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## UNIT 10 WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS

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### 10.1 INTRODUCTION

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Like other social groups women also have been involved in collective actions equipped with their agenda, leadership, ideologies and organisations in order to have their proper and dignified place in all aspects of life. This unit deals with social movements of women. Women as individuals and as a group are among the most discriminated sections of world population. As a marker of this discrimination, societies across the world have shown preference for boy child. The preference for boy child has taken societies to the extent of killing girl child in the womb itself. All practices of discriminations in societies have been legitimised through either invoking socio-cultural needs or the need to maintain a lineage or for material production. The *patrilineality*, where descent is through father's lineage and *patrilocality* where the wife and children lives in father's home or village have added to the preference for the boy child. All these arrangements have the consequence of women being relegated to what Simon De Bouvoir so poignantly termed as the *Second Sex*.

As the *second sex* in material terms means that women is quite often denied political, economic and even cultural rights. She quite often does not have right to inherit property along with her male siblings. She does not have either equal access to education and health care equal to a male counterpart. She is also perennially in the danger of being the target of male violence within the family or outside. Historically religion, polity and society have been so organised as to make her position vulnerable to any discriminatory trends in the society. There have been protests and revolts by people including women to question such discriminating arrangements within the society. They, however, remained at the level of individual protest while the structure and power of patriarchy being so strong as to crush them or appropriate them easily into the existing arrangements. It is during the last two hundred years or so that the modern times have provided the space, ideas and principles of organisation to people to question as well as alter the arrangements by either aligning the women's protests with the parallel movements to change the society or by incorporating the basic digits of modernity into the women's movements. Nationalist movement in the colonial countries, socialist and communist movement and feminist movement across the world and the larger trend of democracy have been some

of the powerful streams that presented themselves as catalyst of change in this regard. In the increasingly globalising world women's issues and concerns are becoming increasingly part of the larger movements.

The relationship between women and social movements is quite intricate. First, one is not very clear as to where and how do women figure in the broad contour of different social movements. It has been found that women were merely part of the mobilised section of some movement whose overall objectives are detrimental to women's interests and concerns. For example, the fundamentalist movements across the globe have tended to circumscribe women's role as merely that of a mother or provider of children to the community as defined by the group. The glorification of a mythical German women by the Nazi ideology has its counterpart in many other groups. In fact, any move to give the rights of ownership of property, marriage etc., have remained in the domain of the personal and any change in that domain invites the wrath of the section of the fundamentalist groups. Any demand to take women's issues and rights away from community to the larger public domain has been opposed by the fundamentalist groups.

Second, related to the nature of social movement is: whether it allows the space for the articulation of issues and concerns regarding women. Indian national movement was one such movement whose democratic and secular character had given the space for many democratic movements to spring up and voice their concern. Women's movement in India is one such example where the contours of the movement coalesce with the mass phase of the Indian national movement. The notion of equality, idea of justice and democracy, central to the core of the movement of national liberation, were also the premises of the women's movement.

Historically, changing conditions of women and their status constituted the core of the social reform movement that began to take shape in the early decades of the nineteenth century. By the early decades of the twentieth century this core is enlarged by bringing two issues, i.e., equality of women in modern political, social and cultural realm, and women's role in the developmental process, into its ambit. Though the rapid changes in the society, economy and culture have led to rethinking on many issues, the social movements in the country more or less have directed their concerns about women along this core.

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## **10.2 THE COLONIAL CONTEXT: THE VISION OF A NEW SOCIETY AND THE REFORM MOVEMENT**

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In India, like in many other colonised countries, it was colonialism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that brought the new economic and political processes into operation. The coming of the British, the Christian Missionaries and their criticism of the Indian society presented a big challenge to the local intellectuals and social leaders. The former attacked the indigenous society and its treatment of women and the lower caste. It presented new organising principle, equality, or Christianity in some cases. It also brought blueprint for a new organising principle for the society. While colonialism as a system exploited the colonies and stunted its natural and potential growth, it brought, at the same time, the new ideas of democracy, idea of equality and justice.

