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## UNIT 30 WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

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### 30.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit, we have discussed the historical and contemporary dimensions of women's movement in India. After going through this unit you should be able to

- describe women's movement as an important variant of social movement
- explain how women's issues are raised in the reform movements of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries
- state and describe the basic aspects of women's organisation, issues and their participation in the freedom movement

- describe the changing facets of women's movement in the post-Independence period
- explain the resurgence of women's movement in the 70s and 80s.

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## 30.1 INTRODUCTION

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Social movement has been defined as an organised effort by a group of people either to bring or resist change in the society. Women's movement is an important variant of social movement in the sense that it aims to bring changes in the institutional arrangements, values, customs and beliefs in the society that have subjugated women over the years. In section 30.2 of this unit we have discussed women's movement as an important variant of social movement. The reform movements of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries focused on women's issues. The Brahmo Samaj, Prarthana Samaj and the Arya Samaj played important role in projecting women's issues in a wider context. You will find these aspects in section 30.3. Social reforms among the Muslim women have also been discussed in this section. In section 30.4 you will read about women's organisation and participation in the independent movement. In this section you will also observe the role played by Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru in encouraging women to participate in the independence struggle.

In the post-Independence period constitutional provisions and social legislations for women, planned economic development and social change affected women's movement significantly. We discuss the changing facets of women's movement in the post-Independence period in section 30.5. During the 1970s and 1980s occurred the resurgence of women's movement in India. Section 30.6 of this unit deals with this aspect. Here we discuss the attempts of women to organise on the basis of ecological, social and economic issues. Issue-based movements in the 1970s and 1980s included anti-dowry, anti-sati, anti-rape movements. Here we also discuss the emerging trends of the contemporary women's movement and government's response to women's issues.

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## 30.2 WOMEN'S MOVEMENT: A VARIANT OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT

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The study of social movements is not an area for historians alone. Sociologists studying social structure, processes and change would logically be interested in social movements. It is a process through which a collective attempt is made at mobilisation for change or resistance. However, in the context of change it differs from **evolutionary process** of social mobility and change in the sense that movements are based on a perception of injustice or oppression of a certain section or sections within the society. Social movements adopt protest, confrontation or conflict as a method to focus attention on different issues and attempt to bring about qualitative changes in the traditional social structures and social relationships, which are unequal and oppressive. The women's movement is an important variant of social movements. It is an important but neglected aspect of studies on social movements like tribal and ethnic, peasant and workers, backward classes, cultural and religious movements, etc.

In Indian society, differences based on caste, class, religious and ethnicity distinguish the life and problems of women in different parts of the country. An overwhelming majority of 80 percent people in India live in rural areas. The process of development and change affects various sections of women differently. It is in the context of a culturally diverse and stratified or unequal society that the emergence of women's movement needs to be understood.

In this unit women's movement is discussed under four broad headings i) Reform Movements and Women's issues, ii) Women's participation in the freedom movement. iii) Institutional initiatives and women's issues in the post-Independence period and iv) Resurgence of women's movement in the 70s and 80s. Let us begin with the first one.

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### 30.3 REFORM MOVEMENTS AND WOMEN'S ISSUES IN THE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES

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The position of women in India has varied in different periods and in different classes, religion and ethnic groups. By nineteenth century there were several evil social practices like Sati (burning of widow on the funeral pyre of her husband), child marriage, ban on widow remarriage, polygamy etc. which were a matter of debate.

During the British rule the spread of English education and Western liberal ideology among Indians and spread of Christianity and missionary activities, resulted in a number of movements for social change and religious reform in the nineteenth century.

The broad objectives of these movements were caste reform, improvement in the status of women, promoting women's education and an attack on social practices whose roots lay in social and legal inequalities and religious traditions of different communities.

In the earlier phase of the social reform movement during nineteenth century, the initiatives came largely from male reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy. The issues that were taken up by them were Sati, ill treatment of widows, ban on widow remarriage, **polygyny**, child marriage and denial of property rights to women and the need to educate women. Struggle for women's education initiated by men resulted in setting up of women's schools, colleges, hostels, widow homes, protection homes etc. The social reformers' assumptions were that female education would revitalise the family system, which was threatened by the increasing communication gap between educated men and their uneducated wives. The social reform movement saw the emergence of women's organisations and institutions. However, the movement was led by men and originated in **metropolitan cities**.

