WOMEN IN INDIA AND SOME INSIGHTS

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The three units in this section on Women in India and Some Insights focus on three major issues, the women’s movement, empowerment, emancipation and policies in India and finally on women’s health, policies and programmes. These three lessons contain real examples, stories in the areas of movements, policies and health concerns, and are to be read and understood in an exemplary and empirical manner.

In the pre-independence era, the women’s movement began as a social reform movement in the 19th century. At this time, the western idea of liberty, equality and fraternity was being imbibed by our educated elite through the study of English and the contact with west. This western liberalism was extended to the women’s question and was translated into a social reform movement. The reform movements were not homogeneous and varied a lot in terms of the ideas and changes that was to be fostered. They did however share a common concern for rooting out the social evils, partly in response to charges of barbarity from the colonial rulers. These reformers took up the issue of women’s education, widow remarriage, age of marriage for girls and property rights for women. The social reform movement did not radically challenge the existing patriarchal structure of society or question gender relation. They picked up for reform only those issues which the Britishers were pointing out as evidence of degeneration in the Indian society. Even the women’s institutions and organisations that sprang up during this period did not have an independent ideology but only took off from what the men stated. This is understandable because it was primarily the wives and sisters of the reformers who had initiated the establishment of these organisations. The direction and content of reform as laid down by the reformers was accepted by the women’s organisations without any question. Yet, In spite of its limitations, it cannot be denied that the social reform movement did help in removing prejudices against women’s education and provided a secular space for women in the public realm. In the national movement for the first time limited number of women belonging to the elite section of Indian society started taking part in the political activities. Till 1919, the national movement was limited to the urban middle class and it was only later with Gandhi’s entrance into the national movement participation of the masses began to take place. The post Independence period, saw the introduction of constitutional and legal provisions and protecting the society and the women from the discrimination and to provide equality to all the citizens irrespective of caste, creed, race, religion and sex. This period saw some prominent movements such as, Telangana Movement, a protest of the people who wanted both food and freedom from the oppressive regime of the Nizam, the Patils and the Jagirdars in Hyderabad State, the Chipko Movement, i.e., peoples’ ecological movement for the protection of the natural environment and the Anti Arrack Movement, not just for the elimination of liquor but for the protection and survival of their own culture. From 1975-1985 (International women’s decade) saw the emergence of autonomous women’s movement in which autonomous women’s groups and organisations started fighting for liberation.

All these efforts resulted in a development approach shift in focus from Women in Development (WID) and Women and Development (WAD) paradigms to the
more recent Gender and Development (GAD) paradigm. It was in the time of WID and WAD that a new generation of women emerged in India who questioned the supplementary role allotted to women in development programmes, most of which involved training women in the skills of ‘family management’ and ‘home economics’. In India, their critique was bolstered by the publication of a report titled *Towards Equality* in 1974. Documenting the widening of gender inequalities in employment, health, education and political participation since Independence, the report was intended for the United Nations International Women’s Year World Conference to be held in 1975. Yet it is ironic, despite India progressing towards better growth and development, the health of women is deteriorating. The maternal mortality rate (MMR) and infant mortality rates (IMR) are very high in India. The perspectives to understand health and illness have evolved from ‘cultural’ to ‘ecological’ to ‘critical medical anthropology’ in the discipline of anthropology.
1.1 INTRODUCTION

The beginning of women’s movements can be observed first from a social reform movement in the 19th century. During the colonial period women’s movements in India were born out of the same historical circumstances and social milieu as earlier 19th century social reform movements, which provoked a new thinking about various social institutions, practices and social reform legislations. The women’s movements ideological and social content changed from time to time and continued into our times. The movement in its entirety can be divided into three distinct phases.

Phase I Social reform movement, national movement and social reform legislation in the colonial period.

Phase II Women’s movements in the post colonial period.

Phase III Women’s movements in India since the 1970s.
Women in India and Some Insights

Patriarchy, caste system and several other social and religious ideas and practices which have originated in the ancient Indian social milieu continue to dominate our anthropological thinking about the social status and position of Indian women and are still relevant issues and therefore when one discusses them a historical overview is a necessity.

1.2 POSITION OF WOMEN IN INDIA

Society has been patriarchal for most part of recorded history. It is difficult to talk about the position and status of women, with all women being categorised as uniform. There has been infinite variation on the status of women depending on the culture, class, caste, family structure and property rights. Even while women have right to kinship systems, the entire mechanisms of marriage, descent, residence and inheritance are rarely organised in such a way as to guarantee women access to resources or to allow them to secure access for other women. In fact under patriarchal order kinship, conjugal and familial systems tend to construct women in such a way that they hardly live as independent beings and they are seen only in relation to men, thus depriving women of their selfhood and agency (Pande, 2010, 131). Hence for a proper understanding of the social reform movements for the development of women in India it is necessary to examine the historical background that necessitated and brought about social reforms. In Indian history, we see major shifts in the position of women in different periods and some of these changes are reflected in the texts that prescribe codes of behaviour and therefore capture the dominant worldview of the period.

1.2.1 Position of Women in the Vedic Period

The role and status of women throughout ancient and medieval period has been far from static ranging from one of authority to freedom to one of subservience. Most of the historical sources by and large refer to the elite sections of society concentrating on the court and the aristocracy and hence when they talk of women they generally refer to women of this class because women from other classes and tribal backgrounds had different norms. Tribal women and women from the labouring castes and classes are rarely visible as they represent those groups which did not have a literary culture and therefore did not leave behind much evidence. However, there are references to them in literature and historians also use archaeological evidence to try and reconstruct the lives of the pre-literate societies.

It is generally accepted that one of the basis of the stratification in society is the economic surplus that is appropriated by a ruling class and in the context of the hunter gatherers we see that such a surplus is not there and there the question of private property does not assume much significance as these societies were relatively egalitarian. It is with the rise of sedentary settlements that we see the emergence of stratification as the existence of a class of non-food producers who lived on the labour of others is seen. In the Indian context a large number of Neolithic settlements are noticed. In the north-western parts of India, the rise of the Indus Valley Civilisation based on urban settlements and long distance trade was excavated a century ago. However, in the absence of any written record and the un-deciphered nature of the Indus seals we are unable to proceed any further and therefore unable to reconstruct the position of women.
Though it has often been stated that the position of women was much better in the Vedic period and things started deteriorating with the coming of Muslims, and the often quoted examples are given of Gargi and Maitrey who participated in the Sabha and Samitis it cannot be denied that ancient societies were patriarchal on the simple count that the predominant structure and values of society were oriented to giving men a superordinate status, a fact that was reinforced by sacred literature. In fact one can see continuity in modern times which is one of the reasons that the social reformers and freedom fighters took up the agenda of women’s movement in the post Independent period as one of the unfinished businesses of Indian social reform.

Many accounts were written about women in the 19th century by the European travelers. The Orientalists reconstructed the glory of Indian civilisation in the past. The past was presented as a homogeneous whole without any aberrations. The effort was to make the natives understand their laws and appreciate the efforts made by their rulers. The colonial restructuring of gender and the circular institutionalisation of literature both worked to undermine the authority of Indian literature and the societies that gave rise to them. Though they retrieved and put into circulation many Sanskrit and Persian texts, it was a highly restructured version of the past that emerged in the Orientalist framework (Tharu et al (ed), 1991). All these texts showed that women had a very high status in the Vedic period which was a golden age and then the status of the women declined with the coming of Muslim rule and now it was for the British to improve the status of women. One also sees a change in ancient India during the transition from the early to the later Vedic period when the pastoral and semi-nomadic society of the early Vedic period with its relative equality gets settled during the later Vedic period and the territorial units are established during this period. Another perceptible change is seen during the Upanishidic period and later during the 6th century B.C with a proliferation of urban settlements. The emergence of the grhya and the srauta sutras offers us a glimpse of the position of the women during this period. Agriculture was established along with craft specialisation in the urban centers and the ‘grahapati’ or the householder seen as the ideal. He was the one who exercised control over the household. We get a clear indication of the growing control of the householder over the women of the household and their dependence on the men.

Many of these scholars depended for their sources on textual materials which are Brahmanical in origin. These texts are heavily preoccupied with religious and legal questions. Women are viewed mainly in the context of the family, the relationship between husband and wife being the main backdrop. The first millennium BC, can be called the era of the founding of Brahmanic patriarchy, and the 19th century colonial period saw the reconstruction of Brahmanic patriarchy, as part of a larger scale ‘construction of Hinduism’ (Chakravarty, 1998).

Buddhist texts are at a considerable distance from this ideal along with the Jaina and other heterodox religious traditions. Though the Buddha and Mahavira spoke for equality of women, we also notice some resistance from members of the Sangha.

As has been pointed out, most of the historical sources of the earlier period generally refer to elite groups, the king, the court and the rich merchants. We
have to infer about other sections of society from indirect references. The women of aristocracy were regarded as gentle creatures, the mothers of future rulers. Marriage was frequently a disguise for a political alliance and for those of lesser standing a means of mobility for the family. The aristocratic woman led a well protected and isolated life. Reference to women from respectable homes moving about veiled goes back to early centuries A.D. and the purdah of Islam intensified the seclusion of women (Thapar, 1975, 8). The women of the artisan families and those of the peasants had a less relaxed life. Here the pressure was not so much from social mores as from the needs of economic survival, where leisure was limited and women participated in the professional works of men. Perhaps the most independent among the peasant women were those who had distinct economic roles, where they had individual access to local markets. There are ample references to such women in the Smriti literature like the Manusmriti, the Smritis of Apastamba and Gautama. In addition, the Jataka stories also offer us many glimpses from the lives of these women drawn from royalty, aristocracy, trading, artisanal, hunting, fisher folk and labourers. What clearly emerges from reading these sources and the Sanskrit literature and dramas and inscriptions is a distinction between different classes of women, where royal women needed protection and the subaltern women were more unfettered. This distinction can be seen in the realm of religion also, with Lakshmi and Parvathy being demure while Kali and Durga being ferocious.

According to ancient and later Brahmanical law books, for a woman her dharma was stridharma, and her notion of dharma was not a self definition but a world view thrust on her with predominantly male interests. Due to their supposedly fickle nature and the inherent pollution in the female body women were seen as being subordinate to the voice of authority in the family and had to engage in frequent acts of ritual purifications. They had to visit temples with great regularity, perform sacred rites with higher faith and submit to religious fasts.

At the same time, we have examples of women who composed many hymns of the Rigveda. Apala, Lopamudra, Gargi, Maitreyi, Ghosha were few of the women philosophers. There were groups of women who studied throughout their lives and were known as Brahmavadinis. Women also attended political assemblies and offered sacrifices along with their husbands.

1.2.2 Position of Women in the Medieval Period

Most of the source material that is available for the reconstruction of Medieval India is written within the Indo-Persian tradition and was composed in a court setting. We do not get much information about the women and their activities. The few women who find mention in the records are women like Razia, Nurjehan, Rudramma Devi, who were exceptions and hence cannot be generalised. We have no information on the domestic life of ordinary women of medieval times. India witnessed significant socio-economic changes during the medieval period giving rise to new social groups which could not fit into traditional hierarchy. We have a large number of inscriptions of the newly emergent groups who prosper because of the changes in the economy, particularly agrarian expansion and crop diversification. The polities that appear throughout the subcontinent during the Middle Ages were not the dispersed fragments of a previous central government, but new formations arising out of the extension of agrarian settlement and the resulting growth of population.
During the medieval period these newly emerging social groups, attempted to redefine their position and status within the given traditional hierarchy and spearheaded a movement articulating their demands for restructuring the existing order. By declaring that God dwells in each individual and one could attain God through faith these saints brought religion to the downtrodden and henceforth marginalised sections of society. This movement is referred to as the Bhakti movement. What is important is that women could also now practice bhakti and they were regarded as an equal in the eyes of God. In the 12th century, the Lingayat Movement began by Basavanna rejected many of the Hindu beliefs and customs such as Sati, female infanticide etc. which according to its founder brought disaster to Hinduism (Mukherjee 1974). He upheld the individuality of women, their right to choose their husbands, remarriage of widows and right to divorce under certain circumstances.

The advent of Islam did not make conditions better for women in general and a large number of biases and prejudices continued. The invasions of the Arabs and later the Turks and the subsequent setting up of Mughal rule helped to harden the rules and oppressive practices against women. Any woman found without Purdah was considered as shameless. The practice of polygamy and easy divorce by men and the law of inheritance went against them. Education was denied to them. Restrictions on their rights and freedom got aggravated.

During the Mughal period, household was an institution in which gender relations were structured, enforced, and, possibly, contested. During this period the harem metamorphosed into a bounded space which could be understood as a family. The record of routine events (like the king’s visits to the royal women, preparation of marriages, and distribution of gifts) were a repertoire of the processes involved in the making of ‘hierarchical relationships, building alliances and reinforcing kinship solidarities’ (Lal, 2004).

The Mughal rulers attempted to put down Sati. Humayun introduced a system of licensing to bring it under some control. Akbar actively pursued the opposition. Jehangir abolished it by law and Aurangzeb pursued the implementation of this law (Baig 1976). But none of them could pursue their reforms vigorously.

1.2.3 Position of Women in the British Period

The advent of the Europeans into India did not change the situation of women. Like other Western powers, the primary objective of the British in the earlier days was trade. Later when they were faced with the administration of newly conquered areas, they thought it safe not only to keep the existing social structure intact but also to induct its religious pundits (Brahmins) to interpret its rules when necessary.

