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Empowerment of Women and other Weaker Sections

Women had participated extensively in the freedom struggle. Women have also made important contributions in all fields in the post-independence period, too. That is what we will study in this chapter as also the laws enacted for women and other weaker sections.



Know this.

Number of women per one thousand men

No.	Year of Census	Number of women
1.	1951	946
2.	1961	941
3.	1971	930
4.	1981	934
5.	1991	927
6.	2001	933

Find out the reasons why the number of women per one thousand men in the population has been decreasing.

When we study the condition of women in India we realise that the roots of several of the problems they face lie in the mentality of men. Even in the twenty-first century, we have not been able to rid ourselves of this male-centred mentality.

Vinoba Bhave made use of woman power in the Bhoodan Movement which he had started placing his faith in Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy. Women volunteers carried the message of Bhoodan to all parts of India. Women played a significant role in the Telangana Peasants Armed Struggle which challenged the rule of the nizams and the feudal system. As their region became free from bonded labour, women also found freedom from this torment.

Manifestation of woman power:

Women, who have to face the brunt of scarcity of supplies and rising prices, gave a show of their strength as an organised entity in 1972. Under the leadership of the socialist leader



Mrinal Gore

Mrinal Gore, women in Mumbai participated in a demonstration which came to be known as the *laatne morcha* (the rolling pin demonstration). Commodities like oil, ghee, rava, maida, would become scarce just as Diwali was near at hand. Kerosene had become very expensive. Women came together brandishing their rolling pins and took part in the demonstration. This movement met with success and the public got a glimpse of the united power of women.

The Chipko movement: Another show of constructive woman power was seen during the *Chipko* movement in 1973. Trees from the forests in the foothills of the Himalayas were to be cut down for commercial purposes. Chandiprasad Bhat and Sunderlal Bahuguna had started a movement to prevent this. Women followed the strategy of holding hands and encircling each tree. As their method consisted of protecting the



Sunderlal Bahuguna



Gaura Devi

who created this awareness among the women with the help of Sudesha Devi and Bachani Devi.

Anti-liquor movement : In 1992, in Andhra Pradesh, a movement was started against the drinking of alcohol. It received a good response in other States too. When the head of the household dies an untimely death due to addiction to alcohol, the family faces a serious crisis which affects women the most. Due to alcoholism, they have to deal with extreme sorrow and poverty. This movement got the support of the anti-arrack movement in Andhra Pradesh.

As a result of a government policy, arrack (a locally produced alcohol) dealers set up shop in every town and village. The poor labouring people began to get addicted to alcohol. At the same time, a literacy programme was being run in the villages of the State. The *Sitama Katha* (Sita's story) was narrated as a part of this programme. It was a story about Sita who creates awareness among the people of a village and gets alcohol to be banned from the village. In 1992, three youths of Dubuganta village of Nellore district in Andhra Pradesh drowned in a lake, in a state of inebriation, and died. At this instance, the women of the village came together and forced the closure of arrack shops. The report of this news in the local newspapers had its effect on many other

tree by embracing it, the movement came to be known as the *Chipko* movement. Women took part in it in large numbers. Women had a big role to play in the agricultural economy of this region. Gaura

Devi was the activist

villages. The movement spread to the entire State and the government had to adopt a strict policy against the sale of alcohol.

International Women's Year : The United Nations had declared 1975 as the International Women's Year. The three aspects of this programme were peace, development and equality between men and women. In 1975, the government of India constituted the Committee on the Status of Women and appointed Dr Phulrenu Guha as its Chairman.

A comprehensive survey was conducted of several issues such as the social position of women, their status, the consequences of



Dr Phulrenu Guha

the constitutional provisions made for women as also education of women and its percentage, their progress due to education, difficulties faced by working women, the position of women with respect to work/livelihood, their wages (relative to men's wages), the female-male ratio, birth and mortality rates and the role of women.

Taking into consideration this entire background, a State-wide conference for women was held in 1975 organised by the *Stree-mukti Sangharsha Samiti*. Women from all walks of life/regions participated in it. The *Samiti* published its manifesto in 1978. The policy of a struggle against discrimination on the basis of gender, caste and *varna* was adopted. This gave rise to a collection of songs called *Streemuktichi Lalkari*, a street play called *Mulgi Jhaali Ho* by Jyoti Mhapsekar and a periodical called *Prerak Lalkari* which became their mouthpiece, and other such programmes. In 1977, groups like the *Streemukti Andolan Samiti* established by Soudamini Rao in

Pune, *Bayaja* fortnightly, as also *Stree Uvach*, *Maitrin* and *Stree Anyayavirodhi Manch* in Aurangabad, *Mahila Dakshata Samiti* in Kolhapur, *Mahila Hakka* in Nashik and *Nari Prabodhan Manch* in Latur were formed. Anti-dowry protection committees were formed all over Maharashtra. A conference to protest against oppression of women was organised in Dhule city.