Leaders of the social reform movement also realised that religious reforms cannot be separated from it. The British policy was to keep different religious communities separate from each other and maintain each system of family laws, which was closely related to the religious and customary traditions of each community. Social reform movement never developed as a unified movement but developed within each community.

This period has witnessed the proliferation of various organisations. These organisations took the lead to project important issues, which adversely affected the status of women in the society. The most important of these organisations were the Brahma Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Arya Samaj. In the following section, we shall be discussing these organisations briefly.

### 30.3.1 The Brahma Samaj

It was founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1825, and attempted to remove restrictions and prejudices against women, which had their roots in religion. These included child marriage, polygyny, limited rights to inherit property and seclusion of women. Education of women was seen as the major instrument to improve women's position. Keshab Chandra Sen stressed the need for educating women at home and government support was sought for this purpose. A women's magazine called *Bambodhini Patrika* was started. An inter-caste marriage was also solemnised under the auspices of the Brahma Samaj. Opposition to such moves from Hindu orthodoxy resulted in the passing of Civil Marriage Act, 1872. This Act, which permitted inter-caste marriage and divorce, fixed 14 and 18 as the minimum age of marriage for girls and boys respectively.

The influence of the Brahma Samaj was confined to Bengal and North India.

### 30.3.2 The Prarthana Samaj

It was founded in 1867 and had more or less similar objectives as Brahma Samaj. However, it remained confined to western India. M.G. Ranade and R.G. Bhandarkar were the leading figures. In 1869 the Bombay Widow Reforms Association was formed which arranged the first widow remarriage in 1869. Two leaders of the Prarthana Samaj, R.G. Bhandarkar and N.G. Chandravarkar, later became Vice-chancellors of the first Women's University set up by Karve in 1916 in Bombay. This was later named as the SNDT Women's University.

Both these movements stressed women's education to bridge the widening gap between males who had the benefit of modern education and women of the family.

The idea was to make them better wives and mothers. The debate on women's education that raged in nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shows that it did not originate from the influences of Western education only. Other reformers also stressed the need for women's education.

Both these movements were the outcome of the reaction of urban, western educated men and aimed to change women's position within the family.

### 30.3.3 The Arya Samaj

The Arya Samaj was founded by Dayanand Saraswati in 1875. Unlike the above two movements the Arya Samaj was a religious revivalist movement. While rejecting Hindu religious orthodoxy, idol worship and the caste society, the slogan of this movement was to go back to the vedic period. Praising a glorious position of women in ancient India, it advocated reform in the caste system, compulsory education for both men and women, prohibition of child marriage by law, remarriage of child widows. It was opposed to divorce and

widow remarriage in general, and emphasised separate school for girls and boys. Several Arya Kanya *Pathashalas* were set up which later became colleges and contributed to the cause of women's education. Though mainly an urban movement, its influence also extended to semi-urban and rural areas. While rejecting the caste system it never demanded its abolition. Preference for arranged marriages within the caste group and emphasis on home-making roles of women limited its contribution to the cause of women's emancipation.

Social reformers (like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, M.G. Ranade and Swami Dayanand Saraswati) eulogised the position of women in ancient India. However, the radicals like Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Jyotirao Phule and Lokhitvadi Gopal Hari Deshmukh attacked the caste system, which they said was responsible for the subjugation of women. Phule said that Sudras and women had been denied education so that they would not understand the importance of human rights of equality and freedom and would accept the low position accorded to them in law, custom and traditions.

### 30.3.4 Muslim Women and Social Reform

Similar movements began, within the Islamic community in the late nineteenth century. However, emphasis on *purdah* system and slow spread of education among women delayed the development of a progressive movement to improve the opportunities for Muslim women. People like Begum of Bhopal, Syed Ahmad Khan and Sheikh Abdullah in Aligarh and Karmat Hussain in Lucknow spearheaded a movement to improve women's education. In 1916 Begum of Bhopal formed the All-India Muslim Women's Conference. The traditionalists disapproved such activities and were enraged by the resolution passed by the Muslim Women's Conference in 1917 that polygamy should be abolished. In the later years several Muslim women joined the nationalist struggle and non-cooperation movement against the British.

