

# UNIT 10 – UPSC - Role of Women and Women's Organization

## Role of Women

Historical data signified that women have many role in civilisation since ancient time and these roles are changing over the period. In a society, status of people can be assessed by importance of women in that culture. Many factors that rationalise the magnitude of India's ancient culture is the respectable place granted to women. Several research studies have demonstrated that women have raised their position and made a place in different sectors which has led to liberation and to live better life. In ancient culture, women had to suffer from unequal condition, and but as the time passed, females had enhanced their status to get equality to the men (Christina S. Handayani, Ardhian Novianto, 2004). Earlier, women were only allowed for doing domestic activity and their contribution in public was very restricted. It entails that the political sector was only for male communities and the women were concern to the private sector. This notion is the basic understanding of classic feminist theory which wants that women get the equal condition comparing to men (Ann Brooks, 2009). The status of women in India has been subjected to many great changes over the past decades. From equal status with men in ancient times through the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been exciting. In contemporary India, women have joined high offices. However, women in India generally are still exposed to numerous social issues. According to a global study conducted by Thomson Reuters, India is the "fourth most unsafe country" in the world for women.



According to Christina S. Handayani and Ardhian Novianto (2004), females only work in western countries and their role in Asian countries in public-private is not limited like in western countries. It is established in studies that Women are important in our society. Every woman has her own job or duty in this modern society in which men are still dominant. A woman has to take care of her own personal life and if she is a mother, she has to take care also about her children's life too. Married women have lots of worries and they carry out a more stressful life than married men.

Many studies have indicated that physiologically women are not equal to men and both are also dissimilar psychologically. But there is not much difference between women and men in the normal activities like eating, drinking, working, sleeping, resting and speaking. But women have physical and physiological differences based on their functions like child-bearing and child-rearing. It is well established in theoretical studies that women and men react differently when they groom their children. Both women and men do what they have learnt during their childhood as far as their reactions to various situations in their life.

## Women in India

The status of women in India has undergone drastic changes over a Past few millennia. In ancient time, the Indian women were completely devoted to their families. In the Medieval period, known as 'Dark Age', the status of women was declined considerably. They were not allowed to go out, and move with others. They were asked to stay at home and take care of their children. In India, early marriage of a girl was practiced. After Independence women came forward in all the sectors and there is remarkable changes in the status of women in the field of education, Art and Culture. A historical viewpoint to the complexities, India continues to face from time to time since Independence. But the status of women in contemporary India is a sort of inconsistency.

## Role of Women in Prehistoric Time

Indus valley civilization: During the period of Indus valley civilization, status of women were fairly good. They were given equal honour along as men in the culture. The adoration of mother goddess demonstrates that they were respected in the form of mother. During Rig Vedic period, woman had superior status and they got more liberty and equality with men. The position of wife was a privileged one in the household and women had enhanced status to that of a man in performing religious rites. In education sphere, both boys and girls were having equal opportunities. After observing Upanayana Samskar, girls were permitted to spend their life in Gurukul. In intellectual and spiritual life they occupied a position as man. Education of girls were considered as an important qualification for marriage.

**In Uttar Vedic Period:** In this period, freedom of marriage continued and remarriage of widows continued to be allowed. Though dowry system continued but not in the form of today's society. The marriage ceremony was the same as in the previous period. As in the previous period the picture of an ideal family life continued.

## The Age of the Upanishads

Age of Sutras and Epics: The Grihya-sutras give comprehensive rules concerning the proper seasons for marriage, qualifications of bride and bridegroom. The bride is at a mature age, over 15 or 16. The elaborate rites indicate that marriage was a holy bond and not a contract. The women held a respectable status in the household. She was permissible to sing, dance and enjoy life. Sati was not generally predominant. Widow Remarriage was permissible under certain circumstances. On the whole the Dharma-sutras take a more humane attitude than the Smritis of a later age. The Apastamba enforces several penalties on a husband who unfairly forsakes his wife. On the other hand, a wife who forsakes her husband has to only perform self-punishment. In case a matured

girl was not married at a proper time by her father, she could choose her husband after three years of waiting. The appealing feature of this period is the presence of women teachers, many of whom possessed highest spiritual knowledge. The famous dialogue between Yajnavalkya and his wife Maitreyi and Gargi Vachaknavi indicated how enlightened the women of that age were. According to the Sarvanukramanika, there were as many as 20 women among the authors of the Rig Veda. These stories stand in contrast to the later age when the study of Vedic literature was prohibited to women under the most severe penalty.

