

Women's Movement- An Analysis of Pre-Independent India

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Abstract: *The women's movement was founded on social reform like the outlawing of Sati, 1829 and enabling of the Widow Remarriage Act, 1856. The objective of the study was to provide an analysis of the Women's Movement in Pre- Independent India. The idea was to note the contribution of the Indian Women's Movement and the overall success of the Women's Movement in India. In the Indian context, the Women's Movement was divided into various phases according to Kiran Saxena 1994. The first phase was related to the movement by social reformers like PanditaRamabai. The second phase was carried forward by national leaders like Gandhi. So, our focus was on the first two phases. The role of Women's Organisations was commendable in improving the condition of women. Moreover, the research paper also explored the success of the Women's Movement in Pre -Independent India through legislative steps taken like the Devadasi Reform and the Brothel Act of the 1930s, political reform such the Universal Adult Suffrage of 1947. Besides, the Hindu Code Bill of 1955 also aimed at women's welfare. Throughout there were consistent efforts in society to remove the hurdles in women's education through reform.*

Key Words- *Women's Movement, Psychological effect Education, Women's Organisations*

Women's Movement In India: An Analysis of Pre -Independent India

"All issues have a women's aspect to them and all issues are women's issues" (Omvedt 2004).

I. Introduction

This paper attempts to discuss the Women' Movement In India. It intends to explore themes namely the definition of women's movement In India, its phases, and its indicators. We also plan to study a primary source that exemplifies the women's movement in India. Moreover, we seek to establish differences with the Western model of the Women's Movement. Further, we shall explain the challenges in the women's movement in India. Besides, we will try to outline its relevance and conclusion. Objective- To examine the Indian Women's Movement in Pre- Independent India and the Research Question was What was the nature of the Indian Women's Movement in its Pre- Independence phase?

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II. Methodology

The Historical Method was followed in analysing the documents, contemporary newspapers, in the archives and the libraries. The study was conducted at the National archives, NMML, CWDS archives and other libraries. The primary sources included the original writings of reformers like RokeyaHossein and Amy Carmichael and the private papers. The secondary sources included the books by SumitSarkar and Tanika Sarkar, etc. and journals like the Economic and Political Weekly and others.

The relevance of the Women's Movement

History has for long ignored women. It has kept women invisible from the terrain. It has not taken into account the sacrifices and "contributions" of women. If at all the women's role was mentioned it was coloured, full of prejudice. Also, very few women get noticed. There was also the problem of looking at events rather than transitions. There was a need to show that women played an equally important role in History (Krishnaraj 2005). Hence, the role of the women's movement is crucial in this regard.

The main themes that emerge through the review of our literature are as follow-

Definition of Women's Movement In India

1. What is the Women's Movement In India?

The Women's Movement is hotly debated. It can be defined in three main ways. Although, It is an "umbrella term", it was defined as the "political awakening among women" in India. (Mazumdar, Vina and Agnihotri, Indu 1999, 225). But was it just a political movement? Was it confined only to the right to vote? It was related to the colonial reign and "freedom movement but there was more. In India, it was a struggle to overcome the oppression of women which was connected to the move against "social oppression" related to "class, nationality, race and caste" (Omvedt 2004, 181). So, The Women's Movement was certainly socially useful, centred around education, child marriage, female foeticide, female infanticide, sati, widow remarriage, dowry, rape, violence, wife battering etc. It was also economic. It was focussed on winning the right wages and working conditions for women. For instance, women workers were asking for maternity benefits and crèche facilities in the jute mills of Babuniyah in the 20th century. (Sarkar 2009, 259).

2. When did it start in India?

It goes back to the 19th century when the male social reformers along with Swarnakumari Devi and PanditaRamabai and others spearheaded the women's movement. Sati was banned in 1829 with the efforts of Raja RammohanRoy. and the widow remarriage was legalized in 1856 by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar who took up the cause of widows. Education for women was also brought into force in the 19th century. Education was pioneered by the Christian Missionaries in association with IshwarchandraVidyasagar, JyotibaPhule And AryaSamaj (Ray 1997, 179) and (Ray, Bharati and Basu, Aparna 1990, 2). Age Of Consent was also passed in 1891 which raised the age of consent from 10 to 12years. (Ray, Bharati and Basu, Aparna 1990, 2) .Swarnakumari Devi started the Ladies Theosophical Society in Calcutta in 1882. But it had to be closed down because of a lack of members. The SakhiSamiti for educating widows and poor women also proved "self-reliant". It was yet another organisation formed by Swarnakumari Debi in 1886. She was also the first female editor of a women's journal called Bharati, (NCERT 2013, 5). Moreover, there was also the women's

organization pioneered by PanditaRamabai called AryaMahilaSamaj of 1882 in Pune and the SharadaSadan in 1889, located in Bombay, (NCERT 2013, 5). The movement continues today.

