

Unit 24: WOMEN

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24.0 OBJECTIVES

The Unit deals with the role and contribution of women in the various social and political movements in India. After going through this unit, you will be able to know:

- The historical background of women's movement in India.
- Major issues confronting women's unity; and
- Role of the women in Politics.

24.1 INTRODUCTION

It will be easier to understand the role of women in the social and political movements of India if we divide the study into the following categories

First, we shall try to have a panoramic view of the role of women in the 19th and the 20th centuries, i.e. in the pre and post- colonial era.

We shall next, look into these movements from two broad angles, viz, (i) "for" women and (ii) "by" women. (i) The period of reforms and nationalist struggle can be categorised as "for" women since all the benefits and opportunities for advancement were fought for and gifted by social reformers who, inevitably, were men. Women had eager and sincere participation in India's struggle for freedom, but the leadership was in the hands of men only. Yet, this period is extremely significant as the "beginning of freedom" for women.

(ii) In the post-independence period women concentrated on their own freedom. The foundation for this movement had been laid in the anti-British Raj days when women had started discovering their identity through literature and their activities as "terrorists". They slowly became part of the world's women's movement and their role in the social and political movements in their own country started becoming more and more prominent.

24.2 Reforms for women in the 19th and early 20th centuries

The 19th century could well be called an age for women. Their rights and the wrongs done to them, as well as their capacities and potentials, used to be the subjects of heated discussions in Europe and even in the colonies. By the end of the century, feminist ideas were in the minds of the "radicals" in England, France, Germany and even Russia. In India, the wrongs against women began to be deplored by social reformers. Such movement of 'for' women, 'by' men originated in Bengal and Maharashtra.

24.2.1 Against Sati

The Indian bourgeois class, that was born out of Westernisation, sought to reform the society by initiating campaigns against caste, polytheism, idolatry, animism, purda, child-marriage, sati and the like. These, to them, were elements of 'pre-modern' or primitive society. The foreign missionaries had branded these as examples of "Hindu barbarism" thus creating enough grounds for the colonial powers to rule. Ram Mohan Roy and Bidyasagar managed to receive the required administrative and legal support because of this. In 1817, Pandit Mrityunjay Bidyalankar declared that sati had no

“Shastric” sanction. One year later Governor William Bentinck prohibited Sati in his province, viz, Bengal. It took 11 years for this prohibition to get extended to other parts of India as the Sati Prohibition Act of 1929.

24.2.2 Widow Remarriage

In 1850s Pandit Ishwarchandra Bidyasagar, like Pandit Mrityunjay, proved from the Shastras that the re-marriage of a widow is allowed. His was a long, difficult journey through debates with orthodox pandits and banter from some of the pillars of then Hindu society. The Vernacular (Bengali) press got filled with songs and satires both in support and against. Such verses appeared in the designs of the woven cloths. They created turmoil in society. Bidyasagar submitted a petition to the Governor General in 1855.

A Widow Remarriage Association had started in Madras in 1871, but was short lived. In 1878, Virasalingam started the Rajamundri Social Reform Association, focusing mainly on widow re-marriage. In 1892, the Young Madras Party or the Hindu Social Reform Association was launched. Aryan Brotherhood Conference, of which Ranade and N.M. Joshi were members, once declared in one of its meetings, “let us no longer live in a fool’s paradise in the fond belief that because we have managed to survive so long .. under our present social arrangement, we will be able to survive for ever...”

Forty odd years since the Act was passed, there had been 500 widow re-marriages only, though social reform organisations, championing the cause, had mushroomed all over India. The majority of them were child or virgin widows. Widows from the upper caste, who were not virgins, could not and did not- re-marry.

24.2.3 Rehabilitating of Prostitutes

Other notables, who fought for reforms in anti-woman socio religious customs, were Jyotiba Phule, Dayanand Saraswati, Karve and women like Pandita Ramabai, Sister Nibedita and Tagore’s sister Swarnakumari Devi. Bengal had witnessed rebellious spirits like Madhusdan Datta and Henry Derozio. They both were powerful poets also. They had invited the wrath of the reformers even by attacking male morality. Madhusdan organised the prostitutes and inspired them to choose the profession of acting, instead.