## **In The Age 600 BC to 320 AD**

In this period, marriage between the same caste was preferred although inter caste marriages were widespread. Of the eight forms of marriage prescribed by the Dharma-sutras, the Arhsa form of marriage was most popular. The bridegroom was selected by the girl's father. According to Nearchus the Indians "marry without giving or taking dowries but the girls, as soon as they are marriageable, are brought forward by their fathers and exposed in public, to be selected by a person who outclasses in some form of physical exercise". This designated a modified form of Svayamvara. While girls continued to be married around 16, there was a propensity to marry them before they attained puberty. It was perhaps due to the anxiety to maintain their body purity. Lowering of the marriage age affected their education and culture unfavourably. After Extreme emphasis was now laid on the physical chastity of women which dejected widow remarriage, divorce and encouragement of sati.

It was also found that females during this period were active in such public economic activities as wage-labour in state-owned textile factories as well as serving as temple dancers, courtesans, and court attendants. There is less information on lower class women other than some comments on labouring women and the need to give works as spinners to such underprivileged women as widows and "defective girls."

In the beginning of this period, there were well educated women holding an honourable position in society and household. There were lifetime students of sacred texts or those who followed their study till marriage. Buddhist and Jain nuns relinquished the world for the sake of spiritual salvation. Jain texts refer to Jayanti who performed discussions with Mahavira himself and later on became a nun.

In spite of the advancement, there were increasing infirmities. Earlier the girls went through the Upanayana ceremony but now it was only a formality. Manusmriti laid down that marriage was equal to Upanayana while Yajnavalkya took the step of prohibiting Upanayana ceremony for girls. The wife who performed Vedic sacrifices was denied the right to do so. Narada is however, more thoughtful towards women. Greek writers have indicated that sati existed, was in trend in Punjab, possibly confined to the fighter class only. Women courtesans were not looked down by spiritual leaders or kings. Some of them were highly accomplished and in the point of culture, standing resembled the Hetairai of Athens. A famous courtesan Amrapali who lived during the sovereignty of Bimbisara (300 to 273 BC) was a beauty whom Buddha visited.

Chandragupta Maurya, the originator of the dynasty, was apparently assisted by Kautilya, a Brahman prime minister, who composed the Arthashastra, a handbook of state craft which is often compared to Machiavelli's The Prince. This collection documents that women had property rights to the Stridhan, which was the gift made to a woman at the time of her marriage by her parents

and subsequently increased by her husband. Stridhan was generally in the form of jewellery, which many cultural groups was a suitable way of carrying extra wealth, but could include certain rights to immovable property. There were eight forms of marriage. They ranged from the most significant, involving the gift of a virgin daughter (Kanyadan) by her father to another male, to marriage by kidnapping while the woman is incapacitated through sleep or intoxication. Marriage was both a secular and sacred institution. Widows had a right of remarry. Although, when they did so, they lost rights to any property inherited from their deceased husbands. In this period, women were allowed to participate in public economic activities as wage-labour in state-owned factories as well as serving as temple dancers, courtesans.

## Period of 320 to 750 A D

The Gupta Empire was observed as the classical age of Indian culture because of its legendary and artistic happenings. Some information on roles for leading women comes from the Kama Sutra, a manual about the many ways to acquire pleasure, a legitimate goal for Hindu men in the householder, or second stage, of their lives. Women were allowed to be educated, to give and to receive sexual pleasure, and to be faithful wives. There was an increasing tendency to lower the marriageable age of girls with girls being married before or after puberty. Marriage within the same caste was preferred but forbidden within certain degrees of relationship. Girls of high families had ample opportunities for acquiring ability in higher learning. In Vatsyayana's Kamasutra, instances of princess are mentioned whose intellect was sharpened by knowledge of the Sasatras. The literary evidence of the Gupta age demonstrates that girls of high class also those living in hermitages read works on ancient history & legend. Girls living in royal courts were trained in singing & dancing too.

In the Gupta period, Sati was inscribed by some but strongly criticised by others. It was thought that the custom was not extensively prevalent during this period. Probably due to the foreign invasions and its significances for women, the custom of sati, though confined to the warrior class earlier began to gain pervasive acceptance, be perceived as a great sacrifice. The tendency to regard women as feebler and not of strong moral fibre got stronger during this period although women as mother, sister continued to be highly esteemed. Remarriage of widows though coming into disfavour was not forbidden. The only direction in which the position of women improved was in the arena of proprietary rights. During this period, society began to discourage widow remarriages, there began to arise a class of childless widows who needed money to maintain themselves. Due to a lowering of the age of marriage, girls were not literate as earlier. This degraded the status of women. Brides being too young and they did not have any choice in marriage decisions. Love marriages were a thing of the past. During this period, marriage became a binding union, but it was one sided in favour of the husband. Since women were not as educated as before they did not know how to lead life in right way. The most striking modifications may be the increased recognition in Katyayana of the women's right to property and a noteworthy rule in Atri that allowed women ill-treated by robbers to recuperate her social status. Some women enjoyed political power e.g. Prabhavati-gupta, daughter of Chandra-gupta II who ruled the Vakataka kingdom on behalf of her son, in the 4th century a.d. Available Existing literature designated that married women in higher families did not usually appear in public without coverings.

