

(STUDY MATERIALS FOR LONG QUESTION AND SHORT NOTES)

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Women's Movements Pre-Independence India

The women's movement in India began as a social reform movement in the nineteenth century. The Western ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity were being imbibed by the educated elite through the study of English. Western liberalism was to extend to the women's question and translate into awareness on the status of women.

In India, the tradition of women's struggles and movements against patriarchal institutions of gender injustice, have been weak when compared to the women's movements in the Western and European societies. In fact, women's fight against the oppression of patriarchy has been rather slow in emerging.

Most of the women's writings of the eighteenth century reveal disenchantment with the prevalence of patriarchy and gender injustices rather than any kind of active resistance or revolt against them. Women did try to go against the male-dominated world (for example, by joining the Bhakti Movement).

The nineteenth century women found themselves totally suppressed and subjugated by the male patriarchal ideologies and attitudes of those times, though there was a feminist identity consciousness and awareness of their plight. However, this awareness did not get translated into an open and organized struggle for selfhood and survival.

Though there were feelings of deprivation and anger against the injustices women were facing, these remained mostly latent, and at the most, sometimes mildly open. In today's world, feminist movements have gained expression due to similar factors.

The women's movement in India can be seen as forming three "waves". The first wave can be seen during the national movement, when there was mass mobilization of women for participation in the nationalist movement.

Thereafter, for over a decade, there was a lull in political activities by women. The late 1960s saw resurgence in women's political activity and can be called the second wave. In the late 1970s, the third wave of the women's movement emerged, which focused on women's empowerment.

Pre-independence Women's Movements in India (The First Wave of Women's Movement):

Readings of texts, religious, political, cultural, social—oral stories, mythology, folklore, fables, songs, jokes, proverbs, and sayings reveal that women's subordination has existed in different forms since time immemorial. Of course, there have been acts of resistance at different times throughout the Indian history, though these have been sporadic.

There are numerous stories of how women questioned and went against the establishment, personified in the deeds of Razia Sultana, Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, Ahilyabai Holkar, Muktabai, and so on. Women throughout history made efforts to break free from the bonds of oppression they had to face by virtue of their birth.

Many women belonging to the various castes joined the Bhakti Movement. The saints stood up for equal rights of men and women. It resulted in some amount of social freedom for women. Women joined in Kathas and Kirtans organized by

various saints of the Bhakti Movement. This helped in freeing women from the drudgery and restrictions of domestic life.

The Bhakti Movement was an egalitarian movement that cut across gender and caste discriminations. Some women such as Mira Bai, Akkamahadevi, and Janaki became leading poetesses. The saints of the Bhakti Movement produced considerable literature in the vernacular language, or the language of the people.

Indian culture became accessible to women also: Saints also encouraged the worship of the feminine counterparts of male Gods (Narayan-Lakshmi, Krishna-Radha, Vishnu-Lakshmi), which indirectly helped to elevate the status of women.