

Paper-3 Module-17

History of Women's Organisations in India

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(B) Description of Module

Items	Description of Module
Subject Name	Women's Studies
Paper Name	Women and History
Module Name/ Title, description	History of Women's Organisations in India: To look at how women's organisations arose in India and who were its leaders and the issues which they advocated.
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Pre-requisites	To understand the history of women's education and the growth of Women's rights in modern India.
Objectives	To learn about the various organisations, how they came about , what were their objectives and what issues where they advocating.
Keywords	Social Reform Movement, organizations, women's education,discussion platforms, Bharat Stree Mahamandal.

History of Women's Organisations in India

Introduction

In the ancient and medieval periods women were largely connected only to the family and most of the other women that they met were primarily through family functions at times of marriages, deaths etc. The educational experiments of the late 19th and early 20th centuries produced a new woman with interests that went beyond the household. (Forbes, 1998, reprint, 2000, 64). For the first time in India now women began to communicate with women

outside their families and local communities. On the one hand was a small group of women who shared English as a common language. This made possible communication across language barriers (Forbes, 1998, reprint, 2000, 64). As a result of this various women's organisations developed from the 19th century onwards.

We can divide the women's organisations into three phases :

1. First Phase (1850-1915)
2. Second Phase (1915-1947)
3. Third Phase (1947 – Present).

The third phase can further be Classified into three sub- phases

- The Period Of Accommodation (1947 – late 1960s)
- The Period Of Crisis (late 1960s – 1975)
- 1975 – To date

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1. First Phase (1850-1915) :

The 19th cen. Social Reform Movement was the first organised all India response to the challenges posed by the Colonial Rule. But this was not meant as a radical challenge to the existing structures of society. It picked up for reform only those issues which the British pointed out as evidence of the degenerated state of Indian society. Women's status became central to all reform. The reformers took up the issues of polygamy, purdah , widow remarriage and women's education. Many reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy , Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar , Jyoti Rao Phule fought for the upliftment of Women in the early 19th century. Though Ram Mohan Roy was the first Indian to campaign against 'sati ' (widow immolation) the U.S and British missionaries had cited it from the start of the 18th century as an act of Hindu barbarism. British administrators had used it as a reason for ruling India (Civilizing Mission). Lata Mani points out that the debates over social issues constructed women as victims or heroines denying them complex personalities and agency. Tradition was not the site on which the status of women was being contested but women became the site on which tradition was debated and reformulated.(Mani,1989).The women's question loomed large in the 19th cen. Not a question of what women wanted but rather how can they could be modernized. Many of these organizations started reforms specific to women. This first organisations that came up during this time were initiated by men to uproot the social evils of sati (widow immolation), forbidding of widow remarriage, child marriage and illiteracy. The women involved were those related to male activists, elite, western educated, upper caste Hindus. Ishwar chandra Vidyasagar's crusade for the improvement in the condition of widows led to the Widow remarriage act of 1856. Social reformer Mahadev Govinda Ranade, founded the Widow Re-marriage Association and the Deccan Education Society (which sought to increase young women's educational facilities). Kandukuri Vireslingam in Madras presidency founded the Widow Remarriage association in 1891(Karen I leonard and Johan leonard, 1981).

Many woman reformers such as Pundita Ramabai also helped the cause of Women's Upliftment. Pandita Ramabai is considered, the first Indian Feminist to address other women directly about emancipation. Born in 1858 in Western Maharashtra. Her Father Ananta Sastri was a learned brahmin and a social reformer. Her Father used to give a lot of lectures on the need for female education. After her father's death she decided to carry on her father's work. She earned a lot of fame giving lectures. The pundits of Calcutta astounded by her clearness of views and eloquence in presenting them conferred on her the highest title 'Saraswati', the goddess of wisdom. She started a school for child widows in 1882 in Bombay. Pandita Ramabai was amongst the few female leaders of the movement for women's emancipation. She advocated women's education and shed light on the plight of child brides and child widows. She founded the Arya Mahila Sabha, which is known as the first feminist organisation in India. She set up Mukti Mission for young widows, and Krupa Sadan and Sharda Sadan in 1889 for destitute women (Kosambi 1988).