The introduction of English education first started to train Indians for jobs under British administration. This created upper class elites who began to doubt the rationale of many of the existing practices in their society. The establishment and expansion of the British rule also encouraged British missionaries to enter their colonies and start schools, orphanages and destitute homes especially for widows. They stood against sati, child marriage, purdah and polygamy. The new Indian elite exposed to European liberalism of the 18th century through Western education, felt the urgency for reform of their own society. This produced tangible results in the subsequent periods.
1.3 WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD

The women’s movements in the colonial period are mainly of two different concerns: (1) social reform movements and (2) nationalist movements.

1.3.1 Social Reform Movements

The women’s movements began as a social reform movement in the 19th century. The British conquest and its rule over India brought about transformation in Indian economy as well as in society. The new land revenue settlements, commercial agriculture and infrastructural facilities like roads, railways, postal and telegraph services etc. ushered in by the British led to a significant change in the Indian village economy. The new economic system and administrative machinery required a new type of educated personal which resulted in the establishment of Western educational institutions imparting modern education. The Indians who were the beneficiaries of the new economic system were attracted towards this and as a result a new class of intelligentsia evolved in the Indian society. The articulate intelligentsia became the pioneers of all progressive democratic movements: social, political, economic and cultural. The reform movements were not homogeneous and varied a lot in terms of the ideas and changes that was to be fostered. They did however share a common concern for rooting out the social evils, partly in response to charges of barbarity from the colonial rulers. This was a period of the hegemonic control and influence of colonial ideology. This was a time of transition, one of the emerging bourgeois society and values of new modes of thought.

The colonial intervention in the 19th century intruded into the areas of our culture and society and this affected transformation in our social fabric. This potential threat was sensed by the Indian intellectual reformers, exposed to western ideas and values. At this juncture, the Indian intellectual reformer sensitive to the power of colonial domination and responding to Western ideas of rationalism and liberalism sought ways and means of resisting this colonial hegemony by resorting to what K. N. Panniker (Presidential address, Indian History Congress, 1975) refers to as cultural defense.

This cultural defense resulted in a paradoxical situation. Spurred by new European ideas of rationalism and progress, the reformers tried to create a new society, modern yet rooted in Indian tradition. They began a critical appraisal of Indian society in an attempt to create a new ethos devoid of all overt social aberrations like polytheism, polygamy, casteism, sati, child marriage, illiteracy etc. all of which they believed were impediments to progress of women. All the social reformers shared a belief common to many parts of the world in the 19th century that no society could progress if its women were backward. To the reformers, the position of Indian women, as it was in the 19th century was abysmally low and hence their efforts were directed at an overall improvement in the status of women through legislation, political action and propagation, of education. This was mainly spurred by the first wave feminism of the west and concentrated on basic rights for women.

The social reform movement did not radically challenge the existing patriarchal structure of society or question gender relation. They picked up for reform only
those issues which the British were pointing out as evidence of degeneration in the Indian society. Even the women’s institutions and organisations that sprang up during this period do not reveal the development of an independent view. As a result even when women were speaking for themselves they were speaking only the language of the men, defined by male parameters.

Women were seen as passive recipients of a more humanitarian treatment to be given by Western educated elite men. There was thus an attempt to reform women rather than reform the social conditions which opposed them. There were no attempts to alter the power structure and the men-women relation in the society. This was but natural since the change in the status of women was being sought only within questioning patriarchy itself. The attempt was to create a new Indian woman, truly Indian and yet sufficiently educated and tutored in the 19th century values to suit the new emerging society. Thus education for girls was not meant to equip them to be self-sufficient, independent and emancipated and train them to follow some profession but to be good housewives (Pande and Kameshwari, 1987).

Women also joined in the struggle against colonialism, but while they were encouraged to participate by leaders like Gandhi, their work in the struggles was just an extension of their domestic work. Very few women were allowed to join the front ranks with men, and the ones that did, spoke of the isolation they felt at times (Kumar, 1993). As a form of backlash to these new ideas that colonialism brought to India, women’s roles were being pushed to a more traditional way of life.

In spite of its limitations, it cannot be denied that the social reform movement did help in removing prejudices against women’s education and provided a space for women in the public realm. The reformers took up issues, such as, sati, female infanticide, polygamy, child marriage, purdah, absence of education among women etc. There were two groups of social reformers, 1) Liberal Reformers and 2) The Revivalists. Both the groups undoubtedly recognised the oppressive social institutions’ customs of India. But the former group on the basis of liberal philosophy put forth their work for the cause of women whereas the latter group’s work was based on a programme of the revival at the Vedic society in modern India. While arguing in favour of equal rights for women appealed to logic, reason, history, the principal of individual freedom and the requirements of social programme, social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen, Iswarachandra Vidya Sagar, Kandukuri Veeresalingam Panthulu, M. G. Ranade, Karve, Swami Vivekanantha, Swami Dayanand Saraswathi and others provided leadership to the women’s movement by frankly acknowledging the degraded position of Indian women. The social reformers concentrated their attention on important aspects of women like sati, age of marriage the sad plight of widows and their right to remarry. The social reformers established a number of societies like Bramho Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission and others for the cause of Indian women. The best exponent of liberalism was Raja Ram Mohan Roy who was the first Indian to initiate a social reform movement and campaign for the cause of women. He advocated equality between the two sexes and declared that women were not inferior to men morally and intellectually.

Roy’s attention was drawn towards the inhuman practice of sati, after female infanticide. From 1818 onwards he began his active propaganda through speeches
and writings against sati. Largely because of his effort and persuasion, the East India Company declared the sati practice illegal and a punishable offence in 1829.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy also opposed other evils like early marriage, polygamy etc. He supported female education and widow and inter-caste marriage. He wanted that women should have the right of inheritance and property. Roy’s Brahmo Samaj played a significant role in the reform activities concerning women.

The Brahmo Samaj, soon after its inception became a vigorous social reform movement first in Bengal which then quickly spread to other parts of the country and added to the volume and strength of similarly aimed local reformist movements. The members of the Brahmo Samaj opposed the caste system and they concentrated greatly on improving the low conditions of women and played a very important role in the introduction of several beneficial measures.

Like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwara Chandra Vidya Sagar also helped women. He did so by propagating widow remarriage. The child marriage evil resulted in large numbers of young girls ending up as widows whose lives were miserable due to the severe restrictions imposed on them. He argued in favour of widow remarriage and published his work on “Widow Remarriage” in 1853.

Arya Samaj was established by Dayanand Saraswathi in 1875. Dayanand Saraswathi emphasised compulsory education of both boys and girls. A series of schools for women- Arya Kanya Patasalas - were the first concerted effort of the Samaj to promote women’s education in a systematic way. Prarthana Samaj founded by some Maharashatra Brahmans in 1867 had leaders like M. G. Ranade, N. G. Chandra Sarkar and R. G. Bhandarkar. It concentrated more on sponsoring education for women. Both Brahmo Samaj and Prarthana Samaj made forceful efforts to prove that Hindu religious tradition were not the source of legitimacy for the sorrowful condition of women in society. Under the influence of the liberal thought of the west the two Samajes strove to restore to women their dignified status.

The efforts of Vidya Sagar, Keshub Chandra Sen and D. K. Karve resulted in the enactment of widow remarriage act of 1856. In the South Kandukuri Veerasingam led the widow remarriage movement. In 1874 he performed 63 widow remarriages throughout the Madras presidency and financially supported men who married widows by providing them houses and other benefits.

Another aspect that the reformers worked on was the age of girls at marriage. In the 19th century the average age of marriage for girls was 8 or 9. The extensive propaganda by Vidya Sagar and other reformers in this regard led the British government to legislate in order to improve the condition of minor girls and the age of consent bill was passed in 1860 which made sexual intercourse with a girl of less than 10 years of age as rape. Further social reformers like Mahadev Govind Ranade, Behramji Malabari and Tej Bahadur Sapru in their attempts to raise the age of marriage cited several cases of consummation at the age of 10 or 11 which led to serious physical and psychological disturbances. Behramji, a Parsi journalist published his notes on infant marriage and enforced widowhood in 1884 suggesting certain reforms to be adopted in the educational institutions to
discourage child marriage and also suggested some corrective measures to the Government. It was between 1884 and 1889 that enormous pressure was brought to bear on the government to enact law to further raise the age at marriage of the girl. At last due to the collective efforts of the reformers in 1891, the Bill known as the Age of Consent was passed, which rose the marriageable age for girls to 12 years.

The social reformers felt that through female education the social evils that were linked to the issue of preserving and strengthening basic family structure could be eliminated and good wives and mothers could emerge from the same. Starting from Raja Ram Mohan Roy including the liberal as well as orthodox reformers supported female education. This resulted in the establishment of schools for girls and homes for widows. Between 1855 and 1858 while he was inspector of schools, Vidya Sagar established 48 girls’ schools. M. G. Ranado along with his wife propagated female education and started a girls’ high school in 1884. The limited enforcement and practicability of legislations like widow remarriage act of 1856 and others in a tradition bound society was recognised by D. K. Karve, who, therefore, concentrated his efforts on promoting education among widows. In 1896 Karve along with 15 of his colleagues founded the Ananth Balikashram for the education of widows, where the courses were drawn up with an idea to make the widows self reliant. He also started Mahila Vidyalaya in 1907 and S. N. D. T. Women’s University in 1916 a separate educational institution for women so as to lessen the resistance of orthodox section with regard to women’s education. The social reform movement in its later phases resulted in producing women social reformers who worked for their own cause. Pandita Ramabai started Sharda Sadan in Bombay in 1889 to provide an ashram to destitute high caste widows. In 1912-1913 a widow’s home was established by sister Subbulakshmi, another widow in Madras.

Another important aspect of the social reform movement phase of women in India was that of property rights for Hindu women (Mukharjee 1975a). The existing practice was particularly harsh on the Hindu widow who had no claim on her husband’s property except the right at maintenance as a result of which she was at the mercy of her husbands relatives. Raja Ram Mohan Roy suggested that the government should enact and enforce laws to remove these disabilities and bring economic freedom and self reliance. As a result of such efforts, special marriage act of 1872 with its provision for divorce and succession to property to women was passed. The married women’s property act of 1874 widened the scope of stridhan (women’s property) and expanded the right to own and acquire property by women. It also gave a widow a life interest in her husband’s share of the property and a share equal to that of a son.

Swami Vivekananda, Swami Dayananda Saraswati and Annie Besant were the prominent reformers of the revivalist group who also worked for the cause of Indian women. This group believed in the revival of the Vedic society in modern India. Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj was against child marriage. He encouraged widow remarriages and also set up several rescue homes and orphanages. Annie Besant leader of the theosophical movement was also against child marriage and supported remarriage of child widows. She laid emphasis on the importance of female education, thus adding strength to the social reform movement.
Women in India made little progress in their position both in the pre-British period or later British period. Western education, the major vehicle of progress during the British period did not reach them, partly because of the existence of Purdah and seclusion of women from external environment and partly, because education was considered inessential for them. Educated Muslims formed only a small segment of the population in the 19th century and were confined to urban areas in the country. Consequently, efforts in education and association formation among Muslim women did not begin until the 20th century, one notable exception being the Tyabji family of Bombay. Badruddin Tyabji who graduated from Elphinstone College founded a Muslim self-help association in 1876. His female relatives were later active in starting a Muslim girls school (Amina Binte Badruddin Tyabji) and running a girls’ orphanage (Begum Nawale Misra) and starting nursing centres (Shareefa Hamid Ali).

Thus the social reformers laid the foundation of the women’s movement in India. Social reform movement was the first attempt to remove the obstacles in the life of women. It created awareness among the people that women must be liberated and be made equal of men.

1.3.2 Nationalist Movements

As a result of the social reform movement of the 19th century, the social evils were eliminated and opportunities were provided to women for their education. The expansion of women’s education and their admission to educational institutions had produced a sizable number of English educated middle class women by the late 19th century- and they made their presence felt in political activities. The characteristics of the second phase of women’s movement i.e. the national movement are: for the first time many women belonging to the middle class, started taking part in the political activities. Till 1919, the national movement was limited to the urban upper class and it was later with Gandhi’s entrance into the national movement, participation of the masses began to take place. In this phase, political developments and women’s participation in the National movement went hand in hand.

The partition of Bengal in 1905 resulted in the launching of Swadeshi movement by the nationalists. Though there was the absence of mass awakening amongst the women, but meetings were arranged and khadi spinnings were taken up by women. Women contributed their bangles, nose rings and bracelets to the national fund. In villages, women started putting away a handful of grain daily for such purpose. The women of Bengal and Punjab took active part in the Swadeshi movement. The women workers of the Arya Samaj were also responsible for arousing national spirit among the people. Swarna Kumari, sister of Rabindranath Tagore and her daughter Sarala Devi were strong supporters of the Swadeshi movement. Important women who participated in the revolutionary activities were Mrs. Shyamji Krishna Varma, Ms. P. Nauroji, Ms. M. Chettopadhya, and Madam Bhikaji Rustum, K. R. Kame, a regular among the Indian revolutionaries based in Europe, coordinated to the activities of the revolutionaries. She also raised issues of women’s equality at international socialist circles reflecting the Indian reality.

This Swadeshi period marked the formation of several women’s organisations. Sarala Devi took steps to organise the women’s movement and its nucleus in the
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form of Bharat Stri Maha Mandal in Lahore in 1910. Branches of this organisation were established at Allahabad and Calcutta. The objective of this society was to bring together women of all castes and creed on the basis of their economic interest for the moral and material progress of Indian women. Parvati Devi, the headmistress of a Hindu girls’ school at Kanchi a small town in the Madras presidency started Kanchi Mahila Parishad to equip women of Kanchi with knowledge to create public opinion over burning issues of the nation.

