UNIT 3 WOMEN’S MOVEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA (PART II)

Vibhuti Patel

Structure

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Objectives

3.3 Nature, Dynamics and Composition of the Women’s Movement

3.4 Women’s Studies and Women’s Movements: Dialogue
   3.4.1 Participatory Technique
   3.4.2 Research and Action

3.5 Methods of Functioning of the New Women’s Groups

3.6 Political-Social-Economic Agenda of the Women’s Rights Movement

3.7 Issues Taken Up by the New Women’s Groups
   3.7.1 Fight Against Unjust Family Laws
   3.7.2 Legislative Reforms
   3.7.3 Reproductive Rights of Women
   3.7.4 Anti Arrack/Alcohol Movement

3.8 Women’s Movement and the Development Agenda

3.9 Social Movements and Mainstream Political Processes

3.10 Let Us Sum Up

3.11 Unit End Questions

3.12 References

3.13 Suggested Readings

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the earlier Unit we engaged with the historical movement in South Asia and also studied the inter linkages and correlations of the movement with history and society.

We also read the challenges and the strengths before the women’s movement (WM). In this Unit, we will interrogate the gender biases in contemporary India and how the women’s movement responded to it. We studied the type of nature, dynamics, composition, methods of functioning, and political-social-economic agenda of the women’s rights movement. We will also identify different ideological trends and critically evaluate important debates in the women’s movement.
3.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this Unit, you will be able to:

- Analyse how gender biases are challenged by women’s movement in contemporary India;
- Evaluate the nature, dynamics, composition, methods of functioning, political-social-economic agenda; and
- Critically identify different ideological trends and debates.

3.3 NATURE, DYNAMICS AND COMPOSITION OF THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT

The genesis of the new women’s liberation movement lay in the radicalization of Indian politics in the late sixties. The rebellious mood of the youth, poor peasants, marginal farmers, educated dalit and tribal men and women, industrial working classes found its expression in the formation of innumerable special interest groups addressing themselves to the needs and demands of the local masses. Macro political processes were also finding major shifts in their rhetoric as the protest movements of the subaltern masses had taken militant paths guided by different political ideologies. The official communist parties faced major political challenge in the form of the Naxalbari movement in Kerala, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Punjab.

Middle class mass upheaval in Gujarat (popularly known as Navnirman movement) against corruption, price rise, unemployment, speculation, hoarding and black-marketing in 1974 was replicated in Bihar in the name of Sampoorna Kranti Movement under the leadership of a Gandhian leader, Jay Prakash Narayan. The unprecedented strike of the railway workers gave proof of the political power of collective strength of the working class. Tribal people’s struggles against destructive development which served the interests of the kulaks, moneylenders, contractors, bootleggers and indigenous industrialists thriving on the barbaric means of surplus extraction developed in Chhattisgarh, Singhbhum, Bhojpur, Srikakulam, Chandrapur, Dhulia and in the pockets of the North Eastern states. The tribal masses in Dhule region of Maharashtra demanded the Employment Guarantee Scheme in response to the 1974 drought paralysing normal agricultural activities. This historic demand revolutionised the thinking of the development workers about responsibility of the state at the time of economic crisis (Patel 1985).

In Maharashtra, women activists and women intellectuals involved in progressive movements took initiatives in forming a united front called Anti-price rise Women’s Committee and organised direct action against the culprits who created man-made scarcity of essential goods. Thousands of
poor and lower middle class women joined the struggle under the leadership of seasoned and able women from the left and socialist background. Mrinal Gore, Ahalya Ranganekar, Manju Gandhi and Tara Reddy made their special mark in the eyes of the masses as a result of their unique ability to reach out to women of different class backgrounds. Their intellectual self-sufficiency, ability to relate micro issues to macro political reality, simple lifestyle and non-bossy nature provided role models to the younger generation of women’s liberation activists of all political hues. Around the same time, a conference of Women’s Liberation Movement Coordination Committee was organised in Pune. This had an even larger socio-political and cultural base as right from young educated women, professionals, writers, teachers, industrial working class women, women workers from the unorganised sector, temple prostitutes and tribal women participated in the deliberations and highlighted their demands.