By the late nineteenth century several women's organisations began to be formed in several parts of India such as the Banga Mahila Samaj and the Aghorekamini Nari Samiti in Bengal, the Satara Abalonnati Sabha in Maharashtra, the Mahila Seva Samaj in Bangalore, the Prayas Mahila Samiti in Allahabad and the Bharat Mahila Parishad or Ladies Conference (1904) which was a wing of the National Social Conference (1887) in Benares. Some of these were either self help groups for women or were organised as discussion platforms. They discussed women's problems and what women could do to change the situation. Education was foremost on their list, followed by child marriage and the problems of widows and dowry. They were just beginning to formulate strategies for women; most of their efforts were still directed towards understanding and formulating the issues. A larger gathering was made possible with the Mahila Parishad or Ladies Congress formed at Madras in 1908. Saraladevi Choudhurani, a well-educated woman and radical nationalist, used the Ladies Conference of the National Social Conference to propose that women form their own organization: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani formed Bharat Stree Mandal (The Great Circle of India Women) in 1910 with the aim of bringing together women of all castes and classes to promote women's education. She is remembered for her speeches at the Indian National Congress meetings in favour of women's right to vote. She was involved in not only petitioning the government to give women the right to vote but also in bringing about changes in laws pertaining to marriage, divorce and property rights (Basu n.d.). This was one of the short lived organisations and did not grow beyond Lahore, Allahabad and Calcutta (Basu and Ray, 1990).

2. Second Phase(1915-1947):

The second phase saw the birth of three Major Organizations, Women's India Association (WIA), National Council Of Women in India (NCWI) and All India Women's Conference (AIWC). All these organizations were formed by women between 1917 and 1927 after World-War-I. During this period struggle against colonial rule intensified. Nationalism became the pre-eminent cause. Gandhi legitimized and expanded Indian women's public activities by initiating them into the non-violent civil disobedience movement against the

Raj. In the decades that followed, Women showed active participation in the freedom movement paving the way for some 'womens only' organizations. There were Organizations by Women like Saraladevi who set up the Bharat Stree Mahamandal. It met for the first time in Allahabad in 1910. Soon many branches in Delhi, Lahore, Karachi, Amritsar, Lahore and Hyderabad were set up and it addressed many problems including Purdah, which to them was a stumbling block to accept female education.

Women's India Association

Women's India Association (WIA) in 1917 was "the first purely feminist organisation to arise in India (Kaur, 1932, cited in Kaur, Manmohan, 1968, 106). Annie Besant was chosen as the first WIA president. The honorary secretaries were Margaret Cousins, a teacher and Irish suffragist; Dorothy Jinarajadasa, the Irish wife of a Sri Lankan Theosophist; Ammu Swaminathan and Malathi Patwardhan. Borrowing the idea of a cross-cultural association from the Tamil Māthar Sangam (Tamil Women's Organization) formed in 1906 by Indian and European women, Margaret Cousins sounded out her proposal to a gathering of Theosophists at Adyār after her arrival in 1915. The founders included S. Ambujammal, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi, Mangalammal Sadasivier, Saralabai Naik, Herabai Tata, Dr. Poonen Lukhose, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Begam Hasrat Mohani, and Dhanavanti Rama Rao. Describing themselves as the 'daughters of India', its mothers and wives, their objectives were to guide the nation; serve the poor, promote women's education and compulsory universal primary education, abolish child marriage, raise the age of sexual consent to sixteen for women, win female suffrage and attain the female right to elected office. The Association soon grew to have around thirty three branches within a year and after five years added another ten branches with twenty centres and two thousand three hundred members. It claimed to represent women from all races, cultures and religions. Religion, education, politics and philanthropy were the four areas identified for intervention. Non sectarian religious activity was promoted while in education, adult literacy, sewing and first aid were taught. Politically, the first women's delegation to demand the vote that met Secretary of State Montague, in 1917, included a large number of WIA members and in the following years it was this organization which took the lead in mobilizing support for female franchise. In the area of philanthropy, shelters for widows were set up and relief for the poor and disaster victims were provided. The WIA published a monthly journal *Stri Dharma* in English. Though published in English, it contained articles in Hindi and Tamil. The daunting task for this early women's organisation was firstly, to bring women out of their homes and into the platform of political and social action and secondly to co-ordinate activities of all the local branches. One of them said, it is a bull's work to drag out the reluctant sisters from the kitchen and to persuade them to spend a few minutes at the meetings periodically. This movement had a large agenda for women's rights. Soon there were Branch organizations and 33 branches by the end of the year. Membership open to Indians and Europeans, it represented women of all races, religions and cultures.