The period from 1911-18 is of great significance in the history of Indian national movement because for the first time a woman Annie Besant led the national movement as president of Indian National Congress. The setting up of Home Rule League and organisation of the Home Rule agitation raised the tempo of the movement. It was due to women like Annie Besant that organised movement for the emancipation of women took place and the demand for political rights for women came to be firmly established on the political agenda. The important achievement of the women’s movement in India during the second phase was the founding of Women’s Indian Association (WIA).

Pandita Rama Bai’s Sharda Sadan (1892) in Poona, Shri Mahapatram Rupram Anathashram in Ahmedabad (1892), Shri Zorastrian Mandal in Bombay (1903), Maternity and Child Welfare League in Baroda (1914), Bhagini Samaj in Poona (1916) all were established and worked with the particular objective of improving women’s lives. These regional organisations were followed by national organisations like Women’s Indian Association (1917) and The National Council of Women in India (1920). All India Women’s Conference (1926) went on to organise 12 women’s conferences till 1937 and Federation of University Women in India (1920) stimulated the interests of women in civic and public life and concentrated on the removal of disabilities of women and promoted social, civil, moral and educational welfare of women and children.

The Women’s Indian Association was mainly concerned with influencing the government policy on women’s suffrage, educational and social reform issues. Its main objectives were spread of women’s education, elimination of child marriage and other social evils, franchise for women and establishment of equality of rights between men and women. This association played an important role in articulating the women’s movement till its merger with the All India Women’s conference.

From the beginning, the Indian women’s movement approached the suffrage campaign as a measure to achieve social reform. The leaders believed that enfranchisement of women would mean additional support for reform legislation.

The entry of Mahatma Gandhi with his experience altered the national politics dramatically. He realised the importance of mass base to Indian nationalism, and subsequently an ideology which suited the same was introduced. Gandhian style of mass mobilisation had implications for the Indian women’s movement in as much as increasing number of women were sought to be mobilised for participation in the independent movement. Even though Gandhi recognised the existence of a set of problems unique to women, he saw no conflict between a women’s movement and a national movement. During the Gandhian era of national movement, women continued their movement for political rights and social reform activities by forming organisations.
Gandhi launched an all India Satyagraha in 1919 against the provocative enactment of the Rowlat Act. Women took out processions, propagated the use of Khadi and even courted jail. Though a few number of women were arrested, yet a beginning was made. Though the non-cooperation movement ended in failure, it awakened the women of all sections and imparted first lessons in Satyagraha.

After the struggle for franchise, for the first time, Indian women exercised their vote in the elections of 1926. The franchise granted to women was very restricted. The first woman to stand for election was Kamala Devi Chattopadhaya. Madras was the first state which nominated a woman member, Dr. Muttu Lakshmi Reddy to the legislative Council. She saw to the enactment of the abolition of Devadasi system and laws to close brothels and protect the minor girls. She brought amendments to the children’s act and worked for the creation of health schools.

A large number of women including Sarojini Naidu, actively took part in the Dandi March. Women participated by breaking salt laws, forest laws taking out processions, picketing schools, colleges, legislative councils and clubs. In 1931 Sarojini Naidu attended the Second Round Table Conference as an official representative of the women of India.

During the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya addressed meetings and picketed foreign cloth and liquor shops. She was in-charge of the women’s wing of the Hindustan Seva Dal. The inauguration of provincial autonomy under the India Act of 1935 gave women an opportunity to be elected to the state legislatures and also become administrators. In the elections of 1937, 8 women were elected from the general constituencies, 42 from the reserved constituencies and 5 were nominated to the Upper House when the ministries were formed, 10 women took office one as minister and others as deputy speakers and parliamentary secretaries.

The Quit India Movement which was the last in the series of the nationalist agitation was launched by Gandhi in 1942 with a significant slogan “Do or Die”. Men leaders were arrested in the first round up and in their absence women carried on the movement and bore the burnt of the British wrath. The women not only led processions and held demonstrations but also organised camps in which they were given training in civil duties and first aid and were educated on democracy. Women organised political prisoners’ relief fund while some women went underground and directed the movement secretly. In the Indian National Army of Subhash Chandra Bose, Rani Jhanshi Regiment was created for women. Women were trained in nursing, social service and to use weapons. Thus women took part in various activities of the national movement. The specific feature of this phase of women’s movement is the establishment of several women’s organisations led by women themselves on an all India basis to enhance their social, economic, cultural and political scene.

The male leadership during the freedom struggle did not encourage a second line of leadership and women could assume leadership only when the men were in prison. However, in such times, there was an upsurge of women, which took not only the British government but their own men folk by surprise. Here were these women, of the upper or middle class leading sheltered lives in their homes, peasant women, working women pouring out in tens and thousands in defiance
of government order and police atrocities. It was not only their display of courage and daring but what was even more surprising was the organisational power, they showed.

It was primarily due to the efforts of women and their role in the freedom struggle that women got the right to vote and complete equality in the constitution of India. However a great gap arose between the theoretical status of women and their rights and what existed in reality.

### 1.4 WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS IN THE POST COLONIAL PERIOD

The period after India’s independence is called post-colonial period. Immediately after independence, India had to deal with a variety of problems. Years of colonial domination had destroyed our indigenous crafts and depleted our natural resources. Industrialisation, changing technologies illiteracy, lack of mobility all resulted in the inability of women to cope with the new order.

During this period the social reformists tried to channelise the Indian society by introducing constitutional and legal provisions and protecting the society and the women from discrimination and by providing equality to all the citizens irrespective of caste, creed, race, religion and sex. A few of the prominent movements are:

- Telangana Movement;
- Chipko Movement;
- Anti Arrack Movement.

#### 1.4.1 Telangana Movement

The Telangana Movement began in 1946 and continued till 1951. It is one of the two major post-war insurrectionary peasant struggles in India. The Telangana Movement (1946-51) was a protest of the people who wanted both food and freedom from the oppressive regime of the Nizam, the Patils and the Jagirdars in Hyderabad State. The peasants on the Nizam’s personal estate were bonded to the ruler. Under Jagirdari system various illegal taxes and forced labour were extracted from peasants by the landlords. Apart from this there were the Deshmukhs and Despandes (principal revenue officers of a district who became land owners overtime) or tax collectors of the Nizam who grabbed thousands of acres of land and made it their own property. Peasants thus became tenants at will.

One common social phenomenon was the Vetti system of forced labour and exactions imposed on all peasant sections in varying degrees. Each family had to send someone to collect wood for fuel, carry post to other villages, carry supplies etc. Foot wear, agricultural implements, pots or cloth had to be supplied free to landlords. Another system that prevailed was keeping of peasant girls as slaves in the landlord’s house. When landlord’s daughters were married these with were often sent with them to serve as concubines.

When the exactions of the landlords reached the point of evicting peasants from their land, the peasants began to resist. Sporadic struggles were launched in 1946 against the Deshmukhs of Visunur, Suryapet, Babasahebpet and Kalluru.
Large number of women who were desperate because of extreme poverty, slavery and sexual exploitation by the feudal lords fought courageously in this movement. In order to mobilise and develop political acumen among women, the communist party formed a women’s organisation which published a woman’s Journal *Andhra Vanitha*. Through this they campaigned against child marriage, widow remarriage, increased wages etc.

Crucially affected by the oppression of landlords and money lenders, women who were a large section of the agricultural labour and tobacco leaf pickers became militant in the struggle for land, better wages, fair, rent, reasonable interest on cash and grain loans.

Among the bonded class, rape, becoming concubines to landlords’ married daughters etc. were prevalent. The oppression of the upper class women was kept under wraps as the violence they faced was not visible and structural purdah was strictly observed both by high caste Hindu and Muslim women. Child marriage and early widowhood were common. Education for women was unheard of. In Telangana the cultural dominance of Muslim feudal rule kept women out of the mainstream for long. Andhra Maha Sabha, which sprung up to assert the cultural identity of the people, added women’s education to their agenda of constitutional reform and civil liberties. Thus many women, who were drawn into the cultural movements, drew closer to the communist party which was working through the Andhra Maha Sabha. When the Andhra Maha Sabha added basic agrarian reforms to its programme of action these women also plunged into the struggle.

Women from all classes participated in the movement with energy and commitment where both the urban middle class as well as the peasant sections of the population, drew their support slowly but surely into the movement. The communist party which seriously took up issues of social reforms for women like widow remarriage, prohibition of child marriage, education for women and opportunities, also began to identify women of ability to make the movement stronger. Some of the women who took active part in the movement were Dubala Salamma, Ch. Kamalamma, Regulla Achamma, Chityala Ailamma, Pesaru Satbamma, Malla Swarajyam, Dayani Kausalya, Pramila Tail, Chakilam Lalithamma, Bullemma, Narasamma, Vajramma, Saidamma, Suganamma, etc.

The Communist party in Andhra served as a rear base for the Telangana struggle, arranging for relief and supplies. The entry of the Indian Army into Hyderabad in September 1948 brought about the surrender of the Nizam and the disbanding of the Razakars. The force of the Army was then turned on the peasants, the communist party was banned and repression increased. The rich peasantry withdrew its support once the Nizam was gone and the squads had to move into the forests. Finally the struggle was withdrawn in 1951.

Some changes took place after the withdrawal. Forced labour was abolished, village became active and people resisted the return of the old Jagirdari system. The demand for division along linguistic zones to facilitate all round political, social and cultural development of the people was also subsequently pushed forward. More important was the fact that it had set a revolutionary tradition among Telugu people.
1.4.2 Chipko Movement

Chipko Movement was born in a small hilly village, Advani in Tehri Garhwal district of Uttar Pradesh. The illiterate *adivasi* women led this movement in December 1972. It challenged the old belief that forests mean only timber and emphasised their roles in making soil, water and pure air as the basis of human life. This philosophy popularised the movement in many countries. The women symbolically tied sacred threads around the trees, faced police firing in February 1978 and later courted arrest. This movement continued under the leadership of Sri Sunderlal Bahuguna in various villages. The movement’s plan is a slogan to plant five F’s- food, fodder, fuel, fiber and fertiliser to make communities self sufficient in all their basic needs.

The Chipko movement is inimical to gender in its theoretical underpinnings as well as the political and economic ones. Women and children gather firewood for domestic consumption. They rely on the forestry for combustible crop residues such as rice straw. This, however, is considered inferior to fuel-wood. Therefore, forestry activities that increase the availability of fuel-wood and development projects that promote improved stoves both release women’s labour from fuel collection and permit its use in other productive activities, and improve the agricultural environment by permitting crop residues to be better used for enriching depleted soil. The movement points out the link between women’s burden as food providers and gatherers and their militancy in protecting natural resources from violent devastation.

The Chipko women believed that the trees were alive and could breathe like them. Thus trees should be respected. Besides supporting agriculture and animal husbandary, the forests grew medicinal herbs used for healing powers. The hill women used fruit, vegetables or roots from it in times of scarcity. This dependency on forest resources was institutionalised through some social and cultural mechanisms, like religion, folklore and oral tradition. Many wooded areas bore marks of the hill folk’s instinct for the plantation and preservation of the forest.

The Chipko movement against tree felling is a phenomenon no less. On April 1974, these women whose annual per capita income was Rs.129 rose against tree-felling. It is nationally and internationally discussed as the peoples’ ecological movement for the protection of the natural environment. Men migrated to the plains and women were left to cope with an impoverished existence and to provide for the old and the children. Women repeatedly challenged administrators and politicians stating, planning without fodder, fuel and water is one eyed planning. In the course of this movement, Garhwal women successfully undertook leadership roles and questioned the right of the men to decide the fate of the forests or to enter into contracts without consulting them, who were the worst affected. The forests were these women’s home, and hence they would not let it be cut down. The police force used all repressive and terrorising methods to retreat the non-violent strength of the women.

One of the women, Gaura Devi led 27 village women to prevent the contractors and forest department personnel, about 60 men in all, from entering the Reni forest to cut 2,415 trees. While the women blocked the narrow passage leading to the forest, the men used all sorts of threats and also misbehaved with the women. But the women bravely refused to budge. In the course of this movement,
Garhwal women successfully understood leadership roles and questioned the right of the men to decide the fate of the forests or to enter into the contracts without consulting them.

1.4.3 Anti Arrack Movement

The anti-arrack movement of women in Andhra Pradesh was one of most historic and significant movements of the 1990s. The historic bangle waged by the women of Andhra Pradesh against the social evil of alcohol drinking is a magnum war in Indian social history. Women have played a historic role in bringing about a ban on consumption and sale of distilled liquor in Andhra Pradesh. The movement indeed was not just for elimination of liquor but for the protection and survival of their lives and culture. The rural women in the villages raised their voices against the degeneration of the progress of their families through the damage caused by their men to their children and themselves.

The movement was started in a small village, Dubagunta, in Nellore district of Andhra Pradesh. The main reason for the movement was said to be the successful literacy mission that has been going in Nellore district. The National literacy Mission (NLM) was officially launched in Nellore District from 2nd January 1990 and was implemented from January 1991. This program was implemented in a very innovative way with recognition of development as an instrument of change and empowerment of women. Hence a campaign approach was adopted to spread the message of literacy. Primers were written, popular performances used and a center for people’s awareness created. Besides this, cultural committees were organised to convey the meaning and need for literacy in the forms of songs, dance-dramas and street plays. (Pande, 2002)

Sharing of problems through such mediums helped women to create a close bonding. They decided to fight the vice of drinking. The women reasoned that if the arrack shops were closed the men would not get liquor and hence would not drink. These women then marched together the next day and were able to get the arrack shop closed in their village.

