



SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AND ROLE OF WOMEN'S GROUPS IN INDIA

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Abstract: The recent studies on the development of women's organisations have fostered an understanding that women's roles, positions, and status in society are redefined. The relentless efforts towards the formation and functioning of women's groups in India from the very beginning have shown increasingly significant changes in the lives of women today.

This paper intends to study the emergence and nature of women's groups and their efforts in bringing the social transformation in Indian society. The study enables us to create a comprehensive foundation of women's organisations in India.

This article provides an understanding on the evolution and the processes involved in bringing societal changes through various women's groups and organisations. The main focus lies on the conceptualisation of women's social position, identification of the network built for bringing the necessary changes.

The study shows a major shift in the nature of women's groups from the colonial period, which were elite-based, western-influenced, organised and welfare-specific, to non-elitist, spontaneous working in the post-independence period. The contemporary women's organisations reflect more on discourses on gender equality and social justice.

Keywords: Women, Groups, Organisations, India, Change, Transformation, Society.

Introduction

Women's groups in general can be defined as an association of women who come together to address issues and values relevant to them and for the greater interest of their gender and society.

Srilatha Batliwala, a renowned social activist, scholar and advocate of women's rights, defines women's groups as "collectives that aim to empower women by enabling them to challenge patriarchy, gain control over resources, and participate in decision-making processes at all levels". ^{*i} She views it as a tool for social transformation. Naila Kabeer, a Professor of Gender and International Development at the Department of International Development at the London School of Economics, refers to "Women's groups as spaces where women come together not only to address practical gender needs like income and healthcare, but also to negotiate strategic gender interests such as rights, equality and social justice". ^{*ii}

The marginalisation of Indian women was not an established fact from the outset, as women in the early Vedic period (1500-100 BCE) enjoyed considerable freedom, respect, and opportunity. The decline in their status and role emerged as an outcome of a shift to a more patriarchal society.

Efforts to bring about a significant change in their status during the Ancient and Medieval period or the Pre-colonial period were meagre and not pronounced. Sources, however, have it that both Buddhism and Jainism advocated for equality and denounced discrimination. The establishment of the Bhikhuni Sangha (community of nuns) by Gautama Buddha^{*iii} was a modest beginning towards women's upliftment. The absence of women's groups during these periods hindered significant transformation in their status.

The early 19th century saw some new course of action that led to the upliftment of women. Campaigns for women's education and formation of independent women's organisations gained greater importance. From small local groups to the national groups like Indian National Congress and the National Social Conference reflected women's concerns and issues.

With the establishment of women's group in India from the later half of the 19th century various positive societal changes began to emerge gradually and steadily.

This paper, therefore, explores the conditions for the evolution and development of women's groups. It also delves into the nature of these groups and their impact, as well as their contribution in bringing about social transformation, both in the colonial and post-colonial period of India.

Objectives of the study

- To assess the emergence and nature of women's groups in India
- To analyse the conditions for the evolution and development of women's groups.
- To examine the impact of women's groups in bringing about social transformation in the Indian society.

Colonial period -Early Steerings.

A prominent enhancement of the status of women in India emerged in the first half of the 19th century as a result of Western contact. The harbinger of change was the newly emerged English-educated Indian middle-class men who, being influenced by the rational outlook of the West and imbibing the enlightenment philosophy of individualism and humanism^{*iv} began to organise movements for the emancipation of women in India consciously. Women's status became central to all their endeavours as they upheld that "women's emancipation was a prerequisite to national revivalism and an index of national achievement in the connected discourse of civilisation, progress, modernity and nationalism".^{*v}

Further, these male crusaders, to name a few, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar of Bengal, Jyoti Rao Phule, Gopal Hari Deshmukh, Mahadev Govinda Ranade of Maharashtra and Kandukuri Veeresalingam of Andhra Pradesh, advocated against the prevalent social evils like Sati, child marriage, female infanticide, polygamy, purdah and women's education. It was due to their relentless initiative that the colonial administration was compelled to pass landmark regulations like the Bengal Sati Regulation of 1829, making Sati illegal and punishable under criminal law, the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, which legalised the marriage of Hindu widows, and the Female Infanticide Prevention Act of 1870, passed to prevent the murder of female infants.

These regulations were major milestones in safeguarding the human rights of Indian women, and more so, they led to setting the impetus for the emergence of women's groups taking up the cause for their own selves in the later half of the 19th century. However, it is also pertinent that credit should not only be given to the male social reformers for inspiring, encouraging and guiding the Indian women to organise and to advocate for their emancipation. A profound role in this respect was also the exposure of Indian women to liberal ideas as a result of the introduction of female education under the Woods Dispatch in 1854^{*vi} during the colonial period. Through education, women came to develop a sense of consciousness of their degraded status, and it was this consciousness that stimulated them to come out of their homes and to mobilise themselves into groups.

