

Women's Organizations and Feminist Consciousness in Modern India

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Abstract: This research paper will look into the formation and growth of women organizations and the feminist consciousness in modern India between 1850-1947 in the context of North India. The study delves into the progressive shift in gender roles, when women began to do more outside of the home, to education, social reform, public life, and politics. In the 19th century, serious debates emerged relating to women's role in Indian society due to several practices including child marriage, purdah, lack of education for women and social inequality. Women's progress started with social reform organizations and education programmes and gradually more women set up and joined groups where they expressed their own concerns and interests. Special focus of the research is on women association, educational institutions, reform movements, publications and political groups in the promotion of collective awareness and the fostering of feminist consciousness. Effort is made to pay special attention to the North Indian areas, especially the United Provinces, Delhi, Punjab and Rajasthan with its rapidly fluxing social and political dynamics allowing significant space for women's activism and leadership. The study uses historical research method and analytical research methods which utilize primary and secondary data in the form of writing created at that time, newspapers, organizational records, historical documents, books and studies. These results offer strong evidence for the role of women's organizations as an agent of change in people's lived experiences of gender inequalities into a shared collective awareness and organized action. This study suggests that the feminist consciousness in India emerged and took shape as a result of an interaction of social reform, education, organizational movement and national movements. The paper follows the theme of North India and emphasizes on regional experiences thereby enriching the discussion on earlier perceptions and the basis for the women's movement and feminist thinking in India today.

Keywords: Women's Organizations, Feminist Consciousness, Modern India, North India, Social Reform, Women's Education, Women's Movement, Nationalism, Gender Equality, 1850–1947

1. INTRODUCTION

The social, educational, intellectual and political status of women changed significantly during the period of modern Indian history from 1850 to 1947. The nineteenth century was a period of women's existence that was largely determined by patriarchal social systems, curtailed educational opportunities, child marriage, widows not marrying again, purdah, and limited women's role in public life (Anagol, 2018). They later came to be the center of social and intellectual discussion, as preformationists, teachers, authors, and ultimately women, looked at prevailing practices and questioned them. New forms of education along with the development of social reform movements formed the groundwork for potential developments

in women's consciousness (Banerjee, 2017). The change, however, did not stop at reforms which were instigated by women. As time went on, women increasingly found themselves in all the major Life and Social organizations, educational programs, publications, social campaigns and political movements (Basu, 2018). The shift from the locus of women's reform to the birth of women as agents of social change has been an integral part of the modern Indian feminist movement (Chakravarti, 2018).

Collective spaces for women to discuss common problems, inspire leadership, share ideas and voice demands in the areas of education, social equality, legal rights, and political participation were provided by women's organizations, of which particular importance was the development of women's organizations (Forbes, 2016). The early 20th century saw the establishment and growth of women's organizations like Bharat Stree Mahamandal, Women's Indian Association, and the All India Women's Conference. Over time, the work of these organizations grew from the educational and welfare-based work to issues of suffrage, social legislation, political representation, and citizenship (Kumar, 2017). The role of women's activism in a nationalistic context developed in the decades leading up to independence also (Menon, 2016).

1.1 Historical Context of Women's Organizations and Feminist Consciousness, 1850–1947

The first half of the 19th-century is a crucial historical context for analysis of the epochs of women's organizations and the beginning of feminist consciousness. The nineteenth-century debates over women's education, the remarriage of widows, child marriage, and other social issues fostered an intellectual climate in which the “women's question” gained prominence (Ray, 2017). Gradually in North India centers of reform and women's public interaction began to emerge in the cities as well as in educational centers (Sinha, 2018). During the early twentieth century, women were becoming more active in the social and political issues that were important to them, as opposed to breaking into reform organizations. Organized networks made it possible for women to create collective demands from individual experience of discrimination. Women's groups began to discuss issues of education, suffrage, social legislation, political participation and citizenship during the years 1917-1947 (Tharu & Lalita, 2019). The Nationalist movements further increased the role of women in the public sphere, and led to differences on the question of how nationalism and women's independent rights