The Stree Mukti Sangathana in Bombay and Progressive Organisation of Women in Hyderabad were formed in 1974. In Delhi, new leadership among women evolved from the radical students’ movement and the democratic rights movement. Individual women in different political groupings all over India were feeling discontented about patriarchal biases in their organisations but they came out openly against it only after the emergency rule got over. These were independent, self-determining democratic movements, which questioned all hierarchical structures. In India, young people of that period had not participated in the dreams of the nationalist movement. Faced with multiple crises—economic, social and political, along with corruption, drought, inflation, unemployment, pauperization of the rural poor—the disenchanted youth responded with protest. Widespread, open discontent was expressed in action and consolidation of the action developed into powerful organisations throughout the country. These movements raised a number of diverse issues—land-rights, wages, employment, security at work place, water availability, destruction of nature, oppression and exploitation of Dalits and the working masses. Many women participated in these struggles with enthusiasm, responsibility and creativity (Patel, 2002).

The UN Declaration of 1975 as an International Women’s Year coincided with the Emergency Rule in India. By the time the Emergency was lifted in 1977, several women’s groups had vouchsafed democratic rights issues. The press swung into ‘action’ after the imposed silence of nearly two years. Atrocities committed against women during the Emergency were openly documented and reported in the press. These atrocities struck a chord in most women’s own experience of life in the family, in the streets, in the workplace and in political groups. The culmination of this process was reached in 1980 when many women’s groups took to the street to protest. During the 1980s, the issue of women’s oppression was depicted not only in discussion forums, seminars and `serious’ articles but also in the popular
media. Women, who had on their own identified the sources of their problems and indignity, began to acquire a language, an organisational platform, a collective identity and legitimacy they did not have earlier.

The Status of the Women’s Committee appointed by the Government of India released a voluminous report in 1974. This report called ‘Towards Equality’ was prepared by the scholars with an interdisciplinary perspective and was presented in the Parliament of India, where it received a tremendous response from the decision-making bodies, the state apparatus and the print media. Shocking description of Indian women’s reality, which manifested in declining sex ratio, very high rate of female mortality and morbidity, marginalisation of women in the economy and discriminatory personal laws were some of the major highlights of the report. Nevertheless, the report failed to throw any light on violence against women in the civil society and by the custodians of law and order. Major achievement of the report lay in the policy decision taken by the principal research body like the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) i.e. to provide financial support to scholars committed to the women’s cause, to conduct research into problems faced by women in poverty groups.

Between 1977 and 1979, new women’s groups emerged in the cities like Delhi, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Bombay, Ahmedabad, Patna, and Madras. They organised protest actions against dowry murders, beauty contests, sexist portrayal of women in media, pornographic films and literature imported from abroad, introduction of virginity tests by the U.K. immigration authorities, custodial rape and pitiable condition of women in prison. These groups were multicultural in their composition and worldview. As a result, their political agenda reflected the contemporaneous handling of the complex reality of women constructed by interplay of class, caste, religion, ethnicity and globalisation (Melkote and Tharu, 1980). The spokespersons of these groups had an advantage of high levels of ideological investment and the experience of the radical movements of the late sixties. Their collective wisdom provided the main backbone to the movement. Their newsletters, magazines and booklets in regional languages as well as in English provided a creative way of handling Indian women’s problems. The launch of Manushi in January 1979 was a qualitative leap in this direction. The need to study women’s issues in academic institutions and to conduct research based on experiential material and affirmative action was beginning to be discussed among Indian women’s studies scholars by the early eighties. Further, the discourse on this subject proved to be a fruitful exercise for activists, academics, researchers, policy planners and the United Nations system. The apex body of higher learning, University Grants Commission defined women’s studies (WS) as a discipline that involved research, documentation, teaching, training and action. It is understood that women have subordinate status in our society so the knowledge base created by ‘women’s studies ’ should be used for the empowerment of women (Patel, 2009).
3.4 WOMEN’S STUDIES AND WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS: DIALOGUE