3. Phases Of The Women's Movement In India

The Women's Movement In India is divided into two major phases. First, the pre-independence phase and second the post-independence phase. Patel (2012) according to (NCERT 2013, 4) discussed the three phases of the Indian Women's Movement. The first phase consisted of the "social reform movement," the second phase was about the "freedom movement and women's rights movement". Then, in the post-1975 period, a lot of women' issues were brought to the forefront in the third phase. Furthermore, (NCERT 2013, 4) talked of Sen (2000) who pointed out that the women's movement in India was started in the 1920s when the national movement was at its peak. Concerning the analysis of The Phases of The Women's Movement In Pre – Independent India, in phase one, the movement was confined to the elite urban women. Phase two welcomed women from all walks of life. (NCERT 2013, 6)

III. Analysis

What were its contributions in Pre Independent India?

Women in the 19th century were suffering under the evils of " ignorance, illiteracy, superstition, and physical seclusion." (Ray 1997, 178,179). (Rao: 2010,pp96-112) also examines the 19th Century India. JyothiraoPhule an educationist led a scathing attack on the Dharmashastras. It did not help the cause of widow remarriage. The first widow remarriage was arranged by Ranade in 1869. Next child marriage was considered the chief cause for the regressive nature of education and the growing widow population. The Dharmashastras were attacked for their gender bias. Phule began schools for girls in the time of four years, 1848 to 1852 in association with Savitri Bai Phule. Stones were pelted on Savitri Bai Phule when going to school. Also, Children of upper caste did not enter these schools. In Maharashtra, women entered the debate on women earlier than Bengal. PanditaRamabai also criticised the Dharmashastras for painting women in poor light. She argued that poor education was tied to the cause of anaemia and bad child care. Whenever Ramabai arose to give her speech she noticed the men were getting out of hand, reported Rabindranath Tagore. In StriPurushaTulana, Tarabai Shinde questioned how women were morally depraved? When the prisons were filled with men not women. Coming to Tilak, he attacked the proposal for girls' education. He wanted girls to be married at age 10 and boys at age 14. He put forth that English education would make women immoral. He supported "Sanskrit, sanitation and needlework" for the curriculum in High Schools. He otherwise did not support the proposal for a High School for girls. He discouraged the orthodox people and prostitutes from joining schools. The case of Rakhmabai is important. She did not want to join her husband because he lived with an immoral uncle. She critiqued Manu for demeaning women. Tilak supported Rakhmabai's husband, DadajiBhikaji. Tilak also advocated the jailing of Rakhmabai. He also attacked Malabari for being a Parsi and commenting on an issue beyond his purview. According to TilakRakhmabai and Ramabai were equated with being"thieves, adulteresses and murderers". Moreover, Tilak measured the brain size and found women's brain lighter. He wanted Girls to learn vernacular, moral science and needlework. He supported 3 hours of School regularly.

(Rao:2010, pp123 -130) pointed out that Karve's School for unmarried girls was joined to the widow home. Agarkar supported co-education for girls. Ranade's school was unable to accommodate the growing

numbers. Tilak wanted an increase in marriageable age. Ranade wanted five methods to reform. Rebellion, caste organisations, through religious heads, through Men's sense of honour and legislative help. The case of Phulmoni is important. She died during intercourse. Tilak once again supported the husband of Phulomani. Telang arranged signatures for the age of consummation to be 16 years. As a result, the Age Of Consent Bill was passed which made the age of consummation 12 years instead of 10 years. Shankaracharya supported the bill on Age of Consent Bill. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan resisted girl's education like Tilak.. (Rao:2010, 3) Tilak in her book "Educate Women And Lose Nationality" opposed the setting up of girl's school during 1881-1920. They did not want education to reach the non –Brahmins either. nor the fruition of compulsory education. They resisted the reformer's education in favour of National education comprising the learning of the Dharmashastras and technical skills. Tilak's views were expressed in the Mahratta. Phases Of The Women's Movement In India There were two components of the movement. One was the aspect of urban culture. Two, the rise of the bhadrakok. Women were modelled according to the Western And Indian models. Annie Besant And Margaret Cousins were the women who brought in Western Feminism and created many novel ideas

In the 20th century, the Women's Indian Association or WIA was founded in the year in 1917 by Annie Besant. It especially worked at "securing " voting rights for women (NCERT 2013, 5). The Indian National Congress and the Muslim League fought for the voting rights for women in 1917 as well. (NCERT 2013, 5). Apart from this, the All India Women's Conference or the AIWC was set up in 1927. It worked for the legislation called the Sarda Act in 1929 to raise the age of marriage. It also wanted to transform the personal law, It asked for the prohibition of polygamy, property rights and the right to divorce which culminated into the Hindu Code Bill of the 1950s. Also, in the 20th century, the women's movement was fused with the larger freedom struggle with Gandhi as its leader. Gandhi called the sisters to participate in the Non – Cooperation, Civil Disobedience And Quit India Movements in the 20th century.