Historically speaking, the pioneer of women's groups in India should be conferred upon Savitribai Phule (1831- 1897) of Maharashtra for her endeavour of organising the first women's group, the Mahila Seva Mandal in 1852, Pune. This group worked against the social atrocities faced by women and advocated for women's education,^{*vii} rights and dignity. However, since this group was co-founded by her husband Jyoti Rao Phule, a staunch social activist, it did not comply with the characteristics of the modern sense of the term 'Women's group'; that is why records regard Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) to be the torchbearer of women's groups in colonial India. Pandita Ramabai of Maharashtra was inspired by her father's contribution to the upliftment of women, and also due to her unconventional upbringing, she established the first all-women's

organised group or the Arya Mahila Sabha (1882) in Pune. The Arya Mahila Sabha was aimed at creating a platform where women would conduct meetings and organise lectures concerning the eradication of irrational social customs pertaining to Indian women and advocate for female education. In the process, the group garnered collective strength, which created a support network to bring about a transformation in their condition. This group further advocated for female education, campaigned against child marriage and the woeful condition of the widows. The outcome of the efforts of the Arya Mahila Sabha was the setting up of shelters, that is, Sharda Sadan (1889) and Mukti Mission (1898), for the downtrodden woman. These shelters worked towards the upliftment of the downtrodden women by providing them with education and vocational training. It is therefore through these initiatives that Pandita Ramabai sowed the seeds of subsequent women's groups in India.

True to this thought, in the last decade of the 19th century, innumerable women's groups were formed in different parts of the country. A few examples of such groups were Banga Mahila Samaj in Bengal, Prayas Mahila Samiti in Allahabad, Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam in Punjab, and Mahila Seva Samaj in Bangalore to address and curb various social evils against women.

A shift, however, in the organisation and agenda of these earlier women's groups emerged when Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, an educationist and freedom fighter from Bengal, broke conservative stereotypes by actively participating in the freedom struggle through the Swadeshi movement. To her, women's participation in the Freedom struggle was a way forward towards achieving privileges and also to exhibit women's determination and commitment. Her importance also lies in the fact that witnessing the commitment of women actively participating in the Swadeshi movement and realising that the Indian National Social Conference 1887, a social reform wing of the Indian National Congress was inadequate to advocate for women's issues she established the first national level women's group, Bharat Stree Mandal in 1910 Allahabad with its branches in Delhi, Lahore, Amritsar and Hyderabad. Similar to the earlier groups, it also primarily advocated for female literacy, health awareness and women's upliftment. Alongside this group indirectly promoted the genesis of the demand for political rights in the form of women's right to vote, as she firmly believed that women could regard themselves truly emancipated only if they actively participated in political and public life. Unfortunately, this group failed to achieve anything concrete and faded away.

Technically true, the groups that carried forward the aspirations of the Bharat Stree Mandal were the successor groups, i.e., Women's India Association (WIA) 1917, which claimed to have represented women from all races, cultures and religions. Annie Besant was appointed the first working President. The WIA, with great vigour, worked on three areas, that is, women's upliftment, philanthropy and women's political rights. As a matter of fact, this group was the first all-India women's group that sent a women's delegation under Sarojini Naidu to meet the Secretary of State Montague in 1917 to demand female franchise and request the inclusion of women in the legislative assemblies. It is due to their commitment to the cause and coming under pressure, the Joint Parliamentary Committee of Parliament agreed to remove the sex disqualification, but left it to the provincial legislatures to decide how and when to do so. Another great achievement for this group was when, in 1920, for the first time, Travancore-Cochin, a princely state, gave voting rights to women, followed by Madras and Bombay in 1921 ^{*viii} (Kumar, 22).

Another notable group was the National Council of Women in India, established in 1925 in Bombay by Lady Aberdeen and Lady Meherbai Tata. This group is credited for expressing and addressing Indian women's issues in international forums as well as carrying out activities for the emancipation of women.

However, a distinct group in the colonial period was the All India Women's Conference in Poona, 1927, established by Margaret Cousins, along with other prominent women like Muthulakshmi Reddy and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, which gradually established more than 500 branches across the country. Members of this group came to include women from different streams. This group should be given credit for initiating a deviation in their agenda, as this group took up various issues ranging from women's education, equal rights for women, and women's franchise. By the mid-1930s, the subcommittees expanded to include labour, rural regeneration, indigenous industries, textbooks, the age of consent and birth control, etc. By addressing these various issues, the group worked towards the upliftment of women in particular and for the welfare of the country at large. citation??)