connect (Vaid & Sangari, 2020). Therefore, the era of 1850-1947 is a crucial one when the convergence and interaction of the four aspects of social reform, education, organization and political participation created new forms of feminist consciousness and helped shape the flooring of the women's movement in independent India.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Forbes (2008) Outlines some of the important historical narratives about the changing role of women in modern India related to social reform, women education, formation of women organizations, women rights movement and women in nationalism. Forbes state that the changes to the education system in the late 1800s and early 20th century helped create a “new woman,” whose new hobbies embraced newfound pursuits beyond the domestic sphere. In her analysis of women's organizations, she highlights how collective action occurred among women in the areas of education, health, social legislation, civil rights, and political participation. The study is significant for a study of the growth of the transition from the reform-oriented activities to the organization of women's activism. The links between women's groups and nationalism are also discussed here by Forbes, who demonstrates how the demands of the feminists evolved alongside, but were not exactly the same, as the nationalistic goals. The work is important in providing a chronological context to the analysis of women's organizations from 1850-1947.

Anagol (2006) Investigates the emergence of ‘feminism’ in India 1850-1920 and challenges the idea of Indian ‘feminism’ purely in the twentieth century nationalist period. Anagol is a composite of women's periodicals, texts, reviews, songs, cookbooks and court records, which allow her to reconstruct women's personal encounters with colonial and patriarchal structures. Her study identifies the crucial role played by women pointing out the gender disparities and an effort to overthrow the existing social relations for the development of feminist consciousness. Importantly, the work challenges and supports a feminist development which is complex and not linear. It was essential for the constant articulation of women's concerns, and for the creation of fresh definitions of "woman" and "social equality," that an educated female intelligentsia arose in Russia. The appearance of an educated female intelligentsia had an important role in articulating the concerns of the women and in giving rise to fresh understandings of both "woman" and "social equality. For the present research this study is especially relevant for the period of 1850-1920, as the period of time it covers seems to

correspond closely with that of the present study and is a starting point of the developments of the organization until 1947.

Mathew (2020) Explores the part played by women's organizations in fostering women's education during the period 1917 to 1947. The research adopts historical approach which involves the uses of documents, especially contemporary newspapers and primary sources which highlights the role of organized women movements in educational development and empowerment. Mathew demonstrates how organizations started to express a strong link to upper-caste and upper class women but then became multi-class and more orientated towards the individual. Educational initiatives were also started by professional women who included teachers, doctors, academics and social workers. The study also shows that the role of women's organizations connecting education with political rights and social change generally increased. Its conclusions are particularly relevant for the insights gained about the way education started to work as a tool to build women's confidence and awareness as well as their capabilities in the organization and in the public realm. Thus, for the last decades under colonialism a deceptively simple link between education for women and development and feminist awareness is not lost on the research.

Forbes (1982) Traces what can be interpreted as a first wave of organized Indian feminism in the late 1800s to the Second World War. The subjects examined are women's concerns, the formation of women's' groups and the formulation of a women's right ideology during a period when women began to talk about their problems, organize women, and express a clear women's right ideology. Special focus is laid on the period 1917 to 1927 when three major women's organizations got started all over India and further women's activism was continued till the Independence in 1947. Forbes explores women's campaigns around issues of female education, child marriage, purdah and legal reform, and shows how social issues became intertwined with issues of women's rights. The study also analyzes critically the mutable nature of the linkage between the concept of feminist ideology and Indian nationalism. The literature is relevant to the present piece of research because it laid the groundwork for women to have an organized form of action and was a way they were able to see that individual grievances could be aggregated to feminist consciousness.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Historical Approach

In the present study, a historical and analytical research design has been adopted to unfold the journey of the women organizations and the feminist consciousness of modern India in the period played between 1850 – 1947. Historical approach is suitable because changes that have taken place during a well-defined time frame from the prevalence of social reform and women's education during the nineteenth century till 1947 when India became a sovereign nation, have been studied. The research traces the journey from reform-minded conversations about women's standing to concerted women's engagement, sense of community, and awareness of their rights. Special focus and information is provided on developments in North India such as United Provinces, Delhi, Punjab, and Rajasthan. The study also divides the period into broad phases to identify changes over time: 1850–1900, 1901–1917, 1918–1930, and 1931–1947. The periodization also helps to provide a systematic interpretation of the growth of the organization, social reform, education, nationalism, and feminist awareness.

