UNIT 2  WOMEN’S MOVEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA (PART -I)

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Structure

2.1 Introduction

2.2 Objectives

2.3 Women’s Question, Struggle: Emancipation in Asia

2.4 Mass Movements: Women as Major Actors
   2.4.1 Chipko Movement and other Ecological Struggles
   2.4.2 Trade Union and Land Struggles, and Displacement
   2.4.3 Women in the Peace Movement
   2.4.4 State and Movement

2.5 Negotiation, Co-optation and New Challenges in the Twenty First Century

2.6 Let Us Sum Up

2.7 Glossary

2.8 Unit End Questions

2.9 Reference

2.10 Suggested Readings

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit, you studied how ‘civil society’ empowers women’s political agency. We also understand the role of women’s identity politics and women’s political mobilization and community based organizations. In this Unit, our attempt is to study the vibrant women’s movements with many achievements to its credit. An attempt will be made to understand these linkages of South Asian women’s movement and its impact on Indian women’s movement, to arrive at an understanding of the present state of the women’s movement through the way in which it has evolved through placing demands on the state as well as marinating a critical distance from the state.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this Unit, you will be able to:

- Engage with the historical movement in South Asia;
- Learn the inter linkages and correlations of the movement with history and society; and
- Evaluate the strengths and challenges before the movement.
2.3 WOMEN’S QUESTION, STRUGGLE: EMANCIPATION IN ASIA

Apart from events and thought currents in Europe which you have read in MWG-001, Block 1, Unit 1 there were major events in Asia’s liberation struggles that left an imprint on the Indian women’s struggles for equality, liberty and freedom. In semi-colonial and semi-feudal old China, for a long time, women were kept at the bottom of society. At the same time as China launched its struggle for political unity and national integration, a large-scale women’s emancipation movement was launched, resulting in the historic liberation of Chinese women which won worldwide attention. The impact of several millennia of oppression and devastation imposed by the feudal patriarchal system on Chinese women was exceptionally grave. In political, economic, cultural, social and family life, women were considered inferior to men. This was profoundly manifested in the following ways:

- Possessing no political rights, women were completely excluded from social and political life.
- Economically dependent, women were robbed of property and inheritance rights and possessed no independent source of income.
- Having no social status, women were forced to obey their fathers before marriage, their husbands after marriage and their sons if they became widowed.

Women had no personal dignity or independent status, and were deprived of the right to receive an education and take part in social activities. They enjoyed no freedom in marriage but had to obey the dictates of their parents and heed the words of matchmakers, and were not allowed to remarry if their spouse died. They were subjected to physical and mental torture, being harassed by systems of polygamy and prostitution, an overwhelming majority of them were forced to bind their feet from childhood. For centuries, ‘women with bound feet’ was a synonym for the female gender in China.

The 1911 Revolution kindled a feminist movement which focused on equal rights for men and women and participation by women in political affairs. These movements promoted the awakening of Chinese women. Nevertheless, they all failed to bring about a fundamental change in their miserable plight as victims of oppression and enslavement.

After the Chinese revolution, the Chinese Communist Party declared the achievement of female emancipation and equality between men and women one of its goals. Under the leadership of the Party, women were mobilized and organized to form a broad united front with working women in industry and agriculture as the main body. The Marriage Law of the People’s Republic of China, promulgated in 1950, was the first statute enacted by New China.
The experience of many other Asian countries mirrored that of China. There were of course important national differences based on differences in national liberation history. Japanese women lived under feudal oppression much like Chinese women until well into the twentieth century. The macho Samurai culture kept elite women firmly locked into domestic spaces, while poor women on farms and fields worked in conditions of semi bondage. Women’s questioning of the samurai culture of war and violence became public after the Second World War, and it is important to recall that Japanese women led the largest broad based anti-Vietnam demonstrations in Tokyo and Osaka during 1970-71.

2.4 MASS MOVEMENTS: WOMEN AS MAJOR ACTORS

The modern Indian women’s movement came into its own in the late twentieth century and can be read together with the history of toiling peoples’ struggles of the time. The women’s groups associated with class based political parties and mass organizations present a somewhat different picture from that presented by the ‘autonomous’ stream arguing for an undivided women’s movement. This has been discussed in detail in another unit. Although the feminist critique of policy in the mass movements may have been more muted than that in the autonomous stream, there were much larger numbers of women associated with them. By definition, their articulation presents a critique of state policy. While the National Federation of Indian Women associated with the undivided communist party continued its work, other formations like the All India Democratic Women’s Federation (AIDWA) and the Mahila Dakshata Samiti began serious work among workers and peasants, and highlighted women’s issues as well.

The decade of 1970-80s was marked by a general disenchantment with the promises of independence among large sections of the people, and the period is noted for the many mass struggles located on independent platforms as well as struggles led by political formations ranging from Sarvodaya-Gandhian to the far left. Many of these movements included significant participation of women and addressed their issues conjointly with any other leading issues guiding the movement. We can study some important movements from this period in order to understand the way in which gender issues enmeshed in other issues were treated during this time.

