WOMEN’S MOVEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT DURING THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY

- A STUDY

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The women’s movement started off with small beginning during the mid eighties of the nineteenth century by founding provincial associations. The major breakthrough took place in 1917 in Madras when the Women’s Indian Association (WIA) was formed. It inspired by English women like Annie Besant and Margaret cousin linked with the suffrage movement in the west.1 Besides, Donothy Jivardesa, wife of a Sri Lankan theosophist Mrs. Maidekoper and Margaret Noble known as sister Nivedita were closely associated with women’s movement. In 1925, the national council of women and in 1927, All India Women’s Conference (AIWC) was born.2 They provided the linking process to various provincial associations. Secularism was the key note of these organizations.3 These branches were spread in all places in India. They focused the attention of the government on women issues- education, social and legal reforms, which they published through their organs Sri Dharma and Roshari, urging the women to press the government to promote it.4 AIWC pointed out three obstacles to women’s education-poverty, early marriage of girls and purdah.5 To fight against them Dr. Muthulakshmi suggested that women should find representation on legislative councils, local bodies, senates, syndicates and educational boards and councils. So that they could control all stages of education. Another hindrance to female education lay in languages AIWC suggested that at the primary level vernaculars should be the medium of instruction. She should be literate in her mother tongue. In 1928 the All India Fund for Women’s Education (AIFWE) was started.6 AIWC also founded many pioneering institutions over the years.7

1. All India Child Marriage Abolition League was established in March 26, 1928.
2. Lady Irwin College for home science established in 1932.
3. Family planning centre established in 1937.
4. Save the Children Committee established in 1943.
5. Setting up the Cancer Research Institute in Madras with a Laboratory and Clinic.
6. Demand for Women’s Suffrage.
The aim of the women movements was to remove those customs such as child marriage, purdah and legal disabilities etc., which were detrimental to women’s gaining ‘dignity and status’ and at promoting measures which would allow for recognition of the distinctive features of womanhood, particularly related to the family. Later on with the passage of time they demanded political representation.

Throughout history women collectively have struggled against direct and indirect barriers to their self-development and their full social, political and economic participation. The histories of the women’s movement is usually dated back to the social reform movements of the in nineteenth century and when campaigns for the betterment of the conditions of women’s lives were take up, initially by men. By the end of the century women had began to organize themselves. Gradually they took up a number of causes such as education, conditions of women’s work and so on. The women’s organization started the struggle for women’s right in the early part of the twentieth century. At present, women’s movements focus attention an equality and empowerment. The women’s movement has been able to influence policy and planning of the government for development and empowerment.

Women’s movements in general are directed by the objective i.e., promote better understanding of the process of social, technological, and environmental changes, to contribute to the pursuit of the human rights and to develop alternative concepts, approach and strategies to bring out necessary changes for bettering the life of women with autonomy, freedom and full rights of the citizens. The women’s movement and groups have to recognize the importance of the modalities of empowering women.

Tamilnadu Mahalir Thittam

The vision of Tamilnadu Mahalir Thittam of Tamilnadu Women Development Corporation is the “empowerment of one million women in Tamilnadu with special emphasis on the poorest and disadvantaged. Social empowerment, economic empowerment and capacity building are the missions of the Mahalir Thittam.

The aim of the Mahalir Thittam are as follows:

1. To build capacity of disadvantaged women in order that they are enabled to cross all social and economic barriers and thereby facilitate their full development into empowered citizens.
2. To achieve the equality of status of women as participants, decision makers and beneficiaries in the democratic, economic, social and cultural spheres life.
3. To create or reorient democratic economic and social process and institutions to enable women to participate fully and actively in decision-making in the family, community and at the local, district, state and national levels.
4. To empower women to work together with men as equal partners and to inspire a new generation of women and men to work together for equality, sustainable development and communal harmony and
5. To promote and ensure the human rights of women at all stages of their life style.

The Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women Limited with its headquarters at Chennai is implementing the Mahalir Thittam Project. The main objective is to combine the wide reach and resources available to the State, with the commitment and quality work of the N.G.Os. It has a project management unit. The unit consists of Chairperson and Managing Director, Executive Director
and General Manager. Each District has Project Implementation Unit (EIU), which is headed by a Project Officer, assisted by Assistant Project Officers in the various functional areas of training and communication, monitoring, schemes, marketing, administration and credit co-ordination, monitoring the groups conducting regular review meetings and organizing training programmes for NGOs and bankers are the roles of EIU’s. NGOs are another important unit that proved its quality of work and commitment to this project at the grass root level. They help to form groups and work continuously with the groups to make them strong, cohesive and sustainable. They serve as adviser and facilitator to the groups on various matters such as social, economic and community action programmes.¹³

**Better access to Institution Credit**

The Self Help Groups help rural poor in gaining better access to formal institutional credit by overcoming the problem of collateral. The joint liability of the group helps in the matter, as it ensures better loan repayment by monitoring and peer action. Since the Self Help Group is a combination of small homogeneous group of persons, it has the unique advantage of face to face interaction which helps in persuasion and achievement of the objectives. Similarity can be seen in social condition and approach. Since the members of the group are having identical interests, it helps to have unity and integrity which is a symbol of strength. Members have flexible attitude and each has responsibility too. It is democratic in operation and has a collective leadership.

Self Help Group in general helps the neglected section of the society to get recognition and also to get economic benefit from the banks. It helps to create a sense of esteem among the members. Self Help Group helps to create the habit of thrift and savings. Further Self Help Group helps to improve the ethical and moral values apart from stimulating and helping tendency among the members. All these things change the outlook and attitude of the members and thus help in improving the living conditions as well as social conditions.

**Women Education**

Education is the best means of empowerment. It gives exposure to the public and helps them in shouldering greater responsibility. Education helps the women folk in adopting better methods of childcare and gives them an awareness on the need to adopt family planning method and in the importance of having healthy and hygienic atmosphere. It helps to reduce anxiety and tension. Further it is beneficial in maintaining harmonious relation in the family and also in the social system.

The first milestone is the development of education in Tamilnadu was the enactment of the constitution which defined a number of matters concerning education. Women are cradle of civilization. Education women makes the family and the society cultured. Education has been regarded both as an end in itself and as a means of realizing other desirable ends. It develops the personality of individuals and gives qualities than to fulfill certain economic, political and cultural functions. Thus, it imporves peoples socio-economic status. The movement for improving women’s status all over the world has always emphasized education as the most significant instrument for changing women subjugated position in society. This conference was instrumental in starting the All India Educational Fund and under whose aegis a central training college for women in Delhi has been opened. One of the important was to facilities for the higher education of girls. Madras presidency had also accepted compulsory girls education.

Then All India Women’s Conference in 1930 was originally organized only to deal with education. Its basic interest was to organize women to demand reforms in the system of education. Debates conducted within the AIWC, reveal that the education itself was initially perceived as a panacea
for solving problems of women, family and society. In this fray All India Women Education Conference was organized in 1927. Their demands were made for providing different types of education to women.

As regards women’s education while in 1901 only 12 girls were enrolled in the primary schools for every 100 boys in 1950-51 the enrolment went up to 39 and in 1965-1966. It was around 55 girls for every 100 boys. Though there is enormous increase in the enrolment of girls at primary level. The secondary level girls were enrolled went up to 19. In the college level it was raised in the year 1950-1951. There were 40,000 girls at the college level and it was raised 2,70,000 girls in 1965-1966.

In our country, Article 15 of the Indian constitution it is written, “the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on ground only of religion, race caste, sex, place of birth or any of them”. Government has encouraged the education of women by declaring the equal rights of women in this field. In this regard, the five year plans has been given towards the expansion of women education.

**Women and Health**

Health is another important factor which stimulated the empowerment of women and their social development. Health condition includes not only maintaining health but also knowledge about various health programmes introduced by government and acceptance and adoption of three methods. It includes knowledge and utility of nutritional programmes, childcare, protection of environment and occupational hazards. They are more aware of preventive healthcare. Being members of Self help Group, there is a close interaction among the members and that helped the illiterate people to get information from other literatures.

Women’s health is affected by many factors, including biological factors and social conditions, discrimination and lack of access of healthcare and other services. Lack of food, deficient housing inadequate access to safe drinking water pose a threat to rural and other women’s health.

Health of the women and children is an important part of national health. The promotion of public health in the country is one of the major problems facing both provincial and central governments. Sound public health is a basic for achievement in any sphere of the activity and hence it is that great importance it attached to matters relating to :

1. Women and employment
2. Women and economic development
3. Women and politics
4. Women and law

The promotion of public health generally medical facilities in the State are provided by means of hospitals and dispensaries maintained by the State government as well as by local bodies and private agencies.