3.2 Sources of Data

Documentary and historical sources (PW papers and secondary materials) constitute the major source used in the study. The primary sources span a broad range of contemporary newspaper and journal articles, women's magazines, organizational reports, government publications, legislative records, speeches, and autobiographical writing and correspondence, along with pamphlets, all dating to the period 1850–1947. They are valuable in comprehending the realities of women's lives in the present, as well as their organizations, their needs and their evolving conceptions of gender equality and social change. Secondary sources are books, scholarly research articles, historical studies, biographies, dissertations, and social reform, women's history and feminist studies on India. Extra insight is provided on the documentation of women's activities in the North Indian regions. Tracing the material is met with critical analysis of and an appreciation for the historical context, author, goal, and constraints of the text. Where possible, different sources have been compared to minimize reliance on a single source interpretation and to build a balanced historical overview.

3.3 Geographical Scope and Selection of Case Studies

The geographical area of the study is basically North India, as some of the notable events in women's education, social reform, organization and politics of women happened in this region during the prescribed period. The study will cover the United Provinces, Delhi, Punjab, Rajasthan and also other areas in the North of India, taking into account the changes of the political boundaries during the period of the colonial rule. All those places where there is some historical proof are taken as consideration for major urban centers, such as Allahabad, Lucknow, Kanpur, Varanasi, Delhi, Lahore and other points of consideration. Case studies are chosen based on their importance in the history of women's groups and women's action. It explores the educational efforts of women, social reform organizations, women's journals and publications, political organizations, and women's involvement in the nationalist activities. Use of comparative regional perspective is used to look at similarities and differences of women's experiences. Particular attention is drawn to variations by class, community, education, and urban-rural location to avoid across North India assimilating feminist consciousness to a uniform, identical one.

3.4 Data Analysis and Analytical Framework

The historical material is collected and then analyzed using qualitative, theme, chronological and comparative approach. In chronological method the change of women organizations and feminist awareness in the period between 1850-1947 has been followed and in thematic analysis same some common themes in the study were highlighted like women education, social reform, marriage and widowhood, women rights, organization involvement, nationalism, gender equality etc. Comparative analysis is used to look at the comparisons of the different areas in North India and comparisons on the growth of an organization at different stages. The study accounts for the agency and activity of women and their empowerment through collectivity rather than focusing on the women only to be the beneficiaries of social reform. The analysis also separates out reforms carried out for women and those where women became active agents and leaders in organizations. If reliable data exist they will be expressed as quantitative information (number of organizations, educational institutions, publications, etc.) in tables. This integrated analysis assists in establishing the role of the organizations in the gradual development of the consciousness of feminist in modern India.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Growth of Women's Organizations, 1850–1947

This process of women organizations has been one of the most important phenomenon in the history of modern Indian feminism. In the earlier times of the period, women's issues were largely taken care of through social-reform movements spearheaded by men and women reformers. At the turn of the twentieth century, however, a growing number of women started to establish and join Education, Social Reform, Political Rights and Public Welfare groups. The Bharat Stree Mahamandal in Allahabad, formed in 1910, and the growth of bigger organizational networks, such as WIA in 1917 and AIWC in 1927, are significant in the context of North India. One by one these organizations extended their activities from education and welfare to suffrage and legislation, social customs and women's rights.

Table 4.1: Major Stages in the Development of Women's Organizations

Period	Major Development/Organization	Main Area of Activity	Historical Significance
1850–1900	Social reform initiatives	Education and social reform	Foundation for women's awakening
1910	Bharat Stree Mahamandal, Allahabad	Female education and social reform	Important North Indian organizational development
1917	Women's Indian Association	Education, social reform, suffrage	Organized women's political advocacy
1925/26	National Council of Women in India	Women's welfare and rights	Wider organizational networking
1927	All India Women's Conference	Education and social reform	Major national women's organization

1930– 1947	Expansion of women's organizations	Political participation, rights and nationalism	Greater collective and political consciousness
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Source of Data: Compiled from Mathew (2020), *Journal of Indian Education*; All India Women's Conference historical records; and historical studies of the Indian women's movement.