Similar movements also emerged among other communities in different regions. A few women leaders like Pandita Ramabai and Vidyagouri Neelkant faced bitter opposition for marrying out of caste or obtaining education.

All these movements had a very limited perspective of changing the position of women within the family without challenging the social structure and caste inequalities, which perpetuated women's lower position. Their appeal was limited to urban middle class. The gender bias of the reform movement was most pronounced in the argument that education would improve women's efficiency as housewives and mothers. Gender equality was not on their agenda.

The movement was not conceived as a radical onslaught on the religious orthodoxy, which subjugated women. Social reformers viewed women's question as a social problem.

#### Check Your Progress 1

- i) What were the major objectives of the social and religious movements of the nineteenth century? Answer in about four lines.

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 ii) What were the major women issues raised by the Brahmo Samaj? Answer in about four lines

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iii) Tick mark the correct answer of the following question.

Which of the following movements pointed out the glorious position of women in the ancient India?

- a) Arya Samaj
- b) Prarthana Samaj
- c) Brahmo Samaj
- d) All of the above

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### 30.4 WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT

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During the freedom movement, the struggle for Women's right and equality was seen as an integral part of the struggle for national Independence. Many women who fought for the country's freedom were also active on the issues of women's rights. In 1885 the Indian National Congress was founded. In its 1889 Bombay Session, ten women participated. With the spread of women's education among middle class by the last part of the nineteenth century, several women became active in the social and political life of India. Gandhiji's call to women and large scale participation of women in India's freedom movement brought about changes in the perception of nationalist leaders.

#### 30.4.1 Role of Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru

Mahatma Gandhi played the most significant role in involving large number of women in the nationalist movement. Hence it is important to understand the impact of Gandhian ideology on women's movement. He proclaimed: "Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest details of activities of men and she has the same right to freedom and / liberty as he.... By sheer force of vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying a superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have". He said "I am uncompromising in the matter of women's rights". However, at the same time he idealised mythical figures like Sita, Damyanti who were symbols of women's sufferings. He stressed that participation of women in the freedom struggle was an integral part of women's *dharma* (duty). He felt that women were most suited for *Satyagraha* (protest) as they have qualities

appropriate for non-violent struggle and for constructive social uplift programmes of the Congress. He said women had great qualities for self-sacrifice and tolerance and an ability to endure suffering, which were needed for non-violent struggle. He saw women's role as complementary to men.

Jawaharlal Nehru was influenced by the Western suffragettes and was exposed to liberal views on women's question in the West. He believed that 'without economic freedom other aspects of women's equality would not be realised'. He disagreed with the limited view that women's education alone can bring about the desired changes and he wanted women trained in all human activities. He said that "if women's struggles remained isolated from the general political, economic and social struggles, the women's movement would not gain strength and will remain confined to the upper classes".

There cannot be any doubt that a single factor which contributed to the transformation of women's roles and status in the Indian society was their massive participation in the national freedom movement. Equality between men and women was accepted as one of the objectives in the Fundamental Rights Resolution of the Indian National Congress in 1931.

### 30.4.2 Women's Organisations and Issues

The emergence of women's organisation was closely linked with both social reform movement and the nationalist movement. During the early twentieth century several women's organisations were formed. The Women's India Association (WIA) was formed in 1917 by Margaret Cousins, an Irish and an Indian nationalist. This was followed by the formation of the National Council of Indian Women (NCIW) in 1926 and All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in 1927. Jyoti Singh in Gujarat (1934) played an active role in harnessing energies of women. Several women active in the nationalist movement became founders of women's organisations.

#### i) Women's Suffrage

For the first time in 1917, the demand for women's right to vote was raised. A deputation of women including Sarojini Naidu and Margaret Cousins met the Viceroy to put forward the demand for female **franchise**. The Indian National Congress supported the idea and the constitutional reforms in 1919 allowed provincial legislatures to decide the issue. Madras was the first province to allow women to vote. Women also became legislative councillors. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy was the first woman to become legislative councillor in Madras in 1927. The demand for women's suffrage was later changed to adult franchise within the national movement.