Vidya Bal's periodicals, *Nari Samata Manch*, and *Milun Saryajani*, as also the work of the *Samajwadi Mahila Sabha* and the *Krantikari Mahila Sanghatana* were of great help in dealing with women's issues. The Employment Guarantee Scheme in Maharashtra also helped to empower women.



Pramila Dandavate established the *Mahila Dakshata Samiti* in Delhi in 1976. Branches of the *Samiti* came up in the States of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. The Communist Party established the *Akhil Bharatiya Janavadi Mahila Sanghatana* in 1980. Efforts were made to start branches of this Organisation in all parts of India. The *Sanghatana* started a struggle against issues like dowry, female foeticide, domestic abuse. Research on women's issues was undertaken at various levels. Women's Studies Centres were started at the first women's university, the Shrimati Nathibai Damodar Thakersey (SNDT) Women's University, Mumbai, and at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune and Shivaji University, Kolhapur. These Centres

played an important role in critical analysis and in developing a vision on women's issues.

Laws for women: The law enacted in 1952, recognises women's right to alimony and their share in the father's property. Her right to *streedhan* was recognised. Polygamy was made illegal and women, just like men, got the right to sue for divorce. It was a law that took one step forward concerning women's issues over the following decade. The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 made both giving and taking of dowry a cognizable criminal offence. This dismantled the dowry tradition by its roots and further encouraged the social movement. The law alleviated the distress to women caused by the undesirable tradition of dowry. The Maternity Benefit Act which gave women the right to get leave from work at the time of child-birth also came into force in 1961.

Awareness against the dowry tradition: Even after the enactment of the anti-dowry law, incidents like 'Woman burns to death as sari pallu catches fire while cooking' and 'Woman slips into well while washing clothes, drowns and dies' continued to be reported. Investigations still revealed dowry to be the most frequent cause of such deaths. The role of the police, the administration and judiciary were highlighted. This created greater awareness. As a result, the Dowry Prohibition (Amendment) Act came into force in 1984. In 1988, 2209 women died victim to the dowry tradition. In 1990 the number of dowry deaths was 4835 and in 1993, it was 5377. These numbers will impress upon you the seriousness of the issue.

Family Courts (1984): Family courts were established to resolve conflicts arising

out of differences within marriage and domestic problems as well as issues such as alimony, single parenthood, separation, care of children and ownership which are all related to the family situation. These family courts give priority to mutual understanding over witnesses and evidence and to counsellors over lawyers. Emphasis is on resolving issues quickly but justly.

Trial involving alimony (1985): A fixed amount paid to a married woman for her upkeep by the husband who has divorced her, is called alimony. In the case of Mohammad Ahmed Khan vs Shah Bano Begum, the Supreme Court gave the verdict that Shah Bano Begum had the right to alimony. However, religious organisations protested vociferously against the verdict. As a result, the ‘Muslim Women’s Act’ (Protection of rights on divorce) was passed by Parliament.

The Commission of Sati (Prevention)

Act: On 4th September 1987, Roop Kanwar, a married woman, committed *sati*. She did not do this of her own free will; she was coerced into doing so. Committing *sati*, glorifying the practice of *sati* were all illegal acts. The women activists and journalists, Meena Menon, Geeta Seshu, Sujata Anandan, Anu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma investigated the case. In 1988, the government passed the Sati (Prevention) Act with very stringent provisions.

Protection of Human Rights Act : In 1993, this law was enacted to prevent injustice to men and women. The National Human Rights Commission was also formed for this purpose. In some States, the State Human Rights Commission was also formed on the same lines. This law which deals with collective oppression, the social conditions of divorced women, women and secure work places, played an effective role in mitigating injustices to women.

Reservation for Women : The 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution provide for reservation of one-third of the seats for women in Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, Zilla Parishads, municipalities and municipal corporations as well as for the posts of Sarpanch, Chairman and Mayor. Maharashtra and 15 other States have reserved 50% seats for women. This provision provides women the opportunity to participate in the business of the community.

In the post-independence period, the Constitution of India accepted the principle of equality of men and women. Hence, women got the important political right to vote. Women got equal rights to education and work on par with men. Inhuman practices like *sati*, dowry and polygamy were banned by law. Women’s right to sue for divorce was recognised. They got a lawful share in property. In local self-government bodies, seats were reserved for women so that they would have their just



Do you know ?