## Women in Early medieval Period

In this period as in previous time, women were generally considered mentally sub-standard. Their responsibility was to obey their husband blindly. Women continued to be deprived of the right to study the Vedas. Furthermore, the eligible age for girls to marriage was lowered, thus depriving their opportunities to get higher education. However, from some of the dramatic works of the period, it was found the court ladies and even the queen's maids capable of composing excellent Sanskrit and prakrit verses. Daughters of high administrators, courtesans and concubines were also supposed to be highly skilled in the various arts, including poetry.

If a girl's guardian cannot find her a match before she becomes of marriageable age, then she can choose her partner. While love marriages were known they were honoured after approval of the girl's custodians. Sometimes, girls with the approval of their parents opted for a Svayamvara ceremony. Remarriage was allowed under certain condition when the husband had deserted or died, or adopted the life of a recluse, or was impotent or had become an out caste.

In general, women were mistrusted. They were kept in privacy and their life was governed by the male relation, father, brother, husband, son. However, within the home they were given privileged. If a husband abandoned even a guilty-wife, she was to be given maintenance. With the evolution of property rights in land, the property right of women also increased. In order to preserve the property of a family, women were given the right to inherit the property of their male relations. With some reservation, a widow was permitted to the entire estate of her husband if he died sonless. Daughters also had the right to succeed to the properties of a widow. Thus, the growth of feudal society supported the concept of private property. The practice of sati was made mandatory by few authors, but predestined by others. Purdah was not dominant during this period. Generally, their culture was high

## Women in medieval India

Medieval Indian history continued for 500 years. It is principally dominated by Muslim rulers. Muslim appeared in India as a warrior class. Their rule in India is divided into two Eras; The Era of Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Era. The only woman who has power and gained the thrown of Delhi was Razia Sultan. She was not only a wise monarch but also a women of determined courage. She proved herself as the role of model for politically empowered women in India. In Mughal Period, India saw the rise of some renowned Muslim women. Qutluq Nigar Khanm Babar's mother gave wise advice to her son Babar, during his difficult campaign for the recovery of his father's heritage. Another example was Gulbadan Begum, women of excellent poetic talent who wrote Humayun-namah. Nur Jahan and Jahan Ara took an active part in the state affairs. Nurjahan was the greatest Muslim queen of India. She had good persona and military courage. Mumtaj Mahal a princess of an exceptional beauty along with excellent intellectual talents and aesthetic tastes. In India, there was also heroic women. Chandbibi, who appeared on the battlements of the fort of Ahmednagar dressed in male outfit and put heart in the protectors of that town against the influences of Akbar himself; Tara Bai, the Maharata heroine who was the life and soul of Maharata resistance during the last determined attack of Aurangazeb; Mangammal, whose benevolent rule is still a green memory in the South, and Ahalya Bai Holkar, to whose administrative mastermind Sir John Malcolm has paid magnificent honour. The Moghul princesses had vital role in the court life of Agra and Delhi. Jehanara, the partisan of Dara Shikoh, Roshanara, the partisan of Aurangazeb, Zebunnissa, the daughter of Aurangazeb, whose poems have come down to us and others represented the culture of the court. Jija Bai, the mother of Shivaji, was more representative

of Indian womanhood than the bejewelled princesses who wrote poetry, played within the walls of their palaces or administered states. In the medieval period, there were drastic changes in the social life of women. Dependence of women on their husbands or other male relatives was a protuberant feature of this period. During this period women were deprived of opportunities of any education, having lost the access to Streedhana or dowry, they virtually became the subjugated class with dreadful results for themselves and the nation. Indian women were politically, socially and economically indolent except for those engaged in farming and weaving. Political demotion includes the barring of women from all important decision-making processes. With the initiation of Muslims in India, the social movement of Indian women was limited. They were banned to attend public functions and were not free to partake as men's equals in religious functions like yajnas, obviously indicating a deprivation of her role as she was kept in isolation. Another social malevolent that existed in society during this period was child marriage. These pre-pubescent marriages harmfully affected the health of the girls. These child brides were deprived of all intellectual, physical and spiritual development. It virtually stabbed the delicate mind of Indian girl child. Her self-image was wavering into shreds by the patriarchal family which repudiated her basic freedom. Indian womanhood was cruelly locked. Likewise, most of the women thought that they have to serve at home. Thus they were influenced by circumstances to accept their subordination and secondary position. Men being providers, women became dependent on them economically, for their survival except for the labour classes, where both men and women contributed in existence farming and other occupations.