#### ii) Question of Participation in the Freedom Movement

Despite women's active participation in the freedom movement and demand for voting rights, when the civil disobedience movement began in 1930 some of the women leaders took a position that women's organisations should keep away from party politics as women were concerned with social issues and British Government's help was necessary to bring about social change in women's position through education and legislation. There were other women leaders, however, who believed that they should align themselves with the national movement. They believed that sitting on the fence served no purpose and women will progress only with political emancipation.

The gradual change in looking at women's issues, from social and educational to political perspectives, occurred with a closer link between the Congress and women's groups and mass participation of women in the freedom movement. Many advocates of women's rights looked upon freedom for women as dependent on freedom for the country. In the 1920s and 1930s women participated actively in the Civil Disobedience movement. Women were more active in *Swadeshi* movement (campaign to wear home spun *Khadi*) and picketing of shops selling foreign goods and liquor.

Advocates of women's participation in the freedom movement, however, stressed that though Indian culture approved women's equality, it recognised their goals as separate from that of men.

### 30.4.3 Forms of Women's Participation in the Freedom Movement

Women participated in the freedom movement in various ways. They participated in political protests, picketed shops selling foreign goods and organised *Prabhat Pheri* (singing patriotic songs). Women all over the country provided food and shelter for underground political activists and carried messages to political prisoners. In 1930, women in large-number participated in Salt March (Gandhiji urged people to break the salt law by making salt themselves). Thousands of women were jailed.

Within the Indian nationalist groups, however, there were a few more militant groups, which were active in Bengal, Punjab and Maharashtra as well as abroad. Some foreign women also worked with Indian revolutionaries abroad. Bhikaiji Cama, Perm D S Captain, Saraladevi Choudhurani (Bengal), Sushila Devi and Durga Devi (Punjab), Roopavati Jain (Delhi), Kalpana Dutt and Kamala Dasgupta (Calcutta), Lakshmi Sahgal (who was in charge of the Rani Jhansi Women's regiment, part of the Indian National Army formed by Subhas Chandra Bose) were involved in revolutionary activities.

Women's participation in the national movement helped in breaking several of the old barriers of tradition and custom. Women's organisation side by side raised their voices for removal of social and legal disabilities; however, these organisations were dominated by urban middle and upper classes. Women from poor working class families and their problems hardly came into the picture.

#### Check Your Progress 2

- i) What were the two opposite positions, taken by the women's organisations, on the question of their participation in the Nationalist movement? Answer in eight lines.

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- ii) Write a note on Nehru's views on women's equality and women's movement in Indian society. Answer in about ten lines.

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### **30.5 INSTITUTIONAL INITIATIVES AND WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN THE POST INDEPENDENCE PERIOD**

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In the post Independence period a series of institutional initiative has been introduced for the emancipation of women in the society. The most important of these pertain to the constitutional provisions and social legislation for women and planned economic development. Women's movement has been widely influenced by these broad socio-economic and political processes of this period. Let us examine briefly a few important aspects of these processes and the manner they have affected women's movement in the latter half of the twentieth century.

#### **30.5.1 Constitutional Provisions and Social Legislations**

The Constitution of independent India followed the basic principle of women's equality as accepted in the Fundamental Rights Resolution of the Karachi Congress. The provision of Article 15(3), which empowered the state to make special provisions for women and children, suggests that there was a realisation of women's disadvantaged position and the need for the state to enact special measures to bring them at par with men.

During freedom movement it was felt that with the nation's Independence would disappear many of the disabilities, and problems of women attributed to colonial rule. The national government undertook to remove the legal disabilities suffered by women and initiated major reforms in Hindu family laws. The legal reforms in the 1950s sought to provide greater rights to Hindu

women in marriage, inheritance and guardianship. However, they failed to bridge the gap between legal and social realities. Similar changes in the family laws of other communities like Muslims, Christians, Parsis and Jews, have not yet come up due to political resistance despite the Directive Principle of State Policy clearly stating the need for uniform laws for all the communities.