The nineteenth century Hindu, Parsee, Muslim reformers took the challenge and first tried to reform their own societies in the face of such a massive criticism. Ram Mohan Roy, for example, while he attacked the missionaries for presenting distorted picture, was also preparing agitation against Sati and the customs of caste inequalities. In the later part of the century, reformers took the questioning of women's condition very prominently and all the major reform efforts aimed at ameliorating their conditions. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar made great efforts in getting widow remarriage society established. Similarly women's education too was thought to be one of the most important steps in this direction. Veereshlingam Pontulu, Jyotiaba Phule, Badruddin Tybaji, Dadabhai Naoroji all contributed greatly in this direction.

In the later part of the nineteenth century, when there was in some sense a reassertion of the racial and imperialist ideas, there were a movement among the Indians which tried and asserted its own historical superiority. In this line that they looked into the past to suggest that woman was in some sense better placed in those days than they were now. In this sense the problem of integrating women's question into the social movement become more intricate— if the situation became bad what should one do was the question that led to the major indicator of the movements' thrust. It was to the credit of the intelligentsia who fought the issue of social reform that the issue of women remained in the forefront. One of the most intensely fought issues was the between the social reformers and the those who separated the social issues from the political fight.

### **10.2.1 The Issue of Priority: Social or Political?**

What was the exact nature of women's issues and how should they be addressed? Should they be treated purely as question about social inequality or attitude or as part and parcel of larger political questions of equality, freedom and justice? These have been serious questions before the reformers as well as the political leaders since the nineteenth century. It should, however, be noted that except Phule most of the social reformers were concerned with social reforms among the high castes. The problems like widow remarriage and sati were not prevalent among the lower strata of society. And low castes in general irrespective of gender were deprived of education. To the early reformers this division did not present itself very sharply as people like Raja Rammohan Ray articulated women's cause as integral part of his overall vision for what we now referred to as a modern India. Those who began to mobilise opinion regarding the economy and issues related to the operation of the colonial system in the second half of the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century were also concerned with the reforms in society and equality of men and a more just society for the women in a possible modern India. For them the issues of economy and politics were not dissociated. M.G. Ranade, Veereshlingam Pontulu, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Phirojshah Mehta, Dadabhai Naoroji , Badruddin Tyabji, Jyotiba Phule and many more actively campaigned for women's education and more public space. The symbol of this unity of perception was the fact that the annual conference of the Indian social conference used to meet at the Annual Congress session pandal itself. The question whether the social issue or the political issue is more important emerged by this time. The Congress realised that the differences of perceptions on social issues among different communities were given priority over the political issues, it would breach the unity of people while was essential in the national movement.

In ensuing debate between the social and political question, the idea of priority and the location of the principle of equality was very important. Those who opposed the social conference working anywhere close to the Indian National Congress, in fact, did not oppose the principle of equality. But the separation of the social question from the political turned out to be some way detrimental to the women's questions. The debate on the issue of Age of consent Bill which created an uproar in the 1890s saw that the progressive voices were opposed quite powerfully by sections which were not in favour of a legislation which was primarily a legislation in raising the marriageable age for women. The attempt to separate the two also impeded any serious theoretical debate on the ways and means to incorporate the women's issue in the movement for social equality.