Women Chief Ministers in India

Sucheta Kripalani (Uttar Pradesh), Nandini Satpathy (Odisha), Jayalalitha (Tamil Nadu), Mayawati (Uttar Pradesh), Vasundhara Raje (Rajasthan), Mamata Banerjee (West Bengal), Rabdi Devi (Bihar), Anandiben Patel (Gujarat), Sheila Dixit (Delhi), Mehbooba Mufti Sayeed (Kashmir), Uma Bharati (Madhya Pradesh), Rajendra Kaur Bhattal (Punjab), Sushma Swaraj (Delhi), Shashikala Kakodkar (Goa), Sayeeda Anwar Taimur (Assam), Janaki Ramachandran (Tamil Nadu), are all women who have led their States as Chief Ministers.



Do you know?

A demonstration was held in New York on 8 March 1857. It was the first demonstration by working women and its demands were for fewer working hours, proper remuneration, provision of crèches, etc. On 8 March 1909 women went on strike for the very same demands. That is why, this day was declared as the Women's Struggle Day at the Women's Socialist International, a conference held in Denmark. The year 1975 was observed as the International Women's Year and in 1977, 8 March was declared as International Women's Day by a resolution passed in the General Assembly of the United Nations.

share of political power. We see today that, due to these provisions, women have begun to get education and to earn. Also, due to ideas of women's liberation, women are developing a sense of self. They have begun to participate enthusiastically and with determination in all fields of education, earning money, administration, politics, etc.

Scheduled Castes : In the post-independence period, our Constitution adopted the values of freedom, equality, fraternity and social justice. In accordance with his, the practice of untouchability was banned by law. Untouchability was removed by the 17th paragraph of the Constitution and this class was included in the Scheduled Castes. In view of the educational and social backwardness of scheduled castes, they were given reservations in education as well as jobs to facilitate their development.

Scheduled Tribes : Just like the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes or

Adivasis who live in remote parts of the country also face several difficulties. As they have lived far away from the progress made in modern times, they are economically and socially backward. Even though their conditions have seen some improvement in recent times, they do not have any means of livelihood other than agriculture and forest produce. Modern farming implements have not yet reached them. Hence, their income from agriculture is very small. Besides, their fields are on hillsides and not fertile. They are malnourished due to insufficient and poor quality of diet. Adivasis in remote areas find it difficult to get medical attention in time. For all these reasons, there is a need to give special protection to Adivasis.

In the Indian Constitution, Adivasis have been enumerated as Scheduled Tribes. They are getting given representation in law boards, education, government service, etc.

Nomadic and De-notified Tribes :

Castes and tribes that move from place to place for a livelihood, are included under Nomadic Tribes. They live by rearing animals and engaging in some other occupations. The British had declared some of them as criminal tribes. In the Law of 1871 to curb crimes, some of the main groups were mentioned as criminal tribes and their occupations and movements were banned.

This unjust law was repealed in the post-independence period. And the curbs on these tribes were lifted. They were included under De-notified Tribes. Special efforts are made by the government for the purpose of their social and economic development. These tribes have been given representation in educational institutions and the government sector.

Minorities : In any society, a group of people of a particular religion, language or race who are few in number are termed a minority. As there are various religions, sects and languages in our country, we see great cultural diversity. There is variation in cultural traditions, too. In order to preserve their cultural traditions and develop their own language, the Constitution gives the citizens certain educational and cultural rights. Minorities

have the right to protect and conserve their language, culture and traditions. For this purpose they have the right to set up separate educational institutions. The government implements various schemes for their progress.

In the next chapter, we shall learn about the progress that India has made in the field of Science and Technology in the post-independence period.



Exercises

1. Choose the correct option from the given options and complete the statements.

- (1) In 1992, a movement against drinking alcohol was started in
(a) Maharashtra (b) Gujarat
(c) Andhra Pradesh (d) Uttarakhand
- (2) In 1975, the government of India formed the Committee on the Status of Women under the chairmanship of
(a) Dr Phulrenu Guha
(b) Uma Bharati
(c) Vasundhara Raje
(d) Pramila Dandavate

2. Identify and write the wrong pair.

- (1) Saudamini Rao – Stree-Mukti Andolan Samiti
- (2) Vidya Bal – Nari Samata Manch
- (3) Pramila Dandavate – Mahila Dakshata Samiti
- (4) Jyoti Mhapsekar – Women’s Commission

3. Explain the following statements with reasons.

- (1) The women’s liberation movement began.
- (2) The Prohibition of Dowry (Amendment) Act was enacted in 1984.

- (3) The practice of untouchability was banned by law.
- (4) The Constitution gives cultural and educational rights to minorities.

4. Write short notes on-

- (1) *Chipko* movement
- (2) Protection of Human Rights Act.

5. Answer the following question in detail.

Explain with examples how the united strength of women can bring about constructive changes in various fields.

Projects

1. Obtain some information about the work of the Mahila Sabhas in rural areas.
2. Prepare a portfolio about women who have achieved notable success in various fields.
3. Obtain some information and write a note about Women’s Micro-credit Groups.