The Dubagunta episode was soon quoted in another literacy primer, under the title, Adavallu Ekamaithe, (If Women Unite). The lesson had an electrifying impact on women in other villages who felt that they could do the same. In many villages women’s committees were formed. Their fight turned into a larger issue involving contractors, the excise department and the state itself. The women wanted to know why their village did not have drinking water, schools for children or proper wages but plenty of arrack shops (ibid).

Anti-arrack movement though started as a spontaneous outburst of lower class and lower caste women it soon became a rage through classes and castes against local arrack shops, excise officials, liquor contractors and all the machineries of state involved in the trade.

Apart from these, the women resisted pressure tactics and attacks from those whom they were fighting. The inspirational guidance extended by the veteran freedom fighter Mr. Vavilala Gopala Krishnaiah, added momentum to the movement organised and spread to all villages in the district. Soon all the arrack supply sources were blocked. There were spontaneous and simultaneous demonstrations in all the areas against the evils of arrack consumption.
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The women’s struggle against the sale of arrack in Andhra Pradesh had 20 non-political organisations that fought for the scraping of auctions and bring about a complete ban on its manufacture. Through this movement, women have definitely emerged out winners because they are well aware of their strengths and ability to bring about change in society. Most importantly, the anti arrack agitation is a very good example of the articulation of a family violence in public. It showed a feminist way of looking at issues, especially a private issue like family violence and aligning it to a larger issue of state and society. It questioned the notion about domestic violence being private and women not being able to do anything about it.

This movement gave tremendous self-confidence and sense of power to women, who realised their strength and used it to their benefit. Women emerged out winners because they are well aware of their strengths and ability to bring about change in society.

1.5 WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS IN INDIA SINCE THE 1970s

In the post Independence period during the first few decades, the major concern was for overall economic growth. This was immediately followed by another decade, which witnessed an increased concern for equity and poverty alleviation. Gender issues were subsumed in poverty related concerns and there were no specific programs which aimed at women. Women during this period were involved in such movements like the law and famine relief movement but did not start to pick up issues involving their oppression until the 1970s. NGOs and other such organisations from the 70s started emphasising on women’s development and provided women avenues of collectively voicing their concerns. These grass root organisations have questioned the welfare approach to women and incorporated an empowerment participatory approach. While questions about the success of these organisations are often raised, it is often seen that women exposed to some amount of mobilisation show great potentialities, receptiveness and defining capacities (Banerjee, 1992).

The myth of equality for women was shattered by the path breaking, Towards Equality Report of 1974. It focused attention on the fact that despite many progressive social legislations and constitutional guarantees, women’s status had indeed not improved much. Women continued to have an inferior status in many areas like political, economic and social. The report pointed out to a sad fact that society had not yet succeeded in framing the required norms and institutions to enable women to fulfill their multiple roles. The increasing incidence of practice like dowry indicated a further lowering of the status of women. The report also pointed out that the concern for women and their problems which received an impetus during the freedom movement had suffered a decline in the last two decades.

In the post independence period, the women’s movement has concerned itself with a large number of issues such as dowry, women’s work, price rise, land rights, political participation of women, Dalit marginalised women’s right, growing fundamentalism, women’s representation in the media etc. It has also been able to draw a large number of women around three major issues: girl child, gender violence and globalisation.
The important characteristics of the 3rd phase of women’s movement i.e. from post independence era to 1985 are as follows: till the 1970s a kind of passivity or accommodation due to the socio-economic circumstances of free India influenced the women’s movement. The economic crisis of 1960s created an atmosphere in which issues concerning women are more and in which women started taking place (1975-1985- International Women’s Decade) saw the emergence of autonomous women’s movement in which autonomous women’s groups and organisations started fighting for liberation.

Ideals of equal status and important provisions for the welfare of women were incorporated into the Indian constitution, while the pre-independent legislative acts continued to be in force. The constitution guaranteed equal rights to both the sexes. Article 15 and Article 16 (2) of the constitution forbids discrimination and accepts all as equal in the eyes of the law (Article 14). In the early 1950s a series of legislations such as the Hindu Marriage Act, Hindu Succession Act, Dowry Prohibition Act and Equal Remuneration Act were passed.

The emergence of independent India as a welfare state also affected the contours of Indian women’s movement. The government Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) promotes welfare and development services for women, children and under privileged sections of the society. It has a nation wide programme for grants-in-aid for welfare activities with a special emphasis on women’s welfare.

The period from the late 1960s has been marked by an economic crisis and stagnation, rising prices, increasing landlessness and generalised discontent both in the rural and urban areas. The left parties took interest in the economic crisis and started organising movements. Through women’s issues were not taken up, women were mobilised in large number and they participated in the general struggle of the rural poor, tribals and industrial working class. Women’s organisations such as Shramik Mahila Sangathana (the working women’s organisation) took up the issue of rising prices of essential goods, adulteration etc. This saw its culmination in the anti price movement of 1973 as a united front organisation of women belonging to political parties such as CPI (M), Socialist Party, Congress and even non-political women. The political parties mobilised women to achieve their own political gains. This resulted in the establishment of National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) by the Communist Party of India. The economic hardships of the rural masses also drew the attention of some political parties. While pressing for better working conditions for peasant women, issues like wife beating, alcoholism, dowry and sexual harassment from the upper castes were also given attention. Thus in the early 1970s while elite women’s organisations were conducting cultural activities and beauty shows, the poor women were getting entrenched into serious movements.

The decade from 1975 to 1985 saw the emergence of autonomous women’s movement. The year 1975 was declared as the International Women’s Year (IWY) which was later extended to a decade. The government appointed the Committee on the Status of Indian Women (CSIW) in 1971 to examine the rights and status of Indian women and to suggest certain measures to enable women to play their proper role in the building up of the nation.

Paying unequal wages to women for equal work is a part of the general discrimination against women in the work place especially in the agriculture,
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plantations, mines and other unorganised industries. Working women’s hostels, legal facilities and trade union rights are not available to women. Mortality rate among women is higher than that of men due to malnutrition. Violence against women appears in the form of dowry deaths, wife battering, mass rape during caste and communal riots, gang rape, sexual harassment of women and stereotyped representation of women in media. Along with these, poverty and deprivation affect the conditions of dalit and tribal women, many of whom are forced to prostitution.

Autonomous women’s movements emerged during the international women’s decade which provided an opportunity towards attention on women’s issues. In 1975, March 8th was celebrated as international women’s day for the first time. Important features of the women’s autonomous movement are that women organised themselves and led the movements and fought against oppression, exploitation, injustice and discrimination.

The women’s organisations that emerged during the autonomous movement period could be divided into six categories:

i) Autonomous groups whose main propaganda is agitation and to raise consciousness.

ii) Grass root or mass based organisations like trade unions, agricultural labourers’ organisations, democratic groups, tribal organisations etc. in which women’s issues like wife beating, sexual harassment by the landlords, alcoholism of men have been taken up.

iii) Groups that concentrate on providing services, shelter homes etc. to needy women.

iv) Professional women’s organisations such as doctors, lawyers etc. that seek to agitate against discrimination and more often create alternate channels for professional activity.

v) Women’s wings or fronts of the political parties.

vi) Groups involved in research and documentation on women’s issues.

The above mentioned groups and organisations take up women’s problems and its members are mostly women and they are run by women. Saheli, Manushi, Stri Shakti, Stri Mukti Sangathana, Pennurimai Iyyakam etc. are some known women’s organisations. All these groups have taken up various issues like atrocities against women. They issue pamphlets, collect signatures to support demands, organise protest rallies, make demonstrations to mobilise public opinion etc. They also organise street corner meetings, street plays, skits and songs and poster exhibitions. They also bring out feminist magazines to raise awareness among women.

The autonomous movements besides creating general consciousness among women, exposed the conversation of the judiciary as in the Mathura Rape case, by removing the bill boards and stopping shows where women have been shown or used as sex symbols. These autonomous movements have also given rise to special interest groups involved in the anti-dowry and anti-rape campaigns. More research is being carried out on subjects related to women. In the academic field, women’s studies became an upcoming field to be taken more seriously during
the 1970s (Patel 1975). As a result of the pressure created by the women’s movements, amendments in the laws regarding rape, dowry, marriage etc. were made.

1.6 SUMMARY

Unlike the women’s movements in America and Britain, in India, the concern for women’s freedom was first espoused by enlightened males during the British era who had imbibed liberal ideas. Upto the 1920s the struggle was carried on by men. It was only after Mahatma Gandhi’s entry into politics, that the nationalist movement under his leadership was transformed from a middle class movement into a mass movement where women for the first time raised their voices against the disabilities that they suffered. It is the women’s movement in India that has been the force behind the long struggle of women’s advancement from subordination to gender equality and finally to women’s empowerment. Though a lot needs to be achieved and there are various impediments in making this reality available to a large section of women, the women’s movement has brought women’s issues centre stage and made them more visible.

References


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Suggested Reading


Sample Questions

1) Discuss the position of women in Vedic society?
2) How did the status of women start declining during the Medieval period?
3) Critically analyse the women’s movement in post independent era.
4) “Social reform movements’ contribution towards the emancipation of women” Discuss.
UNIT 2  EMPOWERMENT, EMANCIPATION AND POLICIES IN INDIA

Contents

2.1 Introduction
2.2 What is the Meaning of the Term ‘Emancipation’? Understanding its Meaning and Relevance in the History of Women’s Struggles in India
2.3 What is ‘Empowerment’? Examining the Concept and its Origins
2.4 Tracing the Trajectory of ‘Empowerment’! Engaging with Women, Public Policy and Development in the Context of the State-women’s Movement Relationship, and Five Year Plans in India
2.5 Is Public Policy Sufficiently Engendered? Case Study of Towards Equality (1974) and Mahila Samakhya
2.6 Unraveling the Politics of Women’s Empowerment
2.7 Summary

References
Suggested Reading
Sample Questions

Learning Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

➢ explain the meanings of the terms ‘empowerment’ and ‘emancipation’;
➢ trace the struggles for emancipation and empowerment, especially in the context of the state and women’s movement in India;
➢ assess whether and how public policies have contributed to women’s empowerment;
➢ unpack the politics and discourses of women’s empowerment and
➢ understand feminist approaches to gender and development.

2.1  INTRODUCTION

The terms ‘emancipation’ and ‘empowerment’ are both used when referring to women’s movements, gender and development. However, these terms have different meanings and are associated with specific periods in the women’s movement and approaches to gender and development. We shall first take a look at the term ‘emancipation’, and engage with its meaning and relevance in the history of social reform movements and nationalist struggle for freedom from colonial rule in India. We shall then turn our attention to the concept of ‘empowerment’, examine its linkages with power, and theoretically locate its origins. Further, we shall attempt to trace the trajectory of the concept in India, with particular attention to the state-women’s movement relationship and the Five Year Plans. With the aim of delving deeper into whether and how public policy is sufficiently engendered, we shall take a closer look at the making of
Towards Equality (1974) and the country-wide state-sponsored women’s education and empowerment programme, Mahila Samakhya. Last but not least, we shall unravel different facets of women’s empowerment in conjunction with the politics of NGO expansion, projects and funding in the context of post-liberalisation India.

2.2 WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE TERM ‘EMANCIPATION’? UNDERSTANDING ITS MEANING AND RELEVANCE IN THE HISTORY OF WOMEN’S STRUGGLES IN INDIA

‘Emancipation’ refers to liberation from oppression or bondage of any kind. When used in conjunction with women, it can also be taken to mean escape from narrow gender roles into which women get typecast and which perpetuate gender-based inequalities. The period of 19th and 20th centuries is often referred to as one of social, sexual, economic, political and legal emancipation of women in not only India but also the West. Below are a few instances of key actors who made efforts towards women’s emancipation in pre-independent India:

Raja Ram Mohan Roy is regarded as the ‘maker of modern India’. He founded one of the first socio-religious reform movements in India, namely, the Brahmo Samaj. He campaigned for the rights of women, in particular, for women’s rights to property and education, and against polygamy and sati. His efforts are said to have borne fruit when in 1929, sati was legally abolished (Sarkar and Sarkar 2008).

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar championed the cause of women within mainstream Hindu society. He opened a number of schools for girls’ education in Bengal. His writings and activities are said to have helped create public opinion in favour of legalising widow remarriage and abolishing polygamy, which in turn led to the passage of the Hindu Widows Remarriage Act of 1856 and the Civil Marriage Act of 1872 (Basu n.d.).

Pandita Ramabai was amongst the few female leaders of the movement for women’s emancipation. She advocated for women’s education and shed light on the plight of child brides and child widows. She founded 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 for destitute women (Kosambi 1988).

Sarala Devi Chaudhurani formed Bharat Stree Mandal (The Great Circle of India Women) 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.).
These and other such actors were primarily concerned with issues such as purdah, sati, education, age of marriage, polygamy and widow remarriage, which affected Hindu upper caste, middle class, urban women. While they encouraged women to come out of their homes and work for the nation, there was no questioning of traditional gender roles of mother and wife that women were expected to conform to. They contended that women’s uplift was crucial as women were the mothers of future generations. The state was expected to play a paternalistic role by ‘protecting’ women and women’s interests.

