CHAPTER 3

EMPOWERMENT MOVEMENT IN INDIA
CHAPTER III
EMPOWERMENT MOVEMENT IN INDIA

This chapter deals with the empowerment movement in India. It is organized as follows: Section I deals with the origin and development of women organizations in India. Different programmes and schemes initiated with a view to empower women are explained in section II. Section III examines in brief the overall impact of empowerment movement.

SECTION I

3.1 Origin and Development of Women’s Organizations

There are several social evils in our society directly affecting the lives of millions and millions of women. While evils are from time immemorial, the empowerment movement is of a recent origin. For the first time in 19th century, the women empowerment movement started under the auspices of the Brahma Samaj. A ladies association was founded in Calcutta (now Kolkotta) in 1886 by Swarna Kumar Devi with the object of friendly relation and spirit of service among the Indian women. It also provided training to poor girls to become teachers. Another organization Sharada Sadan meant to provide education and employment for women was founded by Pandit Ramabai in Poona 1892. Seva Sadan, an organization with an objective of imparting education and training to women was formed by Ramabai Ranade at Poona in 1909.

The status of women was an issue of great concern to ninetieth century reformers in India. The first efforts were directed against certain

14. ibid
15. ibid
customs like Sati, female infanticide and prohibitions of widow remarriage, seen as detrimental to the status of women. Later they tried to educate women with a view to bring them into public life. By the first decade of the twentieth century, a few Indian women were convinced that they needed an all-India women's organization run by women to deal with women's problems. Saraladevi Choudhurani, the founder of the Bharat Stree Mahamandal in 1910, wrote the following critique of the male champions of the women's movement: "They are the so-called social reformers. They advertise themselves as champions of the weaker sex, equal opportunities for women; female education and female emancipation are some of their pet subjects of oratory at the annual show. They even make honest efforts at object lessons in the above subjects by persuading educated ladies to come on their platform and speak for themselves. But woe the women if they venture to act for themselves"16.

Between 1910 and 1920 the number of social organizations for women grew rapidly. Called by various names, Mahila Samitis, Women's Clubs and Ladies' Societies, they emerged in the cities and towns of British India and the native states. The following Table 3.1 traced their origin from 1886 to 1916.

### Table 3.1

**Origin of Women Organizations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SI. No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Founder</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Main Object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Sharada Sadan Organization</td>
<td>Pandit Ramabai</td>
<td>1892</td>
<td>To provide education &amp; employment for women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Bharat Stree Mahamandal</td>
<td>Sarala Devi</td>
<td>1910</td>
<td>To deal with women problems.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Mathew P.M. and M.S. Nair, *Women’s Organisations and Women’s Interest*, Ashish, 1986, p.10)

Mahila Samitis organized by Saroja Nalini in many districts of Bengal also had similar objectives. An integrated approach to women and child welfare came with the formation of two organizations in the early 20th century. Chimanbhai Maternity and Child Welfare League were set up in Baroda in 1914 and Bhagini Samaja started at Poona in 1916. The activities of these organizations were centered on three fronts: health, education and employment.

Modern western movements of women’s rights especially the one that developed in latter half of the 19th century and first half of the 20th centuries demanded, “Votes for women.” Three national women’s organizations in the country voicing women’s demand for vote began

---

18. ibid
between 1917 and 1927. These organizations were Women’s Indian Association (WIA), National Conference of Women in India and All India Women’s Conference, set up in 1917, 1925 and 1926 respectively, had developed branches all over India20. Based mainly among the educated elite women, these organizations claimed the authority to speak for the women in India. It was accepted by the colonial government as the spokesperson for women.

Women’s Indian Association, the first all India organization of women was founded at Madras in 1917 (now Chennai) by Mrs. Dorothy Jinaradasa, a social worker. Even foreigners like Mrs. M. Cousins and Dr. Annie Besant were associated with it later21. The Association showed an apparently international color through maintenance of links with various international organizations through financial and other support. WIA became the parent of AIWC in 1927. When the latter was formed the NCWI was formed as a branch of the International Council of Women in 192522.