2.4.1 Chipko Movement and other Ecological Struggles

The Chipko movement originated in the Garhwal Himalayas in the decade of the seventies, and had to do with opposition to tree felling contracted to a sports good manufacturer. The women of the hills protested strongly as they were heavily dependent on the existence of the forest cover for fuel, fodder, and water. They used a unique method of hugging the trees
as the tree fellers approached with their logging equipment, and this is why the movement derived this particular name. This movement was successful in stopping this particular contract, and was imitated in the Appiko movement in Karnataka in the decade of the eighties.

The Chipko movement was an important milestone in the development of Indian ecofeminist discourse, and posited the theory of women’s essential nurturing, caring and life saving qualities. The theory—though not the movement—had its detractors who questioned the legitimacy of this binary essentialist assumption. It has to be noted that the women involved in the Chipko movement were primarily fighting for livelihood, as the trees felled would leave them without any subsistence. Thus, while the Chipko movement did eventually lead to the Indian government desisting from cutting forests, the basis of the Chipko women was to undermine the contract and to ensure that the forest remained so that their own livelihood was not disrupted—these women would themselves cut trees, albeit not on the scale of a professional lumberman or contractor.

Further, the women of Reni village were involved because the men had gone to intercede with the forest officials. The convergence of environmental and feminist assertion could also be read as an imposed critique. It also brings in an added complexity of the ecofeminism discourse of the Chipko movement—were these women fighting patriarchal capitalist structures and was the movement in itself environmental considering its basis? All this notwithstanding, there are underlying complexities of the Chipko debate—particularly the problematic question of whether the women would have initiated the movement if their own sustenance was dependent on felling the trees of the forest—which reflect the concerns and anxieties within ecofeminism. The reading of women as nurturing and peaceful is an essentialist argument; women’s involvement in communal violence and caste and class hierarchies problematizes this argument. You will read further on the co-option of the tenets of the women’s movement into fundamentalist agendas.

2.4.2 Trade Union and Land Struggles, and Displacement

In the decade of the seventies and eighties trade union struggles of beediworkers at Nipani and mineworkers in Chhattisgarh made important contributions to the mobilization of women. These movements are important because they succeeded in weaving in women’s issues into the fabric of the trade union struggle at the same time as they took up the so-called personal issues of women through allied forums. In Chhattisgarh the history of mine mechanization and the negative effect it had on women’s employment was taken up as an argument to demand manual or semi-mechanized mining options that would conserve the jobs of unorganized workers.
In Bihar, the Bodh Gaya movement of the mid-seventies under the leadership of the JP Movement led Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini spearheaded the demand for the redistribution of the huge landholdings of the Mahants of the Bodh Gaya Math to the landless, at the same time as they demanded that land rights be given to women as well as men. This successful struggle went a long way towards changing the concept of equality in coparcenary rights in Indian jurisprudence.

The Narmada movement erupted in the decade of the eighties on the issue of displacement of people and villages concerning the area which would be submerged under the construction of three major dams on the Narmada. The movement had a huge following of women and men across the submergence area in three states. It questioned the development strategy that made it necessary for harnessing water resources in this manner, and became an intensely political issue, with strong opinions being expressed on both sides of the debate.

### 2.4.3 Women in the Peace Movement

The states of the North East of India were not fully integrated into colonial governance, and the post independence national integration process was opposed by many in these regions on grounds of subnational identity and cultural differences. The emerging Indian nation state reacted strongly, and over a period of two decades, the north east of India erupted into a conflict zone, with many insurgent groups claiming to represent the true aspirations of the people. The conflict came with its baggage of state brutality, militant attacks on life and property, accompanied by the total destruction of human security for the people of Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Assam at different times. In this situation, a section of women emerged as the torchbearers of peace and demanded respect for the fundamental rights of the people. These include traditional women’s groups like the Meira Peibis of Manipur, who assumed the mantle of a new role as defenders of ordinary people, and the Naga Mothers’ Association which sent out and maintained its strong message for dialogue, reconciliation and the human security of the ordinary people of the area. These movements are not classified as ‘Women’s movements in the classical sense of the term as they do not only or exclusively raise women’s issues. However, they have involved women in far larger numbers than the so-called pure line women’s movements and raise important questions about where the centre of the women’s movement in India should really be located.

Efforts to consolidate these scattered initiatives into a joint platform and to sharpen the collective theoretical understanding on the issue of women’s oppression have been made several times. The Nari Mukti Sangarsh Sammelan at Patna in 1987 was a major effort in this direction and the later series
of movement conferences continued the effort to build perspectives on the women’s question and women’s struggle. An interesting feature of the end century scenario is the large participation of women in the ranks of armed revolutionary movements of the far left—while normally women are perceived as victims of violence in studies of armed conflict; here women seem to have decided that the only way to overthrow a violent and patriarchal state was by force. This phase is marked by major political mobilization of women, advancement in women’s overall political consciousness, and by the development of the discourse on feminist critique of development. The latter includes a developmental, an ecofeminist and a class-based analysis of both state policy and women’s marginalization.