It was in the early 1980s that women’s studies’ centers, functioning autonomously or within the university system, started accepting empirical and experiential evidence from the women’s movement. It was a time when participatory research, action research and subaltern studies were gaining ground in the field of social sciences as well as among the social work institutions and Non-governmental organizations focusing on specialised fields. This process indirectly facilitated the interaction of ‘women’s studies’ and the ‘women’s movement’. Wide range of issues concerning women were extensively discussed with tremendous technical details in the first National conference on perspective for women’s liberation movement in India in December 1980. In terms of alternative cultural inputs, this conference was a trendsetter. It constituted songs, music ballets, skits, jokes, vocabulary, plural lifestyles and multilingual dialogues. The conference made it possible for women from totally divergent political moorings to come together for democratic discourse. Four months later, in the first National Conference of Women’s Studies in April, 1981 at SNDT Women’s University, a wide variety of issues were discussed by activists, researchers, academicians, administrators and policy makers.

These included the developmental process which bypassed women, the gender bias in textbooks, sexism in the media, gender blindness in science and technology, health needs of women and violence against women—rape, domestic violence and prostitution. The general consensus among the participants (both women and men) was that WS was pro-women and not neutral. It was seen that WS would build a knowledge base for empowering women by pressing for change at policy level and in curriculum development, by criticising gender-blindness as well as gender-bias within mainstream academia, by creating alternative analytical tools and visions and by advocacy for women’s developmental needs in the economy and in society. This Conference established a new trend by which, gradually, women activists were invited, as resource persons and participants, to academic seminars, consultations and training workshops.

3.4.1 Participatory Technique

Participatory technique is used more often in training development personnel and organising awareness programmes. Action being an important constituent of WS, this technique is used to conduct researches on the existing movements and developmental projects. Those who have been working with women at grass roots have felt the need of using various techniques to break the silence of women, to get their participation and eventually generate a climate of equality. The hiatus between the trainer and the
trainee needs to be obliterated; the gap between producer of knowledge and user of knowledge has to be removed (Rebello, 1982).

In ‘women’s studies’ we have been saying that women’s voices have to be heard; how they perceive dowry or violent situations are very crucial. While studying objective reality and micro forces, ‘women’s studies’ also examines subjective reactions and psychological issues. To understand social oppression, personal involvement provides a deeper understanding of the problem. Hence, women’s studies recognizes the role of personal accounts in highlighting the dynamics of women’s oppression in situations like draught, communal riots, caste riots, Bhopal gas tragedy, appropriate technology, family planning programmes, fuel, fodder, water management, income generation activities and developmental policies.

3.4.2 Research and Action

During the International decade of women declared by the United Nations (1975-1985) for quite some time research on women and action on women were moving parallel. After the eighties, as funds started pouring into women’s research, the chasm between the researcher and the activist sharpened. Many women activists worked for the established research institutions on a subcontract and freelance basis for below subsistence wages because the funding was used mainly for institution building and for the perks of the decision-makers of the institutions. The government through its ministries, such as Labour, Rural Development and Social Welfare and the United Nations system sponsored studies only for academics initially, which might have resulted into a hierarchical situation.

Simultaneously with the growth of grassroots work and autonomous women’s groups organising campaigns and lobbying for political action, a necessity to study the problem with participatory perspective arose. Foreign funders started supporting such actions or activists which resulted in debates—whether one should accept foreign funding or not? It was believed to have implications of unequal power dimensions, apart from the fact that the funders might determine research priorities. Another dimension of this issue concerned the role of the researcher. If women’s studies are both understanding and action, then commitment to social change is essential. Women’s oppressive reality is not to be merely studied in a classroom but has to be eliminated. The logic of adopting innovative techniques like life history, autobiography, and experiential data provides self-awareness and motivation for change (Gotoskar, 1982). Articulation of one’s experiences in terms of oppression or growing identity on the one hand, indicates a changed situation wherein a woman is able to frankly and honestly express her inner tribulations and a critique of the most private relationship. On the other hand this realisation, some day, ought to lead to action for changing this relationship. It could come more rapidly if there is support available through
the women’s movement. Of course, there are levels and levels of action, but activity and empathy are of prime significance in women’s studies.