Various social welfare organizations came into existence, promoting the cause of women and thus linking together women all over India. The major step in the linking process was the inception of the AIWC, which brought women on a common platform. Incidentally the first conference was organized in Poona in 1927 and the representatives of 20 branches all over India participated in it23. Today there are as many as 102 branches and AIWC has a total membership of more than hundred thousand women from all walks of life. There are international branches of the AIWC

20. ibid
21. Mathew. P.M., M.S. Nair, OP. cit; p.11
22. ibid
23. Mathew. P.M., M.S. Nair, OP. cit; p.11
in cities like London, Moscow and New York. The objectives of AIWC is to work actively for the general progress and welfare of women and children and to help women utilize to the fullest the fundamental rights conferred on them by the constitution of the Indian union.

The main object of National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) is to work for complete emancipation of Indian women, social, economic, cultural and political; based on equality of rights between men and women, and full social justice, physical, intellectual, moral, artistic and educational well-being, security of children and protection of the rights of mothers and ensure a happy motherhood for all women. Both AIWC and NFIW are well organized and thereby playing an indispensable role in the emancipation of women. These two organizations along with other organizations like YWCA (Young Women and Children Association), AIDWA (All Indian Development of Women Association), and MDS (Mahila Dakshata Samiti) have come together to form (DVCM) “Dehej Virodhi Chethana Manch.”

Mahila Dakshata Samiti (MDS) is a women’s vigilance committee, which works to fight against corruption, injustice, social evils affecting women. It has been functioning since 1977 through its three wings, viz. (i) Consumer Protection Cell, (ii) Anti-Dowry and Protection of Women’s Cell and (iii) Status of Women Cell. It fights against all kinds of exploitation and atrocities against women. Its object is to develop among women, particularly those of poorer classes, an awareness of their rights, political, social, and economic, and inculcate in them a spirit of self-reli-

26. ibid
ance and independence. Dahej Virodhi Chetana Manch has been organized on August 3, 1982, which involved all sections of society.

Some important functions and objectives of certain women organizations are mentioned below.

3.1.1. Sahelu

Sahelu was started on August 9, 1981. Sahelu as such means friend which connotes sorority rather than fraternity, “All Women are Equal” in this organization. In April 1983, Sahelu was recognized as a society. It is a voluntary organization. The organizers felt the need for women’s centers, a place where women meet other women, share their experiences and collectively work out solutions to their problems. Their future plan is a short stay home to provide interim shelter to needy women.

3.1.2. Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST)

ISST is a voluntary research organization that was founded in 1964. In 1980, ISST has become a trust. It identifies areas of research, which would empower the women’s movement with a strong information base and alternative strategies for a united action. It also directly offers services to women’s organizations particularly to those working for self-employed women. The focus is on the poorest women and their families.

3.1.3. Self-Employed Women’s Association (Sewa)

The members of this association are women belonging to the lower strata who are self employed like bidi (a type of cigarette), agarbatti (incense stick) makers, vendors of vegetables or fruits, manual workers, etc. Ela Bhatt, the founder of Sewa was given the Magasasy Award in

27. Singh, Indu Prakash, op. cit; p.206.
1971, quietly walked into an all-male trade union, her head uncovered, the first woman member in a place where other women worked as clerks or typists, *pallus* (sari or cloth used to cover the head) drawn tightly over their heads. Even though it was in Ahmedabad, Gandhi's city, and the trade union, the Textile Labour Association was his creation; she created ripples of amazed unease28.

### 3.1.4. Dahej Virodhi Chetna Manch (DVCM)

For years women's organizations have focused on the urgent need for effective and stringent laws to help eradicate dowry. Since its inception in 1982, the DVCM has conducted an intensive campaign in Delhi, a city that has the dubious distinction of maximum recorded dowry deaths, drawing to its fold thousands of young educated men and women and bringing to light many new dimensions of the problem, especially police apathy and even collusion. Public response has been overwhelming to their campaign. The DVCM has demanded that:

(i) The demand for dowry be made a cognizable offence.

(ii) Necessary amendment to I.P.C., Cr.P.C and succession laws is made.

