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## UNIT 10 WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN COLONIAL INDIA: ROUTES AND ROOTS\*

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### 10.0 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this Unit, you will be able to understand:

- Social movements and women's movements,
- Different trajectories through which women in India were mobilized and organized, and
- Major issues raised by the women's movements.

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### 10.1 INTRODUCTION

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Today many of us feel that the issues of women have been solved. The common-sense understanding is that women are now at par with men, and if there are some residual problems, they will either go away as we 'modernize' or are linked to other issues like poverty. On the legal level, women have rights: the right to education, to property, to work, to move about freely in the world. Historically, women's lives were very different from what we see around us today. The rights and opportunities that women have today, come from a long history of struggle. It is important therefore for us to know whose shoulders we stand on, who were the women (and men) involved in this struggle, how did we reach where we are today. This unit will introduce us to the history of these rights and the women's movement; the debates and struggles, movements and campaigns that have gone into the journey of women's rights. We will begin in the Colonial period and trace the journey of women's movements up until Independence in this unit.

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## 10.2 UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS

Let us begin by understanding what social movements mean, since women's movements are one type of social movement. Studies of social movements have tried to answer questions like origins, aims and purposes of movements, questions of participation and membership, emotive aspects of movements, strategies and organization of movements, how movements influence and are influenced by other institutions like the State and the media, reasons for the decline in movements and of their achievements (*Goodwin and Jasper, 2003*). Most definitions seem to agree that social movements have the following characteristics:

- collective action by a group of people,
- a sustained, organized public effort making collective claims,
- employment of a variety of tactics from a repertoire of political action,
- participants' concerted public representation of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitments on the part of themselves and/or their constituencies.

Thus, we see that social movements, though linked to phenomenon like revolutions, campaigns and community organization, are distinct because they involve collective action and are sustained over a period of time, employing a variety of different strategies. Thus, we can see that the women's movements in India have been a very important social movement, if we apply the above-mentioned principles to it.

Even though, formal organizing of women is a recent phenomenon, scholars say that women talking about their own lives and being critical of the systems which oppress them has a much longer history. In India, we have Buddhist nuns (or theris) writing verses called the “Therigathas” in which they talk about their suffering and their aspiration towards salvation by following the path of the Buddha. Similarly in medieval times, saint poetesses like Akka Mahadevi, Lal Dedh, Meerabai, Janabai and many other spoke of their yearning for their beloved God and how the demands of wife-hood and domesticity, as well as burdens of modesty and honour placed on their bodies was stopping them from realizing their spiritual escape. Women like Razia Sultan rose to power within male dominated structures to lead empires. Rasasundari Debi wrote about her life as a housewife and the burdens of domestic work. Thus, across time we see that even when women’s movement or feminism as a term did not exist, women were speaking up against injustice and discrimination and dreaming of a different life. We will however, focus on the period starting from colonial times, because this is the time when there was an organized and concerted effort to bring about changes in the life of a group called ‘women’.

The idea of a group of people called 'women' as distinct from a group of people called 'men' is not a natural thing. We will see therefore, how the idea of 'women' as a distinct category emerged in a particular historical moment of the encounter with colonialism and how they were interpreted to be mothers/wives/citizens/workers through different kinds of movements. It is this conscious thinking about women that marks then the beginnings of the modern movement and we will begin our study of women's movements from there.

In this Unit, we are using the term 'women's movements in India' consciously, to avoid some of the problems thrown up through the use of the term 'Indian women's movement'. The use of the term in singular suggests there is only ONE kind of movement, while in reality the women's movements in India are like a multi-coloured, multilayered fabric stitched together by different threads. There is lot of diversity, sometimes internal debates and even conflicts about issues, strategies and methods to fulfill goals. Hence we use the term-Indian Women's Movements.

A related question that arises is why we are not using the term 'feminist movements' instead of women's movements. The reason for this is that the term 'feminism' has a complicated history in our context, because it has been pejoratively (and rather, unfairly) associated with being western and irrelevant to our contexts. Due to this, many individuals and groups who have made huge contributions to improving the condition of women in India, choose to not associate themselves with the term 'feminism'. Women's movement as the term, allows us to capture those movements which have made significant contributions to the gender question in India, even though they might not call themselves 'feminist'. We will however only be looking at those movements that recognize that women as a group face systemic and structural subordination and have undertaken efforts to change these systems and structures.

