



E-ISSN: 2706-8927
P-ISSN: 2706-8919
www.allstudyjournal.com
IJAAS 2022; 4(4): 16-19
Received: 02-07-2022
Accepted: 04-08-2022

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The women's movement in India (I): Feminist figures before and within its first phase and second phase

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/27068919.2022.v4.i4a.860>

Abstract

The advent of a nationalist movement known as Neo-nationalism in India led to the history of the women's movement there. Gender concerns have been dropped from the Neo-nationalist agenda in order to concentrate on the lost Hindu identity that was influenced by nostalgic traditions from the past that oppressed and subjugated women while celebrating the role of the male figure. This paper covers the description of the public activists who diverged from the social regulations before the Women's Movement in India (before 1850), along its first phase (1850-1915) and the second phase (1915-1947). These phases would become the key to improving the role of women in the country and would drive reforms to achieve gender equality.

Keywords: Women's movement, India, foundation, first phase, second phase, feminist figures

Introductions

Since the need for social changes was evident in India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the number of activists and researchers dramatically expanded. The majority of them will go on to play pivotal roles in the fight for gender equality in the future. Most of these activists and academics were upper-middle-class women who typically blended their active public lives in service of their communities and countries with their conventional roles as wives and mothers in support of their commitments to their families.

The historian Geraldine Forbes looked into the public and private lives of a number of women involved in these associations and concluded that many of these women's intentions were to try to promote certain values of class and caste linked to maintaining their positions in the elite, despite the fact that they were advocates for universal education. The high-spirited atmosphere of inequality in India boosted a part of the population to struggle and agitate, creating what would be subsequently called the Indian Women's Movement, which would connect relevant reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy (Before the Women's Movement even started), Jyotirao Phule and Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati (During the first phase) and Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Mira Datta Gupta (during the second phase) among many others. The figures would be introduced in chronological order according to their year of birth.

Public figures before the Foundation of the Women's Movement in India

The main figure for the basis of the Women's Movement is Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), an Indian philosopher, abolitionist, and religious and social reformer who founded the Brahma Samaj religious and social reform organization. He was born to a Hindu Brahmin family in Calcutta, British India, and educated in a Hindu school. After a few years of study in England, he became a barrister and returned to India in 1814. He began to campaign to eliminate Sati, the practice of burning widows on their husbands' funeral pyres. According to Ganguly, "those who have no reliance on the shastras, and those who take delight in the self-destruction of women, may well wonder that we should oppose that suicide which is forbidden by all shastras and by every race of man" (109). He also advocated for women's education and freedom, as well as Hindu conversion to Christianity and Islam.

Feminist figures during the first phase of the Women's Movement in India (1850-1915)

The first phase of the Women's Movement emerged in the middle of the 19th century and persisted till 1915 by capitalizing on the unstable time.

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Indian activists were becoming more powerful despite the lack of official institutions and organizations which supported them since they would be founded during the second phase of the movement. One of the first figures within the first phase who struggled towards equality was Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890), a Maharashtra-born Indian philosopher, social reformer, and writer. He is well known for founding India's first ladies' school in 1848, as well as his attempts to elevate the position of women and untouchable castes in Indian culture. His father worked as a planter and weaver and was a poor peasant. Phule only obtained a rudimentary education, but he was a brilliant student who showed a strong desire to learn. In the hamlet of Bhidewadi, in the present-day Indian state of Maharashtra, Phule was born in 1827. Based on Begari, "he thought if both women and sudratisudhra (community of enslaved people) do not get an education, they would not be able to emancipate themselves. So, he started a massive work of education by starting various schools in and around Poona" (399).

Another crucial social activist related directly to literature was Savitribai Phule (1831-1897), an Indian poet. She was born in Maharashtra in 1831 to a family of subservient farmers. Savitribai Phule was a pivotal person in India's nineteenth-century social reform movement. Jyotirao Phule, a social reformer, was her husband. In 1848, Savitribai Phule became the first Indian woman to organize and administer a girls' school. She also worked to end prejudice against women and Untouchables. In agreement with Wolf, quoting Deshpande and Jamanadas:

Every girl child, in any school, on any day, in India-sitting alongside boys, reading a book, exploring the Internet, learning new things-is creating a new kind of India. It is a Savitribai-kind of India, where centuries-long deference is haltingly giving way to a barely century-long, Savitribai-led defiance. It is defiance that is struggling to break clear from a 3000-year past of mandatory non-education (94).

