

GROWTH OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN INDIA, IN THE MIDDLE CENTURIES

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Abstract

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Unlike the feminist movements in the Western countries, women's movements in India, in its early stages, had adopted a revivalist ideology and worked for improving the social condition of women. Even the women activists stood for the complementary sex roles and not against the division of labour based on sex. They also discouraged the competition between the two sexes for economic independence. They took measures to spread the light of knowledge among women by opening different educational centres throughout the country in association with various social organizations. Most of the women's associations of the 18th and 19th century had adopted 'self help' as their motto for women's emancipation.

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Unlike in the West, men in India were active supporters and sympathisers of women and the guiding force behind the open fight against the unjust customs and practices that prevailed in society during the post-Vedic period. Many of the social as well as religious reformers during 18th and 19th century had realised the need for women's welfare for the material as well as spiritual advancement of India. They also wanted to bring women into all fields of activities. "Great thinkers realized that, if India wants to advance, women must play their part as equal citizens with men in all works and vocation of life. It was the reason that the women's movements in India did not take the form of an angry feminist revolt." (1)

Among the social reformers from the elite intellectual class in Indian society, the reformists tried to promote modern ideals of womanhood and the revivalists tried to promote the Indian ideal of womanhood that prevailed in ancient Indian society as the method of women's emancipation programme. Revivalism became the most popular women's movement in the 18th and 19th century India. Many organizations were formed during this period with the intention of awakening women physically, mentally and spiritually by promoting social service and education among women. BrahmaSamaj, Arya Samaj and Ramakrishna Mission were some among them which served the above purpose.

Efforts of the social thinkers had paved a way for the development of women's movement and formation of their associations in the later period, which was corporate in nature, and uphold the traditional value system in a conservative manner. Most of the participants in such movements were educated women from urban areas. Unlike the Western feminists, they were not concerned about achieving economic independence and political rights, but about the ill effects of the sexual discrimination that prevailed in Indian society during that time. In association with the male members of society, they worked for eradicating the social injustice towards women members with the objective of making women realize their potential and responsibility in the building up of a new nation. They also worked hard to implement all the privileges and rights to women which were enjoyed by the other sex by improving the social, economic and intellectual status of women.

Unlike the feminist movements in the Western countries, women's movements in India, in its early stages, had adopted a revivalist ideology and worked for improving the social condition of women by reviving India's traditional ideal of womanhood in modern society. Even the women activists stood for the complementary sex roles and not against the division of labour based on sex. They also discouraged the competition between the two sexes for economic independence. They took measures to spread the light of knowledge among women by opening different educational centres throughout the country in association with various social organizations. Most of the women's associations of the 18th and 19th century had adopted 'self help' as their motto for women's emancipation.

The women's movement had brought about a great impact on the personal as well as social life of women in modern Indian society. It had opened the way for the self expression of women and provided them with a constructive role in various fields of activity and to express their views on the mode of education they required, choosing the life partner of their own interests and the type of employment which will satisfy their material as well as mental needs. It also helped women to gain social, economic, and political independence, besides enhancing their spiritual development. Unlike their Western counterpart, modern Indian women have gained legal and constitutional support from the nation without any opposition from the male half of society.

Modern Indian society had also improved the legal status of its women providing them legal protection. Many rights were actuated in order to bring about economic independence, freedom and social and political equality to women. Abolition of the Sati Act of 1829, Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1925, Hindu Succession Act of 1956, Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act of 1956, Hindu Widow's Property Act of 1937, the legislation passed on raising the minimum age of marriage for girls as 18 in 1955 are some among them. Many irrational customs prejudicial to women like Sati, female infanticide, tonsure, etc, were legally banned and considered as punishable crimes. The implementation of Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1937 had helped women to get economic independence. The widows got the right to inherit a share from her husband's family through this act. The Hindu Code Bill which was passed in 1952 had allowed the married daughters to avail a share from her paternal property which is equal to that of sons.

Along with legal security and economic independence, modern society had also given her the freedom in decision making in her personal as well as social life and to enter different fields of work which were once monopolised by the males. “In many respects, women working as labour force lived a less constrained and socially more equal life which is not different from that of their men folk.” (2) The active participation in the freedom movements along with men had given them sufficient energy to concentrate on individual as well as social problems of the Indian women and help themselves as well as other women in India in addressing their individual, social, economic, and political problems.

References

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