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### **10.3 DIVERSE ROOTS AND ROUTES OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS: COLONIAL INDIA**

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In this section, we will be mapping the diverse contexts in which the issues concerning women in India came to be debated and conceptualized. The contemporary women's movements have their roots in these articulations and movements in Colonial India. Women were mobilized and learnt to see themselves as political beings in a variety of different contexts, like anti-caste movements, peasant and workers movements. Women's participation in these movements and the ways in which women's issues were discussed are important foundations of the present movements. We will therefore trace how 'women' as a category were imagined and mobilized within each of 'roots' and what were the trajectories/ 'routes' that the movements took.

Before we get introduced to these different trajectories, we need to take an overview of the pre-history of how women and their issues gained visibility in colonial India and how were these debated before women entered the public sphere. We will begin by looking at the social reform movement and how it paved the way for women's issues being discussed in the public sphere and for women's entry into it.

#### **10.3.1 Social Reform Movement**

The nineteenth century saw a lot of discussion about the status, roles, nature, capacities of women, not only in India, but also in Europe. In India, this century was marked by a slow but steady rise of British power, from the East India company which came here initially as a trading partner, but slowly extended into domination and rule. It is now widely acknowledged that this encounter with colonialism, brought about large-scale changes in Indian society and was also the impetus for the discussions around women's 'status'. Colonial rule brought about large-scale changes in agrarian relations, started industrialization and

brought changes in the administrative structure, leading to process of the creation of a 'new' middle class (largely composed of dominant castes, land-owning elites, clerical and administrative castes). It was the men of these caste groups who first benefitted from the coming of western education and got acquainted with western ideas about the status of women (*Sangari and Vaid, 1989*).

For the British, interested in establishing their dominion over India, the status of women became the yardstick to mark the 'natives' as backward, savage and therefore in need of British imperial intervention in order to become 'civilized'. In this colonial representation then, colonialism came to be cast as the 'White man's burden', the 'civilizing mission', where the white man had historical responsibility to spread the ideas of renaissance and modernity to all (*Sangari and Vaid, 1989*).

Indian men, aspiring to become middle class and influenced by the British views on the backwardness of Indians, started debating women's issues and pioneered the 'social reform' movement. The idea was to reform themselves and the focus of their campaigns were practices like sati, idolatry, purdah (or seclusion of women), child-marriage, castebased discrimination etc. In agreement with the British, they saw these practices as primitive and sought to modernize themselves. The important point to note in this context is that while, there is no denying that the reform movements produced positive results for some groups of Indian women, their focus was not on women's rights, but rather on the self-definition of the 'new' middle class. Thus, it is not surprising that much of what got identified and addressed as the 'woman question' was essentially issues faced by upper caste and upper classwomen (*Sangari and Vaid, 1989*).

Feminist scholars have pointed out that instead of seeing social reform as an unmitigated story of women's progress, it needs to be seen as a process of recasting of women and recasting of patriarchies (*Sangari and Vaid, 1989*).

The process was one of bringing gender relations in accordance with more modern, western ideas but was certainly not a process of dismantling patriarchy and reformulating the unequal relationships between men and women.

Watch the film 'GhareBhaire' by Satyajit Ray, based on a story by Rabindranath Tagore. Note the emergence of the respectable, middle-class Bhadramahila and the ways in which Bimala emerges as the icon of Mother India within the context of the Swadeshi movement in the film. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNdEZEFrG7Y>)

While women were the grounds on which many of these discussions were held, it was not merely a concern with women's condition that animated them. The debate was as much about different communities feeling that they are under siege and trying to reaffirm their identities, as well as contestations over what constituted 'authentic' Indian traditions. The example of the debate around sati will clarify this statement.