As a result of the collective endeavour of women’s studies scholars and the women activists, two important documents providing insights into enormity of Indian women’s problems have come into existence. They are: SHRAM SHAKTI Report focusing on poor self-employed women and women in the unorganised sector and National Perspective Plan for Women (1988-2000A.D.). These documents provide political agendas for the mainstream political bodies and women’s organisations.

**Check Your Progress:**

*Discuss the nature of women’s movement by giving suitable examples.*

*Describe the relationship of women’s movement and women’s studies.*
3.5 METHODS OF FUNCTIONING OF THE NEW WOMEN’S GROUPS

Most of the women who took an initiative in the formation of the new women’s groups were extremely averse to authoritarian structures within the family, educational and religious institutions and society at large as all of them did not allow women critical thinking and a space to grow as independent, cerebral and politically conscious human beings. Hence, they were very clear in their approach that they would encourage each and every member of the group to articulate thoughts and establish intimate working relationships based on the collective decision-making processes.

Initially this method proved very effective in creating a new cadre of women who were intellectually enlightened, politically articulate, well informed and supportive to each other within their small groups. This was because there were no male political bosses to curb their initiative and make them rot in routine activities of fund-raising, translating, typing, posting, cleaning and cooking for the members of their political groups. Such groups in Madras, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Bombay, Pune and Delhi brought out documents, position papers, manifestoes, pamphlets and reproduced whole lot of documents of the women’s liberation movements in the other countries containing debates that had direct bearing on our situation. They had tremendous urge to reach out to more and more like-minded women. Their meetings were throbbing with new ideas, powerful polemics on epistemological issues, at the same time they reflected deep concern for immediate problems of women. As they believed that women’s issues needed to be taken upon a day-to-day basis and patriarchal power needed to be challenged in both ‘personal’ and ‘political’ spheres of life.

They simultaneously started engaging in support work to individual women, solidarity work for the mass movements and united front work on an issue-to-issue basis. But, at the same time, they were committed to maintaining their own political autonomy and organisational identity. These groups kept in touch with each other by circulating their leaflets in English and regional languages, mimeographed documents and letters. They functioned purely on an informal basis and organised meetings in the homes of one of the members or sympathizers. Between 1977 and 1980, only in Maharashtra, a new culture of exclusively women’s workshops, women’s conferences and women’s gatherings, in which women of politically diverse views were invited, was found. As these gatherings were multi-class and multi-caste (within the matrix of Brahminical Hinduism), women pursuing different occupations—right from agricultural labourers, beedi workers, industrial working class women, students, teachers, journalists, writers, researchers, white collar employees shared their experiences and put forward their demands.
3.6 POLITICAL-SOCIAL-ECONOMIC AGENDA OF THE WOMEN’S RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The nationwide anti-rape campaign in 1980 resulted in the emergence and proliferation of autonomous women’s organisations in several cities and towns of India. These groups such as Forum Against Oppression of Women (Mumbai), Saheli (Delhi), Stree Shakti Sangathana (Hyderabad), Vimochana (Bangalore) managed to get tremendous publicity in the print as well as the audio-visual media because at that time ‘violence against women’ was the most sensational and the newest issue. Family members, especially fathers and brothers of the women victims of violence flooded the women’s groups. Later on, the women victims started approaching these groups on their own.

While doing agitational and propaganda work against the series of rape cases in custodial situation, domestic violence and dowry harassment, these groups realised that to work on a sustained basis and to take care of the rehabilitative aspects of violence against women, it was important to evolve institutional structures for supporting women victims of violence based on feminist principles of solidarity (mutual counselling) and sisterhood. The criminal legal system in India made it inevitable for these groups to establish rapport with the police for an immediate redressal to the women victims of violence. The condition of women in the remand homes and the Nari Niketans were so repugnant and barbaric that they could not be trusted for women’s rehabilitation. In fact, many women who suffered at their hands approached the new women’s groups.