Was Gandhi a feminist?

Gandhi encouraged women to participate in the boycott of foreign products and the picketing of shops. He even appreciated women who had been jailed in the course of the non-cooperation movement, (Gandhi 1919-1922, 762). He advocated for the ban of the Devadasi system. He also thought that women had a deeper level of self-control and therefore could lead the man closer to spirituality. He also spoke against the purdah system as it would hinder the concept of mass education. Even though the non- cooperation movement of 1921 tried to involve women in the larger agitation for national freedom, Gandhi wanted women's participation but he did not want to disturb the fabric of the nation. Women were encouraged to partake in their traditional roles and at the same time contributed to the welfare of the nation (Kishwar 2009, 239).

During the salt satyagraha, there was greater participation of women. Gandhi chose women because women were intrinsically more non-violent. This was primarily also why women were drawn to the Gandhian movement because of its element of Ahimsa. Women and Harijans were the two most depressed sections in Indian society. Gandhi helped women by removing the biases against women and by creating a heart of compassion for them (Kishwar 2009, 247). Gandhi believed that women were more moral than men Gandhi did not approve of the modern inclination of women to imitate men. He argued that this cheap imitation would lead to utter chaos. He recognised that women felt inferior to men. But women, as a result, should not disengage from the role of mothers. As this would lead to the disappearance of men from the public domain. Gandhi wanted

equality of the sexes in education, "civic and spiritual matter," (Datta 1968, 135) So, Gandhi was in a few senses a feminist despite his traditional role.

Despite this, women also participated in revolutionary acts of terrorism with the likes of Pritilata Waddadar who participated in the Chittagong armoury raid in the 20th century (Ray 1997, 203). Women also participated in the labour movement. Anasuya Sarabhai in 1917 led the textile workers' strike in Ahmedabad.

Indicators Of Women's Movement In India

The three main indicators of the Women's movement in India were women's legislations, women's organisations and women's writings. The last two have been discussed by (Ray 1997, 204-215).

Comparison Of Indian Women's Movement With The Western Model

The Women's Movement In the west was about resisting male authority. For instance, the right to vote in England was about "chaining oneself, shouting slogans, in the Houses of Parliament, processions, mass meetings" and flouting the police orders, Women henceforth, were forcibly jailed where they fasted. But were forcibly fed to keep them from dying. In India, the movement was not directed against men because many of the men like "Gandhi And Nehru" came forward to help women in their fight against oppression. The movement in India was an attack against "superstition, apathy and ignorance" (Ray 1997, 11). The women's movement in India merged with the anti-colonial movement, social reform, labour movement and nationalism.

Challenges Of the Indian Women's Movement

Religion has obstructed the growth of the women's movement in India. Sati for instance was an age-old Hindu practice. But, its ban in 1829 irked the conservative sections. The same thing happened in the case of the RoopKawar case in 1987. The girl had been immolated by Sati. The very act of Sati was a public spectacle. RoopKanwar was immolated and the site became a popular religious site for the Hindus. The Hindu Right-wing came up in arms for Sati. Similarly, as mentioned earlier we have the Shah Bano case that provided alimony to Shah Bano despite her divorce. This ruling irked the conservative Muslim sections. So much so that a Fatwa was issued by the ulema that the court ruling had hurt the sentiments of Islam. The supporters of the Shah Bano Case had been roughed up. (Kumar 1999, 361-367) . (Vijayalakshmi 2011, 112) has put forth that it may be argued that gender itself tended to divide people. The Women's movement in India has been looked at with a great deal of suspicion. It has been mistakenly seen as a movement against men which is certainly not the case. Could the Indian women's movement have taken place without men? The answer is no. The traditional family structure remained yet another stumbling block for the women's movement. Age of Consent in 1891 created a furore because traditional voices like that of Tilak opposed the bill saying that it disturbed the peace in the Indian family. Traditional mindsets have also opposed the women's movement for its support given to education. So much so that Savitri Bai Phule was pelted with stones for having pioneered women's education. Education it was argued tended to make women immoral.

IV. Findings and Conclusion

The Women's movement in India was no monolithic movement. It was a movement that interacted with social reform, politics and human rights. It was movement supported by men. It was attacking superstition above

all else in India. It was a movement that was backed by Marxists and Feminists. (Omvedt 2004, 180). It was a debated and also questioned. It was initially elitist later the movement acquired a mass base. Nonetheless, the movement consisted of women from all spheres of life. It may have started as an elitist movement but it acquired a mass base in course of time. It is very relevant today because women are still trying to find a space for themselves in this world stricken with injustice. Women's movement in India helped education by through legislations like the Sarda Act 1929, Devadasi and Brothel Acts of 1930 and Universal Adult Suffrage 1947.

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