged in India but that it is also very loosely organised and lacks the coherence and depth which is much needed for it to be transformed as a powerful tool to achieve their goals.

India has a long march ahead in tackling gender based issues and gender based violence with better enforcement and greater social change. In spite of all that has been done, we still need to make more progress and India has a long march ahead to liberate every woman from societal oppression and discrimination.

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