In comparison to the 19th century social reform movement, the 20th century nationalist movement somewhat widened its ambit; the latter brought into its fold poor, illiterate, rural and urban women too, not only engaging in social and legal reform but also campaigning for women’s political and economic rights and encouraging participation in the struggle for freedom from colonial domination. While the social reform movement had been predominantly led by male leaders, women leaders and women’s organisations began to emerge later on (Basu n.d.; Sarkar and Sarkar 2008). Several women’s movement scholars regard the period of emancipation of women as the beginnings of the women’s movement in India (Kumar 1993; Sen 2002). We shall delve into important aspects of the contemporary women’s movement in section 2.4 of this unit.

### 2.3 WHAT IS ‘EMPOWERMENT’? EXAMINING THE CONCEPT AND ITS ORIGINS

What is central to the idea of empowerment is ‘power’. Power operates at various levels such as the family, the household and other social structures. Power operates in the following different ways as:

- **power over**: This power involves an either/or relationship of domination/subordination. Ultimately, it is based on socially sanctioned threats of violence and intimidation, it requires constant vigilance to maintain, and it invites active and passive resistance;

- **power to**: This power relates to having decision-making authority, power to solve problems and can be creative and enabling;

- **power with**: This power involves people organising with a common purpose or common understanding to achieve collective goals;

- **power within**: This power refers to self confidence, self awareness and assertiveness. It relates to how individuals can recognise through analysing their experience how power operates in their lives, and gain the confidence to act to influence and change this (Williams et al. 1994 as cited in Oxaal and Baden 1997).

Apart from ‘power’, the notion of empowerment is constructed around a cluster of other recurring concepts: choice, agency, achievements, women’s interests, gender, participation, and rights-based approaches. The term ‘empowerment’ has been used by various actors across the ideological spectrum, including individuals, international development institutions, state actors and policy-makers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and women’s movements. Below are a few instances of how different actors interpret ‘empowerment’ differently (Oxaal and Baden 1997):
Empowerment is about participation. Development must be by people, not only for them. People must participate fully in the decisions and processes that shape their lives... Investing in women’s capabilities and empowering them to exercise their choices is not only valuable in itself but is also the surest way to contribute to economic growth and overall development (UN Human Development Report, 1995).

Empowerment is about challenging oppression and inequality. Empowerment involves challenging the forms of oppression which compel millions of people to play a part in their society on terms which are inequitable, or in ways which deny their human rights (Oxfam, 1995).

Empowerment is a transformative process that challenges not only patriarchy but also the structures of class, race, religion and ethnicity, which determine the condition of women and men in society (Batliwala 1994; Kabeer 1994).

Empowerment has its origins in Socialist feminist discourse and Third World organisations like Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN).

DAWN is a network of Southern activists, researchers and policymakers (e.g. by Moser, 1989), founded in the mid-1980s. The empowerment of poor and marginalised women is central to DAWN’s vision of development. It envisages empowerment as being a collective rather than individual process. It has sought to link micro-level activities, i.e. grassroots and community level initiatives to a macro-level perspective.

Empowerment is essentially a bottom-up process rather than something that can be formulated as a top-down strategy. This means women must empower themselves; empowerment is not something that can be done to or for women. The feminist slogan “the personal is the political” roots the process of empowerment in an expansion of women’s consciousness. When women recognise their ‘power within’ and act together with other women to exercise ‘power with’, they gain ‘power to’ act as agents (Cornwall 2007).

Over the years, the term empowerment has risen in popularity. The reasons for this are the changing role of the state and planning; and donor governments, multilateral funding agencies and international development institutions embracing NGOs as partners in development. UN conferences too have successively advocated women’s empowerment as being central to the project of development. Significant in this regard was the UN World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. The Conference Report called its Platform for Action ‘an agenda for women’s empowerment’ (UN 1995). The World Bank, the UK Department for International Development (DFID), USAID, Oxfam, and other bilateral and private donors have all embraced the concept. It is argued that northern development institutions and aid agencies find the concept of empowerment appealing. After all, the concept originated in the South, and espousal of the concept would ensure that they are not accused of cultural imperialism.
2.4 TRACING THE TRAJECTORY OF ‘EMPOWERMENT’? ENGAGING WITH WOMEN, PUBLIC POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF THE STATE-WOMEN’S MOVEMENT RELATIONSHIP, AND FIVE YEAR PLANS IN INDIA

‘From at least the 19th century, the role of the state in defining and influencing the status of women has informed the many struggles for women’s equality. The state, its policies and programmes continue to be the focus of much of the energies of the women’s movement in post-independent India as well... The relationship with the state has been fraught with conflicting emotions - fears of co-option, subversion of the feminist agenda, of becoming reformist rather than enabling radical social change. The dilemmas of this interaction have not, however, prevented an interaction with the state. What has varied is the nature of issues and the degree of involvement... This engagement involved lobbying, pressurising and highlighting women’s issues/contributions to inform policy formulation... and challenge state policy. There were [also some] examples of a direct involvement with the government and its development programmes... Despite fear of co-option by the state, a few women both as individuals and in groups decided to participate in government-sponsored programmes as a means to mainstream the gender question. ... The Women’s Development Programme (WDP) in Rajasthan launched in the early 1980s and the subsequent Mahila Samakhya programme launched towards the end of the 7th Plan period [in the late 1980s] demonstrated that spaces were available even within the formal state structures to try and bring about change from within...’ (Jandhyala 2001).

The first two decades after Independence were a period when the women’s movement considered the state its ally. The postcolonial Indian state defined itself as the primary vehicle for social transformation. It was, in fact, strikingly innovative in creating institutions to guarantee development for all (Frankel 1978; Kohli 1990; Kothari 1970). With respect to women’s development, in particular, the Central Social Welfare Board was set up at the national level in 1953. Similar Boards were set up at the level of the states too whose responsibilities included provision of counselling, legal services and short-stay shelter homes for women (Gopalan 2002). The boards and the constitutional guarantee of women’s rights satisfied many women who had participated in the social reform and nationalist movements in pre-Independence India. Regarding the state as a key instrument, they laid emphasis on seeking solutions from the state through the passage of ‘progressive’ legislations (Sen 2002; Jandhyala 2001) and not surprisingly shared a welfarist approach with the government.

By the 1970s emerged a generation of women who criticised the approach to women’s development and to the place accorded to women in state-led development processes (Desai and Krishnaraj 1987). These were mostly educated, urban, middle class women, strongly influenced by either the Left or by Gandhian
movements. They questioned the supplementary place allotted to women in the Community Development Programmes of the 1950s and ’60s, ‘which involved training women in the skills of “family management” and “home economics”’ (John 2001: 109). According to them, such programmes failed to challenge traditional gender roles. Their critique was bolstered by the publication of the *Towards Equality* Report in 1974 that discussed the condition and status of women in India. Commissioned by the Indian government, the report was intended for the 1975 United Nations International Women’s Year World Conference. It documented the widening of gender inequalities in employment, health, education and political participation since Independence.

Such critique formed part of a general dissatisfaction with the developmental state. It was felt that the state had failed to deliver the promise it had made about social transformation and elimination of poverty. Accounts of these years have rightly seen them as a period of crisis for the Indian state, the clearest indication of which was perhaps the rise of a range of social movements. Rural and urban women, especially from the poorer sections of the society, got organised in affiliation with or as part of social movements of peasants, workers, and tribals (Desai 2002; Sen 1990). In 1975, the Congress government declared a state of emergency. Consequently, from 1975 to 1977, women’s organisations, along with other political organisations, were driven underground. The suspension of fundamental freedoms and the lack of governmental transparency during this period led to a deep suspicion of the state among women’s activists. Scholars (Gandhi and Shah 1991; John 1996; Menon 1999) identify the declaration of Emergency as marking the end of an era in women’s and social movements’ activism.

Post-Emergency, there was a realisation that the women’s movement’s explicit commitment to gender issues had taken a backseat to class issues in not only state policy but also in the social movements and party organisations that they had been a part of. As a result, autonomous women’s groups, sans party affiliations and hierarchical organisational structures, were formed in towns and cities. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, these groups organised and led public consciousness-raising campaigns around issues of violence against women (Desai 2002; Kumar 1993). These campaigns specifically addressed the issues of dowry and (custodial) rape. Within months, the Union government passed new laws on dowry, rape and domestic violence; introduced new policy measures, including the creation of national and state-level programmes and resources for addressing violence, a ministry of women and child welfare, and support groups within the criminal justice system to help abused women (Jandhyala 2001). The government hoped that these laws and policy measures would go some way towards satisfying the movement’s expectations that it knew it was increasingly unable to meet. Women’s movement activists had a mixed response to the steps taken by the government. Some activists felt these steps reflected the success of agitations in getting the state to take cognisance of the movement’s demands; they were now prepared to work with state structures to influence policy and legislation. Others considered the laws to be dubiously progressive. There were also those who felt that the new laws and policy measures would only contribute to increase in state control to the detriment of the people’s freedoms (Menon 2004).

An increase in emphasis on ‘gender’ in the international development agenda too affected the state-movement relationship. Proponents of the Gender and
Women in India and Some Insights

Development framework, led by Third World women’s groups, campaigned to make grassroots ‘empowerment’ the favoured strategy for undoing social inequalities and for enabling development globally (Kabeer 1994). Autonomous women’s groups turned NGOs were the chosen vehicles for implementing the strategy in Third World countries (Chaudhuri 2004). India was no exception to this trend. The international focus on women’s and gender issues, indeed, played an important role in the Indian state taking up these issues through policy and legislative measures. The United Nations’ declaration of 1975-1985 as the International Women’s decade was significant in this regard. ‘As a member country, India was required to report its efforts in working towards women’s equality and [in creating] what the UN called “national policy machinery for the advancement of women”’ (Desai 2002: 74).

The basic assumption that development processes impact men and women in the same way had begun to be questioned. There was a gradual recognition that the overall goal of development of a country cannot be achieved unless women’s status and condition, and women’s involvement in development processes are not taken into account. In the Sixth Five Year Plan (1975-80), a whole chapter was devoted to women and to resources to be allocated for women’s issues. The Plan recognised women’s role in national development as partners/contributors rather than recipients/beneficiaries (Lingam 2002). Post-Emergency, the Janata party government promoted rural-based NGO efforts by setting up semi-governmental bodies such as the Council for the Advancement of People’s Action and Rural Technology (CAPART). By the mid-1980s, the Congress government had begun to make funding available to NGOs. In 1985, the government set up an exclusive Department of Women and Child Development under the Ministry of Human Resource and Development. In 1986, the National Policy on Education directed that education be used as ‘an agent of basic change in the status of women’ (GOI 1992). In 1989, the Development for Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA), a pilot project was extended across the country.

In fact, women’s NGOs had expanded dramatically in the Indian subcontinent after the 1975 declaration of the United Nations’ International Decade for Women. By the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90), the government had (at least on paper) embraced the idea of NGOs as the ‘third sector’, complementing government agencies and private businesses (Purushothaman 1998). The 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing gave a further fillip to this strategy, which was subsequently picked up by women’s movement organisations. Some developed partnerships with the state to expand their outreach. Others started accepting direct and indirect funding from bilateral donors, international NGOs and development institutions. Several women’s movement activists and organisations felt that attempts to ‘engender’ the state needed to go beyond simply advocating for policy change to opening up spaces for women themselves to actively engage with officials of different state agencies and branches in restructuring state policies, programmes and practices. The collaboration with the state was seen as a means to expand reach to marginalised women on a scale that women’s groups by themselves could never achieve (Jandhyala 2001). The Women’s Development Programme of Rajasthan (WDP) and Mahila Samakhya (MS) are examples of joint initiatives of the women’s movement and the state.
WDP, set up in 1984, was a result of collaboration between state and central governments, local voluntary organisations, and the women’s studies wing of the Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur. It functioned with considerable autonomy in the initial years. It mobilised rural women to perform leadership roles in the community, especially as volunteer sathins (helpers) in development projects. It refused state-defined priorities like family planning and engaged instead in various consciousness-raising activities around employment and wages, political participation, challenge of child marriage customs, and promotion of education (Sunder Rajan 2003; Jandhyala 2001).