Self-Respect Movement of Tamil Nadu

Self-Respect Movement of Tamil Nadu

Another major Organisation was the well-known Self-Respect Movement of Tamil Nadu, by a single individual Periyar E.V.Ramasamy - so that the name of the great movement and that of its outstanding architect - are synonyms. When Periyar joined the Congress as its Chief in Tamil Nadu in 1920, he did so with a burning desire to serve the people on the social front. i.e. more on the social front than on the political one. But very soon he found that the Congress was not at all a social organization as it professed itself to be, but a pseudo-social body which sheltered under its roof only the reactionaries and the orthodoxy - particularly the Brahmins, who were deadly against any real change to the social structure. But what pained him more was the fact that Gandhi was a willing leader of this anti-progress clique in the Congress. In a crucial discussion with Gandhi at Bangalore in 1925 he asserted that if the society was to be saved, then the Congress, the Hinduism and the Brahminism should all go. He quit Congress the very same year. The Self Respect Movement that began in Madras, with a more radical critique and agenda, drew a larger following than the WIA and this eventually limited the appeal of the WIA to high caste women.

The National Council of Women in India (NCWI)

The National Council of Women in India (NCWI), was formally founded in 1925 when the women of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras made use of the networks developed for war work to forge their different clubs and associations into a new council. It came to be accepted as the national 'branch' of the International Council of Women and was the first all-India women's organization intimately associated with an international organization. The Marchioness of Aberdeen, President of International Council of Women from 1922-1936, learned of the Council and invited them to join the International Council. It provided an opportunity to voice Indian opinion in international forums. The President was the Maharani of Baroda till 1928 and from 1930-4 and 1936-7 and later from 1938-1944 Maharani Setu Parvati Bai of Travancore was President. Mehribai Tata who had been Chair of the Executive Council of the Bombay Council was a key figure in the NCWI. Mehribai Tata, Chair of the Executive Committee of the Bombay Council, played a key role in its advancement. She had married the elder son of Jamsetjee Tata so a very important member of the industrial family. To her caste, purdah and lack of education prevented women from working to change the social conditions. She urged men to support female education and freedom of movement for women. She urged the middle class women to visit slums as against passive charity. Because of its elitist nature, the council failed to grow and become a vital national organization. Other notable Women included, Dowager Saheb of Bhopal, Maharani Saheb of Baroda, Lady Dorab Tata and Maharani Setu Parvati Bai Of Travancore. Some of the important women associated with this organization were, Margaret Cousins, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Annie Besant, Mrs. Ambujammal, Mrs. Malati Patwardhan, Kanuben C.Mehta. Some of the areas on which they focused their work included, Religion, education, politics, philanthropy. They also organized regular adult classes for sewing, crafts, literacy, First Aid etc.

Other women who held important positions included Lady Dorab Tata, Ms Cornelia Sorabji (India's first lady barrister), Ms. Tarabai Premchand, Ms. Shaffi Tyabji and Maharani Sucharu Devi. The NCWI received active support from both British women and many titled and wealthy Indian women. It was basically an elitist organisation and did not become broad based. Moreover, it was socially and politically conservative and because it allied with the British, remained aloof from the struggle for independence. However, though it lacked the nationalist fervour that was present in other women's organizations of that time, it acted very effectively to express women's issues in the political arena. Standing sectional committees were formed to deal with art, labour, legislation and the press. The committees collected information, prepared memoranda and presented these to the authorities concerned. The committee on legislation became particularly active with the leadership of Mithan Tata Lam, the first practising woman lawyer in India. The Council failed to grow for a variety of reasons. Many women could not afford to join or felt uncomfortable in the presence of the elite women. Apart from its political conservatism, socially it stood for status quo. They did not visit slums, as urged by Lady Tata and found village work difficult and unhealthy. Instead they concentrated on advising the government on welfare issues.