Other social evils in this period were female infanticide, sati, child marriages, Purdah system or zenana. The seclusion of women developed during the middle ages, due to the political instability of Northern India, particularly due to various assaults. Muslims who came to India were mainly soldiers and they did not give much importance to Hindu principles like chastity and Pativrata dharma so the seclusion of women was fortified mainly by the Rajputs and the other high castes like Brahmins. Polygamy was the first reason which contributed to the demotion of women. Muslim rulers in India had big aim. Thus women came to be regarded as tools of sensual satisfaction. Even among the Hindus, there was no limit for wives a man could take. Marriage in Islam is a contract. But a Muslim man can have as many as four wives. Thus even religion encouraged, there was the hopeless subservience of women. Islam also made husband the head of the family and insisted that a wife should follow all his commands and should serve him with greatest loyalty, whether he deserved for it or not.

Purdah gained acceptance with the advent of the Muslims. The purdah system existed among Kshatriyas in the period of Dharma Sastras. But the Hindu women veiled only their face or sometimes only covered their heads with sarees or "dupattas." But for Muslims it meant complete covering. Dowry system was also prevalent during this period. It actually meant "Stridhana" which included gifts, ornaments, property, and cash presented to her by her father or her relatives. But in the medieval period, the term had special importance. It meant money or "Dakshina" which was actually presented to the bride groom along with the bride. In Vedic times, it guaranteed security for her. But during the middle-ages, women was not free to use it as it was owned by her husband and his kith and kin. During the middle Ages, the term "Stridhana" acquired huge magnitudes. The Hindus and Muslims favoured this custom of dowry. It could be paid in cash or kind along with the bride. During the Vedic ages, it was given to bride for her security when a crisis occurs. She was free to make use of this "Dhana". But the middle Ages observed a sudden change. The Stridhana received by the groom belonged completely to the in-laws. The bride did not have free

access to this wealth, which lawfully belonged to her. Dowry system existed even among the Muslims, especially among the Shias. With time, dowry became a vital part of the marriage ceremony. This in a way contributed to female infanticide, as it became a heavy burden on the poor. The birth of girls became a frightening to the majority of the population. Another negative effect of the dowry system was that there was degradation of the Indian woman. She began to be regarded as transportable and removable property by her husband. Many law intellectuals and upholders of religion in the medieval age stated that it literally induced physical as well as intellectual impairment on women in medieval India.

In the medieval period, widow's condition were more miserable. Inflexibility of caste system deprived of them the right to freedom and social movement. Inhuman treatment was given to the widow. She was forced to lead a life away from sophisticated pleasures. A widow was also isolated from society as well as family. Another pre-requisite for a widow was shaving the head. She was thus shamed mercilessly by modern society. The condition of the Muslim widow was somewhat better owing to the fact that she could marry after a certain gap of time following her husband's death.

According to Jauha, there was the practice of voluntary immolation by wives and daughters of overpowered warriors, in order to avoid capture and resulting molestation by the opponent. The practice was followed by the wives of defeated Rajput rulers, who are known to place a high premium on honour. The medieval society of the time stimulated "Sati" which referred as self-immolation of the widow. It was thought that by burning herself on the fire of her husband, she proves her devotion. Even the child widows were not safe from this grisly ritual. According to Saroj Gulati "because of the continuous wars, there were chances of too many widows young and old, and main issue was how to accommodate them without getting shame to the family or creating problems for society." In this period, Sati was considered as the best course though it was the nastiest crime committed on Indian women as it was inhumane.

Another heinous torture of women was prostitution which became a recognised institution. The Devadasi system which was predominant among the Hindus and the courtesans who ornamented the court of Muslim rulers, dishonoured the status of women in civilisation. Under the Devadasi system, women were the brides of gods. But they were supposed to amuse kings, priests and even members of the high classes. Actually, they were abused by the existing male-dominated society.

## **Women in the Bhakti Movement**

Bhakti movements which succeeded during the medieval age gave rise to a new course of man and women who cared slightly for gender prejudice. The liberal current, which to some extent extended the prospect of women, was the Bhakti movements, the medieval saints' movements. Female poet-saints also played a significant role in the bhakti movement at large. However, many of these women had to fight for acceptance within male dominated movement. Only through demonstrations of their absolute devotion to the Divine, their outstanding poetry, and persistent insistence of their spiritual equality with their contemporaries were these women unwillingly acknowledged and accepted within their ranks. Their struggle shows to the strength of patriarchal values within both society and within religious and social movements attempting to pave the way for more egalitarian access to the Divine.

