

(STUDY MATERIALS FOR LONG QUESTION AND SHORT NOTES)

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Women's Movements in India After Independence

There is a distinction between pre-independence and post-Independence women's movements in India. The pre-independence movements were essentially about social reforms and initiated by men. In comparison, the post-independence movement demanded gender equality, questioned gender-based division of labor and highlighted the oppressive nature of the existing patriarchal structure.

In the euphoria of post-independence, it was believed that women's status would dramatically improve along with other marginalized groups because they were now the masters of their destiny.

However, when this was not achieved there was an upsurge of various movements which raised a number of issues around diverse subjects such as land rights, wages, security of employment, equality, etc. Some of the issues on which women got together were work, population policies, atrocities on women, including rape and liquor.

After India gained independence from British rule in 1947, it was the Congress party that came to power and formed the Government. The government made certain attempts to fulfill the promises it had made to women during the pre-independence period, and also in the initial period after independence.

While framing the Constitution of India, it included the very important aspect of equality of men and women in all spheres of life. Article 14 of the Constitution of India states that, “The State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India”.

Article 15 states that “The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, sex, place of birth or any of them.” Article 15(3) states that “Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children”.

Article 16 states that “There shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State”. According to Veena Majumdar, “The Constitutions radical departure from inherited social values represented to women of that generation its greatest intrinsic quality.

For the women ... with definite memories of pre-independence society and of the freedom struggle, the acceptance of gender equality in the constitution was the fulfillment of a dream of women’s entitlement to an independent identity.” A number of administrative bodies were set up for the creation of opportunities for women. A number of women were inducted into the government.

In the two decades that followed, 1950s and 1960s, there was a lull in the activities of feminists and in the women’s movements in India. Women, however, started realizing that the constitutional promise of equality did not by itself resolve the equality questions, especially in a country as diverse as India, which comprises different religions and cultures.

The challenge of addressing inequality within women remains till this day. The women’s movement has not been able to “decommunalise” the issue. Women’s organizations and feminists did not know how to deal with the problems of

women belonging to different religious groups. By the time the feminist movement stepped into the 1970s, minority identities had begun to harden. This divisive environment affected Muslim women.

Religious fundamentalists tried to place the onus of preserving religio-cultural identity on women. This identity syndrome, with women in the center, diverted attention away from Muslim women's grim realities and the deviations from the actual Islamic position.

Having been a secular movement, the women's movement found itself facing a difficult challenge that it did not know how to handle. On the conceptual level, Indian

feminists were in a dilemma: how to assimilate Muslim women's issues into broader feminist issues and, at the same time, safeguard their religious and cultural identity. This has been most obvious in the case of Muslim Personal Law.

Placing Muslim women's issues within the confines of religion has further marginalized them, and created hesitancy among the secular feminists in addressing their problems for fear of hurting religious sentiments.

The 1970s also witnessed the split of the Indian Left Front. This led to a number of doubts regarding their earlier analysis of revolution. New Leftist movements and ideas emerged. A few streams of feminist movements also developed, such as the Shahada movement, which was a Bhil tribal landless laborer's movement against the exploitation of the tribal landless laborers by non-tribal landowners. It began as a folk protest, and became militant with the involvement of the New Left party.

It has been said that women were more active in the movement, and as their militancy increased, they demanded direct action on issues specific to them as women, such as physical violence and abuse as a result of alcoholism.

Groups of women would go from village to village, enter liquor dens and destroy liquor pots and containers. If any woman reported physical abuse by her husband, all other women would surround him, beat him up and force him to apologize to his wife in public.

The formation of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) was probably the first attempt made to form a Trade Union attached to the Textile Labor Union in Ahmedabad. It was formed in 1972 at the initiative of Ela Bhatt, and was an organization of women who were involved in different trades, but shared a number of common features and work experiences—low earnings, extremely poor working conditions (some worked at home, and others toiled on streets as vendors or hawkers), harassment from those in authority (contractors, police, and so on), and lack of recognition of their efforts as socially useful work.

SEWA aimed at improving the working conditions of women through a process of training, technical aid, legal literacy, collective bargaining, and to teach values of honesty, dignity and simplicity, the Gandhian goals to which SEWA subscribes.

The anti-price rise agitations in Maharashtra were the direct result of the drought and famine conditions that affected rural Maharashtra in the early 1970s. These led to a sharp price rise in urban Maharashtra. In 1973, the United Women's Anti-Price Rise Front was formed to mobilize women against inflation.

Within no time, it fire balled into a mass women's movement for consumer protection and the demand was for the government to fix minimum prices and to distribute essential commodities. Huge groups of women, between 10,000 and 20,000, would hold demonstrations at government offices, houses of Members of Parliament and merchants, and those who could not get out of their homes would

express their support by beating thalis (metal plates) with lathis or belans (rolling pins).

This movement spread to Gujarat, where it was called the Nav Nirman movement. In Gujarat, the movement started as a student's movement against spiraling costs, corruption and black marketeering. Soon, it became a massive middle-class movement and thousands of women joined it. The methods included mock courts where judgments were passed on corrupt state officials and politicians, mock funeral processions, and processions to greet the dawn of a new era.

Women started participating in increasing numbers in the Naxalbari movement in West Bengal and the Naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh, the Navnirman youth movement in Gujarat, and the Chipko Movement. The Shramik Mahila Sangathan (Working Women's Organization), the Progressive Organization of Women, and the Mahila Samata Sainik Dal (League of Women Soldiers for Equality) were some of the organizations that emerged during this period.