In the following section, we delve deeper into the making of Towards Equality (1974) and the aforementioned joint initiatives, especially Mahila Samakhya, to closely examine whether and how attempts have been made to sufficiently engender public policy in India. But before we so, below is a snapshot view of the shifts in perception regarding the attention paid to women and gender-related concerns in India’s Five Year Plans (Patel 2004):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plan</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Plan (1951-56)</td>
<td>Set up the Central Social Welfare Board</td>
<td>Welfare work through voluntary organizations and charitable trusts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Plan (1956-61)</td>
<td>Supported the development of Mahila Mandals at the grassroots</td>
<td>Rural development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third, Fourth and Interim Plans (1961-74)</td>
<td>Provisions for women’s education, pre-natal and child health services, supplementary feeding for children, nursing and expectant mothers</td>
<td>Women as “targets” of family planning and social sector “beneficiaries”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth Plan (1974-78)</td>
<td>Programmes and schemes for women in development</td>
<td>Shift in the approach from welfare to development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth Plan (1980-85)</td>
<td>Separate chapter for women in the Plan</td>
<td>Accepted women’s development as a separate agenda; took a multidisciplinary approach with a three-pronged thrust on health, education and employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh Plan (1985-90)</td>
<td>Working group for employment of women; statistics on women: quota for women in development schemes</td>
<td>Bringing women into the mainstream of national development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eighth Plan (1992-97)</td>
<td>The core sectors of education, health and employment outlay for women rose from Rs. 4 crores in the first plan to Rs. 2,000 crores in the eighth</td>
<td>Paradigm shift from development to empowerment and benefits to women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ninth Plan (1997-2002)</td>
<td>Concept of a women’s component plan to assure that at least 30% of fund benefits from all sectors flow to women</td>
<td>Empowerment of women as its strategic objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenth Plan (2002-2007)</td>
<td>Self-help groups</td>
<td>Suggests specific strategies, policies and programmes for the empowerment of women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.5 IS PUBLIC POLICY SUFFICIENTLY ENGENDERED? CASE STUDY OF TOWARDS EQUALITY (1974) AND MAHILA SAMAKHYA

The Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) was constituted by a resolution of the ministry of education and social welfare, Government of India on 22 September 1971 with Phulrenu Guha, then Union Minister of Social Welfare as chairperson. The Committee was set up to review the changes in Indian women’s status that were expected to result from constitutional equality, government policies and social reform since Independence. Vina Mazumdar critically reflects on the review exercise. She observes that the entire emphasis was on social status, education and employment, to the exclusion of the political; the focus was on rural areas rather than urban; the Committee was only asked to find out the reasons for the slow progress of women’s education but it also looked into the content and method of education; while the terms of reference asked that the implications of discrimination in employment and remuneration, and population and family planning programmes on women’s status be studied, it omitted health. To quote Mazumdar, ‘How are we going to define status? Status means different things in different contexts... [The] drafting committee was to draw up and put before us an approach. The committee imposed a self-denying ordinance on itself: not to be influenced by any other country reports or any feminist literature and philosophy... We also refused to reopen the equality debate, despite Naik sahib’s suggestion that we look into questions such as: Does equality mean identity or similarity? Does it mean that women do all the things that men do? After all, men cannot do all the things that women do. We refused to reopen this debate because we adopted a very firm position on the Constitution... as a deliberate departure from the inherited social, economic and political systems... How did we interpret inequality? We related it first to the variety of social, economic and cultural inequalities inherent in our traditional social structure, making specific references to caste, class and community. Second, we related it to the increasing forces of disparity through structural changes in the economy... We referred to the urban, middle class bias of planners and social scientists and identified the state, intelligentsia, in general, and the educators in particular, for their blindness and indifference to the declining conditions of the majority of women... But we failed to see that our rejection of the modernization process as an unmixed blessing was also a critique of the dominant development paradigm’ (2008: 30-31).

We now turn to the Mahila Samakhya programme, whose guiding philosophy carries the imprint of the CSWI report. Mahila Samakhya was inspired by the vision and methods of WDP, and was the first state-sponsored, national-level programme for rural women’s empowerment. It was initiated in 1989 by the Department of Education, Government of India with joint funding from the Dutch government under the banner of ‘Education for Women’s Equality’. It aimed at actualising the 1986 National Policy on Education (NPE) through the Programme of Action. Below are relevant excerpts from the same:
**EDUCATION FOR WOMEN’S EQUALITY**

4.2 Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of woman. In order to neutralise the accumulated distortions of the past, there will be a well-conceived edge in favour of women. The National Education System will play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women. It will foster the development of new values through redesigned curricula, textbooks, the training and orientation of teachers, decision-makers and administrators, and the active involvement of educational institutions. This will be an act of faith and social engineering. Women’s studies will be promoted as a part of various courses and educational institutions encouraged to take up active programmes to further women’s development.

4.3 The removal of women’s illiteracy and obstacles inhibiting their access to, and retention in, elementary education will receive overriding priority, through provision of special support services, setting of time targets, and effective monitoring. Major emphasis will be laid on women’s participation in vocational, technical and professional education at different levels. The policy of non-discrimination will be pursued vigorously to eliminate sex stereotype in vocational and professional courses and to promote women’s participation in non-traditional occupations, as well as in existing and emergent technologies (NPE 1986).

1.1.1 Education for Women’s Equality is a vital component of the overall strategy of securing equity and social justice in education. Paras 4.2 and 4.3 of the National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986 are very strong and forthright statements on the intervening and empowering role of education. *Inter alia*, they emphasize the provision of special support services and removal of factors which result in discrimination against women at all levels of education. The POA clearly spells out the actions which need to be taken to promote education for women’s equality; it can hardly be improved upon. What is sought to be done is to modify the contents of the POA wherever appropriate. What comes out clearly is the need for will to implement and institutional mechanisms to ensure that gender sensitivity is reflected in the implementation of educational programmes across the board. Education for Women’s Equality is too important to be left to the individual commitments or proclivities of persons in charge of implementing programmes. It should be incumbent on all actors, agencies and institutions in the field of education at all levels to be gender sensitive and ensure that women have their rightful share in all educational programmes and activities (Programme of Action 1992).

Mahila Samakhya started as a pilot project in 10 districts in Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Karnataka. Mahila Samakhya currently operates in over 30,000 villages in 9 Indian states: Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Uttarakhand and Jharkhand. The programme is considered as an innovative one not only because of its focus on grassroots women’s ‘empowerment’ but also because of its hybrid government-organised NGO (GONGO) form. This form is aimed at merging the benefits of small NGOs with large-scale government development programmes (Sharma 2006). Women’s movement activists and organisations and civil servants have played a crucial role in Mahila Samakhya from the time of its conception.
Activity

Carefully read the text below (Jandhyala n.d.) on the Mahila Samakhya programme and answer the questions that follow.

The Mahila Samakhya experience over the past twelve years offers a unique case of trying to explore and understand the issues of women’s education and empowerment and the inter linkages thereof in different regional and rural contexts within India. It offers an example of the importance of empowerment of women as a critical precondition to facilitate greater inclusion of women and their daughters into education. Further, it provides an alternative paradigm to women’s mobilisation and empowerment to the current and dominant focus on economic interventions as the principal strategy for women’s empowerment. The uniqueness of the MS strategy was pithily captured in the Programme Appraisal Report of 1989. “There is no programme comparable to the Education for Women’s Equality programme in terms of the scale and mix of activities, in terms of organisational location and form, or in terms of the long term ambition to grow into a major vehicle for women’s empowerment throughout India.” Has this euphoric expectation been met? Successive evaluations have generally concurred with this early expectation with some limitations. The organisational form and diversity of activities has been an effective vehicle for women’s empowerment and education in the areas where the programme is being implemented. However, it has a long way to go to have an impact across the country.

…Through successive plan periods, MS has not deviated from [its] basic objectives that have been articulated in a set of non-negotiables that are to be accepted by any new state to which the programme is extended. Essentially they state that the pace of women’s mobilisation shall not be hurried, women’s concerns and problems as articulated by them will be the starting points for the programme, and project personnel will play a facilitative than a directive role. Given the radical nature of the approach, it was clear that such a programme cannot be implemented through the normal governmental departments but would require a structure that would allow for women from outside government to be part of the implementation process. Autonomous project societies, therefore, have been set up at individual State levels.

Further efforts are made to find women committed to the cause of women’s empowerment and with experience of having worked with poor women to steer the programme at different levels. This enabled capturing the “worm’s eye view and not a bird’s eye view” of situations of poor women. Grassroots level workers are in almost all cases poor women themselves from within the communities the programme works in and hence bring a radical edge to the interventions.

…Dave and Krishnamurthy’s study, Home and the World (2000) that explores women’s perceptions of empowerment has been one of the few attempts to examine the changing relations within the household. Change in relations within the household has often been softly and tentatively
articulated. The sharing of household work and responsibilities has emerged out of men acknowledging the right of their women to attend sangha meetings. Looking after children, milking the cow, cooking are some of the tasks men have taken over when women are not there. ” It is evident that the changes in the relationship with the husbands are not the direct result of confrontation… women engage in strategic planning to maintain relationships. ‘We allow men their illusions. ’This enables them (women) to negotiate a place for themselves without disturbing the surface of things.”

Women have reported not only changes in their relationship with husbands but also in the relationships with mothers-in-law. And how they are able to assert themselves with respect. For the women the institution of family and marriage continue to be a defining element as they negotiate and tease out spaces ad autonomy of existence and action for themselves.

...MS consciously took a decision not to exhort sangha women to acquire literacy skills. Instead waited till the sanghas themselves felt the need to acquire the basic skills of reading and writing. Over the past few years with an increasing number of women standing for elections in panchayat elections, and sanghas also federating at block levels, each sangha recognises the need for at least some of their members to be fully literate.

A song composed by sangha women in Gujarat says, “we thought we were uneducated but we were only illiterate. Now we know we can learn reading and writing—we know we are not inferior. We are part of this world! ”

- What do you learn about the programme from the text before you?
- What is the programme structure like?
- Whom has the programme sought to mobilise?
- Has the programme brought about a difference in the lives of those it has mobilised?
- What do we learn about the state-women’s movement relationship from the text?
- Is education about literacy for Mahila Samakhya programme planners?
- What forms the content of the Mahila Samakhya programme?
- Which are some of the problems in the idea and implementation of the programme?

2.6 UNRAVELING THE POLITICS OF WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

It is important to place all of these developments in the larger context of economic liberalisation. In popular perception, liberalisation of the Indian economy is associated with the reforms initiated under the leadership of the then Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, part of the Congress government, in 1991. Generally speaking, economic liberalisation implies privatisation and withdrawal of the state from several economic processes. Indian women’s movement scholars and activists’ discussion on how economic liberalisation has changed the character
of the movement today invariably tends to be focussed on NGOs or ‘NGOisation’ (Chaudhuri 2004; John 2001; Menon 1999 and 2004; Ray 2000; Subramaniam 2006; Sunder Rajan 2003).

NGOs have been broadly defined as self-governing, private, not-for-profit organisations that are geared towards improving the quality of life of disadvantaged people (Vakil 1997). Whereas 12,000 Indian NGOs were registered with the Home Ministry in 1988 (a subset of the total number of NGOs), their number is said to have risen to around two million by 2002 (Kamat 2002). These include groups providing social welfare services, development support organisations, social action groups struggling for social justice and structural changes, and support groups providing legal, research or communications support. Some are big in terms of membership and funding. But many are small and are locally based. A lot of these big and small NGOs work with women.

Almost every donor operating in South Asia has set aside a significant proportion of resources for women’s organisations and projects on women. Availability of donor funding has contributed in no small measure to the expansion of NGOs in the field of women’s empowerment, with a focus on self-help groups and micro-credit financing.

For most governments, donors and international financial institutions like the World Bank, sponsoring development, women’s active participation in the market economy is a vital sign of empowerment. Empowerment is basically interpreted as economic empowerment or the ability to earn an income. It has come to be synonymous with projects that give women small loans and enlist them in small-scale business activities such as producing handicrafts for sale. Credit schemes have certainly brought millions of women out of their homes and into the public domain. They are seen as having the potential to link women with the formal banking sector and thereby integrating women in mainstream development (Von Bülow et al. 1995).

But critics (Cornwall 2007) of such an approach argue that focus on women’s economic empowerment conflates power with money, and imbues the acquisition of money with almost magical powers - as if once women have their own money, they can wish away overnight social norms, institutions and relationships part of their lives. Economic empowerment policies may bet on women pouring their resources into their households, expanding their roles as mothers and wives to meet their family’s needs.

But much depends on how they choose to spend such newly-acquired economic power, and whether, where and how entry into the market offers women sufficient resources to begin to challenge and transform the persistent institutionalised inequalities that shore up the established gender order. The empowering effects of work need to be better understood and contextualised given the enormous differences between the countries and the women that are the targets for development’s one-size-fits-all interventions.

Another approach to supporting women’s empowerment is the promotion of women’s participation in politics. This includes promoting women in government and national and local party politics as well as supporting women’s involvement
in NGOs and women’s movements. Increasing the number of women in formal politics is by itself not enough. Women in politics may be elites, in positions due to their personal connections with male politicians and be unable or unwilling to represent women’s gender interests. There are a range of possible mechanisms to increase women’s participation in and empowerment through political life. These include: reform of political parties; quotas and other forms of affirmative action; training to develop women’s skills and gender sensitivity; work with women’s sections of political parties; and the development of women’s political organisations. Critics argue that this approach fits well with the broad programmes of democratisation and good governance, and strengthening of civil society that the neo-liberal framework seems to promote. They claim that this approach does little to redress the power issues that lie at the very heart of the matter - such as in the cultures and conduct of politics itself. Opening up the debate on women’s political participation means asking new questions about what is needed to democratise democracy. It calls us to ask whether greater representation of women within flawed and dysfunctional political orders can really do the trick.

Almost every development NGO, today, claims to be working with the ‘poor and marginalised’ women. At the international level, development institutions and aid agencies claim that they are promoting the empowerment of ‘poor and marginalised’ (Parpart 2004). But who are these poor and marginalised women? There is a tendency in development discourse to universalise the category of ‘poor and marginalised’. But just as the universalisation of the category ‘women’ and presumption of homogeneity of interests among all women at all times and in all contexts have led to complications, there are problems with presuming the homogeneity of ‘poor and marginalised’ women. Poor and marginalised women could be upper-castes or ex-untouchables, urban or rural, Muslim, Christian or Jewish, young or old, engaged in paid labour or otherwise.

Women’s movements, in general, and grassroots women’s organisations, in particular, have a vital role to play in promoting women’s empowerment and resistance. They build bottom-up pressures on policy makers and governments. They are much closer to realities on the ground than official agencies of development, and can avoid the one-size-fits all model of empowerment. The gains of the empowerment strategy are that with more funding, more committed women can be full time activists, and can have time for documentation of and reflection on activism. However, critics claim that this has also resulted in feminism becoming a 9 to 5 job, with those with hardly any commitment to the cause of women and gender getting involved because of the salary that a NGO job can fetch. Critics also lament NGOs’ lack of autonomy from getting and retaining funding. These developments, they argue, result in the depoliticisation of women’s activism (Batliwala 2007; Menon 2004).

