UNIT 7 : WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN INDIA DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

UNIT STRUCTURE

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7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to,

- know the role of reforms movements towards uplifting India women's status
- know the role of Indian women towards the Indian National Movement

7.2 INRODUCTION

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.Women's Movements in the colonial period are mainly of two different concerns: (1) social reform movements and (2) nationalist movements. We will discuss about these two movement in detail in this unit.

7.3 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 question 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, IswarachandraVidyaSagar, KandukuriVeeresalingamPanthulu, M. G. Ranade, Karve, Swami Vivekanantia, Swami DayanandSaraswathi 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 like sati, age of marriage, the sad plight of widows and their right to remarry. The social reformers established a number of societies like BramhoSamaj, 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 BrahmoSamaj played a significant role in the reform activities concerning women. The BrahmoSamaj, 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 BrahmoSamaj 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 VidyaSagar 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 DayanandSaraswathi in 1875. DayanandSaraswathi emphasised compulsory education of both boys and girls. A series of schools for women- Arya Kanya Patsalas - were the first concerted effort of the Samaj to promote women's education in a systematic way. PrarthanaSamaj founded in 1867 had leaders like M. G. Ranade, N. G. Chandrasarkar and R. G. Bhandarkar. It concentrated more on sponsoring education for women. Both BrahmoSamaj and PrarthanaSamaj 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 Samaj strove to restore to women their dignified status. The efforts of VidyaSagar, Keshub Chandra Sen and D. K. Karve resulted in the enactment of widow remarriage act of 1856. In the South Kandukuri Veeresalingam 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

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 VidyaSagar 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 MahadevGovindRanade, Behramji Malabari and Tej Bahadur Sapru in their attempts to raise the age of marriage cited several cases ofconsummation 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, VidyaSagar 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 husband's 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. Muslim 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.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

QA1) In which year Badruddin Tyabji founded the Muslim self-help group?

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QA2) Name few social reformers who worked for the benefit of Indian women

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7.4 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 spinning 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. Kame 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 form of Bharat StriMaha 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 MahipatramRupramAnathashram in Ahmedabad (1892), Shri Zorastrian Mandal in Bombay (1903), Maternity and Child Welfare League in Baroda (1914) , BhaginiSamaj 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 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 brunt 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 Jhansi 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.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

QB1) Name the act which had enabled the woman of India to get elected in the state legislatures.

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QB2) In which year Quit India movement was launched?

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7.5 LET US SUM UP

- 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 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.
- 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



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7.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to QA1) 1876

Answer to QA2) 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.

Answer to QB1) The India Act of 1935 gave women an opportunity to be elected to the state legislatures.

Answer to QB2) 1942.



7.8 MODEL QUESTION

A) Short Questions (Answer within 150 words)

Q1) Write a short not on Quit India movement.

Q2) Mention the characteristics of women's movement when it coincided with the national movement against the Britishers.

B) Long Questions (Answer within 300- 500 words)

Q1) Discuss the role of woman in the Indian National Movement.

Q2) Write an essay on the reforms movements in India.



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