### 10.3.2 Debate on Sati

Sati was a practice of burning the widow on the funeral pyre of her husband on his death and was said to guarantee salvation for both. However, feminist scholars have pointed out that Sati was a way of eliminating the widow who had rights to

property and was also a way of ensuring the sexual purity of widows. Thus, it was a practice that was sanctioned by the family and community as a way of reinforcing sexual and moral codes and material power. The first instance of the need to ban sati can be traced to Raja Ram Mohan Roy's Atmiya Sabha. This campaign got wide-spread British support, since it was seen as bolstering the argument about the barbarism of the natives. The tension between the self-definition of the British as harbingers of enlightenment and their political position of non-interference in Hindu religious matters led to a situation where they legislated half-heartedly, introducing the distinction between voluntary and forced sati and making forced sati a crime. However, if we examine both sides of the debate carefully, we will see that both sides were using the evidence of the Hindu dharmashastras, to argue out whether Sati had shastric sanction or not. The question then which was at hand was whether Sati was sanctioned in the holy Hindu scriptures and was it part of "essential" Hindu tradition. Thus, sati became the ground on which the British articulated the primitive barbarism of the natives and the Hindu orthodoxy put forth as the exemplification of Hindu wifely devotion and sacrifice. Thus, the debate around Sati became a debate around the definitions of the orient and the occident, the east and the west, and what constituted 'authentic' Hindu tradition rather than about improving women's status. Thus, women became the battle-grounds over which tussles of modernity and tradition were fought (*Mani*, 1989).

Read about the debate around lifting the ban over widow remarriage and the aftermath of the passing of the law allowing widow remarriages. Refer to Prem Chowdhry's work to read why Jat women in colonial India preferred to be labeled 'adulterous' than admit that they has remarried.

The social reform movement, thus, was more an attempt at modernization and recasting of patriarchy in a modern mode. The movement focused on the lives of upper caste women, seeing their experiences as the experiences of 'Indian' women and since the British strategy of reform was the codification of Hindu law by giving precedence to shastric sources, this process tended to impose Brahmanic ritual on all Hindus, much to the detriment of customary rights that women in other caste groups enjoyed.

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## 10.4 NATIONALIST MOVEMENT

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By the late nineteenth century, the social reform movement had started showing effects: though the advances in other areas had been limited, in the area of women's education, there had been significant advances. While the social reform movement had focused on a reform of the Hindu family, as we saw, it was largely a reworking of patriarchy, but the newly educated middle class woman had slowly started emerging into the public sphere, though one segregated from the men's public sphere. With the opening up of, in a limited way, of the public sphere for women, they also started participating in nationalist campaigns and organizations, though there was initially some resistance to their participation by men.

The nationalist movement that came up in the late 19th and early 20th Century, was predicated on distinction between the world and the home, the public and the private. The sphere of the family/private came to be seen as the sphere of the "authentic" spirit of Indian culture and spirituality, leading to an impetus to keep this sphere isolated from British influence. This rise of a nationalist sentiment,

was accompanied by marking the woman question as a matter of internal debate, to be resolved after political independence was achieved (*Chatterjee, 1989*).

This led on the one hand, to a decline in the debates around the woman question in the public sphere, on the other hand, through the Swadeshi movement, especially in Bengal, a new equivalence of women as mothers of the Nation came to be established. The figure of the mother came to be equated with the figure of women. In Bengal, nationalists used the fear of the marauding, raping British soldiers and cries of "saving our women" came to be articulated in terms of "saving our mother". This led to a call for young Indian men to empower themselves physically, to protect their women and ultimately the nation. Women like Sarala Devi Ghoshal enjoined men to take up 'physical culture' and organize themselves for self-defense and defense of their women and the nation.

In the Swadeshi movement, the British imperialist rule came to be seen as 'drain of wealth' and emphasis was placed on self-reliance and mass mobilization. A more radical version of nationalism was in the making and women like Swarnakumari Devi, calling for *atmashakti* and *swadeshi* were at the centre of it. In Bengal, the images of Kali/ Durga/Chandi came to be enjoined with the idea of the Mother Nation and this goddess-centered nationalism gained new acceptance, as parts of the nationalist movement espoused revolutionary violence. Ultimately in Bengal and in Punjab, women in small numbers joined up in the armed revolutionary struggles, but it wasn't till the entry of Gandhi in nationalist politics that mass participation of women was seen (*Kumar, 1993*).