Post Independence – Progression of women's groups in India.

The conscientious efforts of various women's groups in the colonial period yielded positive results, as after Independence, the Constitutional guarantees enhanced the status of women in India. Nevertheless, groups like the All India Women's conference (AIWC) National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) continued to work for the welfare of women but there appeared to be a period of relative quiet in the formation and activities of women's group in the following two decades after independence probably because women were confident that the rights and concessions guaranteed would make a difference in their socio-economic status. Also at that juncture, many of the pre-independence women's groups faded into oblivion while a few, having integrated with the major political parties, lost their independent identity and influence. The period of relative quiet was but for a brief period, as certain developments in the 1970s facilitated a gradual emergence of new women's groups.

The first major development was the publication of a report, 'Towards Equality' in 1974 by the Committee on the Status of women established by the Government of India in 1971. This report was an eye-opener to the female gender of India as it made startling revelations that, despite the constitutional guarantees^{*ix} the women of post-independence India were still enduring political, social, cultural, and economic disparities. The report also recommended social transformation as the only way forward towards social justice.

Other reasons that served as a catalyst for the renewed form of women's activism were also the establishment of research centres for Women's Studies, which helped in raising consciousness and in redefining policy changes. However, an immediate cause for the emergence of numerous women's groups was the rising gender bias violence, which witnessed the rise of spontaneous, autonomous grassroots women's groups addressing diverse issues.

A noteworthy group was the Shahada group in 1972, where agricultural rural women in the Shahada taluk, Dhulia district in Maharashtra, after overcoming great hardships, successfully organised themselves against the severe oppression they faced in terms of wages, long working hours and sexual abuse in the rural sector, as well as the domestic violence meted upon them at home by their drunken husbands. Forceful closure of the liquor shops, as well as destroying liquor stored in containers, became a symbolic activity of this group's sense of consciousness and commitment to change their miserable plight .

Another yet distinct group was the Naga Mothers' Association, established in 1984 by women in Kohima, Nagaland. This group was an outcome of the psychological, economic and physical challenges women in Nagaland were experiencing due to the rise in substance abuse, alcoholism, and insurgency. Not only did this group work tirelessly to eradicate drug addiction and mitigate the spread of HIV and AIDS by establishing detoxification and counselling centres, but they are also credited for launching the 'Shed no more blood' campaign by initiating peaceful dialogues and negotiations with various underground outfits to restore peace in their violent, torn state (Varma, 2022). Another significant contribution of the NMA was their advocacy for more representation of women in politics and decision-making in the public sphere, which, in their opinion, was still inadequately met in spite of the constitutional guarantees.

Nevertheless, a positive step in this direction was made by them when in 2006, the Nagaland State Government passed the Nagaland Municipal First Amendment Act, this group put pressure on the government by forming the Joint Action Committee on Women's Reservation (JACWR) to ensure the inclusion of women, and again in 2011 this Committee submitted a memorandum to the State government demanding that the Municipal Act should be implemented and elections should be held with 33% reservation for women (Longchar, 2023). Again, an influential women's group was the Janwadi Mahila Samiti, founded by noted reformer Jagmati Sangwan in 1995 in Jind district, Haryana. This group came into prominence after almost a thousand women opposed the diktat of the Khap Panchayat, which ruled the rape of a minor girl as a punishment since her brother had married against the orders of the said panchayat.^{*x} Even though many of the women from this group were married to men who supported the diktat, yet they unitedly campaigned against it. This group later also spearheaded campaigns against honour killing and female infanticide, thus being brave vigilantes of the oppressed and the discriminated sections.

Further, the 21st century also witnessed even more spontaneous emergence of autonomous women's groups like Gulabi Gang by Sampat Pal Devi in 2006, Banda district, Uttar Pradesh. Claiming the inactivity of law enforcement, this group took up causes against domestic violence, sexual assault, polygamy, oppression and

caste discrimination, etc. This group portrayed themselves to be protectors of the marginalised in society. Dressed in pink sarees and wielding bamboo sticks, this group portrayed themselves to be protectors of the marginalised in society. They resisted all forms of oppression and social obstacles they faced in their day-to-day life. Due to their activities and protests, the colour pink acquired a new definition and meaning, and came to be perceived as a symbol of strength and hope.*^{xi} The pink brigade has also been credited for rehabilitating and incorporating a sense of self-sufficiency amongst the rural women by promoting the production of cottage industries. Interestingly, as the group has achieved a high rate of success, their activities are not only confined to women, but also to male members who, many a time, have sought their intervention in various issues like caste discrimination, hoarding of food grains, etc.