The imagery of bhakti poetry is chastised in the everyday, familiar language of ordinary people. Women bhaktas wrote of the obstacles of home, family tensions, the absent husband, meaningless household chores, and restrictions of married life, including their status as married women. In many cases, they excluded traditional women's roles and societal norms by leaving husbands and homes altogether, choosing to become wandering bhaktas; in some instances they formed communities with other poet-saints. Their new focus was sheer devotion and worship of their Divine Husbands.

While it is attractive to realise women's participation within the bhakti movement as a rebellion against the patriarchal norms of the time, there is less evidence to support this perspective. Women bhaktas were simply individuals attempting to lead lives of devotion. Staying largely within the patriarchal philosophy that upheld the chaste and dutiful wife as ideal, these women transferred the object of their devotion and their duties as the "lovers" or "wives" to their Divine Lover or Husband. However, that their poetry became an important aspect of the bhakti movement.

Additionally, it would seem that with the movement's northward advancement (15th through 17th centuries), its radical edge as it related to women's inclusion was toughened. Women took part in the movement's earlier development (6th to 13th centuries). It is mainly male bhaktas and saints that are today perceived as the spokespersons for the movement in its later manifestations. The poetry of women bhaktas from this latter time period is normally not revealing of a rejection of societal customs in terms of leaving family and homes in chase of divine love. Instead, some of the later poet-saints stayed within the limits of the household while expounding on their souls' journeys, their perpetual love for the Divine, as well as their never-ending search for fact.

## Women in Modern India

Modern India denotes to the era from 1700 A.D. to 1947 A.D. In the background of the intellectual disturbance of the 18th and 19th century, there observed a worldwide demand for establishing of independent and democratic nationalist societies which consistently emphasized the fairness of women with men. Women in modern India have been influenced by the programs of modification and upliftment which brought about a fundamental change in their status. With the numerous reform movements and a steady change in the opinion of women in society, there, a radical change in the position of women in modern India was seen. Before the British rule in India, the life of women was rather domineering, and they were subject to a continual process of subjugation and social domination. The women's youth was spent in the preparation of marriage and her whole life was dependent on the male members of her family. Though a few women became educated, got fame and commanded armies but most were deprived of men's opportunities to gain knowledge, property and social position.

### **Status of women in India during the British period:**

If comparing with past records of women status with contemporary life, it can be said that there are important change in the position of women. Numerous studies of the English literature by a section of the Indians which helped them to integrate the western democratic and liberal ideology, an philosophy successively utilized by them to start social and religious reform movements in India. During the British rule, several changes were made in the economic and social structures of Indian society, and some considerable progress was accomplished in removal of inequalities

between men and women, in education, employment, social rights. Earlier to this period, the status of women was in gloomy state.

In the British period, women were given opportunities for education. After the Bhakti Movement, the Christian Missionaries took interest in the education of the girls. The Hunter Commission too highlighted on the need for female education in 1882. The Calcutta, Bombay and Madras institutions did not permit the admission of girls till 1875. It was only after 1882 that girls were permitted to go for higher education. Since then, there has been a constant progress in the extent of education among females. Though the number of girls studying at various levels was low, yet there has been a marked increase in the number of female students at every level from 1941 onwards. At the end of the Nineteenth Century, women in India suffered from infirmities like, child-marriage, practice of polygamy, sale of girls for marriage purposes, severe restrictions on widows, non-access to education and restricting oneself to domestic and child-bearing functions. The Indian National Conference started in 1885 by Justice Ranade contained these disabilities.

Renowned social reformer, Raja Ram Mohun Roy, who contributed immensely in getting the Sati system abolished, raised voices against the child-marriage and fought for the right of legacy for women. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar propelled a movement for the right of widows to re-marry and also begged for educating women. Maharaja S. Rao, ruler of Baroda State worked for deterrence of child-marriages, Polygamy and getting the rights of education to women, and the right of re-marriage to widows. Other eminent personality like Swami Vivekananda, Annie Besant, and Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Dayanand Saraswati also had interest in the social and political rights of women. Gandhiji thought that, women should labour under no legal disability. He said that equal treatment should be given to both boy and girl.

Indian woman are well-known in various fields of life as politicians, orators, lawyers, doctors, administrators and diplomats. They are not only trusted with work of responsibility but also they do in their duties honestly and sincerely. In modern time women are actively participating in every field of life. Women exercise their right to vote, contest for Parliament and Assembly, seek appointment in public office and compete in other spheres of life with men. This demonstrates that women in India has got more liberty and equality as compared to earlier period. They have learned more liberty to contribute in the affairs of the country. They have been given impartiality with men in making their future and sharing responsibilities for themselves, their family and their country.