Some years later, the feminist Tarabai Shinde would appear to campaign against the patriarchy. Tarabai Shinde was an Indian writer, social reformer, and women's rights campaigner who lived from 1850 to 1910. In the manner of Rajan, "Tarabai Shinde criticized the traditional value system which was imposed on women forcefully, and both were initially attached with a social organization" (3). She began writing at a young age, releasing "Stri Purush Tulana" which she introduced in the following way:

Every day now, we have to look at some new and more horrible examples of really wicked men and their shameless lying tricks. And not a single person says anything about it. Instead, people go about pinning the blame on women all the time, as if everything bad was their fault. When I saw this, my whole mind just began churning and shaking out of feeling for the honor of womankind. So, I lost all my fear, I just couldn't stop myself from writing about it in this very biting language (O'Hanlon 77).

"Stri Purush Tulana" pamphlet, which includes the passage above, is considered the earliest feminist Indian book in 1882, which defied the Hindi sacred scriptures because she criticized the status of women within the caste system and made a comparison between men and women. Her publications focused on women's issues, the need for education, and social transformation.

In 1858, Pandita Ramabai was born as a social activist, writer, and speaker from India. She lived until 1922. Pandita Ramabai (Rama Dongre) worked to improve women and

girls' status in India and promote spiritual equality between men and women. Ramabai was a well-educated woman who rose to prominence in India's women's rights movement, notably in the fight against child marriage. According to Rajan, Pandita was "thinking about the adverse condition faced by women to get opportunities to grow themselves... [Posing] logical opposition to the dominant values of the chauvinistic society or moved away from those that were excluded from its narrative" (8). Ramabai also authored various religious and social works, such as "The High Caste Hindu Woman" (1887). She fought to enhance women's and girls' social and economic standing by advocating for their education. Ramabai also emphasized the need for women's self-reliance and independence, contrasting the false nationalist idea of maltreatment of women with the authentic Hindu doctrine writing, "those who have done their best to keep women in a state of complete dependence and ignorance, vehemently deny that this has anything to do with the present degradation of the Hindu nation" (Sarasvati 94).

The writer who encloses the first phase is Kamini Roy (Sen), an Indian woman poetess, social worker, and thinker who lived from 1864 to 1933. Roy was India's first female honors graduate. She put in a lot of effort to promote women's rights and education. "Kamini Roy has attached tremendous importance to education and knowledge. She feels knowledge is the inspiring force behind growth and development" (Mukherjee 163). Roy rose to prominence as a pioneer in the women's rights movement, advocating for women's education and opportunity, "She was the leader of the girls in Bethune College and organized agitations. This incident is a glorious example of the role played by Bengali women even before the inception of the Indian National Congress" (Neogi 486). "Hindu girls, studying in schools with Brahmo and Christian girls showed distinct keenness on pursuing studies" (Ray 9).

Feminist figures during the second phase of the Women's Movement in India (1915-1947)

The first phase of the Women's Movement in India emerged approximately in 1915 century and persisted till Indian independence in 1947 by capitalizing on the unstable time. Thanks to the development during the previous decades, some organizations were established to provide help against violence and marginalization, like the Women's Indian Association (WIA), formed in 1917, and the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), established in 1927 which created a space to deal with social issues.

There were women who knew how to break the molds; at a rally in 1930, Sarala Devi Choudhrani (1872-1945) publicly denounced the unequal power relations between men and women. "It's object was, in her own words, 'the creation of an organization by means of which women of every race, creed, class, and party in India may be brought together on the basis of their common interest in the moral and material progress of the women of India'" (Ray 3). She denounced the discrimination Indian women suffered at the hands of their husbands, brothers or fathers, or by women of different social and caste backgrounds, and their unequal representation at the Indian National Congress. Sarala was a great leader of women. Her central thesis was that women were the real source of power in society and that it was necessary to bring them out of the temporary decline that had set in. The crucial task, therefore, was to make women conscious of their latent power and rekindle it (Ray 3).