While the above groups were spontaneous, autonomous local groups that advocated against various prevailing detrimental issues, simultaneously, at the national level, a profound group that vehemently worked to promote self-reliance, leading to empowering women in the informal sector, was SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) initiated by Ela Bhatt in 1972, citation??) Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Realising that self-employed women were in particularly precarious social and economic condition because they were largely illiterate, unaware of their rights and were often harassed and exploited by authorities and contractors SEWA founder Ela Bhatt felt that self-employed women from diverse backgrounds needed to be organized "not against anyone" but 'for themselves', and to use their collective strength to attain social justice and improve their conditions of work and life.*^{xii} This group was a trailblazer in the establishment of self-help groups and has accorded its growing number of members, which to date is over 3.2 million women across 18 states in India,(Google.com) with skill development training, promoting cooperative production and marketing. This ensures work and income security, food security and social security for all its members. Moreover, SEWA fosters women's leadership at the micro, meso, and macro levels (ILO, 2014).*^{xiii} This group has earned international recognition in developing grassroot women's economic empowerment through the SEWA Co-operative Bank, the first bank for poor self-employed women in 1974 in India and advocating for policy changes that support the marginalized women, wherein 2004 SEWA was the leading proponents for government policies such as the 2004 'National policy for urban street vendors' and the 'Unorganised workers social security Act'.

The 1970s also witnessed the revival of the demand for a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) within the framework of gender equality. In 1977, the JWP or Joint Women's Program supported the UCC as the only way to end gender discrimination as in the patriarchal personal laws of various communities relating to divorce, inheritance, marriage, maintenance and adoption. Even though the demand was just one and lasted till the 1990s, however, as it got embroiled in religious discourses and interpretation, it waned out.

The last group that has continued to make its impact at the national level as well as the state level is ASHA workers or Accredited Social Health activists in 2005 and 2006. Recognised by the WHO as 'Global health leaders', they play a pivotal role in connecting the women's community in rural India to the government health programs. Their activities include health promotion and awareness, disease surveillance and management, facilitating health care access, etc. Despite appalling working conditions and low honorarium, these workers put their lives at risk and work tirelessly to promote and accomplish the government's goal of a healthy public health system. Appreciating and acknowledging their selfless and exemplary efforts, the Sikkim Government recently announced a one-time incentive of Rs. 10,000 each to ASHA workers in recognition of their services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

Women's groups have come a long way from having a tentative presence to becoming assertive pressure groups in society. Their advocacy for issues has contributed to the policy changes in the country. This transition did not come easily. To understand the process, one needs to delve into the nature of these groups, not with the intention of making a comparison, but to have a clear perception of the transition. In the colonial period, women's groups were elite-based, western-influenced, organised and welfare-specific. On the contrary, most post-independence groups were non-elitist, spontaneous; their spontaneity was probably an outcome of the exposure and confidence gained through their engagement in the freedom struggle. The political rights made available through the constitutional provisions, political participation, positive discrimination and mobilisation as a consequence of government policies, along with discourses on gender equality and social justice imparted by the centres of Women Studies, the Media and women representatives, have to an extent served to make women more aware of their societal world. Also, faced with the reluctance of law enforcement agencies in the face of atrocities meted out to them in certain pockets of India, women were forced to come

together to seek justice. Another distinct feature of the post-independence women's group was that they emerged from the grassroots level, and this required them to overcome formidable customary structures, patriarchal norms in a male-dominated society, which often restricted women's rights and opportunities.

However, even though the role and contribution of women's groups have always been underrated and many a time the only commendation they have received is a passing mention, nevertheless, while assessing their impact, these groups played a notable role in both the pre- and post-independence era. The pre-independence initiatives like the eradication of irrational social customs, curbing social evils, advocating female education, etc., portrayed immense courage, determination and were a source of inspiration to future generations. The women's group in the post-independence era was not only driven by women-centric issues, but they also addressed structural conflicts within the society, for being vigilantes of the oppressed and the marginalised. They established self-help groups that assured work, income, food and social security, and they also made efforts to restore peace through campaigns like 'Shed no more blood'. Further, they have assisted the government in accomplishing its goal of a healthy Public system. All these initiatives were in the greater interest of the society, and this point speaks volumes about women in general and the ethos of the groups they formed, that despite historical marginalization they still aspire for the well being of all.

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