The table shows that organization development increased after 1900 and especially after 1917. They started with education and social welfare, then added customs discrimination and political rights. AIWC began focusing on women's education in 1927, but it rapidly expanded into social policy and women's rights. Thus, women's organizational integration allowed them to voice personal problems publicly.

4.2 Women's Education and the Development of Feminist Consciousness

It was women's education that played a major part in the development of feminist consciousness in 1850-1947. Education for girls was very rare in the 19th century and women had far fewer chances to become literate. The slow progress of women's education provides women new opportunities to read, write, communicate, organize and debate in public auditorium. A history of women's organizations has revealed a gradual shift of their emphasis towards education as a catalyst for empowerment. This helped to transform the concept of educating women mainly to their role in the family into the broader notion of education as a way to educate citizenship, get women independent and give them social participation.

Table 4.2: Literacy Rates in India by Gender, 1901–1941

Census Year	Male Literacy (%)	Female Literacy (%)	Female–Male Gap (Percentage Points)
1901	9.8	0.6	9.2
1911	10.6	1.1	9.5
1921	12.2	1.8	10.4
1931	15.6	2.9	12.7

1941	24.9	7.3	17.6
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Source of Data: Census of India historical literacy figures, reproduced in Gender Inequalities in the British Period.

Women were 0.6% literate in 1901 and 7.3% in 1941, indicating a large literacy disparity between men and women. The increase in numbers allows women to participate in organizations, publications, education campaigns, and politics and builds literacy. Women's clubs helped broaden and socialize education. The AIWC's 1946 Indian Woman's Charter stated that women be regarded as equal citizens and that there should be no major differentiation between boys and girls in schooling. Thus, education should be about cultivating a feminist awareness as much as learning things.

4.3 Development of Women's Activism in North India

An important geographical context for the development of organized women's activism was North India. Women's activism was not confined to Allahabad; rather, the success of women's organizations in the cities of Delhi, Lahore (Punjab), Allahabad and others shows that it was a pan-Indian phenomenon. In 1910, Bharat Stree Mahamandal was established in Allahabad, a branch of which, later on, opened branches in several other cities such as Delhi and Lahore under the leadership of Sarala Devi Chaudhurani. It worked out on topics like the female education and purdah. The developments illustrate the relevance of organizational networks for distributing ideas beyond a local level. During the 1920s and 1930s, the efforts of North Indian women to organize into a movement were rolled into broader political and nationalist movements, leading to opportunities for women to enter the public sphere.

Table 4.3: Selected Developments in Women's Organizational Activity in North India

Year	Organization/Development	Location	Main Focus
1910	Bharat Stree Mahamandal	Allahabad	Female education and social reform
1910s	Expansion of Bharat Stree Mahamandal branches	Delhi, Lahore and other centers	Women's education and social issues

1917	Women's Indian Association	All-India network	Education, social reform and suffrage
1927	All India Women's Conference	Poona; subsequently national network	Education, welfare and social reform
1930s	Women's nationalist organizations and associations	Various North Indian centers	Political participation and mobilization
1946	AIWC Indian Woman's Charter	National organization	Education, citizenship and women's rights

Source of Data: *Historical literature on the Indian women's movement; Mathew (2020); All India Women's Conference historical records; and studies of women's political participation.*

Education, societal transformation, organizational networks, and national movement participation may have influenced North Indian women's activism. No one had to work welfare. Their members emphasized women's rights and civic involvement. Local evidence can demonstrate a larger point: Feminist consciousness was influenced by local events linking to national networks. The movement was political, and while educated and socially affluent women were first collocated, groups eventually reflected a multi-class, less-qualified-appeal demographic.

4.4 Women's Organizations, Political Rights and Nationalism

The fourth dominant outcome has dealt with the growing interrelationship between the "women's organizations" and the "political rights" and nationalism. Institutionalization after the First World War made way for structured woman's organizations to arise, thus providing women with an avenue for political representation and legislative change. In 1917, Sarojini Naidu and Margaret Cousins along with a women's delegation tabled the demand for women's suffrage. Several provinces gradually extended women's suffrage rights with their own voting arrangements between 1921 and 1930. Meanwhile, the number of women involved in the

nationalists' movements grew significantly during the Gandhian movement, making it more elusive to distinguish between involvement in political and public life. Meanwhile, the representation of women in the political arena and in nationalist movements increased greatly during the Gandhian movement, blurring the line between women's political involvement and women's public awareness.