All India Women's Conference

The most important women's organization formed in this period was the **All India Women's Conference** in the year 1926. In a prize distribution function at Bethune College, Calcutta in 1926 Ms. Margaret Cousins demanded that the women in India should have a full franchise but the then Director of Public Instructions, Bengal, Mr. Oaten taunted stating "how long are you going to tolerate a man made syllabus, a man made examination and controlling authority in which women have no influence as the arbiter of educational destiny which has resulted in a meagre 2% of literacy amongst women?" This prompted Mrs. Cousins to take the initiative and she invited all the women's associations in the country to meet in a conference. The women's association of Madras, Mumbai, Pune and other cities assembled in Pune city at Fergusson College in 1927 under the Presidentship of Maharani Chimanbai Gaekwad of Baroda which brought everyone on a common platform to launch a women's movement on a firm footing to acquire adult franchise and equal rights for women (in health, education, inheritance, marriage laws, social reforms, etc.). Delegates to the Conference included a large number of professional educationists, social reformers, women in the nationalist movement and wealthy and titled women. The important resolution of the Conference was on women's education which they conceptualised as helping women to develop their latent capacities as well as prepare for motherhood and roles as home makers. Their more specific resolutions stressed on moral and physical education, deplored child marriage and urged special measures for educating women in purdah. By 1928, the Conference made clear that existing harmful social customs were hindering women's education and by the next year their scope was widened to include social issues as well. By mid 1930s the sub committees expanded to include labour, rural regeneration, indigenous industries, textbooks, opium and the Sarda Act (on age of consent). Issues like film censorship and birth control too attracted their attention. The Conference drew up a memorandum on women's franchise along with the WIA and NCWI which refused to let

votes for women be subject to the communal award. In 1928 the Conference collected funds for opening the Lady Irwin College of Domestic Science in Delhi (1932). In 1931, Sarojini Naidu became the President replacing the earlier tradition of Maharanis as Presidents. The work of the Conference was two pronged, i.e., for the uplift of women and for the service of the nation. The AIWC faced a lot of contradictions. Many did not want a British woman, Margaret Cousins, at the helm. Others wanted it to emerge as a political force for women. The comprehensive legal bill mooted by the Conference was not popular among Muslim women whose personal laws emanated from the *Sharia*. Their efforts to bring lower class women into their fold were altogether not successful. By 1940s, the AIWC was the foremost representative organisation of women in India. In 1941, they started publishing its quarterly journal *Roshni* and with a central office established in 1946 they shifted their activities to research and propaganda on women's issues. More than 500 branches of AIWC across the country. It is recognized as a premier organization working for women's development and empowerment. They widened their issues over teaching English, Hygiene etc. They would send teachers home to teach reading, writing music, sewing and embroidery. However most of the members of this organisation were from elite Hindu community and there was hardly any coordination with the other branches of AIWC. It always had the name of the club of upper class women (Sen, 2000, 15).

The Desh Sevika Sangh

The Desh Sevika Sangh (National Women's Volunteer Organisation). established in various regions during 1930 had as its aim the attainment of self-rule for Women. It concentrated on banning foreign cloth, eradicating drinking of liquor, and producing Khaddar (hand-spun and woven cloth). As it took an active part in the civil disobedience movement, it was declared illegal by the government. West Bengal women's Union Started in 1932, when a group of women in West Bengal formed a cadre of like-minded women to help their helpless, exploited and victimized fellow women. An independent organization for the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Bengal formed by the Bengal Presidency Council of Women and the All Bengal Women's Conference. The genesis of the group lied in the fact that trafficking in women and children had increased to an unprecedented extent in West Bengal and the Calcutta area and this NGO was an attempt to address the problem. Came into being as ABWU (All Bengal's Women's Union)

3. Third Phase (1947 – Present).

After independence there was a felt need for Women's organisations. Women oppression & atrocities against them. The factors of impact on the type of women's organizations during this Phase, were the adoption of the Constitution and legal reforms, Development planning encouraging a mixed economy; and State-supported social welfare activities. However, a start was made in this period toward the formation of women's organizations along lines completely different from pre-independence ones. There was no effort to form all-India organizations. New organizations were local and tightly knit, with focused agendas.