### **10.2.2 Women's Issues During the Gandhian Era**

In the 1920s the Gandhian movements brought back a sense of unity on the women's question. Along with the question of untouchability, and Hindu Muslim question, women's condition also became a primary issue to be solved immediately. This has serious implications for the women's movement in general and the mobilisation of women's issues for the larger political context. The national movement now created the largest possible space for the women to come out and participate on an issue which was ostensibly political, i.e., political freedom. But at the same time the masses, including large number of women, were galvanised to raise their own groups' issues in the process of the movement. In 1927 All India Women's Association was formed as the national body giving voice to some of the issues. This was the time when we have voices from women as well as from other sections for giving women the voting rights as well as representation in any possible government formation. Interestingly, this was also the time that suffrage movement in Europe gained its momentum. Many of the women who were in forefront of the Gandhian movement later became involved in institutions all over the country. These institutions would play a major role in taking up serious social issues, and mobilising and leading movements in later years. In fact, the methods that Gandhi used in his struggle against the colonial state as well as in his movement against the untouchability and on the question of communal conflict became hallmark of some of the movements by women quite often inspired by these women and institutions. In the seventies when women fought in Uttaranchal against the liquor vendors or against the falling of trees, their movement was characterised by the Gandhian ways of protest-non violent and arousing the moral conscience in the opponent.

The success of Russian Revolution in 1970s encouraged a large number of women to join the communist movement in India, who were involved in the national movement and women's movements at the same time. In fact, the communist movement helped the later day progressive movement to take up issues related to women as well as women's position as the central political and social question. These communist women continued their legacy of women's movement in the post-independence period.

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## **10.3 THE POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD: STATE, REFORM AND WOMEN**

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The post-independent Indian state launched the array of reforms which had been demanded even before the independence. There were, for example, demands that all customary and

religious and traditional laws which regulated the larger Hindu society and which to a great extent therefore determined the legal status of the Hindu women in religious terms should be codified and brought into the public domain. In 1948 there were attempts to bring to the Constituent Assembly what is known as the Hindu code Bill. However, the stiff opposition led to the dropping of the idea. After a couple of other attempts, finally it was in 1955-56 that the Code Bill was passed in sections known as the Hindu Marriage Act, Hindu Succession Act, etc. In spite of the strong support from the Congress party under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru the opposition was very strong. The government could not enter into the issue of the personal laws of the other communities, i.e., Muslim, Christian or Parsees. Crucial aspects of their lives continued to be determined by the personal laws of their religious communities in which man was the supreme arbiter in most of the cases. This was an anomalous situation as women found to their chagrin that the community structures were more authoritarian and Indian state in that sense would be more of an agency of liberation from such structures

The post-independent Indian state geared itself to the consensus that modern developed state and the political democracy would be safeguarded by the economic democracy. Women got franchise – the democratic right and the development would see that she got the economic rights to practise that democracy. Thus a full blown theory of equality, rights and justice was in place.

It was the violence against women in the form of bride burning and rape that galvanised the women's movement led by the feminist groups especially since the 1970s. The campaign against dowry and rape are called the first campaigns of the contemporary Indian feminists movement. The violence against women at the ground level, rape by the landlords, caste oppression etc., made the movement gradually try and incorporate them into the concerns for women. The theoretical and organisational structures of the parties and the movement though highlighted some of the issues, did not develop any new perspective on them. This had set in motion a rapid disenchantment with the state apparatus. There began to be strong voices against the nature of the development and there were demand for more women-centric development in many parts of the country. In fact, several cases, for example, the Chipko movement in the Himalayas, became an eye opener where along with the saving of the trees there were demands for development planning which is sensitive to the local needs and resources.

These criticisms have been yoked into theoretical mode by the criticism of development process that India has been undergoing. The international feminists' criticism of the state sponsored development process which marked its decisive beginning in the seventies also influenced these works during the decade of the UN women's decade. A section of these intellectual critics though not directly coming from the feminists, began to uphold community, tradition and the local bonds as the counterpoint to the project of modernity which they argued was against women. Some fragments of Indian intellectual too joined in those critique. In the nineties these critique merged with sections of the feminists movement which was also waging a battle against the globalisation processes.