It is important to note that this new nationalism marked the Nation as mother, with the sons of the Mother being given the duty of protecting and saving her. Women were at once Nation, and mothers who would produce the sons for the protection of the Nation. Women's role till about 1920s then came to be defined in terms of importance of motherhood for motherland and in that biological role their destiny as mothers of the nation. This idea then centered the middle class woman as the mothers of the nation and as the symbols of Mother Nation (*Kumar, 1993*).

#### **10.4.1 Women in the Gandhian Nationalist Struggles**

One of the most significant aspects of the Gandhian non-violent nationalist movement was the large-scale participation of women in it. Women participated in protests and led activities like spinning and picketing. This massive participation was due to a longer history of women's presence in the public and due to the specificities of the Gandhian approach and politics.

For Gandhi, women were a potential force in the struggle to build a new social order, and he was interested in drawing women into the nationalist struggle. Though he emphasized that the private sphere of family-household was the primary domain of women's activities, he also helped create conditions that helped women break the shackles of domesticity.

Gandhi was different from the male social reformers because he saw women, not as objects of reform but as self-conscious subjects, who could become arbitrators of their own destinies and shape the destiny of the Nation. Thus, Gandhi exhorted women to recognize their own strength and potential and not limit themselves to be passive recipients of male benevolence and humanitarianism. For Gandhi,

women's real strength was consciousness of their purity and chastity, which could disarm even the most beastly of men. Especially, in the context of the nationalist movement, Gandhi called upon women to follow the ideal of Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi, for her bravery and moral courage (*Kishwar*, 1986).

However, Gandhi held contradictory ideas on the issue of purity. He argued that, "none could officiate at the altar of Swaraj who did not approach it with pure hands and a pure heart!" While this notion of purity was incumbent on both men and women, he was particularly harsh in his condemnation of women. This was illustrated when he refused to take monetary contributions made by women in prostitution, arguing that this was tainted money, given by 'fallen sisters' who had made that money by 'stealing the virtue' of men. He called upon them to give up their work and transform themselves into becoming worthy for the nation by doing humanitarian work.

Thus Gandhi drew from the gendered understanding of the essential nature of men and women, arguing that women were naturally maternal, self-sacrificing and having superior moral courage. He however, reversed the relative value placed on them, arguing that feminine virtues which had been looked down upon were the most necessary and useful in the non-violent nationalist struggle, thus, creating a space for women's wide participation. The non-violent nature of the struggle ensured that more and more women could participate in the same. However, according to Patel (1988), Gandhi's understanding of women remained within the framework of middle class, respectable femininity and much of the spaces that women created for themselves were the result of the creative endeavours of women in using the vocabulary and possibilities opened up by Gandhi for their own ends.

In the aftermath of the salt march especially, women became important political drivers as they could be used at the vanguard of many kinds of political action, including marches, picketing shops selling foreign goods etc. Gandhi thus, saw women as the potential political force for political action.

The Non-cooperation movement on 1920-21, Civil Disobedience movement of 1930-31 and Quit India movement of 1942 were significant in drawing women out in large numbers. The participation of women in the 1920 movement was striking, women were involved in the picketing of liquor shops, preventing auction of liquor, charkha spinning and khadi production and sale of khadi products. The Rashtriya Stree Sabha was founded in Bombay during this time. This organization was devoted solely to nationalistic activities (*Kumar*, 1993). The extent of women's participation can be gauged by the fact that the 1921 Congress session was attended by a hundred and forty-four women delegates, hundred and thirty one women volunteers and fourteen women on the different subject committees.

As compared to the non-cooperation movement, the Civil disobedience movement was significant because women struggled for their right to participate and asserted their equality, like in asking to be included in the Dandi march. Subsequent to the Dandi march, the congress party took a position of supporting women's leadership in the movement for breaking the salt law throughout the country. The civil disobedience movement saw the participation of thousands of women in all aspects of the movement (*Kumar*, 1993).

Apart from women who were part of the Gandhian movement and the Congress party, this struggle encouraged and motivated many women to organize in a number of small local-level women's organizations, like the Desh Sevikasangh, Nari Satyagraha Samiti, the Ladies Picketing Board etc. These organizations undertook such activities like organizing picketing, selling khadi, organizing and participating in prabhatpheris, marching and singing nationalist songs, etc.