### 3.1.5. Manushi

It is rendering an effable service to the women issue through not a less powerful media i.e., magazine. Manushi has gained international recognition and is speaking about the feminist movement. Manushi has gone all the way out to educate and reeducate women about their rights29.

---

29. Singh, Indu Prakash, op. cit; p. 213.
3.1.6. Shramik Mahila Sangathana

This is a recent organization to help women who are coming out of their husband's house because of atrocities and wish to take the help of law like 1984 Dowry Prohibition Act. It has arranged jobs for them in MIDC (Maharastra Industrial Development Corporation) area and they are earning bread on their own.  

3.1.7. Legal Literacy Movement

This is a registered organization. It was established to promote legal literacy amongst women. It holds the view that the lack of legal literacy is the root cause of growing atrocities.

3.2. Women's Organizations in Bijapur District with reference to Sabala

There are several women's organizations in Bijapur district. Few important ones are Sabala (est. 1986), Vishala (est. 1994), Ujwaia (est. 1997), and Navjyothis (est. 1997). Of these, Sabala is on the forefront of women empowerment movement. Sabala was started by a group of young educated women to the cause of empowerment of rural women and children. It is a non-profitable society registered under Karnataka Societies Registration Act of 1960.

The major objective of Sabala is to bring acceptable structural changes through organization, education and self-employment of rural women. Sabala symbolizes the strength of women and also it signifies a promise for a bright future. The other objectives are:

i) To strengthen and develop leadership quality among women folk.

ii) To organize and build their own societies.

30. Dr. Sakhare, Seema, op. cit, pp. 156-157.
31. Ibid
iii) To educate and train women and children to minimize migration and child labour.

iv) To provide opportunity for income generating activities.

v) To improve health and nutritional aspects in order to minimize child mortality, anemia and M.C.H. care.

vi) To work unitedly to achieve all-round progress in socioeconomic and educational fields.

3.2.1 Activities of Sabala

Sabala has undertaken several development programmes centring around the all-round development of personality of women. Some important programmes are as under:

3.2.1.1. Embroidery and kasuti training

Most of the Lambani and Dalit community women are migrating to Maharashtra and Goa as coolies to earn livelihood. To stop the migration, Sabala decided to train lambani women in embroidery work, this is almost disappearing. Further Sabala arranged training for 10 women of Kaggod village with the help of Women Development Corporation, Bangalore. After completion of training a loan of Rs. 10,000/- to each woman from KSFC for starting embroidery and kasuti work is arranged.

With the help of NABARD, 120 women were trained in mirror embroidery, Karnataka kasuti, patchwork. Out of this 100 women started earning about Rs. 25/- to Rs. 30/- per day. For marketing and sale of embroidery products Sabala participates in the exhibition of handicraft at Bangalore, Mumbai, Pune, Delhi and Gauhati.
3.2.1.2. Supplementary School
Sabala started 26 supplementary schools within 2 years of its inception. Sabala gave preferential admission to the children of Dalit, Lambani and Shepherd communities.

3.2.1.3. Formation of SHG for Women and Arrangement of Loan
Sabala has taken initiative of forming Self Help Group (SHG) and motivated women to save on weekly basis. For their purpose Sabala selected 30 villages and 10 Tandas from Sindagi Taluka. Proper guidance was provided for the utilization of funds. Till now SHG have generated a savings of Rs. 60 lakhs.

3.2.1.4. Training to Wool Spinners
Sabala arranged the wool spinning training to 30 women on Medleri Charaks who were earlier spinning by Takali, the old style of spinning. Women who were previously earning Rs. 6/- to 8/- per day are now able to earn Rs. 35 per day. For working capital, Sabala arranged loans through Bank of Maharashtra of Moratagi and Chaitanya Mahila Cooperative Bank, Bijapur. A building was also constructed for shepherd women at Moratagi.

3.2.1.5. Community Irrigation
Sabala arranged a community irrigation programme at Kodni village of Sindagi Taluka and arranged digging of bore wells to four families.