In the second decade of the twentieth century, there were forty medical institutions in the Madras Presidency. Of them only two hospitals meant for women and children and Veneral Hospital in Madras were rein by the government. The rest which were partly private institutions either aided or unaided by government.

Developing countries have made great progress during the last few decades in protecting the health of infants and mothers. Millions of children have been immunized against deadly diseases.
Millions of women have received better care during pregnancy and delivery. These advances have helped to reduce infant and maternal deaths.\textsuperscript{19}

In 1868, the British Medical Association and social legal combined in representing to the government of England. They expressed need for a Royal Commission to enquire into the sanitary condition of the country. The report of the commissioner led to the enormous improvement during the past 50 years in the health conditions in Great Britain and indirectly to the establishment of the ministry of health.\textsuperscript{20} Whatever may be the view taken of the need for a similar promote health. Hence, formation of ministry for health done, and all that the formation of a ministry implies.\textsuperscript{21}

While reviewing the working of the Madras registration of births and death Act during 1945, government made the following observations.

“There was a fall in the death rate from 25-40 to 22-27 due to same diseases of cholera, small-pox, plague, leprosy, tuberculosis, fever and malaria.\textsuperscript{22} The large proportion of death in the world are among children an estimate of 15 million children younger than five die each year, the vast majority of them in developing countries. Each year about 500,000 women in the world die during pregnancy of child birth, leaving at least one million children without mother.\textsuperscript{23} To prevent these deaths a separate hospital for women and children was started in the year 1844.

“There is an infirmary for the purpose of receiving and affording medical aid to the native poor women of the presidency, a general hospital for the reception of both European and native stick, a lying-in hospital is started”.\textsuperscript{24} Medical services need to be extended in rural areas and urban slums. Preventing illness is more efficient and less costly, than curing people once they are sick. Preventive healthcare vitamin supplements, periodical baby checkup and immunizations will go a long way in promoting the health of the people.\textsuperscript{25}

In this consequences, the government implemented several separate hospitals for women wealth with a number of other ameliorative measures. These separate hospitals were started for the purpose of extending and guidance to the women during the pre-natal as well as post natal stages.\textsuperscript{26} For a mother to give birth to a healthy baby and to survive the ordeal is an achievement which every modern state wishes to secure, with the minimum of failures. Without healthy mother and healthy offspring, there can be no strong and contributing to its own happiness. Maternity and child welfare have therefore figured very prominently among the activities of the government and local bodies of women constitute roughly half of the population. Abraham Lincoln said, “No nation can be half slave and half free”. Similarly no creameries constitute a weak link.\textsuperscript{27}

Depending upon the socio-economic factors, the life and health of the family as well its reproductive habits vary. It has been pointed out by several workers that reproductive efficiency depends very much on the social factors like nutrition, housing, education, employment and environmental factors-Taller the patient, less the complication is pregnancy and easier the delivery. In how socio-economic groups and social strata, chronic malnutrition is so common that health, including stature, gets affected though fertility as such is not reduced.\textsuperscript{28}

In ill-nourished communities the incidence of abortions, toxemias, anemia’s, difficult deliveries, sepsis, etc., is high. In other words in these groups, the maternal mortality and morbidity as well as the prenatal mortality and morbidity are more than in better nourished, better placed social groups.\textsuperscript{29} Depending on the food habits as well as in the practice of disposal of night soil, the water supply of the town derived from wells is contaminated. The contaminated water supply and the foul atmosphere have
been responsible for much sickness in the town. For that purpose executive committee of the association was appointed in Madras Presidency.  

Some disease factors may also be seen in certain areas. In highly crowded urban areas where the poorer sections of the people live in slums, which are not usually availed of by these groups, till the pregnancy is far advanced or quite often till labour is in its later stage. As a result maternal mortality is quite high in these groups. The prematurity rates, preinstall mortality and the infant mortality rates are also high due to poor nutrition of the mother, lack of antenatal and intranasal care, failure of lactation and improve nourishment of the child in infancy and early childhood. Public Service Commission has recommended that the Indian Medical Service to step the health care of the women and children in the Madras Presidency.

Even today, in split of independence good legislation, education of women and reduction of illiteracy, many social evils and customs exist in Indian society. Indian women on the whole never sought to sublimate or rationalize her limitation and disabilities or by pass family life. However, hard and even be gruel of her. On the contrary their homes and families have invariably come first in their order of priority. However, this has the very important result, of maintaining a stable and integrated society.

Notes/ References

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