According to a report in Amrita Bazar Patrika of 1869, 90% of Calcutta’s prostitutes were widows, of whom a large number came from Kulin Brahmin families. The “Kulins” were the most detestable group of Brahmins whose socially sanctioned livelihood was to go on marrying and collecting dowries. Their day to day living was also totally free as they kept on visiting their wives’ paternal homes as these ‘married’ women had to continue living in their fathers’ house. The number of such ‘wives’ could very well exceed 100. So, with a single stroke of death (of one husband) at least 100 widows were available in the market as prostitutes.

We must make special note of the fact that Bidyasagar, the first and the greatest protagonist of widow re marriage felt a moral repugnance towards this scheme of rehabilitation of the prostitutes and did not think of stopping this abhorrent practice of polygamy. Strangely, he could not realise that the number of widows will drastically decline and thus the problem will become much less formidable if polygamy could be strictly stopped.

24.2.4 Arya Samaj

Swami Dayanand was rather revolutionary for his time. He disowned the caste system and prescribed equal treatment to women quoting from the shastras. His Arya Samaj did not impose any duties or obligations on women, which could not be applied to men according to the Hindu lawgivers. In his representative book, “*Satyartha Prakash*” Dayanand insisted that polygamy, child marriage and the seclusion of women did not exist in Aryan India. He called for compulsory education for boys and girls both and that there should be equal stress on tradition and modernity through the compulsory learning of Sanskrit and English. He raised the age of marriage for girls and boys to 16 and 25, respectively.

But Arya Samajis like Lala Lajpat Rai and Lal Chand opposed higher education for women. They believed that if at all, ‘the character of girls’ education should be different, because ‘the education we give to the girls should not unsex them’ Apart from basic literacy, Arithmetic and some poetry, Arya Samaj religious literature, sewing, embroidery, cooking, hygienic, drawing and music were the subjects taught. The Brahma Samaj that started as a protest against idolatry and the backward pulling norms and rituals of Brahminical Hindusim, was not free of this stereotype notion about girls and women. The notion continued till the latter stages of our freedom movement. They only dissident voice was of Subhas chandra Bose. Herin lies the justification behind dividing the ages into “for” and “by” women. The women, at that time, had neither the awareness nor the sensitivity to demand everything that were allowed to or given to men.

24.2.5 Prohibition of Child Marriage

In 1860 an Act was passed fixing the age of consent at 10. Behram Malabari, himself not a Hindu, (a Parsi) started a campaign in support of this Act towards the end of the century. He could manage to convince a good number of lawyers, doctors, teachers and public servants. They believed, which was echoed in the statement by the Jessore Indian Association, that “early marriage weakens the physical strength of a nation; it stunts its full growth and development, it affects the courage and energy of the individuals and brings forth a race of people weak in strength” and determination. In 1891, Tilak had led an agitation against the Act and a modern visionary like Tagore had opposed in words and deed!

Reform movements were so strong in the Bombay-Poona cultural belt that a few had the courage to question even Brahminism the very base of Hinduism G.H. Deshmukh, a socio-religious reformer for example, had argued in the 1840s that the “Brahmins should give up their foolish concepts; they must accept that all men are equal and that everybody has a right to acquire knowledge...”. But in 1871, he succumbed to threat to outcaste him. As a consequence, he mellowed down.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 1

Note: i) Use the space below for your answers
ii) Check your answers at the end of the unit