With these legislative measures in the fifties women's organisation became passive and lost the vigour shown during the pre-Independence period. Several of these organisations received government grants and their activities were shaped by the grants they received for activities like adult education, nutrition programmes for children, tailoring classes under vocational training programmes and family planning programmes. Most of these organisations were urban-based and the leadership came from the educated middle and upper class women.

In the post-Independence period, two important organisations for rural women were set up, i.e., Kasturba Memorial Trust and *Bharatiya Grameen Mahila Sangh* (Indian Rural Women's Organisation). Their main objective was to assist the rural women in developing leadership potential.

### **30.5.2 Planned Development and Women's Issues**

In the post-Independence period it was assumed that economic development policies i.e., agriculture development and modernisation, industrialisation, technological development etc., will bring about better life for everyone including women. The overall growth strategies failed to take note of the existing class, caste and gender inequalities. Planned development in India increased socio-economic inequalities. Let us discuss the observation in more detail.

#### **i) Thrust of Development Policies**

The main thrust of development policies for women was provision of education, health and welfare. The continued absence of concern for women's economic roles till the Sixth Five-Year Plan shows that women's economic independence was given a low priority. In the Sixth Plan a separate chapter on women and development was included in the Plan document for the first time. It reviewed the status and situation of women in general and came to the conclusion that in spite of legal and constitutional guarantees, women had lagged behind men in almost all sectors. For the first time it clearly spelt out that the economic independence would improve the status of women and suggested setting up of cells at the district level for increasing women's participation through employment. The successive five-year plans continued suggesting programmes for the improvement of the status of women. The Ninth Plan stressed the need for national policy for the empowerment of women for empowering women as the agents of social change. It also discussed the need for reservation of seats for women in the Parliament and State legislative assemblies. However, it must be said that women are as yet nowhere near receiving their due share of the planned development (Seth 2001). Apart from this the nature of economic development in the post-Independence India benefited only a small section of urban educated middle and upper class women whose visibility as legislators, administrators, doctors, lawyers, teachers etc. led to an erroneous belief that women have made great strides and have achieved equality.

## ii) Women's Educational and Economic Status

The report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1974) was a watershed in the debate on women's issues in India. The Committee provided evidence of the decline in women's employment due to technological changes, biases on the part of employers to 'replace women by men and machines'. High illiteracy among women particularly among the Scheduled Castes and Tribes and poor rural and urban women coupled with inadequate training facilities for them. In the year 1981 the rate of female literates was around 29 percent and in the years 1991 and 2001 this rates was 39.29 and 54.16 respectively. In the rural areas the female literacy rates was around 21 percent and 30 percent in 1981 and 1991 respectively.

The Committee on the Status of Women in India was of the view that planners, government officials, employers and trade union leaders perpetuated the middle class perceptions of women's primary role as the homemaker and not as the bread winner. Such a view ignores the realities of millions of women in the poorer sections in rural and urban areas, who work for the survival of the family. Millions of rural women work hard on family farms and within the home as unpaid workers, collect fuel, fodder and water, work as artisans, craftworkers (weaving, cane and bamboo works etc.) with their men but are recognised as helpers and not as workers. When they work as wage labourers they are invariably paid less wages than men. The Government passed the Equal Remuneration Act (1976), however, it remains ineffective.

The neglect of women's economic roles, which you will study in greater detail in unit 31 of this Block, results in exploitation of women workers, unequal wages between men and women, higher unemployment due to loss of jobs in traditional sectors like textiles, mining, manufacturing and household industries.

### 30.5.3 Women's Political Representation

Several women leaders, who had actively participated in the freedom movement, occupied important positions in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha (the two houses of Parliament), state legislatures. They became governors, chief ministers, cabinet ministers and held other position within major political parties. Indira Gandhi became the Prime Minister. Despite the prominence and high visibility of a few women at all levels of political leadership women remain underrepresented. Their number has never gone beyond seven per cent in the Lok Sabha or State Assemblies. Forty eight women MPs were members of the thirteenth Lok sabha.