Sarala was born in Kolkata to a family of intellectuals, his father was the secretary of the newly created Bengal Congress, and his mother was the niece of Rabindranath Tagore, a well-known Bengali writer who encouraged her daughter to continue her studies. She spoke extensively and delivered inspiring speeches to convince women that they were embodiments of the Goddess of power. 'Women of India,' she said, 'Wake up! Let the world know you for your true identity, in the image of Durga, a wielder of power and authority (Ray 3).

On the other hand, Saroj Nalini Dutt (1887-1925) was an Indian feminist educator who worked for the Sylhet Union and as a social worker to promote female education in India. "Saroj Nalini, therefore, had a liberal upbringing and was taught at home like her siblings by a tutor and governess" (Gupta 224). She traveled to Japan in 1920 and wrote a travelogue of her impressions, published after her death in 1928. "Of special interest to Saroj Nalini were insights gained into the education, status, and aspirations of Japanese women. Recalling the conditions of women and children in Bengal, her comparative assessments were motivated towards reform and uplift of Indian women" (Gupta 190). The visit may be so prolific since she established a comparison between Bengal and Japanese society and the way women participate within it. In the words of Gupta: Significantly, Saroj Nalini shared her interest in education, particularly girls' education with the other women from Bengal writing about Japan. In reconstituting Bengali social life in terms of individuality and modernity, women who traveled absorbed what they thought were images of change with a view to replicate it in their own lives and societies. This kind of feminism was drawn into the idea of a free and liberal nation where women would have their independent role as citizens and mothers who would responsibly nurture future citizens of the country (225).

Saroj Nalini struggled for women's and children's rights, disapproving of laws that put vulnerable groups at a disadvantage. Dutt "argues against early marriages on the basis of their physiological effects on women, their children, and thus on the nation as a whole. 'With the lack of girlhood for Bengali girls, they never obtain opportunities for full mental and bodily development, and thus the country lags behind both physically and mentally' (Whitehead 198 - 199).

Finally, a later activist was Mira Datta Gupta (1907-1983), a well-known Indian feminist politician and academic who was a rebel against the patriarchal system that oppressed women. She was a driving force behind the establishment of the All-India Women's Conference (Ghosh 13) and the All-Bengal Women's Union, a West Bengal organization dedicated to assisting exploited women. She was also a member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly (MLA), where she became involved in the women's movement and was twice elected president. As specified by Bethune College:

As a member of Bengal Volunteers, she was the editor of the women's section of its magazine - *Benu*. She was very actively involved in fundraising activities during the Quit India Movement of 1942. During the devastating Bengal Famine of 1943, she, along with co-Congress workers, played a leading role in organizing relief for famine victims.

Conclusions

The women's movement in India refers to the efforts of women to claim their rights, equality, and empowerment. It encompasses a wide range of activities, organizations, and

public figures, from women's rights groups to feminist political parties. The women's movement in India has a long history, dating back to the 19th century. During this time that women began to organize themselves to demand greater rights and equality. Even before The Women's Movement, there were social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who strove for women's education and the abolishment of sati. Afterward, the early women's rights groups in India were led by educated middle-class men and women like Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, Pandita Ramabi, and Kamini Roy, who became part of the first phase of the Women's Movement. These activists lobbied for greater rights for women within the existing legal framework.

In the early 20th century, the women's movement in India gained momentum with the formation of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC). The AIWC was a platform for women from all walks of life to come together and discuss issues related to women. The AIWC was instrumental in the passing of the Hindu Code Bill, which gave women greater rights within the Hindu legal system. It was the beginning of the second phase, headed by Sarala Devi Choudhrani, Saroj Nalini Dutt, and Mira Datta Gupta, among others. However, the women's movement in India was further strengthened in the 1960s with the rise of the feminist movement. Indian feminists began to question the patriarchal nature of Indian society and culture.

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