It is a truth that women are intelligent, devoted and efficient in work. In various fields, they are now competing successfully with men. There are many women working in the Central Secretariat. They are striving very hard to gain highest efficiency and perfection in the administrative work. Their honesty of character is probably better than men. Generally it was found that women are less vulnerable to corruption in form of bribery and favouritism. As a matter of fact, they are progressively monopolising the jobs of receptionists and air-hostesses. Another job in which Indian women are doing so well is that of teachers. Women's contributions in politics and social services have also been significant. Lively example of Indira Gandhi who excelled so brilliantly and ecstatically in the expanse of India's politics. She ruled this country for more than a decade and took India winning out of Pakistan-war which resulted in the historic creation of a new country, Bangladesh. In the field of social service, Indian women have also done outstanding works. They have not only served the cause of the suffering humanity but have also brought highest successes for the country, for example, Mother Teresa who sacrificed whole life for welfare of society. She

brought the Nobel Prize for India by her selfless services to the poor, destitute and suffering people of our country in particular and the deprived and handicapped people of the world in general.

It is well understood that the progress of a nation depends upon the care and skill with which mothers give their children. The first and primary duty of Indian women should, therefore, be to bring forth noble generations of patriots, warriors, scholars and statesmen. Since child's education begins even in the womb and the impressions are formed in the mind of a child while in mothers arms in which women play vital role (Tripathi, 1999).

There is no refuting of the fact that the role of women in India is significant and they contribute in success of nation. Though they have to struggle against many handicaps and social evils in the male subjugated society. The Hindu Code Bill has given the daughter and the son equal share of the property. The Marriage Act no longer regards woman as the property of man. Marriage is now considered to be a personal matter and if a partner is disappointed she or he has the right of divorce. In order to prove themselves equal to the self-esteem and status given to them in the Indian Constitution they have to shake off the restraints of slavery and fallacies. They should help the government and the society in eliminating the sins of dowry.

## Women's organization in India

Women's Organisations emerged in India as a result of the spread of education and the establishment of the notion of the new woman. There was an improved level of communication among women which made them aware of the different problems that they faced and their rights and accountabilities in society. This awareness led to the upsurge of women's organisations that fought for and signified women's causes.

### **Pre-Independence:**

An exclusive feature of the Indian women's crusade is the fact that early efforts at women's liberation were set in motion by men. Social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Maharishi Karve and Swami Dayanand Saraswati challenged the conventional subservience of women, stimulated widow remarriage and supported female education and impartiality in matters of religion, among other issues. Mahila mandals organised by Hindu reformist organisations such as the Arya Samaj and Brahma Samaj encouraged women to go out of the boundaries of their homes and interact with other members of society. Pandita Ramabai, who was considered as one of the innovators of the feminist movement, with the help of Justice Ranade established the Arya Mahila Samaj in 1882. She envisioned creating a support network for newly educated women through weekly lectures and lessons at homes, where women could learn and gain confidence through interactions.

Women's auxiliaries of general reform associations also served as a ground for women to deliberate social issues, express opinions and share experiences. The Bharata Mahila Parishad of the National Social Conference was the most protruding among such opportunities. Though the National Social Conference was formed at the third meeting of the Indian National Congress in 1887, the Mahila Parishad was launched only in 1905.

These initiatives greatly influenced the social status of women. Early attempts at encouraging women to converse outside their families and local committees thus, stemmed from the broader social reform movement and efforts to upgrade the conditions of women.

But a major inadequacy of the movement at this juncture was that it was essentially exclusive in character. The reforms were planned for restricted upper caste women and did not take up the cause of the huge masses of poor and working class women. Also, male-guided organisations still perceived the household as the woman's first priority and did not make efforts to employ education as an instrument to improve their contribution in society.

In the beginning of nineteenth century, there was concerted efforts towards education of women. Schools and educational institutions promoting female public education mushroomed across the country.

The pre-Independence period saw women's issues related to the nationalist agenda at various junctures. In this period, major enhancement of women was in terms of political participation of women, calling for a redefinition of conventional gender roles. Women began openly demonstrating their opposition to foreign control by supporting civil disobedience actions and other forms of protest against the British. Opportunities to organise and participate in agitations gave women the much-needed confidence and a chance to develop their leadership skills. Cutting across communal and religious barriers, women associated themselves with larger problems of society and opposed sectarian issues such as communal electorates. Political awareness among women grew, owing to a general understanding that women's issues could not be separated from the political environment of the country. During this period, the initial women's organisations formed within the historical background of the social reform movement and the nationalist movement were as follows.

1. The Women's India Association (WIA).
2. National Council of Women in India (NCWI).
3. The All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in 1917, 1925 and 1927 correspondingly.