The next important moment in the nationalist struggle was the Quit India movement, launched by Gandhi in 1942. In this struggle, women not took over leadership once the major leaders of the Congress had been arrested. As the British intensified their repression of the movement, women like ArunaAsaf Ali and Usha Mehta evaded arrest, went underground and continued the struggle. Usha Mehta ran an underground radio relaying information and programmes, spreading the news about the on-going struggle.

During this period, women started asserting their participation in the nationalist struggle as a matter of their right and duty. A new generation of women became radicalized in this context and articulated not only nationalist ideas, but also struggle for political and social justice.

What is important therefore to note about women's participation in the Gandhian nationalist movement is that while women did come out of the precincts of the family-household, the structural confines and ideological strictures of the family-household system persisted. Women took advantage of the spaces opened up by this entry into the public to carve out destinies for themselves which were probably unimaginable for women a generation before. But much of these advances were made not because nationalism had issues of gender on its agenda, but rather as the unintended consequences of women's entry into public and due to what women did with those spaces (*Patel, 1988*).

#### **10.4.2 Women in Armed Revolutionary Struggle**

Apart from the non-violent nationalist movement, in Bengal and Punjab especially, organizations and movements which believed in revolutionary violence as the path towards freedom emerged. These organizations believed in taking direct action against the British in the form of arson, political assassinations and other forms of political violence to overthrow the British regime. Women also found the ideology of revolutionary violence attractive and though their numbers were small as compared to the participation of women in the Gandhian nationalist movement, their participation and contribution was significant. Many of these were young, teenage girls with a strong sense of idealism. These women included Kalpana Dutt, Bina Das, Roopvati Jain, PreetilataWaddedar, Rani Gudiallo, Shanti Ghosh and Suniti Choudhary among others. Women took up arms or protested through other means like the non-payment of dues (*Kumar, 1993*).

The other significant stream of women's participation was seen in the 40s and was closely associated with the Azad Hind Senainitiated by Subash Chandra Bose. The Sena consisted of the Rani Jhansi brigade which was headed by Lakshmi Swaminathan (later known as Captain Lakshmi Sehgal). The women of the brigade not only received training in nursing and other allied activities, they were also trained to be soldiers and trained for combat just like men. This movement generated a new militant image of women with a new slogan, "Jai Hind!"

Many young girls, enthused by the news of the revolutionaries, also took direct action on their own, without being part of any revolutionary movements. Thus, we see that within the nationalist movement, there emerged two pathways of women's activism – the picketing satyagrahi of Gandhian nationalism and the armed revolutionary. Both these spaces opened up hitherto unavailable spaces of political action for women, though the nationalist movement largely mobilized and addressed women as mothers/wives (*Loomba, 2018*).

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## 10.5 ANTI-CASTE MOVEMENTS

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Anti-caste movements which addressed women as citizens became an important context for the mobilization of women. Women were active within the Satyashodhak movement, the Periyar led Self-Respect Movement and the Ambedkarite movement among others. We will look at the Self-Respect and Ambedkarite movements in details.

### 10.5.1 Women and the Self-Respect Movement

The Self-Respect movement was launched by E. V. Ramasami Naicker, otherwise known as Periyar in 1926. The Self-respect movement struck at the very heart of the nationalist rhetoric which prioritized the notion of preserving the national unity, even in the face of glaring inequalities like caste. Periyar challenged everything considered 'sacred' by the upper castes - the nation, varnashrama dharma (a belief system which categorizes human beings into different varnas. Each varna is expected to practise a particular profession and follow certain social norms) and inequalities of caste which were routinely practised in the name of religion and God, amounting to a radical critique of Brahminical supremacy and calling for a demystification of puranic Hinduism. Resolutions were passed in Self-Respect conventions condemning the apparatuses of Hindu religion - vedas, shastras and puranas for legitimizing the caste system. They resolved not to employ Brahmin priests for religious rituals, challenging the Brahmin's authority. Since surnames denoted caste, many of them dropped their caste appellations and refused to use caste symbols. The Self-respect movement emphasized rationality and wanted to destroy superstition and blind faith, especially with respect to religion. Most importantly, the Self-respecters argued for women's right to property, work, divorce, remarriage and contraception. They regarded Hinduism and the caste system that went with it, as the roots of gender inequality. Large number of women were closely identified with the politics of the movement. The self-respect women also wrote extensively in their own critical voices in the journals of the movement.