One of the weaknesses in the political strategies of women's organisations in the 1950s and 1960s was their inability to mobilise ordinary women and issues that concerned them. The lack of efforts to reach to the masses and expand the base of women's movement limited its effectiveness and agenda for action. The position of peasant and working class women deteriorated and only a small minority of women benefited. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments in the Constitution have, however, brought reservation of 33.33 percent for women in local governance at the Panchayat level. More on this point will be discussed later in this unit.

- i) What is the constitutional provision for women's upliftment? Answer in about four lines.

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- ii) Point out one weakness of the political strategies of women's organisations in the fifties and sixties. Answer in two lines.

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### **30.6 RESURGENCE OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN THE 70S: ISSUES AND ACTIONS**

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The late 1970s and 1980s was marked by a resurgence of women's struggle and emergence of new women's groups and organisations. After their participation in nation's independence struggle women again withdrew from public life and the debate on women's issues also faded out from the public arena. Several scholars have talked about the absence of women's movement in the 1950s and 1960s in India and the slow erosion of concern for women's issues. The growth of 'protest politics' and breaking out of a limited perspective of legislation and education as the main instrument for improving women's position marked the women's movement in the 1970s. Even the older women's organisations set up during the pre-Independence or during the 1950s which were mainly engaged in 'welfare' and 'charity' work, gradually started changing their stand on several issues concerning women. There were various issues that inflamed women's movement in India. Figure 30.1 depicts some of them.

However, many women activists, who were working with political parties, trade unions, peasant and workers movements, realised that they were hesitant to take up issues which concerned women exclusively. The issues women raised were the retrenchment of women from textile mills and other industries due to technological changes and replacing them by men who received training on new machines, lack of maternity benefit to women workers, lack of provision of children at work place, wage discrimination between men and women, inadequate education and training facilities for women workers and discrimination at work places. These led to the emergence of separate women's organisations in various parts of the country, which seriously attempted to organise poor women for change.



Figure 30.1 Women's Movement

### 30.6.1 Emergence of New Organisations and Approaches

The growing economic hardships of poor rural and urban women (fifty per cent of the households were below poverty level at the end of the Sixth Five Year Plan) and failure to take up women's issues by the general agrarian and industrial workers' movements resulted in women labourers organising separately. Let us now look at the new organisations and approaches in more detail.

#### i) Organisation

Such new organisations as Self-Employment Women's Association (Gujarat), Working Women's Forum (Tamil Nadu), Sramik Mahila Sangathna (Maharashtra) concerned themselves with the plight of women workers in the unorganised sector. Organising women labour and taking up the issues of their wages, working conditions, exploitation and health hazards became an important task for these women's organisations. Research on women in the unorganised sector helped in developing new strategies for dealing with the problems of poor rural and urban workers.

Anti-price rise movement in 1973-74 was a united front of women's organisations belonging to several parties.

#### ii) Approaches

In the late nineteen seventies several women's organisations emerged which were not affiliated to political parties or to trade unions. They were called 'autonomous women's organisations'. They rejected the 'welfarist' approach adopted by the previous women's organisations, many of which were set up during the pre-Independence period, and adopted 'protest politics' for mobilising women on specific issues.

### 30.6.2 Deforestation and Ecological Movement

Economic hardships faced by women in the Himalayan region due to cutting down of forests resulted in spontaneous mobilisation of women. They hugged the trees to prevent the contractors from felling them. This is popularly known as *Chipko* movement. The disappearance of forests means acute hardships to women who are primarily responsible for the collection of fuel, fodder, fruits, herbs for medicine and other forest produce which give them income and employment. This is why we find that women are even now in the forefront of these ecological agitations.

### 30.6.3 Issue Based Movements in the 1970s and 1980s

The ineffectiveness of social legislation at reform is clearly indicated by several studies in the 1970s. The autonomous women's organisations' took up issues related to women's oppression like dowry, violence within the family, alcoholism among men and wife-beating, discrimination at the work place etc. to mobilise women for collective action. For the first time some groups in Mumbai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Patna etc. raised issues such as sexual exploitation of poor scheduled castes and scheduled tribe women by upper caste landlords. Issues of rape, dowry murders, crime and violence against women were taken up. All India anti-dowry and anti-rape movements were launched by women's organisations and Civil liberties and democratic rights organisations also joined them. They launched important issue based movements. Let us examine few of these movements.