Each of these organisations emphasised the importance of education in women's progress. The WIA, created by Margaret Cousins in Madras, worked widely for the social and educational emancipation of women. Associated with the Theosophical Society, it encouraged non-sectarian religious activity and did creditable work in promoting literacy, setting up shelters for widows and providing relief for disaster victims. Women in Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata through networks developed during World War I work, allied their associations together and created the NCWI in 1925. A national branch of the International Council of Women, its most prominent member was Mehribai Tata, who aggressively campaigned against inert charity and advised men to support female education. The most important of the women's organisations of the time was the All India Women's Conference. Though its initial efforts were directed towards improving female education, its scope later extended to include a host of women's issues such as women's franchise, inheritance rights.

### **Period of Post-Independence:**

The Constitution of India enlisted in 1950 which permitted equal rights to men and women. Rights such as the right to vote, right to education, right to entry into public service and political offices brought in satisfaction among women's groups. In this period, there was limited activity in the area of women's rights. Many women's organizations such as National Federation of Indian Women (1954) the Samajwadi Mahila Sabha (1559) were formed to work for supporting the cause of Indian women. Since the country was facing a social, political crisis after the British rule, many demands

of the women activists were not supported by the Government. But during this period from 1945, the Indian women got an opportunity to participate in confrontational politics.

In post-independent India, the women's crusade was divided, as the common opponent, foreign rule, was no longer there. Some of the women leaders formally joined the Indian National Congress and took powerful position as Ministers, Governors and Ambassadors. Free India's Constitution gave universal adult franchise and by the mid-fifties India had fairly liberal laws concerning women. Most of the demands of the women's movement had been met and there seemed few issues left to organize around. Women's organizations now observed that there was an issue of implementation and consequently there was a pause in the women's movement.

Women displeased with the status quo joined struggles for the rural poor and industrial working class such as the Tebhaga movement in Bengal, the Telangana movement in Andhra Pradesh or the Naxalite movement. Shahada, which acquired its name from the area in which it occurred, in Dhulia district in Maharashtra, was a tribal landless labourers' movement against landlords. Women actively participated and led demonstrations, developed and yelled militant slogans and mobilized the masses. As women's belligerency developed, gender based issues were raised.

For the meantime in Ahmedabad the first attempt at a women's trade union was made with the establishment of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) at the initiative of Ela Bhat in 1972. Major objective was to improve the condition of poor women who worked in the unorganized sector by providing training, technical aids and collective bargaining. Based on Gandhian ideals, SEWA has been a remarkable success.

The Nav Nirman movement, initially a student's movement in Gujarat against rising prices, black marketing and dishonesty launched in 1974 was soon joined by huge number of middle class women. Their method of protest reached from mass hunger strike, mock funerals and prabhat pheris.

The 1970s and 1980s observed the development of numerous women's groups that took up issues such as dowry deaths, bride burning, rape, and sati and focused on violence against women. They stressed the sexual coercion of women in a way previous reform or feminist groups had never done. They questioned the patriarchal assumptions underlying women's role in the family and society based on the biological sex differences implying a "natural" separation of human activities by gender differentials, the public political sphere being the male domain and the private familial sphere as that of the female which eventually translates into a supremacy of male over female. Some of the earliest self-governing women's groups were the Progressive Organization of Women (POW, Hyderabad), the Forum Against Rape (now redefined as Forum Against Oppression of Women), Stree Sangharsh and Samata (Delhi). Among the first campaigns that women's groups took up was the struggle against rape in 1980.

The modified law was passed in 1983 after heated debate with women's groups. Since then, women's groups have lobbied again to have the law further changed to make it more severe and have also fought for an implementation machinery to be set up without which the law is less effective than it was intended to be. The POW in Hyderabad planned new and fresh remonstrations against dowry. In the late 1970s, Delhi became the focus of the movement against dowry and the violence imposed on women in the marital home. Groups which took up the campaign included 'Stree Sangharsh' and 'Mahila Dakshita Samiti'. Later, a joint front called the 'Dahej Virodhi

Chetna Mandal' (organization for creating consciousness against dowry) was made under which a large number of organizations worked.

In 1975, the Lal Nishar Party structured a joint women's conference which was well attended by women in Pune in Maharashtra. Similarly the communist party in India in 1975 organized a National Seminar which was attended by women in Maharashtra. The famous women's organisations which were established during this time are the Stree Mukhti Sangkatana, the Stree Sangharsh and Mahila Dakshata in Delhi. Vimochana in Chennai, Baijja in Maharashtra, Pennurumai in Chennai. The Feminist Network in English and Manushi in Hindi were some of the first women's newsletters and magazines to appear. The issues that they raise are rape, wife-battering, divorce, maintenance and child custody along with legislative reforms. This progressive outlook is indeed a by-product of the changing economic, social and political climate in the country. Therefore, the women's movement in India after Independence struggle not only struggled for liberation but also averred the need for creating a non-class socialist society where women can be completely free from apprehension and violence. The reverberations of changes, recurrent and sporadic at the beginning, began to be heard rather loudly from the middle of the 20th century.