The Period Of Accommodation (1947 – late 1960s)

Women's participation in the freedom struggle developed their critical consciousness about their role and rights in independent India. This resulted in the introduction of the franchise and civic rights of women in the Indian Constitution. The state adopted a patronizing role towards women. Women in India did not have to struggle for basic rights as did women in the West. This was a period primarily of accommodation. Some of the organisations took up Constitutional measures such as The Marriage Act of 1954, The Hindu Code Bill 1955 – 56. These Bills took up the issue of marriage, divorce, succession, guardianship and adoption. The Hindu marriage Act made monogamy legal, outlawed polygamy among all Hindus and conferred equal rights of divorce on both men and women. It also made inter-caste and interreligious marriages legal. It fixed the marriage age for boys and girls. It also made Child marriage punishable. The Hindu Succession Act, 1956, The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956, The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, The Maternity Benefits Act, 1961 were some other acts during this period. The NFIW (National Federation of Indian Women) wing of Communist Party of India. It was established in 1954 by several leaders including Aruna Asaf Ali. It works for the empowerment of women, women's rights. National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) is affiliated to the Women's international Democratic Federation (WIDF), composed primarily of women from socialist countries.

- **The Period Of Crisis (late 1960s – 1975)**

This period from the late sixties has been marked by economic crisis and stagnation, rising prices, increasing landlessness and generalised discontent both in rural and urban areas. This period is also associated with the Green revolution. This dramatically improved scientific agricultural techniques aimed at improving agricultural yield. It was very successful in India. Although food was more plentiful, farmers not wealthy enough to keep up with the technology got left in the dust. In 1971, the CPI(M) set up the Shramik Mahila Sangathan (Working Women's Organization), to mobilise women of the lower middle and working class affected by the growing economic crisis and economic hardship. The anti-price rise movement (1973) was a united front composed of women from the CPI(M), Socialist, Congress and non-party middle-class housewives from urban areas in Western India. Founded in 1974. The population base of this movement was the rural and the toiling. It was the year that the official Status of Women Commission published their report, *Towards Equality*, on women's low and ever decreasing status in Indian society. In 1973-74 Maoist women formed the Progressive Organisation of Women, initiating a self-consciously feminist critique of radical leftist politics along with an overarching analysis of gender oppression. This led to other Maoist women's organizations in Pune and Bombay, culminating in the first major celebration of March 8 as International Women's Day in 1975 (Kumar 1995). They took up issues like anti dowry campaign, protests against eve teasing-the harassment of women in the street-obscenity, price rise, and against the hardships suffered by women living in slums. With the repression of the Emergency period, the organization disintegrated within only two years of its formation.

However, this period saw the rise of many autonomous groups with different agendas and issues. Some of the common issues included; the division of housework, party politics, rape, and dowry deaths. The issues of violence, popularly called atrocities against women became the centrepiece of the movement in the early eighties and the cause for the movement's expansion. In the 1970s the New Women's movement attempted to revive the Uniform Civil Code within the framework of gender politics. But women's rights became articulated within a state-led reform agenda, reinscribing the concerns of national integrity, modernity, and progress. In 1974 the report of the Committee on the Status of Women raised the question of the Uniform Civil Code, appealing to earlier arguments but also squarely in the context of gender equity and justice, "The absence of the [Uniform Civil Code] in the last quarter of the twentieth century, twenty-seven years after independence, is an incongruity that cannot be justified with all the emphasis that is placed on secularism, science and modernism. The continuance of various personal laws which accept discrimination between men and women violate the fundamental rights". (Committee on the Status of Women 1974: 142). In India, we have a criminal code that is equally applicable to all, irrespective of religion, caste, gender and domicile. However, a similar code does not exist especially with respect to divorce and succession and we are still governed by the personal laws. These personal laws are varied in their sources, philosophy and application. Thus, a major constraint arises while bringing people governed by different religions under one roof.