3.2.1.6. Seminars and Workshop
It conducts seminars and workshops for women to discuss the socioeconomic problems of women. Since more women were fond of working as agricultural labourers, Sabala arranged training programmes
and discussions about dry land development with the help of the Agricultural Department at Sindgi and Bijapur.

3.2.1.7. Chaitanya Mahila Co-Operative Bank

Sabala established Chaitanya Mahilla Co-operative Bank Ltd. It is first of its kind in Bijapur District devoted for the improvement of economic conditions of women. There are about 3,000 members. This bank has mobilised Rs. 2.70 crores in deposits. The bank has assisted mainly the women from weaker sections of the society so far this bank has given different types of loans to 1,200 women.

3.2.1.8. Low Cost Housing

Sabala with the help from CPART organization New Delhi constructed 53 houses for Dalit families.

3.2.1.9. Watershed Development Project

Sabala launched watershed development projects with the co-operation of Zilla Panchayat, Bijapur at Yaragal B.K., Yaragal K.D., Aheri and Bankalagi villages of Sindgi Taluka covering 4,609 hectares of land. There is a considerable improvement in the water-table in and around the villages of this project.

3.2.1.10. Education for Democracy

Sabala started training programmes for the elected women members gram panchayats. Women members of Gram Panchayat were greatly benefited by the training programmes. They have come forward to solve women's problems by forming "Mahileyar Hakkin Sangha."

3.2.1.11. Entrepreneurship Development Programme

The basic thrust of this programme was to develop self-reliance
and self-confidence among Dalit, Lambani and Devadasi women through collective activities. Hence on a participatory basis Sabaia formed Grameen Mahila Abhivrudhi Trust, which has 390 women members.

In brief it can be said that over the years Sabaia has evolved itself into an important women organization. It has made a definite mark in the area of women empowerment. In recognition of its services it has received several awards and prizes. In the area of women economic empowerment it is now a name to reckon with.

SECTION II
Different Programmes of Empowerment Initiated by Associations and Organizations

After briefly describing origin and growth of different women organizations we now discuss a few empowerment programmes initiated by different associations and organizations. There are several women's and social welfare organizations, promoting the cause of women and linking together women all over India. From time to time these organizations announce different programmes. For example, All India Women's Conference (AIWC) organizes conferences relating to women's problems. AIWC has been participating in and organizing numerous national and international conferences over the years. At the national level they meet twice a year to discuss and attempt to solve women's problems. The programmes of AIWC are mainly welfare and service oriented. A few to mention are establishing of Working girls hostels, Balwadies (nurseries), promotion of small savings, handicrafts, sewing centers, free medical aid, mobile health units, family planning centers, fair price shops, school
for the blind, center for mentally retarded, condensed courses for women
for Secondary School Leaving Certificate Examinations, adult education
centers, leprosy cure centers, canteen for women, blood banks, printing
presses, marriage bureaus, flour mills and food inspection units, etc.

Special mention may be made of: (a) Vocational training in hand
printing and textile printing which is imparted to the poor and needy
women for a period of six months to enable them earn their livelihood
elsewhere at such centers. (b) Free legal aid is given to the families who
cannot afford to arrange for a lawyer on their own. (c) Facilitating lec­
tures, meetings, debates and film shows on different days of national
importance such as Women’s Day, Teacher’s Day, etc.

The Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) runs a small reading room
and a documentation center called “JIGYASA” as a first step towards
setting up an information “Network” service covering women’s studies
and/or women’s development.

ISST canvases its findings and views through the publication of
books and papers, articles in journals and newspapers and also intensive
participation in national/international forums and seminars. Between
1975-1982, the institute has published 10 books of case studies, contrib­
uted 20 papers and 60-80 memoranda to both government agencies
as well as committees set up for advancing the cause of women. ISST
hopes that JIGYASA will be developed to provide counseling service to
women in need, which would include guidance on legal matters as well.

Sewa is another organization, which gave women better strength
to demand better wages, unity and protection against individual’s ex-
exploitation. Sewa has around 14000 women workers, who are home based producers, vendors of vegetables or fruits and as manual workers selling their labour as head loaders and handcart pullers. Sewa gave them the dignity, a feeling of 'SELF EMPLOYED.'