1. Why can the 19th century be called the age for women?

 2. What do you know about the various attempts enforce widow re-marriage.?

3. What was Dayanand Saraswati's contribution?

24.3 EDUCATION FOR WOMEN AND WOMEN EMERGING WITH IDENTITY

24.3.1 Women in Literature and Literature by Women

By the late 19th century, social reform movements were beginning to show effects; confidence and determination started getting observed in the life and work of some women. Novelists like Nirupama Devi and Anurupa Devi started getting referred to in the Bengali literary circles and were even given memberships of literary clubs which were dominated by men. Tagore's novels and short stories are full of women characters who excel their husbands and other male admirers. A few examples are "Gora" and "Gharey Bairey" by Tagore, "Anandamath" and "Debi Choudhurani" by Bankimchandra and "Pather Debi" by Sharatchandra. In Tagore's "Char Adhyay", a nationalist woman, seeking identity, is criticised and crushed by male leadership-typical of politics even today, which has largely remained a male domain. Almost all women activist were literary writers also; literature and writings with literary flavour were commonly used as side weapons with most of the male freedom fighters also. Some of the noted names among women were Nagendrakala Mustafi, Mankumari Basu and Kamini Roy. Kashibai Kanitkar was the first woman novelist from Maharashtra. Others were Mary Bhore, Godavaribai Samaskar, Parvatibai and Rukminibai. In South, Kamala Sathinandan, the editor of Indian Ladies Magazine, was a writer also. Sarala Debi, Kumudini Mitra and Madame Cama had made marks in Journalism to promote the cause of revolution.

24.3.2 Women for Rights

Madame Cama had the honour of unfurling a 'Bande Mataram' flag at 1907 Congress of the Socialist International at Stuttgart, and, in 1913, Kumudini Mitra, more known as a "terrorist", was invited to the International Women's Suffrage Conference at Budapest, Hungary. Sarojini Naidu waited upon the committee, headed by Montague and Lord Chelmsford to demand a series of reforms in the condition of the Indian women. Sarala Debi made representations before the committee on behalf of Bharat Stree Mahamandal. At the sixth National Social conference in 1892, Hardevi Roshanlals, the editor of "Bharat Bhagini" insisted that this platform was 'more important' than Congress, because the former understood that:

The woman's cause is man's
They rise or sink together,
Dwarfed or god-like, bound or free.

Anandibai Joshi was the first woman doctor. She and Kantibai were stoned when they dared wearing shoes and carrying umbrellas on the streets. These were symbols of male and caste authority. Was women's position better than that of the lower castes or the untouchables? In 1882, Tarabai Shinde's book, *Stree Purush Tulana* generated heated discussions all over. She insisted that the faults, commonly ascribed to women, such as superstition, suspicion, treachery and insolence, could be as much found in men. She suggested to the women that, by the strength of their firm will, they remain always well behaved, pure as fire and unblemished internally and externally. Tarabai also suggested that men would have to hang their heads down in shame.

Mai Bhagawati, an "upadeshika" of the Arya Samaj had the confidence to speak in a large public gathering in Haryana. In 1881, Manorama Majumdar, educated at home by her husband, was appointed dhama pracharika by the Barisal Brahmo Samaj. As expected, lot of heated debate followed questioning the 'wisdom' of carrying the issue of women's equality a little too far. Regular participation in the nationalist campaigns and organisations had generated such a spirit that a group of Brahmo women walked through the streets of Calcutta singing and speaking against the evils of purdah. These are indisputable instances of initiatives or movements "by" women. But Indian National Congress and other political parties were not yet prepared to acknowledge that potential among women. Though the women delegates were allowed to sit on the dias, they were not allowed to speak or vote on the resolutions.

24.3.3 Women for Women

Rabindranath Tagore's sister Swarnakumari Debi launched "Sakhi Samiti" with the aim of training widows to learn, to teach and thus become the most powerful agents of spreading education among women. The Samiti organised crafts fairs in order to promote women-centric cottage industries as a means of developing self-confidence (atmashakti) and nationalism. Congress discovered great value in this kind of "meals", but the male leaders could not think beyond organising a separate women's section.

Swarnakumari Debi's daughter, Sarala Debi, was strikingly rebellious. She wanted to flee the 'cage' or 'prison' of home and establish her right to an independent livelihood like men. She started a gymnasium in 1902, where women were trained in the use of sword and 'lathi'. She can be called the architect of militant nationalism or even revolutionary terrorism.