Article 44 of the Constitution of India declares that "The State shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a Uniform Civil Code throughout the territory of India."

A uniform civil code administers the same set of secular civil laws to govern all people irrespective of their religion, caste and tribe. This supersedes the right of citizens to be governed under different personal laws based on their religion or caste or tribe. Such codes are in place in most modern nations.

Though Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was an extensive supporter of the Uniform Civil Code, he couldn't get it through more than a status of Directive Principle due to opposition from the members. This directive principle is aimed to achieve, gradually, rather than at once, more far-reaching equality for all citizens. The state has been entrusted with this voluminous task. However, no significant steps have been taken by any government till now.

The main argument of those who spoke in favour of such a code was that it has the potential to unite India because Hindus and Muslims had followed the “common customary Hindu civil code” smoothly till 1937 when “the Muslim League-British combine” divided them by imposing sharia on Muslims through the Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act.

But only a minuscule minority of Muslims followed Hindu customs before 1937. Even this section had the right under laws such as the Cutchi Memons Act, 1920 and the Mahomedan Inheritance Act (II of 1897) to opt for “Mahomedan Law”. As for a majority of Muslims, there is enough evidence to show they followed Muslim law, not the Hindu civil code.

- **1975 – To date**

Since the late 1970's there have been a steady increase in the number of women's welfare organizations in India. There are over 100 major Women Organisations working in India .

From the mid- to late 1980s women's groups concentrated on providing services to individual women to enable them to gain advantages already given in law. This case work was significantly different from the welfare dispensed by earlier women's groups. The earlier groups sought amelioration; the new groups sought recognition and realization of rights (Agnes 1992; Forbes 1996). Some of the important women's organisations in this period included, SEWA, National commission of Women (New Delhi), National Council of Women (Pune), Joint Women's Program (Delhi), Kali for Women (Delhi) and several others.

Self Employed Women's association (SEWA) the aim and goal of this organisation was to provide full employment and reliance to women Women's Association (SEWA,) was founded by the Civil rights leader Ela Bhatt. Its aim is to provide full employment and self-reliance to women. Its aim for its workers is to be able to hold his or her own against tyranny from employers or the state and provide social security. Social security includes basic services that provide protection to workers and promote their wellbeing. It is the means through which workers can make their lives secure, safe and productive. It is an economic support to them. In fact, it is an economic security, as with these services and protection, their economic situation is safeguarded. Once they have some social security, they do not slip deeper and deeper into poverty. They may even come out of poverty and move towards self-reliance. Social security must include at least the following elements:

- health care — preventive, curative and promotive care
- child care — holistic care of the young child, including nutrition, health care and child development activities
- insurance — protection against as many risks as possible, including sickness, accident, maternity, assets
- shelter and basic amenities — a roof over one's head with water, sanitation and electricity • pension — to provide regular income in old age (Shah, 2013, 4-5)

SEWA received the Right Livelihood Award in 1984. After this many autonomous groups popped up with different agendas and issues. Issues included; the division of housework, party politics, rape, and dowry deaths. The issues of violence, popularly called atrocities against women became the centrepiece of the movement in the early eighties and the cause for the movement's expansion.

A National Commission for Women was set up on 31 January 1992 according to this Act. It hears complaints from women on refusal of rights, cruelties and other atrocities and redresses their grievances. The Rashtriya Mahila Kosh or The National Credit Fund for Women was formed on 30 March 1993. Poor and needy women who form Self-Help Groups (SHG) to start an industry or occupation are assisted financially from this fund. The Balika Samridhi Yojana (1997) was founded to help poor mothers and their girl children. Female children born to poor mother below poverty line benefit by this scheme. Swa – Shakti Project (1998) is primarily to assist women to start some productive work and they are financially assisted by the Government through this scheme. There are many more steps taken by the Government and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) aimed at the development of women in India.

All these speak of the improvements in the position of women in India and the social progress achieved in a century. Hence a number of women's organizations along with the Government are involved in carrying out a number of programmes for the benefit of women and to create a gender just society.

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