The women activists had to deal with the attitude of victim-baiting and double standards of sexual morality, sexist remarks, and sick humour from the staff of the police, the legal apparatus and the public hospitals. At each and every step, they encountered class, caste and communal biases (Lalitha, 1980). These resulted into confrontation between the women’s groups and the established institutions. However, in course of time, they realised that it was necessary to suggest concrete alternatives for attitudinal changes in terms of legal reforms, method of interventions and staff training. For public education, literature written in convincing style was a must. Audio-visual material for reaching out to more and more people was necessary. Professional bodies and educational institutions were approaching these groups for understanding the women’s question. In this context special interest groups focusing on agit-prop, media-monitoring, resource material for consciousness raising, creation of cultural alternatives, publications, research and documentation, bookstalls, legal aid work came into existence during the eighties and got consolidated in the 1990s. These groups played complementary roles in each other’s development.
3.7 ISSUES TAKEN UP BY THE NEW WOMEN’S GROUPS

The movement acquired momentum with the campaign against the Supreme Court of India’s judgment against Mathura, a teenage tribal girl who was gang-raped by policemen at the dead of night in the police station in Chandrapur district of Maharashtra in 1972. After 8 years of legal battle by her sympathetic lawyer Advocate Vasudha Dhagamwar in the Session’s Court, the High Court and the Supreme Court, Mathura lost everything—her status, her self-esteem and her credibility. The Court declared that Mathura was not raped by the men in uniform but Mathura, being a woman of ‘an easy virtue’ gave a willful consent for sexual intercourse. Vasudha Dhagamwar and her three colleagues in the legal profession wrote an open letter challenging the Supreme Court’s verdict in an extremely poignant and logically convincing style. This letter was widely publicized in the print media. Two major points concerning this issue were: Reopening of the ‘Mathura Rape Case’ and amendments in the ‘Rape Laws’ that put burden of proof on women and had a narrow definition of rape. Around these demands, the women’s groups were formed. They collected signatures on their petitions, conducted study-circles where experienced lawyers spoke, organised rallies, sit-ins, demonstrations in front of the offices of the concerned authorities, prepared poster exhibitions, plays, skits, songs, slogans against violence against women, wrote letters to the editors of different newspapers, wrote articles in newspapers and magazines for the first time on women’s problems (FAOW, 1985).

Initially they concentrated on the women-specific issues such as wife-battery and dowry-murders, rape and eve-teasing, pornographic films, plays and literature on harassment of women at the work place. Militant actions, social boycott, gherao of tormentors, raiding of the matrimonial homes for retrieval of dowry had to be resorted to because of antipathy/lethargy of the state apparatus. From these experiences of direct action, the activists of the women’s groups got to understand and know the power relations operating within modern families (working class, middle class and upper class), different religious communities and various caste organisations (Patel, 1985).

3.7.1 Fight Against Unjust Family Laws

While providing support to women facing problems concerning marriage, divorce, maintenance, alimony, property rights, custody of child/children and guardianship rights, the activists realised that the existing personal laws and most of the customary laws were discriminating against women. Hindu daughters were deprived of coparcenary rights in parental property as per the codes of Mitakshara. Christian women could not get divorce on the ground of husband’s adultery; it had to be coupled with cruelty, bestiality
and sodomy. While Christian husbands could just declare their wives as adulteresses and divorce them. These antiquated laws were enacted in the colonial period to serve the interests of the British bureaucrats who had their legally wedded wives in England and were cohabiting with the Indian (in their language ‘native’) women.

Parsee daughters who married non-Parsee men lost their property rights and non-Parsee wives of Parsee husbands got only half the shares in husband’s property as per the Parsee Personal Law. Shariat Law subjugated Muslim women by imposing purdah, allowing polygamy and unilateral divorce by men to his wife/wives and by depriving divorced Muslim women of maintenance rights. The underlying philosophy of all these personal laws was that: women are not equal to men. They are governed by the patriarchal ideology. Irrespective of their religious backgrounds, these personal laws perpetuate patrilineage, patrilocality, double standard of sexual morality for men and women and perceive women as dependent on men. Individual women from different communities have challenged the constitutional validity of discriminatory aspects of the personal laws in the Supreme Court of India. Increasing number of educated working women and housewives from all religious backgrounds have been approaching secular women’s organisations. The main problems faced by them from their natal families have been forcible marriage, murderous attacks in cases of inter-caste, inter-class and inter-religious marriages, property disputes, incest and from their husbands and in-laws have been adultery, bigamy, polygamy, divorce, custody of child/children, property, incest etc. As the issue of personal laws is intertwined with the religious identities, the secular women’s movement had to face tremendous hostility from the elites of the different communities, mass organisations, the patriarchal secular lobby and the parliamentary parties cashing on block-votes. Individual women (divorced, deserted, single and married under duress) were questioning discrimination in the customary laws. Tribal women in Maharashtra and Bihar filed petitions demanding land rights in the Supreme Court of India. Several women’s groups (Saheli, Delhi, Vimochana, Bangalore and the Forum against Oppression of Women, Mumbai) and human rights lawyers’ team (The Lawyers Collective, Mumbai and Indian Social Institute, Delhi) have prepared drafts containing the technical detail of gender just and secular family laws (D’mello and Agnes, 1982).