24.3.4 Women in Nationalist Struggle

The 1905-8 Swadeshi movement in Bengal reflects the beginning of a women's participation in nationalist activities on a larger scale. Many of the wives, sisters and daughters started forming support groups for the movement. Middle class nationalism inspired women and girls who gave away jewelry as well as money. In the villages, Handfuls of grains came as contributions. Militancy became such a feature of the 'samitis' in which women had active involvement that five such in East Bengal, viz Swadesh Bandhab, Brati, Dhaka Anushilan, Suhrid and Sadhana, were banned in January, 1909.

Purani Agyawati, a woman member of Hissar Arya Samaj, toured almost all over Punjab, pleading mothers to bring up their sons not for government service but as independent manufacturers and traders of 'swadeshi'. She also tried to convince that strict and blind observance of caste norms prevent the mothers from giving great sons to the nation. In Delhi, Agyawati opened a "Vidhava Ashram" to organise widows not only against oppression and for their right to education, but also to train them in militant nationalism. She was described as "a very bold woman" by the government, which was sufficiently alarmed by her activities.

24.3.5 Women for Equality

Speaking to the Indian Social conference at Calcutta in 1906. Sarojini Naidu said, "instruction may mean accumulation of knowledge, but education is an immeasurable, beautiful and indispensable atmosphere in which we live and move and have our being... How then shall a man dare to deprive a human soul of its immemorial inheritance of liberty and life? Your fathers, in depriving your mothers of that birthright, have robbed you, their sons, of your just inheritance. Therefore, I charge you restore to your women their ... rights... you are, therefore, not the real nation-builders... Educate your women and the nation will take care of itself..."

That there was a sense of great achievement among women and of new spaces opening up for them was beautifully put by the Tamil nationalist poet Subramanya Bharati in his poem, "The Dance of Liberation", in 1920

Dance! Rejoice!
 Those who said
 It is evil for women to touch books
 Are dead.
 The lunatics who Said
 They would lock women in their houses,
 Cannot show their faces now.

A discourse on equality began to develop, in the late 1910s and 1920s, amongst women. They used nationalists' arguments to defend their demands for equal rights. Urmila Devi, a militant woman, defined 'swaraj' as self-rule and 'Swadhinata' as the 'strength and power to rule over oneself'. Amiya Debi rightly felt that 'Swadhinata' cannot be given, it has to be taken by force.... If it is left to the "well-wishing" men, then women's adhinata (dependence) along will get strengthened. The nationalist leaders, who were the first to call women outside their home and household, believed in complementarity and not sameness, which the revolutionary women demanded. The reformers and the 'givers' believed that women's rights should be recognised because of women's socially useful

role as mothers. Women demanded equal rights because, as human beings, they have the same needs, the same desires and the same capacities as men.

Prabhavati worked for a group in U.S.A called “Freedom for India and Ireland” and Renuka Ray was associated with the “League Against British Imperialism” in England. Pabhavati married M.N. Roy, the pioneer of communist movement in India, and got equally involved with the revolutionaries and the communists. She joined hands with Muzaffar Ahmad, poet Nazrul Islam and Hemanta Kumar Sarkar to organise the scavengers as a member of the Workers and Peasants Party.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 2

- Note:** i) Use the space below for you answers
ii) Check your answers at the end of the unit

1. Write, in brief, women’s first fight for rights during the colonial period.

2. What was the role of Purani Agyavati in the nationalist struggle?

3. How did women define “Swaraj” and “Swadhinata” during freedom struggle?

24.4 WOMEN’S INDEPENDENT POLITICAL IDENTITY

24.4.1 Discrimination Against Women in Politics

No woman was chosen by Gandhi in his long list of 71 marchers to Dandi. Well-recognised women, like Khurshid Naoroji and Margaret Cousins, protested strongly. But the leader remained firm on his decision arguing that he had allocated a “greater role to women than the mere breaking of salt laws”. But Sarojini Naidu defied and joined the march at Dandi at the final stage and was the first woman to be arrested in that movement. Once defiance cleared the path, and thousands of women joined the salt satyagraha. This is generally remembered as the first time “the masses of Indian women” got involved in the struggle for independence. Husbands now started getting proud of

their wives in the jails; but they resented if their wives had not taken prior permission. A few notable amongst these wives were Kasturba Ghandi, Kamaladebi Chattopadhyay, Nellie Sengupta, Basanti Debi (Roy), Durgabai Deshmukh and Aruna Asaf Ali.