The Self-Respect marriage form perhaps best illustrates the gender ideology of the Self-Respect movement. First, they abandoned the services of a Brahmin priest and the chanting of the ceremonial mantras in Sanskrit. They discarded custom and convention since these were followed without a sense of their significance and only because they were deemed to be sacrosanct by elders. The Self-Respect marriage held that it was the approval of the bride and the groom, rather than the consent of the parents which was necessary and central for the marriage to take place. The Self-Respect marriage vow required man and woman to abide by each other's views, needs and concerns (*Rajdurai and Geetha, 1998*).

Marriages which defied the norms of caste, community and what was considered 'proper' or 'respectable' sexuality thus made for families which were outward looking in their orientation; they came to be less concerned with domestic virtues and worries and notions of privacy, honour and pride and were more interested in activities deemed public. Thus, many self-respect couples worked as full time activists within the movement, not minding the dislocation of family and home that happened from time to time and not concerned with building careers or fortunes. This opened up unprecedented spaces for women. In the accounts that self-respect women have written of their own lives, we see that the political, public life of the movement was much more important to them, rather than the duties they were expected to perform as wives and mothers.

For women, participation in the movement brought them out of the home and family space and integrated them into a community of like-minded citizens, who did not abide so much by the ascriptive rules of conduct, as they did by those norms of civil virtue which required men and women to mingle freely, across caste and creed, in a spirit of mutuality and equality.

The Self-Respect ideology on gender denounced chastity as a false ideal, criticisms of manhood and hegemonic ideals of beauty, as well as a denouncement of double standards of sexuality for men and women. The Self-Respect movements' dream was of a community of women self-Respecters who would unite in solidarity with their male peers in a spirit of horizontal comradeship and citizenship. Many women self-respecters struggled to at least partially realize this dream. These movements, focused on women as citizens and equal humans, trying to break the frameworks which rendered women visible only as wives and mothers.

### 10.5.2 Women in the Ambedkarite Movement

The anti-caste struggle led by Dr. Ambedkar, was perhaps the most significant anti-caste struggle in Colonial India. There are two important things to note about the participation of women in the Ambedkarite movement. One is that women participated in large numbers in the movement and from very early on, parallel conventions of women were held. But more importantly, we need to note that Ambedkarite women were entering into the public sphere and debating issues like education, the devadasi system and reservations among others in the 1920s and 30s which is marked in mainstream nationalist historiography as the period of the 'nationalist resolution' of the woman question. Therefore, reading and understanding the participation and issues raised by these women, allows for a rethinking of the history of the woman question itself (Rege, 2006).

Education of girls and women was an integral part of the vision Ambedkar had for the emancipation of Dalits. When women began to be actively involved in the movement, they first appealed to all women to educate themselves and their sons and daughters. Further, women trained to be teachers, started schools and managed hostels for Dalit boys and girls so they could access education. Dalit women were taking part in the various meetings and conferences and also delivering speeches in the same. Women's participation in the agitation for access to water at the Chavdar Lake in Mahad, and for the entry into the Ambabai temple in Kolhapur has been documented. In fact, the presence of women in the Mahadsatyagraha was so significant that Ambedkar especially addressed the

women who had come there and asked them to take up a pledge not to lead a stigmatized life, give up caste-based clothing and ornaments, the old customs and ways of life that mark them as untouchable, asking them to be vigilant about not eating the meat of dead animals, and asking women to embrace the path of knowledge and learning, including educating their daughters.

Pawar and Moon (2008) note what a radical impact this speech had on Dalit women and how many of them turned up the very next day wearing their nine-yard sarees around their ankles like the Brahmin women to show their dedication and loyalty. They note how Ambedkar was touched by this and he gave each of them eight annas to buy blouses and bangles.

In the Kalaram temple satyagraha in Nashik and the Parvati temple entry satyagraha in Pune also the participation of Dalit women was significant. They even led groups of satyagrahis independently.