The most important contribution of the women’s movement has been its commitment for peace-initiatives in the disturbed areas torn by communal conflicts, ethnic tensions and mob violence. Media publicity on this issue is extremely important so that such work can be replicated in the places where such groups do not exist. During communal riots in 1992 and 2002 in Gujarat, the women’s movement played a pivotal role in providing support to the victims of violence and also took up campaign against xenophobia and jingoism.

2.4.4 State and Movement

An important debate in feminist scholarship concerns the relationship of women with the modern state. Is the state an instrument of women’s oppression or can it be used to break down patriarchal authority? There are arguments that the state is a ‘contested terrain’ on which battles both for and against patriarchy are fought. The paradoxical role of state with regard to women and family results from a structural contradiction between the state’s interest in production, on the one hand, and reproduction on the other. Feminist theory has been fairly clear that the state is an active agent of patriarchy and has contributed significantly to the historical subordination of women. Law has indeed been a privileged site of struggle and debate in the contemporary women’s movement, with a wide range of expectations and demands being placed by the women’s movement on the legal system. However, a full-scale engagement with state based legal reform has sometimes led to a turning away of the eye from the essential patriarchal nature of the state.

2.5 NEGOTIATION, CO-OPTATION AND NEW CHALLENGES IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

One realization during the decade of the nineties and the turn of the century was the ease with which fundamentalist right wing organizations co-opted the language and style sheet of the women’s movement and
managed to mobilize large numbers of women in its communal, fundamentalist enterprise, often against the vulnerable sections of other communities. Mouthing the rhetoric of women’s empowerment, these organizations combined heavy traditional role casting of ‘their’ women using this in the violent attacks against the ‘others’. These tendencies could be seen in their most riots, when rioting mobs included women of the majority community baying for blood. This shattered the myth of the essential non-violent and peace loving nature of women as well as of their essential commitment to sustainability as claimed by some sections of ecofeminists.

The other phenomenon of the end century scenario was the massive funding into women’s equity and equal opportunity by the multilateral, bi-lateral and the non-governmenta organization sector. A large section of those politically active in the women’s movement have been influenced by these happenings and have thought it important to become a part of the ‘capacity building’ efforts of these organizations. The government has also conceded to many of the demands of the movement and created spaces in formal structures for women’s greater participation, for e.g. through the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution, it has sought to ensure greater participation of local self-governance. These developments have led to many questions about the non-governmental organization of the women’s movement as well as co-option of its terminology and concepts. At the end of the day however, the success of the women’s movement is not to be measured by its stridency, but by its commitment to ensuring a gender just society, and concrete achievements in this direction.

In the twenty first century, the women’s movement confronts new challenges of a communalized and fractured polity, and rising fundamentalism of community and caste groups. Honour killings by community courts and the regulatory activities of *khap panchayats* pose new threats to women’s well being and freedom of choice. The sharp decline in the child sex ratio in many parts of the country is indicative of the way in which medical technology has been subverted to service gendercide, and of the deep roots of patriarchy in Indian society that will not let its baby girls be born. The new generation of women in the movement will have to devise new strategies, and find new intellectual and political resources to combat these threats. Although we have laws in place against female foeticide, the battle will ultimately have to be fought politically, for gender equity is also a strong political issue.
Check Your Progress:

Explain the role of women in the peace movement.

What do you understand through the inter-linkages of State, NGO, and movements?

2.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, you have studied the vibrant women’s movements. An attempt will be made to understand these linkages of South Asian women’s movement and its impact on Indian women’s movement. To arrive at an understanding of the present state of the movement through the way in which it has evolved through placing demands on the state as well as maintain a critical distance from the state.
2.7 GLOSSARY

State: The category of state is not the same as government. Changes in government in democratic system do not witness a change in the structure of the political state. The notion of state is pitted against the notion of civil society that signifies institutions and forms of practices such as school, economy, family and church. It structures human life through politics. State refers to power and authority that structures political order. The State constitutes police, army, civil service, parliament and variants of local authority (Robertson, 1993, pp. 444-445).

2.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) The women’s movement is part of the broad democratic movement for equity’. Discuss with examples from India.

2) What were the ecofeminist assumptions of the Chipko movement? Discuss.

3) Comment on the kinds of issues raised by Dalit Feminism.

4) Write short notes on: (a) Meira P eibis (b)Naga Mothers’ Association .

2.9 REFERENCES


Stree Shakti Sangathana (1989). We were making history: women in the Telengana movement. Kali for Women.

2.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

Stree Shakti Sangathana (1989). *We were making history: women in the Telengana movement*. Kali for Women.