24.4.2 Women's Initiatives in Politics

Lilabati Mitra helped Bidyasagar in 1890s to perform widow re-marriages by sheltering willing grooms. Kamini Roy was active in the Ilbert Bill agitation, organising girls at the Bethune School to hold meetings and wear badges supporting the Bill. She worked with Banga Mahila Samiti in their social reform projects. Aghorekamini Nari Samiti mobilised opinions against the ill-treatment of women workers by the tea planters. Prabhavati Mirza had got inspired by Aurobindo's terrorism.. At the age of ten only she fasted in protest against Khudir am's hanging and later turned out to be a committed trade unionist of the 1930s.

24.4.2 Women "Terrorists"

Kumudini Mitra had organised a group of educated Brahmin women who liaised between the revolutionaries in hiding. Women got increasingly involved with revolutionary groups, popularly known, feared and revered as "terrorists". In December, 1931, Shanti Ghosh and Suniti Chowdhury shot a district Magistrate, Mr. Stevens, who had harassed women more than the law, perhaps, permitted. Mina Das had attempted to shoot the Governor of Bengal, Stanley Jackson in 1922. They had all acted on their own and the first two were sentenced to transportation for life. Preetilata Wadedar led a raid on a club that the Europeans frequented. The bomb killed one and injured four. Preetilata, clothed in male attire took cyanide to avoid arrest. A paper stating that the raid was an "act of war" was recovered from her person. On the same day pamphlets were distributed exhorting teachers, students and the public to join the campaign against the British rulers and the Europeans. Sarala Debi and Sister Nibedita were also closely related to and inspired by the Bengal terrorists.

24.5 MAJOR ISSUES CONFRONTING WOMEN'S UNITY

24.5.1 Communalism and Casteism

The issue of communalism was taken up by All India women's Conference (AIWC) in the thirties. In 1932 both their district branches and the annual conference organised protests against the reservation of separate seats for women in the legislatures applying communal criteria. The Bombay branch, for example, got involved in riot relief and the Andhra Pradesh branch started a campaign against religious prayers in the schools. The organisation was, perhaps, the first to raise demands for uniform civil code so that women cannot be subdued and tortured by religious dictums and caste obligations. They demanded exactly the same law for all women of India- whatever may be their caste or religion.

Unfortunately, by 1940s communal tensions manifested among the members themselves, as a result of the increasingly hostile relations between the congress and the Muslim League. By 1944 most of the Muslim women left AIWC. After partition and migration to Pakistan, they formed All Pakistan Women's Conference, thus belying the very purpose of this organisation. The AIWC in India continued to work against

communilism, casteism and patriarchal oppression and started getting members from all religious groups, though the Hindu and the Dalits are many more in number.

Communalism and casteism have taken a horribly violent and ugly form ever since the carving out of the country on communal lines; Intolerance of the lower castes and of the religious and racial minorities has increased by leaps and bounds; mobilisation among women in protest and self-defence has also become stronger and wider. The other modes of oppressions, related to and born out of patriarchy and the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few, have also motivated the women's movement in India. The number of such organisations is so large and the area of their activities is so vast that it is simply impossible to make individual note of them within the extremely limited scope of this lesson. The students will have to rely on their general knowledge and daily newspaper reading.

24.5.2 Daily Encounters with Oppression

i) Against Alcohol

Bhil women were the first known to have raised their voice against the alcohol menace by breaking liquor pots in 1972. We know of so many such after that, the most sustained and successful having been The Anti-Arrack Movement in Nellore in Andhra Pradesh. Alcoholism is understood by women and the men who fight for women's cause, as a major cause behind wife-beating and family violence. Unending or increasing impoverishment of a family is also mainly because of man's income being wasted on this menace. That is why all women's bodies take up alcohol as a major issue, apart from dowry and sexual abuse, in fact all anti-liquor movements gradually get involved in all other problems facing women. Even the movements for environmental protection, e.g the Chipko movement, the movement for equal land rights, e.g the Bodhgaya, and the movement for a separate political entity, like Uttaranchal, could not separate itself from the age-old day to day problems that have not allowed women, from the socially and economically backward section particularly, to see the light of freedom.