3.7.2 Legislative Reforms

During last 30 years, laws concerning violence against women and girls have come into existence. India was the first to enact the Family Courts Act (1984). Protection of Women from Domestic Violence (DV) Act (2005) was enacted due to pressure exercised by the women’s movement to safeguard interests of survivors of domestic violence. The Domestic Violence Act has broadened the definition of domestic violence to include violence against
women senior citizens (abuse of ‘mentally unfit’ certificate), incest and rape by family members and relatives forcing women and girls into prostitution. The marked features of the Act are: recognition of the right to residence, provision for the appointment of Protection officers and the recognition of service providers, trainings for Protection Officers and judges, awareness creation and budgetary allocation for legal, counseling and other support services.

From the very beginning of the women's movement legal reforms has been the top most priority. Women's organizations campaigned for reforms in the rape law (1980) and dowry prohibition Act. Thirty years of campaigning demanding the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence resulted in an Act in 2005. Similarly struggle against pre-birth elimination of girls resulted (Patel 1988) in inactions of the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technique Act (2002), Public Interest Litigations to deal with sexual harassment at workplace filed by the Non-governmental organizations resulted in the Supreme Court Directive for Prevention of Sexual Harassment At workplace, 1997. In spite of all that has been done, we still need to make more inroads. For instance, we now strongly need common legislation for the region to deal with cross-country trafficking of women and girls for sex-trade and organ transplant.

Many cases of violence against women also get resolved in the neighbourhood committee, community organisations and *lok adalats* (People’s Court). The women’s movement has emphasized that violence against women is a manifestation of unequal power-relations between men and women. If women are empowered by the community and via official support, we can tilt the balance in the favour of gender justice.

### 3.7.3 Reproductive Rights of Women

When it comes to the reproductive rights of women, most of the efforts of the women’s groups in India have been directed against excesses committed in the name of family planning programmes. The Indian Council of Medical Research, the All India Institute of Medical Sciences and the Institute of Research in Reproduction (IRR) had shown readiness to discuss scientific, medicolegal and operational dimensions of bio-medical researches conducted on human subjects. United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (1998) and World Health Organization (WHO) have drawn guidelines about population policies that its focus shifts from targeting women for population control to women’s reproductive rights. Ethical guidelines for bio-medical research have also been drawn. Still in the interior parts of India, poor women have been the main targets of the abusive sterilization operations and unsafe injectable and oral contraceptives. Recent researches on adolescent girls and abortion have highlighted the problem of teenage pregnancies, trafficking of young girls for sex trade and the complicity of the criminal justice
system. The campaign against sex determination resulted in the central legislation banning amniocentesis, chrion-villai-biopsy and sex pre-selection techniques for femicide. But, much is needed to be done to make the legislation effective in the real life. Centre for Enquiry inti Health and Allied Themes (CEHAT) and the Lawyers Collective have jointly supported a petition (Public interest Litigation in the Supreme Court of India) filed by Dr. Sabu George for effective implementation of the Act (Patel, 2009).