#### i) Anti-dowry Movements

Dowry murders have witnessed a sustained campaign by several women's organisations and civil rights groups. Journalists wrote extensively about the dowry problem. In the 1980s several women's and other progressive organisations formed a joint front in Delhi called "*Dahej Virodhi Chetna Manch*". Organisations in other major cities also campaigned through protest, demonstrations, discussions, street theatre, posters etc. against the ghastly murders of young brides for dowry. The Law Commission and the Parliamentary Committee also looked into the problem. After a sustained campaign, finally a Bill was introduced in the Parliament in 1984, which made certain changes in the Dowry Prohibition (Amendment) Act of 1961. The Dowry Prohibition (Amendment) Act, 1984 was passed. The Act sets a limit to the amount given in dowry but does not ban dowry. While cruelty by the husband and his relatives leading to suicide or death has become an offence, punishable with imprisonment, still dowry deaths continue. In 1986 alone 1,285 dowry deaths were reported but there were few convictions. In 1998, as many as 6917 dowry deaths were reported throughout India (National Human Development Report 2002).

#### ii) Anti-sati Movement

In 1829 the practice of Sati was abolished through a legislation which marked the culmination of a debate initiated by the British.

The burning of a young widow Roop Kanwar in 1888 on the funeral pyre of her husband in Deorala, Rajasthan, sparked off strong protests by women's organisations. The delayed response of the government came in the wake of mounting agitation in the shape of Commission of Sati (Prevention) Bill, which

was hurriedly passed in the Parliament. The Act assumes that it is a practice sanctioned by the custom. It does not seek to punish those who profit by raising money by selling photographs and raising donations in the name of so called 'sati'. There is nothing on preventive action. The pre-sati feeling within the community mounted a counter agitation against the so called attack on their religious custom. It is strange that the barbaric practice, against which social reformers raised their voices, still persists in a country, which reveres mother goddesses.

### iii) **Anti-rape Movement**

An anti-rape movement was launched in the last decade demanding review of the Supreme Court judgment in a rape case, which acquitted the culprit. Women activists forced the government to review Rape Laws. Several women's organisations and legal and social activists held discussions with the Law Commission to amend the law and in 1983 Criminal Law (Amendment) Act was passed.

In the 1990s women took up the issue of communalism and globalisation through a wider networking both at the national and international level. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the women's organisations in India are linked together through networks on different issues and campaigns. While former methods of protest and advocacy are still used, new methods of resistance and mobilisation for change are also being evolved.

### **30.6.4 The Emerging Trends and Government's Response**

One should not get the impression that women's movement in India is largely urban based. We find that it has also involved middle class educated women. There are several active grassroot organisations of poor rural and urban working class women, tribal, self-employed women who are fighting against all forms of oppression, injustice and exploitation. Various national and regional political parties and trade unions have also set-up women's wings.

As a response to women's movement that began in the late 1970s, the government set up women's cells within a few ministries (Rural Development, Labour and Human Resource Development). In government's programme for rural poor 30 per cent women beneficiaries are to be selected for training and income generation programmes. In the late 1980s the government prepared a National Perspective Plan for Women (1988-2000 A.D.), which has made several recommendations relating to legal, economic, social and political status of women. The government also appointed a National Commission on self-employed women and women in the informal sector to look into the specific problems of unorganised women labour who constitute eighty seven per cent of women workers but do not get any protection from Labour Laws like equal wages, maternity benefits, childcare facilities and better working condition. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments of the Constitution prepared in the late 1980s was passed in 1993 and it contained an across the board reservation of 33.33 percent in panchayats, panchayat samitis, zilla parishads and local body institutions for women. The National Commission for Women was set up in 1992 envisaging to cover all facets of issues relating to safeguarding women's rights and promotion of their empowerment. It was visualised as an expert body to advice the government on women's issues and be a powerful advocate of their rights and hence a statutory body to lend it independence (*Annual*

*Report of Women and Child development Department, Ministry of Human Resources, 2002*). Besides this the government has come out with various programmes such as Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK), Indira Mahila Yojana (IMY), Balika Samriddhi Yojana (BSY), Swasakthi Project etc. for the benefit of the women.