ii) Against Dowry

Progressive Organisation of women, Hyderabad was the first to organise powerful movement against dowry in 1975. It used to attract more than 2000 men and women in their demonstrations and the anger had spread to Maharashtra, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and even to as far as Punjab and Bengal. But the movement took deep and permanent roots in and around Delhi because the problem was, and is, much more acute and gruesome in this clutural belt. Mahila Dakshata Samiti was the pioneer body in Delhi in this regard. Now its scope, like in case of all other similar organisations, has spread over to all other areas concerning women's oppression and subjugation.

iii) Against Sexual Abuse Rape and other forms of sexual abuse are the most common and frequent of crimes against women and yet, the most unreported. This is the most easily available and ego-satisfying weapon in the hands of male power not merely to overpower women, but even to overpower men from the deprived and oppressed communities. Apart from rapes within the family or due to personal lust or enmity, rapes are quite common occurrence in communal and caste tensions and in police custody. The agitation against rape, for the first time, started against police rape. The rape of Ralimmeza Bi in police custody became a symbol. The movement is ever-increasing in area, support and anger, yet the upward trend in the number of incidents is not getting checked. Shakti Shalini,

1. Explain why alcoholism has been taken as a major cause for violence against women.

2. What do you think is/are the basic reason/s behind violence against women?

24.6 WOMEN IN POLITICS OR POLITICS ‘BY’ WOMEN

In section 24.4 you have read, in brief about women’s independent political identity or initiative. In this section you will be able know a few instances where such initiatives looked more pronounced.

24.6.1 Telengana Movement

Women’s participation was significant in the Telengana movement for land and related Eco-political rights. Though the leadership was with men, the movement could have died early if not for the strong and sustained motivation from the women. It started against the injustices for the British Raj (1941), and continued against the continuation of the injustices even under their own government (till 1952).

24.6.2 Bodh Gaya Movement

Another landmark movement for land, i.e., livelihood, or economic rights “by” women was the forceful acquisition of the ‘patta’ by the peasant women, who had collected from in and around Bodh Gaya (Bihar). The men were not putting in enough efforts or resources into the land due to drinking and other bad habits. The unexpected success became a terrific inspiration for all united efforts by women. But, the success here was unique and exceptional; in most other cases success was not in their fate, and Bihar continues to be one of the top States in social injustice and oppression of women.

24.6.3 Dalit Women’s Movement

24.8 SOME KEY WORDS

Colonial: relating to or characteristic of a colony. A colony is a territory and a people, occupied and ruled over by an imperialist power or imperialist mentality

Reform: amendment of what is defective, vicious, corrupt or depraved; removal or correction of an abuse, wrong or errors.

Feminist ideas: ideas born out of the belief that women are equal to men with regard to political, economic and social rights.

Gender: the socially established division between man and woman with the implied belief that women are inferior to men in every aspect of life.

Radicals: marked by a considerable departure from the usual or traditional; a political group associated with views, practices and policies of extreme change.

Bourgeois: one with social behaviour and political views influenced by private property interests and consumerism.

Westernisation: conversion to or adoption of the traditions and the latest culture of the highly industrialised countries, generally in the western hemisphere.

Polygamy: the custom of having more than one wife at the same time.

Suffrage: the right to vote (in political matters or for the formation of a government).

24.7 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

Kumar, Radha, *The History of Doing*, Kali for women, New Delhi, 1993.

Sanghari, Kumkum and Vaid, Sudesh (eds.), *Recasting Women: Essays in colonial History*, Kali for women, New Delhi, 1989.

Liddle, Joanna and Joshi, Rama (eds.), *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Cast and Class*, Kali for Women, New D`elhi, 1986.

Gail Omvedt: *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society*

Gail Omvedt : *We will smash this prison*

24.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that I have spent a sum of Rs. _____

(Rupees -----) towards

typing charges of Unit Nos. _____

entitled _____