Today bank finance is made available by Sewa to the poorest members, and thus Sewa saves them from the grip of moneylenders. Sewa members have also created the Sewa Mahila Trust. This provides them with legal aid, social security benefits like maternity, death or widowed compensation and ongoing trainings in skill development. Sewa is giving them 'what the government ought to provide.'

It took years to persistent lobbying by Sewa organizers to change the definition of the term 'worker' to include self-employed women. In 1980, the Gujarat government finally set up the Unorganized Labor Board. Later the Planning Commission added separate chapter on the self-employed in the Draft of the Sixth Five Year Plan. Recently, Sewa sponsored several meetings of representatives of various organizations and presented its recommendations to the Planning Commission to cover basic demands of the women employed in unorganized sector.

Planning for the future of the children of its members is a recent development within Sewa. Bidi worker's children are being given scholarship to study. In Ahmedabad there are 20 anganwadis, crèches, and day care centers for worker's children. To provide the children of the rag pickers and the handicrafts with options for a different trade, the Sewa runs training centers for these children, where they are taught weaving and sewing.

The Dahej Virodhi Chetana Manch (DVCM) has conducted inten-
sive campaigns against the practice of dowry. It has demanded that: (i) dowry is made a cognizable offence and (ii) necessary amendment to I.P.C. and (iii) succession laws be made.

Manushi magazine has gone all the way out to educate and re-educate women about their rights. It has gained international recognition. It is a sort of link between society and women. It is a radical magazine. It organizes lectures, classes, and meetings for rural and urban women. A number of posters, slides and books have been prepared to teach them. The publishers of Manushi are trying to introduce women studies in the universities in social science curriculum. One optional paper for M.Ed. has already been started. It has also undertaken many sample surveys, critical studies, analytical studies and small researches on deaths of newly married women, dowry death, etc. Socialization of female child, sex biased textbooks; co-education and educational institution are also within the purview of its research areas along with struggle against blind faith, personal laws and fundamentalism. A research project on exploitation of women in the name of religion was undertaken along with small researches on child marriage, maidservants, life styles of single woman, married life of working women with special reference to nurses, telephone operators and gram sevikas. It is also conducting camps and classes to train grassroots workers. Workshops on legal literacy movement are very common.

The publication of the report of the Committee on Status of Women Towards Equality, declaration of the International Women Year and the U.N. Decade of Women, data generated by various government and non-government organizations on social economic conditions of women and formulation of working groups on women issues in gov-

43
ernment has led to an appreciable focus on women's development in government run programmes. For the first time, the Sixth Five Year Plan included a chapter on 'Women in Development'. Government of India now has a variety of programmes aiming at women development. The thrust of these programmes or schemes, many of which were initiated during the Sixth and Seventh Five Year Plans is to provide:

(a) Employment and income generating services,
(b) Education and training services,
(c) Support services,
(d) General awareness services, and
(e) Legal support services.

There are 27 beneficiary oriented schemes for women identified by the Prime Minister's Office. There are 48 training schemes for women under different ministries and departments. The Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD) in the ministry of Human Resource Development set up in 1985 has the nodal responsibility of coordinating and monitoring programmes for the development of women under different ministries and departments. The Women's Development Division set up at the National Institute of Public Co-operation and Child Development in 1986 provides technical support to the Women's Bureau of the Department of Women and Child Development by the way of training, research, documentation, etc.

There are approximately 82 schemes for the development of women. These schemes fall under the four broad categories:

(a) Economic Development (including general/ vocational/ specific training)
(b) Welfare
(c) Public good/services, (including education, health, nutrition, supportive services)

(d) Awareness.

The government and other public authorities have, thus, chalked out a number of programmes for the welfare empowerment of women. They have been implemented through a large network of organizations. However, in order to create a visible impact there should be a clear marriage between government programmes on one hand and those chalked out by women's organizations on the other. The women’s organizations claim that the upliftment of women through empowerment is essential to the national cause because women are the mothers of future generations.