The post-independent Indian state is grounded on the idea of equity with justice and this has been the consensus developed during the freedom movement. The development was supposed to bring the equity closer and the democratic functioning of the system would see to it that the fruits of development would reach to the different segments of population. Regarding the issue of women, the consensus was on women's development. On the

equity front the legal system was found to be unequal and the one of the first major restructuring tried by the Constituent Assembly in 1948 itself was to try and effect a standardised Hindu code which would try to do away with a large number of discriminatory personal and customary rules applied to women in different Hindu communities. The ultimate conceived goal, as the Women's representative would argue, was to usher a common uniform civil code. This was thought to be very significant because the state continued to treat women through the personal or community laws where male was the dominant and authoritarian figure. It was argued that unless the rules, conventions and laws are brought out of the personal or community into the public domain women would not be able to enjoy the equality as promised by the constitution.

The Shah Bano affair brought an entire range of issues related to women to the fore. It brought the Indian state's attitude towards the issue of women in the context of her religious community. It also showed the weakness of the women's movement to mobilise its strength to fight for a common civil code. Thirdly, it brought the weakness of the progressive sections in the society to come forward and demand uniform civil code for all the communities so that the women's rights come out of the domain of religion into the secular legal domain. The Indian government's act in some sense weakened the liberals within the Muslim community and the voice of the educated women who found at this point of time the strength of the orthodoxy vis a vis the state.

The Governments' act also emboldened the fundamentalist groups in other communities who could now on show that Indian state appeases the minority community sentiments and not concerned about development really. From Now it is the fundamentalist and communal groups among the Hindus which started demanding uniform civil code to provoke the minority. Thus in sum, one of the most important issues concerning women's equality became part of the real politics of the Indian democracy. By the eighties the political movements by communal parties which had a large middle and lower class support gradually affected the original discourse on women and her legal and political entitlements.

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## **10.4 THE LEFT AND WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS**

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The communist parties, since 1950s, not only provided women leadership but also kept the women's question in the centre of political discussion. However, with the split in the communist movements in 1964 and emergence of many new voices within the left movement which questioned old assumptions of the Marxist parties, new ideas and organisational principles to articulate demands of communities and groups began to emerge. The Shahada movement, in Dhulia district of Maharashtra was one such movement. The exploitation of the local Bhil tribal landless labourers by the non-tribal local landowners was the key issue in this. To add to the woes of the tribals came the successive drought and famine in Maharashtra. Different exploitative practices of the landowners and the moneylenders pushed the tribals to take extreme steps of protest. Though the movement had its origin in the late sixties through the traditional folk ways, singing bhajans etc., the seventies saw a complete metamorphosis when the newly inspired left leadership joined the movement and Bhil women were mobilised gradually and in large number. However, in the course of the movement it was realised that the issues that were central to women in these area was not exactly what the organisation

had initially thought out as such. For example, after the agitation began in Shahada movement that it was realised that most of the women were landless wage earners and the demand for higher wages would address the women's issue more directly. The movement gradually shifted to cover issues such as higher wages and anti-alcoholism because it was found that the husband's habit of having liquor eats into the domestic economy and women had to struggle more to keep the household going. Alcoholism also led to regular wife beating. Issues such as these which earlier were not part of the concerns of the movement came to be realised as intimate reality of the women's life and were taken up. This encouraged women too to come out in larger number to join the groups by women formed and went from village to village destroying liquor pots.

In the 1970 again, the Maharashtra agitation soon spread to Gujarat where the women in major cities like Bombay, Poona and Ahmedabad came out in streets protesting against the government for such a situation. It happened in the background of economic worsening conditions of the people following Bangladesh War. In Bombay, for example, Socialist Mrinal Gore and Communist Ahilya Rangnekar led the movement. The Maharashtra and Gujarat agitation gradually added to the larger oppositional politics that was being galvanised around this time. In fact, in Gujarat and Maharashtra, the lower classes were conspicuous by their absence. Hence, the issues and concerns of the women from the lower classes or the tribals had not become part of the movement. It was soon through different sets of movements that this section began to voice its concerns. In Maharashtra, for example the tribal women in the Shahada movement brought the issues of landless wage earning women and the perils of alcoholism while on the other hand in Bodh Gaya the issue of land was involved. One realised that after a gap of a decade or so the political and social questions were rapidly becoming closely involved