The first sessions of the all India Depressed Classes Congress was held in Nagpur from 8th to 10th August 1930, in which there was a separate women's session organized on 10th. The women gave speeches supporting Ambedkar's stand for the Roundtable Conference. In 1936, the C.P (Berar) Untouchable Women's Provincial Congress was held under the leadership of Anusayabai Ingole and passed resolutions regarding political reservations, economic rights and education for untouchable girls among others. Similarly, conferences in Nagpur, Malkapur, Manmad, Umred etc. passed resolutions backing Ambedkar's call for conversion among other demands.

An important landmark in this history was the Dalit Mahila Federation Conference held in Nagpur in 1942. Many important women leaders were part of this conference which passed many important resolutions around the legal ban on polygamy, various reforms in labour laws, education for girls etc.

In the speeches delivered by women in the meetings of the Schedule Caste Federation, they argued that there was no longer any reason for remaining under the domination of men or the community. They further underlined the need for adequate representation for women in the federation at district and taluka levels, stressed the assertion of selfhood and the importance of standing by the young men falsely implicated in the caste riots. At a meeting organized in 1936, women while supporting Ambedkar's call to conversion argued that the new faith must grant them freedom and equality. Women not only participated in large number in the Dikshant ceremony converting to Buddhism, they also talked about the tensions and joys of abandoning the idols of Gods and Goddesses after Dharmantar (conversion to dhamma, Ambedkar's version of emancipatory Buddhism), their lead in organizing conversion ceremonies at the local level and the proliferation of Buddhist Mahila Mandals in urban and rural areas. Women from these mandals also later participated in large numbers in the Satyagraha for land under the leadership of Dadasaheb Gaikwad in 1956 and 1964. Ambedkarite women also participated in large numbers in the political process.

Thus, we see that Ambedkarite women were not "just" participating in the movement, but that they raised their own concerns and also organized autonomously. Their articulation of the gender question within the frameworks of graded equality and demands for social justice and equality as individuals and citizens were thus, very different from the models of wife or mother which were offered by the reform and the nationalist movements.

## 10.6 LEFT WORKERS, LOWER CLASS BASED AND PEASANT MOVEMENTS

Many women who had been active in the nationalist movement, turned to socialist thought and communist party in the period between 1928-1932. Mumbai emerged as a major centre for the working class movement in India, since it has been the main centre for railway and cotton mills, the two major industries in India at this point in time. In 1880, Satyashodhak leader Narayan Meghaji Lokhande had started the first union for mill workers in Mumbai. However, by the 1920s, the mills in Mumbai has expanded and the number of women workers in mills had gone up, since women were seen as cheap labour (*Kumar, 1993*).

One of the first documented political action by women mill workers was the six day strike that they initiated in 1908, to protest the imprisonment of Lokmanya Tilak. The Bitiya mills struggle in 1939 is a major landmark in the history of the worker's and women's movements. In Maharashtra, the Parel Mahila Sangh (PMS) was formed in 1943, under the leadership of women like Ahilya Rangnekar and Vimal Randive and was envisaged as a space that would take up the specific demands of women, within the context of the larger political struggle. Most members of the PMS were either workers themselves or the wives of workers and the organization soon grew both in size and militancy. The PMS took up and won demands for women workers specific to them being women, for instance demands for higher wages and maternity benefits (*Armstrong, 2002*).

Thus, we see that there was a rich contribution of women workers to the working class movement. Women were being politicized in this context as workers and labourers. Apart from women workers in the industrial sector in urban India and mine and plantation workers, a large section of the working class in India was the peasants or tillers of land. The pre-Independence period saw a number of peasant revolts and movements, for rights to land to the tiller, of better wages and freedom from feudal oppression. Two of the biggest movements in this context, were led by the Communist party in Bengal and Telangana. Women not only participated in large numbers in these movements, but the feminist analysis and study of these movements has also thrown up a number of questions for how this participation shaped the movements themselves. We will examine the Tebhaga movement in details (*Panjabi, 2017*).