SECTION III

The Impact

In India, women are fighting at individual and collective levels against various evils perpetuated against them. They have achieved a great success for instance, All India Women’s Conference (AIWC) has succeeded in getting the following laws passed by the government of India:

(i) The Special Marriage Act, 1954
(ii) The Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act, 1955
(iii) The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act 1956
(v) Interstate Succession Act 1956
(vi) The Orphans Widows Home Act.

It has succeeded in helping working women to get equal pay and
facilities for equal work with men. This organization has represented itself on various committees/commissions, like the National Committee on Status of Women in 1975, State Vocational Education Board for the Union Territory of Delhi in 1980 and the UN Commission on the Status of Women. A hostel for working women attached to the central office has been constructed for the low-income groups who come to Delhi from the length and breadth of India, seeking jobs. Approximately 300 workingwomen are presently housed in the hostel. The central office of AIWC is also maintaining a library, which has a reference and research unit specializing in women's studies. The AIWC has been responsible for starting:

(i) The first Home Science College at Delhi in 1932, which is popularly known as The Lady Irwin College.
(ii) The First Family Planning Center in 1937.
(iii) "Bapnu Ghar," a house for the socially distressed women in 1965.

Sewa has given a new dimension to the concept of militant non-violence and a new dignity to the working women. "For the first time," Ela Bhatt says, "these women develop a concept of their own identity through association and through discussion. They see themselves as valuable members of the workforce, not just housewives working for a living."

The women empowerment movement has attempted to structure itself around its values for a society. Since women have been placed in a largely powerless role in society they are especially sensitive to the degradation associated with powerlessness. Therefore in seeking

change, the movement has sought organizational techniques that do not subject women to oppression.

The thrust of women welfare programme under the Five Year Plans has been to make provisions for grants in aid to women's organizations. The scheme of training to women in distress for rehabilitation formed an important activity of the Department of Social Welfare. This envisages payment of financial assistance to poor women for undergoing vocational training in commercial subjects.

A scheme of giving non-recurring grant-in-aid for employment generating projects undertaken by voluntary organizations of women was introduced in 1980-81. There are now Balmandirs in every state for the care and protection of poor and destitute women. Small work units like tailoring centers have been run successfully in some of these institutions.

Public authorities are the major sponsors of welfare schemes in which the political organizations of women are engaged. Besides such linkages of women, organizations contribute substantially to their economic strength, which among other things adds to their organizational strength. In India too, the year 1975 witnessed a sudden development in the activities on women’s issues. The positive impact of the second wave of the feminism was evident at all levels of the government - local, provincial and central. A large number of committees, commissions and individuals were appointed to look into the injustice against women. Various measures were adopted to improve the status of women and laws were passed to remove discriminatory practices.
The Department of Social Welfare was created in 1976 at the center. This was followed by the establishment of Department of Women and Child Development under Ministry of Human Resources Development of the Central Government in 1985. Various action plans were prepared by these departments from time to time to improve the status of women. In the 1970’s and 1980’s, Departments of Education, Health and Employment were used as agents to bring a change in the status of women. Women, thus, entered national agenda. Steps were taken to integrate them into the socio-economic development of the nation. Women were appointed to higher national positions, on public sector boards, courts, commissions, etc.

More women have started taking part in politics at all levels. The number of women in Lok Sabha has increased from 22 in 1952 to 39 in 1991. Women representations increased even in Rajya Sabha from 15 in 1952 to 24 in 1990.

In India a number of laws were passed which are gender specific such as Equal Remuneration Act 1976, ensuring women with equal pay at the work place; the Marriage Law 1978 providing safeguards for divorced wives regarding maintenance and alimony; Dowry Prohibition Act 1984 to settle matrimonial disputes quickly.

There are thousands of women institutions and organizations, which are busy with activities for women’s welfare and development. They create a common platform for common women and for common cause. An awareness of human rights and democratic freedom is being created. Women are becoming legal and right conscious. Now cruelty and injustice are not being tolerated as they were previously. Women
have started coming outside their homes for seeking justice and there is
an indirect threat to the men dominated society that any injustice to
women will not be tolerated in future.