The arrival of the new classes into the picture meant that the political landscape would have become more complex and sharper questions to resolve. Gandhian ideas of femininity and role of female were now questioned and so were the symbols used by him. It is in such a situation that the mobilisation of the women too began to take place. This was also the time that when the western feminists began to raise the questions whether the issues that they have been fighting for really applied to the third world women as there are doubly suppressive, patriarchy and poverty. The same situation prevailed in India when the issues that were raised by the women movement either under the rubric of equality or right really applied to the women of different social strata. It is vividly portrayed in the experience of the Shahada movement when in the course of the movement the organisers came across the differential issues and changes the demand and mobilisation patterns land rights issues which even the recent feminist writers have shown to be the most important issues – where most of the population is without land. The issue of who would give land to them brings us back to the issue of the state and also the democracy that obtains in India

The year 1975 was declared as the world women's year by the United Nations. The Women's decade, 1975-85, witnessed women related activism by feminist groups as well as political parties. These were primarily urban-based activist groups. It was however the state which was promoter of many progressive steps for ameliorating women's condition and saw a large number of activities. Maharashtra was hotbed of the left inspired women's activism. The Maoist inspired women organised the *Purogami Stree Sangathan* (Progressive Women's Association), and *Stri Mukti Sangathan* in Bombay.

Conferences of women were organised in Poona by the *Lal Nishan Party* and the *Shramik Sangathan*, both Maoist Organisations, which were attended by a large number of women from across party lines and from across the state.

It was also during this time that dalit movement and the feminism got linked. A *Mahila Samata Sainik Dal* too was formed by some dalit groups in Maharashtra. The Maoist groups and the dalit organisations gradually provide a new edge to the argument that religion and caste system provide additional legitimacy to the oppression of women and hence have to be attacked for any possible women's liberation.

The new phase also came with a new consciousness. How should women be organised and represented? While movements like *Shahada* showed that women could be organised in the process of the movement in which issues, close to women's lives, would emerge. A self-conscious feminist stream also came to assert by now. While most of the feminists were drawn from the urban middle classes and were seen to be unable to represent the whole of the women of the society, there were serious thinking that there need to be organisation outside the movements. These groups, referred to as autonomous groups, could think about women's issues and the movement without falling prey to the organisational hierarchy and blinded by the assumptions that have plagued the left parties of the country. Many women's groups that originated during and after seventies decided to keep themselves *women only* group without any party affiliation or traditional organisational structure and quite often structured around one or few serious issues relating to the day to day life and struggle of the women in Indian society. By 2000 we have thousands of such groups working in different parts of the country and in fact the Indian women's movement by 2000 is characterised more by these groups across the country than by the organisationally structured movement as such.

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## 10.5 EQUALITY OR DIFFERENCE

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While the entire edifice of the social movement in India, which wanted to change the status of women, has been raised on the principle of equality, by the eighties there were realisation that even equality was not enough to protect women from being victims of violence perpetrated on her solely because she happened to be a woman. This was in spite of the fact that in many cases she was equal or superior to the male perpetrator in status, education or other indicators. Women were the target of rape simply because she was women – biologically different from Man. It soon became a major theoretical as well as organisational point of debate as to where should the movements place their focus, i.e., on equality or difference. The case of the rape of a tribal girl Mathura in 1987 by the police and despite a campaign and fought by many prominent legal personalities, the judiciary was unmoved and declared Mathura a women of easy virtue. This created uproar and made the women's group realise the insensitivity that the state apparatus has on women's issues. Similarly, the dowry deaths primarily among the affluent middle class households too was a shattering blow to some of the earlier held assumptions, i.e., the development process by raising the status of the women would help her practice her democratic rights fully. The same development was now seen to be capable of making life unsafe for her. By the time the census of 2001 was published, the increasing decline in the sex ratio in the most developed states of India pointed to the same phenomenon.