### 10.6.1 The Tebhaga Movement

The Tebhaga movement was a peasant struggle in Bengal in the 1940s, which saw the participation of more than 50,000 women - from urban and rural Bengal. It was organized by the Communist party of India and saw participation of severely exploited sharecroppers. The movement continued right upto 1947, when in the wake of independence and partition, it was temporarily withdrawn. However, in the aftermath of the partition, it picked up again in some districts of West Bengal and East Pakistan. This phase was however marked by a deeply contentious policy of armed struggle and the movement finally ended in 1951. The major demand of the movement was the collective demand of landless tillers of the soil for a greater share of the crop (two-thirds as against the one-third that they customarily got) against the feudal landlords. That is where the movement gets its name - tebhaga (meaning three parts). Women participated in large number in the movement. The movement is significant because of a major coming together

of urban and rural women. This activism came from the retaliation against threats of sexual violence posed by the entry of US/British soldiers in the second World War as well as imminent attacks by the Japanese. The other important context was the devastation wrought by the 'man-made' famine of 1943. This was unique because it was a case of 'hunger in the time of plenty' caused by the policies of hoarding by an insensitive colonial government for war-related demands. The experience of the famine for rural, peasant women was of witnessing starvation of their families, sexual exploitation by richer farmers and of being sold by their own husbands and kin in exchange of food. Urban, middle class women, who had been deeply moved to action by the sight of emaciated men and women flooding Kolkata and dying before their eyes, as well as the fear of sexual violence; created a context of solidarity with the rural, peasant women. The urban women, especially those in contact with the Communist Party of India, organized self-defence committees, hunger marches to demand food and working in soup kitchens. These urban activists, part of the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (Women's Self-Defence League) of the Communist Party set up women's groups or mahilasamitis in the villages. A majority of the women who participated in the struggle were peasant women, largely from the middle and lower castes. These included Mondals and Majhis in Kakdwip and Mednipurdistricts, Namasudras in Narail and Rajbangshis in Rangpur and Dinajpur. In the tribal areas, in Jalpaiguri, majority of activists were Oraons and in Nachole, Santhals. In Mednipur and Narail, especially, some Muslim women also played a very active role (*Panjabi, 2017*).

Women in the Tebhaga movement articulated a politics of their own and not merely as wives of peasants or nurturing mothers, but as workers who desired to make their rightful claim on the products of their labour. Feminists point to the immense importance of personal desire and finding fulfillment for the same in politics. The women of Tebhaga recall their participation in the movement through experiences of peace, joy and most importantly, nashaor intoxication. Women in the movement had forged powerful solidarities across caste, class and urban-rural divides and had found unique ways of not only transcending social divides but also transcendence in a larger sense of being able to influence the march of history. And that this had gone beyond transforming women's lives into touching the lives of men around them in profound ways. Lastly, the time of the Tebhaga movement, was also a time for the fusing of romance/eros and politics for the women participants. The participation in the movement and the subsequent familiarisation with the ideals of equality and justice and the ethics of comradeship, meant that women took these into the realm of the private/ the intimate and sought to remake their intimate lives in the context of these ethics (*Panjabi, 2017*).

**Check Your Progress**

- 1) What do understand by social movements and women's movements?

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2) Elaborate on diverse roots and routes of women's movements: colonial India.

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3) Discuss the nationalist movement in locating women issues.

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4) Explain the role of anti-caste movements.

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## 10.7 LET US SUM UP

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As we discussed earlier, the narrative about the history and trajectory of women's movements in India needs to be seen as enmeshed and entangled by drawing out the many hidden and ignored legacies. The assumptions of mainstream as well as feminist writing on the women's movement need to be challenged. The women's movements in Colonial India created the space for women to enter into the public sphere and become political actors. As we have seen, there were different ways in which women gained this entry. Sometimes, they found space to be part of politics in their role as mothers, sometimes it was the idea of their 'natural' qualities like sacrificial nature that opened up the way for them. In other contexts, women saw themselves as workers and peasants and asked for equal rights within those contexts. In anti-caste movements, women articulated the ways in which their being women and their belonging to particular castes was linked to each other and claimed equality as citizens. Thus, we saw that women did not only become active and political within the nationalist movement as mothers and wives, but sought to carve for themselves a role in the public sphere by participating in a variety of movements. Women not only participated in these movements, they also raised their own issues and concerns, forcing movements to reconsider their positions, like in the case of the salt march. But women also faced many hurdles in this process and their struggles helped the generations of women who came after them to mount movements for major changes in their lives. Thus, we have

to see these different threads as contributing to creating a strong foundation for women's politics and women's movements that came up in a consolidated way in the post-Independence India, which we will be examining in the next unit.

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