3.7.4 Anti Arrack/Alcohol Movement

Since mid seventies, tribal women in different parts of country—Andhra Pradesh, Manipur, Maharashtra have been fighting against alcohol sale inducing alcoholism among men resulting in the devastation of families and domestic violence against women and children. In Andhra Pradesh, the anti-arrack movement was strong in 1992 to 1993 and it spread into other states at different levels. More than 40,000 women uniting and blocking the arrack auction in Andhra was a historic chapter in the Indian women’s movement. In Maharashtra, the elected women representatives in local self-government institutions, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have forced the state government to declare their block/village/taluk ‘alcohol free zone’ if 50% of women in the area give their vote against sale and distribution of alcohol.

**Check Your Progress:**

Write your understanding about the women’s political-social rights movement in India.

Discuss the legislative reforms taken up by the women’s movement in India.
3.8 WOMEN’S MOVEMENT AND THE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

During 1970s and 1980s, the women’s movement highlighted the marginalisation of women from the economy. The efforts of women activists were directed in agitation and propaganda for women’s rights, street-fighting against escalating violence against assertive women and team building to counter sexual harassment at the work place. In the 1990s, the women’s movement demanded its legitimate place within the mainstream with its own agenda of empowerment of women with partnership with men. It has been able to identify its allies in all sections of society. Its horizontal and vertical networking has created congenial atmosphere to execute development agenda with the help of effective use of information technology, communication channels, modern managerial practices, efficient law and order machinery. The most difficult areas have been providing educational opportunities for the poverty groups, dalit and tribal women, low-cost housing, environmental and occupational safety and human rights concerns. The state, political parties and beneficiaries of women’s groups too have a duty to ensure democratic and multicultural atmosphere within which the women activists can take judicious and gender-just decisions about allocation of developmental resources and development funding for the construction of schools, community centers, sports-clubs, libraries, reading rooms, low cost hospitals and low cost housing for the impoverished groups. Gender Budgeting as a tool is used by elected women representatives to promote gender equality.

3.9 SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND MAINSTREAM POLITICAL PROCESSES

Women’s movement and the state have had areas of both collaboration and conflict. Regarding legal reforms, gender budgeting and providing institutional support to women survivors of violence, the women’s movement has worked with the state (specifically the criminal justice system). Women’s movement has also fought with the state with regards to discriminatory family laws and state terror is unleashed on people’s movements-struggles for safe environment, water, atrocities against minorities, displacement of masses for mega projects. The slogan ‘Personal is Political’ popularized by the western women’s liberation movement appealed to many city-based women’s groups who realized how individual cases of violence against women were not merely ‘personal problems’, but an outcome of socio-cultural, historical, political and economic realities in which Indian women had to survive. As a result, the issues which affected women and were treated as personal problems such as rape, family violence, dowry-murders, harassment at the
workplace were put on the ‘public-political agenda’ of the women’s movement. The pressure from the new women's groups forced the mainstream political parties also to show greater concern for women's issues at least in their public speeches, press statements and election manifestos. After the nationwide anti-rape movement in 1980, cases of violence against women became issues for parties to score points against contenders in electoral battles as well as in the local power struggles.

### 3.10 LET US SUM UP

From 1970 onwards, development of social movements highlighting the problems of the rural and urban poor, industrial working class, tribal masses and minorities threw up new kind of women decision makers who had the combined strength of street-fighting, formal education and strategic thinking. They had to work under tremendous adversity, as they were a part of the politics of protest. In the nineties, other sectors of society also gave space to competent and highly qualified women to be in decision-making bodies. At present, gender sensitisation of the state and central government, management and trade unions, mass organisations, educational institutions is one of the topmost priorities among the development-oriented organisations. In the last two decades, women who have held important positions have had positive experiences whenever they have done thorough homework and have played roles of problem shooters diligently and fearlessly. At the same time, in several places they have faced tremendous male hostility and physical violence. Competent women in public life who have promoted the ethos of distributive justice have managed to get popular support.

### 3.11 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Explain the nature, dynamics and composition of the women’s movement in the contemporary period.

2) Analyse methods of functioning of the new women’s groups.

3) Describe Political-Social-Economic Agenda of the Women’s Rights Movement.

4) Give a profile of issues taken up by the new women’s groups.

5) Discuss the women’s movement and development agenda.

6) Describe the relationships with other social movements and mainstream political processes.
3.12 REFERENCES


3.13 SUGGESTED READINGS