2.7 SUMMARY

What we shall attempt to do in this section is to employ the conceptual lens of gender and development approaches to re-present some of the salient points presented in this unit. My reference to gender and development approaches pertains to the shifts in focus from Women in Development (WID) and Women and Development (WAD) paradigms to the more recent Gender and Development (GAD) paradigm. Generally speaking, WID draws on liberal feminist ideas, WAD
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on Marxist feminist ideas, and GAD is said to have emerged as an alternative to both WID and WAD. The WID and WAD perspectives arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s. WID proponents articulated the concern that women had been left out of development, and needed to be ‘factored’ in (Pearson & Jackson, 1998) whereas WAD proponents saw ‘women’ as a class and sought to create ‘women only’ projects (Connelly, Li, MacDonald & Parpart, 2000).

It was in the time of WID and WAD that a new generation of women emerged in India who questioned the supplementary role allotted to women in development programmes, most of which involved training women in the skills of ‘family management’ and ‘home economics’. In India, their critique was bolstered by the publication of a report titled Towards Equality in 1974. Documenting the widening of gender inequalities in employment, health, education and political participation since Independence, the report was intended for the United Nations International Women’s Year World Conference to be held in 1975.

By the 1980s, GAD had emerged as an alternative to WID and WAD. It drew on the grassroots organisational experiences and writings of Third World feminists (Sen and Grown 1988) and on the analysis of Western socialist feminists (Moser 1989). The GAD perspective emphasises the interconnections between gender, class, religion, race and ethnicity, and the social construction of their defining characteristics. Its emphasis is much more on the relationships between women and men rather than on women alone. Proponents of GAD have campaigned to make ‘empowerment’ the favoured strategy for undoing social inequalities and for enabling development globally (Kabeer 1994). NGOs have emerged as the key institutional mechanisms of the GAD approach. They have significantly grown and diversified in the last two decades. It is important to note that the availability of donor funding, especially with liberalisation of the Indian economy, has significantly facilitated the expansion of NGOs (Ray 2000). The 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing too has been catalytic in this regard. A number of other factors have also mattered such as the choice of a section of the women’s movement to collaborate with the state in the Indian context.

Notes

1 You may be already familiar with several of these concepts; others shall be tackled as we move along in the unit.


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**Suggested Reading**


**Sample Questions**

1) What does the term ‘women’s emancipation’ mean? Explain with examples of issues and actors.

2) What is women’s empowerment? Discuss the steps taken by the Indian state and the women’s movement to actualise the goal of women’s empowerment.

3) Briefly analyse the shifts in perception regarding the attention paid to women and gender-related concerns in India’s Five Year Plans.

4) List three gains and shortcomings each of the empowerment strategy.

5) Describe the salient features of the different gender and development paradigms and state which is the one with which ‘empowerment’ is associated.
3.1 Introduction

Anthropologists understand and analyse individual behaviours, interactions, social structures, health and illness in any society within a cultural context. Culture is an abstraction, blueprint or guide for all sorts of conditions and for social analysis. There is a link between cultural contexts, healing institutions and human behaviour related to illness and health seeking. The ways in which we interpret, perceive health, illnesses, seeking medical care are all influenced by our culture. Pluralistic society in which multiple cultures exist side by side, the dominant or core culture is the one whose norms, values, language, structures and institutions tend to predominate. In health context, bio-medicine is the dominant culture and all other forms of healing systems are subordinate or ‘alternative’ forms of healings. Tenets of science and medicine are considered natural or “correct” and therefore outside of cultural considerations. A medicocentric view focuses on disease, identified through signs and symptoms, and not on the patients’ perception of a problem. A medicocentric physician uses a reductionist model. An ‘emic’
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perspective of a patient may relate his or her own illness perceptions and experiences in myriad ways; such as, inability to carry out daily functions, symptom recognition, interpretation, misfortune and discomfort.

However, understanding health only from the cultural point of view leads to cultural determinism. The perspectives to understand health and illness have evolved from ‘cultural’ to ‘ecological’ to ‘critical medical anthropology’ in the discipline of anthropology. In anthropological literature, sometimes nature/biology is pitted against nurture/culture explanation for human conditions. Neither is true. Both positions are too extreme and too simplistic. Real human thought and action is the outcome of complex interplay of cultural, biological, social, psychological, economic and political variables.

Anthropologists have been documenting health concerns of women, listening to their every day experiences of illness, health, birth, death, pain suffering from women’s own perspectives and have captured through ethnographic traditions which is a hallmark of anthropologists. However, 90 percent of what has been written by anthropologists in the area of women’s health has focused on reproduction. It is recognized that after decades of scholarly neglect, the last twenty five years have witnessed a veritable explosion of social science research on human reproduction (Inhorn 2007, ix).

Anthropologists have contextualised women’s health from their larger socio-economic, cultural, and political forces. Using participatory research, anthropologists have explored women’s health based on their own lived experiences and determined their own health priorities. However, it is often seen that the health priorities are set up from top down approach by the states, often neglecting the local voices and socio-cultural needs. A lot has been written by anthropologists on ‘Child Birth’, however, very little has been researched on other aspects of women’s health. There is a dearth of literature and research by medical anthropologists in the Indian context, on women’s health. Very few studies which are carried out in India are written by foreign scholars. Thus the gaps in the anthropological literature pertaining to women’s health in this unit have been filled from other disciplines. This will give a comprehensive understanding of women’s health where most of the data on morbidity and mortality is from demographic literature and contributions by the public health specialists and feminist researchers.

The first section of this unit will deal with the morbidity and mortality indicators along with reproductive health of women globally and nationally, recognizing the importance of understanding women’s health issue separately. The second section will focus on social determinants and linkages to understand poor health among women in India. Third section will deal with the state programs and policies related to women’s health and the limitations of such programs from anthropological and public health perspective.

3.2 HEALTH STATUS OF WOMEN

Even though biologically women are a stronger species in terms of survival at birth, and also live longer than men, the social practices put the women in the most disadvantageous position, from womb to tomb and they are discriminated. Most often they are killed when they are still in the womb (foeticide) or when
they are born (infanticide), or they are abandoned, sold or neglected. When they are growing they are subjected to all sorts of discrimination from food, to education to heath care. These atrocities are conducted, all due to the preference of a son.

In the marital home, women continue to live subjugated lives, until she bears children, more importantly sons. It is only when the sons grow up, she may exercise some power within the family. Women as care givers in the family often give priorities to the needs of other family members at the cost of their own health. They neglect their health till it becomes critical. Old age adds to the woes of women, especially health care when she is either deserted or live at the mercy of her children.

3.2.1 Mortality and Morbidity Indicators

It is now a well known fact that the maternal conditions or the reproductive period (15-44 years) is the leading cause of death and disability among women. According to a combined report of WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA and World Bank (2007), more than 99 percent of the estimated 536,000 maternal deaths each year occur in the developing world. Report of ICPD Cairo conference (UN 1995) states that an early and unwanted childbearing, abortion, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy related illnesses and deaths account for a significant proportion of the burden of illness experienced by women, especially in low-income countries.

It is ironical that for all these diseases, cost-effective interventions exist, still reproductive health problems account for the majority of the disease burden in women of this age group (World Bank, 1993).

In India, even though, women have higher life expectancy of 66.1 years, compared to male members with 63.8 years\(^1\), women lead a highly morbid life due to various reasons, which will be discussed in the next section. Statistics show poor health condition of women in India. According to National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 3, total fertility rate is 2.7 which have come down from 3.4 in NFHS 1 survey in 1992-93.

It is ironic, despite India progressing towards better growth and development, the health of women is deteriorating. The maternal mortality rate (MMR) and infant mortality rates (IMR) are very high in India. The MMR is 212 out of every 100,000 women in 2007-2009 and the IMR is 50 out of every 1,000 infants in 2009, who die during childbirth (Office of Registrar General India, 2011). These high numbers of maternal and infant deaths are attributed to higher percentages of ‘home deliveries’, compared to 42% of delivery by the medical professionals. Further, the reasons given are inadequate prenatal care, delivery in unsafe conditions with inadequate facilities, and insufficient postnatal care and severe anemia. Around 33% of women have below normal body mass index (BMI). 56.2% of pregnant women between the ages of 15 and 49 suffer from any form of anemia according to NFHS 3, which has increased from 51.8% in NFHS 2. Severe anemia is responsible for 9.2 percent of maternal deaths in India. There is a negative correlation with the education, 60% of women who are illiterate are anemic compared to 44.6% who have completed 12 or more years of education.

\(^1\) http://wikigender.org/index.php/Women_in_India:_Statistical_Indicators,_2007#Sex_ratio
Similarly looking at wealth index 64.3% anemic women fall under the lowest wealth index, compared to highest wealth index having 46.1% anemic women.

However, the positive aspect is that there is substantial increase in the antenatal care. Utilisation of antenatal care services for the most recent birth among ever-married women increased substantially over time, from 66 percent in NFHS-2 to 77 percent in NFHS-3. The rate of increase was higher in rural areas than in the urban areas. 29.4% of tribal women have no antenatal care (NFHS 3).

The Millennium Development Goal 5 focuses on reducing the maternal mortality ratio (MMR) by 75 percent between 1990 and 2015 and ensuring universal access to reproductive health by 2015 (UN 2007). We have approached 2012 and still far from this goal. These maternal deaths can be preventable, provided timely pre and postnatal care, and skilled birth attendance during delivery and emergency obstetric care are available. Not just ensuring the medical services, accessible, available, affordable it is necessary to ensure, good literacy, nutrition and working opportunities to better their lives.

3.2.2 Inequities in Health Conditions across State, Caste, Rural-Urban Distribution

India is the second most populated country in the world. It is also the most stratified society on the lines of caste, class, religion, ethnicity, region and gender. Health is also linked to development, so one can see health of women varies across states, class, and caste groups. The rural and urban divide also influences health of the women. On one hand the health indicator related to women and children in Kerala are as good as any other developed countries and on the other hand the health indicators in some EAG (empowered action group) states like, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan are worse than Sub-Saharan African countries. Some of the health indicators among the Scheduled Castes groups are even worse than the Scheduled Tribes.

At all India level the maternal health indicators gives a very gloomy picture, only 15% received all recommended types of antenatal care, only 38.7% of births delivered in health facility, 46.6% deliveries assisted by health personnel and 41.2% deliveries with a postnatal check-up (NFHS survey-2005-06). Caste/tribe classification shows that the Scheduled Tribe women has highest levels of anemia of 68.5%, SC having 58.3%, OBCs with 54.4% and others having 51.3% (NFHS 3). The place of delivery is an important indicator to understand the health of women. Between the age group of 20-49 years, 67.5% urban and only 28.9% rural women deliver in a health facility. Among the lowest wealth index, only 12.7% deliver at the health facility compared to 83.7% highest wealth index. The lowest 17.7% tribal women deliver at a health facility (NFHS 3). The reasons for not delivering at health are varied. The most important is that 72.1% rural and 69.6% urban women feel it is not necessary to deliver in health facility, for 26.9% rural and 21.5 urban it costs too much. For 11.8% rural women it is too far or no transport. The other reasons being, non-functional, no-trust, no female provider, husband/family did not allow, not customary. However all these are in the single digit percent.

The social distance is much more serious and greater compared to geographical distance. Millions of women in India lack the freedom to go out and seek medical help. According to the second National Family Health Survey, (IIPS, 1998–1999),
only 52 percent of women in India are ever consulted on decisions about their own health. They resort to medical help only when the ailment is aggravated and become serious. There is also a culture of silence, when it comes to reproductive health problems, especially if it is a male doctor. It is more likely in rural context, where women try to seek health care and in the absence of female doctors or functional health services in the reach may resort to local remedies or go untreated and their by risking their own health.

3.3 WOMEN AND ILL HEALTH: UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSAL FACTORS/ LINKAGES

3.3.1 Patriarchy

Women are the only oppressed group in our society that lives in intimate association with their oppressors. ~Evelyn Cunningham

Cunningham’s quote is apt for understanding patriarchy in the real sense. It is ironical that women are most oppressed by men and they live in intimate relationship with their oppressor. Health of the women has to be understood within the concept of patriarchy.

Marcia Inhorn (1996) in her book *Infertility and Patriarchy: The Cultural Politics of Gender and Family Life in Egypt* offer a general definition of patriarchy that is multileveled and summarised as relations of relative power and authority of males over females. These are learned through gender socialisation within the family, manifested in both inter-and intra gender interactions within the family and other interpersonal milieus, legitimised through deeply engrained, pervasive ideologies of inherent male superiority and heterosexist privilege and institutionalised on many social levels (legal, political, economic, educational, religious, and so on).

Valentine Moghadam has written that under classic patriarchy, “the senior man has authority over everyone else in the family, including younger men, and women are subject to distinct forms of control and subordination” (Moghadam 2004, p. 141). Furthermore, property, residence, and descent all proceed exclusively through the male line. Today, however, this definition may be considered an overly simplistic description because the phenomenon has evolved substantially over time.