Some women organizations such as the Banga Mahila Samaj, and the Ladies Theosophical Society functioned at local levels to promote contemporary ideas for women. These organizations deal with issues like women's education, abolition of social evils like purdah and Child marriage, Hindu law reform, moral and material progress of women, equality of rights and opportunities. It can be believed that, the Indian women's movement worked for two goals.

1. Uplift of women.
2. Equal rights for both men and women.

All the major political parties, the Congress, BJP, CPI, CPI (M) have their women's wings. The new women's groups declare themselves to be feminist. They are dispersed with no central organization but they have built informal networks among themselves. Their political commitment is more leftist than liberal.

**Currently there are many women organizations of India:**

- i. All India Federation of Women Lawyers
- ii. All India Women's Conference
- iii. Appan Samachar
- iv. Association of Theologically Trained Women of India
- v. Bharatiya Grameen Mahila Sangh
- vi. Bharatiya Mahila Bank
- vii. Confederation of Women Entrepreneurs
- viii. Durga Vahini
- ix. Friends of Women's World Banking
- x. Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sangathan

National alliance of women: The National Alliance of Women (NAWO) is a national web of women. Its affiliation or membership is open to all liberal minded women's groups and institutions, non-governmental organizations, women workers, women's unions, individuals and others who share the principles, objectives and values of NAWO, as defined in the NAWO vision. Major objective of this organization are:

1. Strengthening and building new initiatives, networks, forums etc., for protecting women's rights
2. Monitoring the Government of India's commitments, implementing the Platform for Action with special focus on the eight point agenda discussed at the Conference of Commitment, CEDAW, the Human Rights and other United Nations Convention.
3. Advocacy, lobbying and campaigning on women related issues.
4. Information Dissemination and Documentation.
5. Solidarity and linkages with other regional and global forums.

Another women organization in India is Swadhina (Self-esteemed Women) which was formed in 1986. It is principally a civil society organization focused on Empowerment of women and Child Development based on Sustainable Development and Right Lively hood. At Swadhina, it is believed that positive social change has a direct effect on the lives of women and that change is possible only through an equal and spontaneous participation of Women. Organization members are active in five states across the country in remote tribal districts of Singhbhum in Jharkhand, Purulia and West Midnapur in West Bengal, Kanya Kumari in Tamil Nadu, Mayurbhanj in Orissa and East Champaran in Bihar.

Major projects of this organization are as follows:

1. Women's Empowerment Through:
  - Promoting Grass-Root level Women's Organization
  - Fostering Functional Literacy, Education & Social Awareness generation
  - Augmenting Participation of Women in Local Governance
  - Encouraging Women's Income Generation & economic capacity building
  - Strengthening Women's Participation in Agriculture & Food Security support
  - Upholding Non-Violence & Social Empowerment
  - Improving Family Health & Nutrition
2. Child Development Through:
  - Supporting Child Education
  - Promoting Sports & Games
  - Advancing Environment & Eco-logical awareness

All India Democratic Women's Association is also dominant woman organization which is an independent left oriented women's organisation committed to achieving democracy, equality and women's emancipation. AIDWA members are from all strata in society, regardless of class, caste and community. It has an organizational presence in 22 states in India. AIDWA was created in 1981 as a national level mass organisation of women. AIDWA believes the liberation of women in India requires fundamental systemic change. It upholds secular values and challenges and resists cultural practices demeaning to women. To summarize, women from earlier time has significant role in shaping of civilization. Historical data indicated that though the struggle for women's rights is long and hard, but currently, status of women is enhanced and society recognized their importance. It was observed that after Independence, the Indian women gained considerable importance within their country in social and political spheres. The women's movement has a long way to go in its struggle for bringing about new values, a new ethics and a new democratic affiliation. The objectives were to get equality based on gender, job opportunities, improving the existing laws which gave women only partial

justice, and creating a society which did not dominate women intellectually, physically and emotionally. Even though the efforts made by women activists and concerned organization were slow in getting a real break-through, despite the conservative outlook of their counterparts, they thrived in creating a focussed awareness among middle-class and upper middle-class women at large. Currently, Indian woman is working throughout the country at high post and virtually in all professions at different positions. She is not only visible as the top politician as seen above in politics. Even as managers in industrial firms, director of nationwide operating banks, top bureaucrats, active members of micro-credit groups or as independent fashion designers. Government is going to help women in every sphere of life in society. Numerous programs are implement to empower women in India (Tripathi, 1999).