Table 4.4: Major Milestones in Women's Political and Rights Consciousness

Year/Period	Development	Significance for Women
1917	Demand for women's franchise	Formal political-rights campaign
1919	Constitutional reforms	Provincial consideration of women's franchise
1921–1930	Provinces progressively extended voting rights	Expansion of political participation
1927	AIWC established	Organized national platform for women's issues
1930–1934	Civil disobedience and nationalist mobilization	Expansion of women's public activism
1935	Government of India Act	Further constitutional expansion of franchise
1946	Indian Woman's Charter	Articulation of broader citizenship and equality demands
1947	Independence	New framework for women's citizenship and rights

Source of Data: Basu (2008), “*Women's Struggle for the Vote: 1917–1937*”;

NCERT/eGyanKosh historical material; AIWC historical records; and the 1946 Indian Woman's Charter.

Nationalist views affected political participation and feminist knowledge, according to studies. Protests, meetings, civic disobedience, and political jail highlighted women. Women's groups

addressed education, child marriage, social standards, suffrage, and legal challenges. Nationalism gave women a voice in public life, and the women's movement promoted gender equality. From 1850 to 1947, feminist and political views were "organized" unlike from 1789 to 1850.

4.5 Discussion

The study reveals how the consciousness for and women organizations in modern India (1850–1947) have emerged as a complex and slow process where education, social reform, organizational activity and political mobilization have played important roles. The findings show that a pre-existing intellectual and social landscape was established through the reform movement of the nineteenth century and that women's education opened up opportunities for more women to become involved in organized activities and public discourse. Activist women's groups like Bharat Stree Mahamandal, Women's Indian Association, and All India Women's Conference helped to coalesce individual issues into organized women's movements in the early 1900s. The regional networks are important in the dissemination of ideologies related to education, social reform, and women's rights: this is what is shown by the experience of the United Provinces, Delhi, Punjab and related areas in North India. It can also be inferred from the findings of the role that nationalism offers women a space for political engagement, while feminist consciousness is not exclusive to the nationalist political goals. Women more and more began to voice their own issues on suffrage, education, law reform, social equality, and citizenship. But, certain social and economic factors, such as class, education, urban residence, caste and community continued to shape participation in the movement and not all women could have been classified as equal participants in Indian women's movement. Collectively, this evidence indicates that the women's association became significant locus of development of collective identity, the capacity for leadership, the practice of public involvement, and rights consciousness which contributed greatly to the historic bases of feminist thinking in modern India.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the present study, it can be concluded that the 20th century (1850–1947) was a turning point in the status, role and awareness of women during the modern India. Women's organizations grew with the development of female education, of the social reform movement, of public communication and political mobilization. At the initial stages women

were mostly portrayed as objects of social reform, and later as active members of groups working on issues of education, social norms, legal status, political representation, and welfare. As women developed their organizations like the Bharat Stree Mahamandal, Women's Indian Association, and All India Women's Conference, they acquired institutional spaces to voice and mobilize their group concerns to build women's leadership. The study further shows that this change can in some measure be attributed to the developments in the United Provinces, in Delhi, in Punjab, and in the other centers of the North. The role of women thus increased in nationalist activities leading to their greater involvement in public and political life and the call for suffrage, education, equality and legal reform further heightened their rights consciousness. Thus, the women's roles in the nationalist activities bore fruit in greater involvement in public and political-life while the demands for suffrage for women, education, equality and legal reform reinforced the women's conscious about their rights. The growth of the feminist consciousness was not always even, though, and of equal opportunity among women. Participation and representation in organizations was related to differences due to class different, caste, education, and the place of residence. However, this time period laid the groundwork for conscious and organized women's activism and feminist views. Overall the women's organizations brought a sense of difference to consciousness and action, and laid the foundations for women's rights and the feminist movement to grow in post-independence India.

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