As already mentioned, to varying degrees, patriarchy is nearly universally prevalent. Although, as Gerda Lerner (1986) has noted, anthropologists have found societies in which sexual differences are not associated with practices of dominance or subordination, patriarchy does exist in the majority of societies.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead (1973, 48) too is of the opinion that “All the claims so glibly made about societies ruled by women are nonsense. We have no reason to believe that they ever existed......men everywhere have been in charge of running the show. ... men have been the leaders in public affairs and the final authorities at home.”

However, many scholars today hold that patriarchy is a social construction. Lerner has written that there are indeed biological differences between men and women,
The existence of patriarchy may be traced back to ancient times. Lerner has stated that the commodification of women’s sexual and reproductive capacity emerged at about the same time as the development of private property, thus setting the stage for patriarchal social structures. The sexual subordination of women was subsequently written into the earliest system of laws, enforced by the state, and secured by the cooperation of women through such means as “force, economic dependency on the male head of the family, class privileges bestowed upon conforming and dependent women of the upper classes, and the artificially created division of women into respectable and not-respectable women” (Lerner 1986, 9).

Modern patriarchy is structural, meaning that it underlies the foundations of all of society’s institutions. In most societies, any accomplishments in the direction of gender equality must be made within a larger patriarchal structure. This is one reason why women are at such a constant disadvantage socially, politically, and economically. In the world today, the vast majority of leaders are men. Moreover, Laura Bierema has noted that while women make up over half the workforce, they fall far short of men in terms of pay, promotions, benefits, and other economic rewards (Bierema 2003, 3).

Often, patriarchy is associated more strongly with nations characterised by religious fundamentalism. Yet male domination and female subordination are salient features of social structure in virtually all societies, regardless of the race, ethnicity, class, or religion of the members. Most patriarchal societies have adopted characteristics associated with male domination, namely, aggression and power, as well as the consequences of these characteristics, ill health for women.

Resulting from patriarchy is the control of sexuality of women. Some of the cultural, religious practices arising out to control and regulate women’s sexuality are quite harmful for the health of women. In some societies of sub-Saharan Africa, Arab, Malaysia, Indonesia, 80 millions girls and women living today have undergone female circumcision, also called female genital mutilation (FGM). These cultural practices are done on adolescent girls as ‘rites the passage’ and also in order to control their sexuality which are brutal and painful. In some states in USA, this practice has been banned and it is a punishable act under the law. However, in other countries it still persists. There are serious health risks of FGM, like infections, hemorrhage, damage to adjacent organs, scar tissue formation, long term difficulties with menstruation, sexual intercourse and child birth.

3.3.2 Poverty

Women constitute 70% of the world’s poor (UNDP 1995, 4). Under feminisation of poverty, women are much poorer as compared to men world over. Poverty is the underlying factor for poor health status for not just women but the whole Indian population. Women’s low status, poverty and the reproductive risks add to their morbidity conditions. As mentioned earlier girl child is discriminated against boys for all the resources. Girls have higher malnutrition levels due to the disproportionate distribution of food to them as compared to their male counterpart.
A study in the Delhi slums revealed that 40 percent to 50 percent of the female infants below the age of one year were malnourished. And in female children in the age group 5–9, the rate of malnutrition increased to 70 percent (Mahbub ul Haq Development Centre, 2000: 127). Child malnutrition depends not so much on income or food availability as on the health care available to children and women. Income poverty explains only about 10 percent of the variation in child malnutrition (Mahbub ul Haq Development Centre, 2000).

### 3.3.3 Gender

Under gender dimension it is pertinent to see how men’s and women’s life circumstances affect their health status. Gender is socially and culturally constructed and politico- economically situated. It is widely agreed that sex-ratio is a powerful indicator of the social health of any society, it conveys a great deal about the state of gender relations (Patel 2007). Worldwide, there are 43 million more men and boys than women and girls. According to Amartya Sen, there are 32 million missing females in India. (Menon-Sen and Shiva Kumar, 2001:11). Sometimes it is not so much to do with poverty but gender discrimination. It is seen that the sex ratio has been declining, especially in more prosperous states like Punjab and Harayana (George and Dahiya 1998). The sex selection is much more in better socio-economic background, the plush areas of South Delhi has adverse child sex ration compared to East and West Delhi. In rural Punjab, 21 percent of girls in poor families suffer severe malnutrition compared to 3 percent of boys in the same families. Thus, sometimes poor boys are better fed than rich girls (UNDP, 1995). It shows that the gender discrimination is much more significant than poverty. The gender difference in seeking medical help is quite obvious from the childhood. Medical help will be more likely to be sought for boys compared to girls. UNDP (1995) reports this difference to be as great as 10 percent. Other social factors like; early marriages, repeated pregnancies further disadvantage women and leads to ill health as compared to men.

### 3.3.4 A Dozen Messages on Women’s Health

This subsection is based on the list of 157 ethnographies, where Marcia Inhorn captured dozen most important thematic messages about the women’s health (Inhorn 2007, 3). It is important to understand the wide range of spectrum in which women’s health is captured in anthropological literature. However, the dozen messages are given briefly and not elaborated.

1) **The power to define women’s health**: It is ironical that women’s health is usually defined by others i.e., powerful biomedical and public health establishments rather than women themselves. Numerous ethnographic studies from around the globe document the fact that women themselves rarely define their health problems in the same ways that the biomedical community defines them (Inhorn 2007, p. 7).

2) **The reproductive essentialisation of women’s lives**: Women’s lives are still essentially seen as reproducers. Child bearing and child rearing are seen as the most important aspects of their lives and tie them to the realm of reproduction, ignoring the other capabilities of women’s lives like work, activism, leadership etc. 90% of what anthropologists have written in the area of women’s health have focused on reproduction.

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2 (http://www.adb.org/1/2/3.pdf)
3) *The cultural construction of women’s bodies:* Lock (1993) provides evidence that the body itself is a cultural construction. Cultures construct the body images and notions of beauty. Plumpness in one culture may be viewed as beautiful and desirable and in other cultures it can be seen as obesity and disliked. Recent anthropological literature has gone beyond reproduction and there are excellent ethnographies on teenage dieting, breast augmentation, plastic surgery, living with disability.

4) *The increasing medicalisation of women’s lives:* The normal stages of women’s reproductive life cycle from menarche to menopause and most important child birth have been pathologised. All the important stages of transition or growing up phase, like menarche, child birth, menopause, aging has been medicalised.

**Medicalisation**

Medicalisation is a social process through which a previously normal human condition (behavioral, physiological or emotional) becomes a medical problem in need of treatment under the jurisdiction of medical professionals. The process of medicalisation is based on the biomedical model of disease, one that sees behaviors, conditions, or illnesses “as a direct result of malfunctions within the human body” (Beard 2010).

5) *The increasing biomedical hegemony over women’s health:* Italian social theorist Antonio Gramsci (quoted in Inhorn 2007, 16) defines hegemony as domination achieved through consent rather than force. In terms of biomedical hegemony over women’s health, physicians rarely have forced women to accept them as their primary medical practitioners, such consent has come from women who have actively participated in this process of medicalisation and have often demonstrated their desire for cutting edge biomedical technologies, especially in western context. However, there is a resistance and protest against harmful technologies and its impact on women’s bodies.

6) *The production of health by women:* Ethnographers who study ethnomedicines have documented the ways in which women around the world ‘produce’ health, often through their formal and informal roles of traditional healers and midwives. In medical anthropology the term ‘household production of health’ has been used to designate the ways in which women of the household produce healthy families by countering hegemony of biomedicine wither because they do not trust them or due to inaccessibility (Inhorn 2007, p. 19). Van Hollen study in Tamilnadu Birth on the Threshold: Childbirth and modernity in South India’ (2003) documents the rituals related to pregnancy ‘cimantan’ to fulfill the desires of the pregnant women and also gives ethnographic accounts of giving birth literally at threshold.

7) *The health demoting effects of patriarchy:* Inhorn notes that whether it is the ‘micropatriarchy’ of authoritarian doctor–patient relationship found in many bio-medical settings or the ‘macropatriarchy’ of gender oppression and its ill effects on women’s health, patriarchy has health demoting effects on women. It can be seen in many ways, ‘missing girls’ undernutrition, neglect, violence, abuse perpetrated against women. Elisabeth Croll’s (2000)
incisive ethnography *Endangered Daughters: Discrimination and Development in Asia*, shows how the perceived benefits of sons and the perceived disadvantages of daughters have led to cruel ‘culture of gender’ rife with both overt and covert daughter discrimination.

8) **The intersectionality of race, class, gender (etc) in women’s health:** There is a need for exploring intersectionality of various forms of oppression in women’s lives, based on gender, race, class, age, nation, religion, sexual orientation, disability, or appearance (Schulz and mulling 2006, cited in Inhorn 2007 p. 22). There are multiple forms of oppression that may intersect in women’s lives. In Indian scenario, caste/tribe is another major factor for ill health among the women, discussed in the previous section.

9) **The state intervenes in women’s health:** State is the most powerful agents of surveillance and control over its citizens. Indian state has been controlling the population by having anti-natal policies, going in for coercive, targeted family planning program (Rao 2004). This is one such intervention apart from other interventions, like immunisation etc.

10) **The politics of women’s health:** Women’s bodies and health becomes the site for overt and covert, micro and macropolitical struggle. Studies show how women’s health is politicised and in turn there is health activism and resistance. In Indian context, there are women’s groups, feminist writers, public health activists who have been protesting and resisting coercive and harmful contraceptive technologies.

11) **The importance of women’s local moral worlds:** Many women’s issues are not just political but also moral in nature. Arthur Kleinman (1995: 27 cited in Inhorn 2007: p. 27) highlights the notion of ‘local moral worlds’ shows the importance of ‘moral accounts....of social participants in a local world about what is at stake in everyday experience’. For women around the world the local moralities, often religiously based, have major effects on women’s health decision making, particularly when the moral stakes are high. Issues related to abortion, assisted reproduction using third party donations in IVF – sperms, eggs, embryos, uterus as in the case of surrogacy are prohibited as per law or if there is a religious ban.

12) **The importance of understanding women’s subjectivities:** There is need to understand women’s own subjectivities by listening to the narratives of women on their subjective experiences of health and illness.

### 3.4 POLICIES AND PROGRAMS FOR IMPROVING HEALTH OF WOMEN

There are various programs for improving the health of women by the central government carried out by the state government. Two of them are given below.

#### 3.4.1 Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme

ICDS was launched on 2nd October 1975, today, ICDS Scheme represents one of the world’s largest and most unique programs for early childhood development. Though the objectives of ICDS Scheme is to improve the nutritional and health
status of children in the age-group 0-6 years, the services are also meant for lactating and pregnant woman. The services comprises of supplementary nutrition, immunisation, health check-up, referral services, and nutrition & health education\(^3\). The pregnant and lactating women from the below poverty line families are given supplementary food, iron and folic supplements and immunisation at the Anganwadi centers.

### 3.4.2 Reproductive and Child Health Program

Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India identified National Institute of Health and Family Welfare, as National Nodal Agency for coordinating the training under RCH 1, in December 1997. The second phase of RCH program i.e. RCH II commenced from 1st April, 2005 till year 2010. The main objective of the program was to bring about a change in mainly three critical health indicators i.e. reducing total fertility rate, infant mortality rate and maternal mortality rate with a view to realising the outcomes envisioned in the Millennium Development Goals, the National Population Policy 2000, and the Tenth Plan Document, the National Health Policy 2002 and Vision 2020 India.\(^4\)

### 3.4.3 Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY)

The JSY is an Indian government-sponsored conditional cash transfer scheme to reduce the numbers of maternal and neonatal deaths and increase health facility deliveries in BPL families. JSY was launched by the Indian government as part of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) in 2005, in an effort to reduce maternal and newborn deaths by increasing institutional deliveries. The JSY covers all pregnant women belonging to households below the poverty line, above 19 years of age and up to two live births. The JSY integrates help in the form of cash with antenatal care during pregnancy period, institutional care during delivery as well as post-partum. This is provided by field level health workers through a system of coordinated care and health centers. Benefits for institutional delivery are more generous in rural areas and in low-performing states, ranging from Rs.600 to Rs.1,400. A subsidy is also available to private sector providers for emergency caesareans, on referral. The program also provides a cash incentive to the health worker who supports the woman throughout her pregnancy and accompanies her to the facility.

### 3.5 SUMMARY

Thus it can be summarised that India lags behind in ensuring healthy lives to its women in spite of sustained economic growth. Secondly anthropologists especially in India have a greater responsibility to understand women’s health and possibly carry out applied research which will improve the health of the women. There is a need to understand the subjective experiences of women’s health from their own real life experiences. It is important to understand women’s health with the interface and advancement in science and technology, opening new avenues for reproductive technologies and the practice of surrogacy in today’s globalised world. I would like to end this unit with a very meaningful quote by none other than famous anthropologist Margaret Mead.

*Every time we liberate a woman, we liberate a man.* —Margaret Mead

\(^3\) [http://wcd.nic.in/icds.htm](http://wcd.nic.in/icds.htm) accessed on 3 March 2012  
\(^4\) [http://www.mohfw.nic.in/NRHM/RCH/Index.htm](http://www.mohfw.nic.in/NRHM/RCH/Index.htm)
References


**Website Links**


**Suggested Reading**


**Sample Questions**

1) Women’s health in India is precarious. Substantiate your answer with the morbidity and mortality indicators.

2) Patriarchy has demoting health effects. Discuss how it manifests in social practice of female foeticide and gender discrimination.

3) What the one dozen messages pertaining to women’s health as drawn by Marcia Inhorn?

4) What are the efforts made by the Indian government to improve the health conditions of women?