The shift in issues and agenda for action within the women's movement and response from the government are also due to the fact that research on women's problems, particularly on women in the working class and other weaker sections especially during the 1970s and 1980s has thrown several challenges for the women's movement as well as the government.

The new knowledge, being generated by scholars to understand the subordination and oppression of women and their points of strength, is broadly termed as 'women's studies' or 'gender studies'. It is gradually finding a place in universities, colleges and schools as teaching material. 'Women's Studies' scholars and women's organisations see a strong link between 'Women's Studies' and action for change. The women's movement during 1970s and 1980s while being effective in bringing women's issues back into the arena of public debate, was only a beginning of the long struggle ahead for equality, justice and dignity to all women.

### Activity 1

Read section 30.6 again very carefully and list the issues that have led to agitation among women in the 1980s. Now write an essay comparing these issues with the issues prevalent in your society. Compare your note, if possible, with the notes prepared by other learners in your Study Centre.

### Check Your Progress 4

Tick mark the correct answers to the following questions.

- i) Which one of the given issues is not raised by the women's organisations in the post-Independence period?
  - a) Lack of maternity benefits
  - b) Wage discrimination between men and women
  - c) Replacement of male workers by trained female workers
  - d) Lack of provisions of childcare
- ii) What was responsible for the shift in responses of the government regarding women's issues in the post-Independent period?
  - a) Shift in issues and agenda for actions within women's movement
  - b) Research on women's problems
  - c) Both of the above
  - d) None of the above



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## 30.7 LET US SUM UP

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This unit began with a brief discussion on women's movement as an important variant of social movement. Then we discussed how women's issues were focused in the reform movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries especially in the Brahmo Samaj, Prarthana Samaj and Arya Samaj movements and in the social reform movements among the Muslim women. We have also discussed in detail the aspects of women's issues and women's participation in the nationalist movement. The broad socio-economic and the political processes, which have affected women's movement in the post-Independence period, are also discussed in this unit. Lastly, we have discussed the resurgence of women's movement in the 1970s and 1980s.

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## 30.8 KEY WORDS

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<b>Evolutionary Process</b>	A process of gradual change in a society from one stage to the other
<b>Franchise</b>	Right to cast vote
<b>Metropolitan city</b>	Urban places with more than one million population
<b>Polygyny</b>	A form of marriage in which a husband has more than one wife at the same time

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## 30.9 FURTHER READING

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Jayawardena, K. 1986. *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. Kali for Women; New Delhi (Chapter 6)

Geabrielle, D. 1988. *Women's Movement in India: Conceptual and Religious Reflections*. Breakthrough: Bangalore.

Seth, Mira 2001. *Women's Development the Indian Experience*. Sage Publications: New Delhi

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## 30.10 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- i) The broad objectives of these movements were caste reform, improvement in the status of women, promoting women's education and an attack on social practices whose roots were in social and legal inequalities and religious traditions of different communities.
- ii) The restrictions and prejudices against women which had their roots in religion. These included child marriage, polygamy, limited rights to inherit property and, seclusion of women. Education of women was seen as the major instrument to improve women's position.
- iii) a) Arya Samaj

**Check Your Progress 2**

- i) Some of the women leaders took position that women's organisation should keep away from the party politics as women were concerned with social issues. They also thought that the British Government's help was necessary to bring about changes in women's position through education and legislation. There were other women leaders, who believed that they should align themselves with the national movement, as they will progress only with political emancipation.
- ii) Nehru believed that without economic emancipation, it is not possible to realise equality for women. He disagreed with the limited view that women's education alone can bring about the desired changes and he wanted women trained in all human activities. He said that if women's struggle remained isolated from the general political, economic and social struggles, the women's movement would not gain strength and will remain confined to upper classes.

**Check Your Progress 3**

- i) Article 15(3) of the Constitution of India empowers the state to make special provision for women and children. It also suggests that there is a realisation of women's disadvantaged position and need for the State to enact special measures to bring them on par with men.
- ii) Their inability to mobilise the ordinary women and to understand the issues which concerned these women.

**Check Your Progress 4**

- i) C
- ii) C