It was also realised that while it has been pursuing the developmental agenda ostensibly for the betterment of women, the state at times was amenable to the forces of patriarchy. This had further implications. Thus, the feminists and women activists have come to accept that movement for democratisation has to be strengthened so as to strengthen the force behind the demand for better and safer daily lives of women. The need for a strong women's movement got further underlined in the age of globalisation where new forces of violence were unleashed on women.

Issues of not only women's right in a democratic system but also the question of overall equality in a situation when the state is withdrawing is not merely a crucial political issues that the women's movement has to solve.

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## 10.6 NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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By the late eighties the overall scenario in India and the world created situation where the women's movement could not remain outside the domain of the issues that have led to the world wide movement regarding ecology, environment and issues of sustainability in the face of the a new globalising economy. Very soon we have movements in different parts of the country, which have voiced the concerns of the day-to-day life and survival in the face of the new forces of economy and politics. While the national politics seems to retreat into the caste and community and costly and corrupt electoral practices, a large number of movements from different parts of the country saw the coming of people from the local communities and villages. One of the chief characteristics of these movements has been the prominent role including that of the leadership being played by women. Survival and dignity seems to have become the twin issues, which these movements have infused to the already existing issues of equality and justice. Participation of a large number of women in the movement for the rights of labour and the tribals in Chhattisgarh by the *Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha*, in the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* and the agitation against the authorities in Bhanwari Devi case where the authorities were trying the shield the oppressors, and recently in the agitation for rights to information has shown that the social movements have been trying to fuse the issues of politics and society at a larger canvass and convert them into struggles for a more democratic and just society. Interestingly enough, a careful perusal of the voices from these movements would show that women in these movements have often questioned the validity of the representative nature of our democracy. While they have tried to forge alliances with similar movements across the country and even the world, they have, at the same time, demanded from the state to change its electoral system to have more participation from the women. All these were taking place quite close to the time when a large number of new forces were getting unleashed on the ground without adequately preparing the population for it. The women, without the adequate even elementary education and primary health care facilities, had to face these forces. There were also indications that the state, which till now declared that it would take care of the vulnerable sections, has began to waver and withdraw.

It is these circumstances that one found women in the forefront of many of the new movements. The results of these new mobilisations is that the woman found herself face to face with extremely powerful combination of patriarchal structures entrenched within the state apparatus. In Meghalaya and Kashmir, for example, it is the state legislatures which tried to debar women from any inheritance, if she marries outside the religiously

or otherwise defined community boundaries. This was an attempted check on women's right to take decisions on her own on crucial issues such as on choosing her own partner. In a world, caste, community and state boundaries have been brought to suppress the mobility of the women.

The Women's movement in the meantime also tried to fight against the structures of community and tradition as they have been found quite often to be impediments in the way to equality and freedom. This was evident in the case of two powerful movements in the 1980s, one against the issue of dowry and another in the famous case of Roop Kunwar in which the latter was being burnt as Sati. In cases of the dowry deaths tradition has been forwarded where as in the latter case a young Rajput lady was made to die along with her husband. The opposition by feminist and other groups of the Sati and its later glorification was countered by the powerful combination of the caste and community politics which defended not only the act of sati but also those who forced Roop Kunwar to the funeral pyre. However, in the process there were awareness of the new forces both which supported the women's cause of equality and those opposed came face to face and was an educating for the Women's movement.

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## **10.7 SUMMARY**

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To sum up, like several other social groups Indian women also have been involved in social movements before and after independence. Placed in the discriminatory position in all aspects of society undergoing multiple sufferings the women, and their problems became a matter of concern of the social reformers in the pre-independence. In the post-independence period a large number of grass-root organisations and civil society organisations, organisations of different ideological persuasions took up the women's issues. Though women's issues have occupied significant place in the agenda of policy makers, they are still neglected on the whole.

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## **10.8 EXERCISES**

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- 1) Write a note on the issues of women in the pre-independence period.
- 2) Explain with some examples the mobilisation of women by the leftist forces.
- 3) Explain the role of state regarding women's issues.