



# Role of Women in the Civil Rights Movement in India

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## Abstract

*The civil rights movement in India primarily increased during emergency rule from 1975 to 1977. At that time, women with different backgrounds and organizations significantly impacted the civil rights movements. The movements led by women had an impact on both social and economic issues at that time. The main objective of this study is analyzing the role of women in the civil rights movements in India and the contribution of the women's movement to human rights. This study followed the primary data analysis and qualitative methods in the methodology case. The findings of this study are women intellectuals and activists were majorly involved in progressive movements that took vital initiatives.*

**Keywords:** *Women activists, women's movements, AIWC, NFIW*

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## I. Introduction

Women's civil rights activity in India has been subjected to numerous changes over the years. However, from equal standards with men during ancient times to the influences of equal rights through several reformers, the overall women's rights history in India has been fruitful. In the modern era, women have obtained a standard place in a respected office in India that involves the Speaker of the Lok Sabha, the President, and an opposition leader. However, the contemporary movement of Indian women is mainly constituted through various organizations. Besides, the organization involves women activists drawn from society's middle, upper, and lower-income families. However, in some cases, women also mobilized for mass meetings, rallies, and protests for civil rights. In India, since the last quarter of the 20th century, many relevant movements have been taking place for human rights. However, three vital phases have been developed in the past. The first phase was the nationalist movement in the period 1936 to 1970. In this specific movement, women were the primary activist, and the primary aim of this movement was to provide political power to women in India. In the second phase, the movement was a "right-based civil society movement from 1970 to 2000s". Besides the last phase is state-led activities for economic empowerment. However, the main objective of this study is to analyze the role of women in the civil rights movements in India and the contribution of the women's movement to human rights.

## II. Literature review

### Women campaign for reforming the family laws

During women's movements, some significant challenges occurred regarding custody of children's property rights, alimony, marriage, and divorce. The women activist realized that in India, the existing personal laws and the majority of custody laws significantly discriminated against females and women. According to the codes of "Mitakshara", daughters from Hindu families were deprived of fundamental rights within the parental property. All women from different communities face discrimination regarding marriage law. Those laws primarily indicate that women are not equal to men and are governed by patriarchal ideology. Women from various communities have challenged the constitutional validity regarding the aspects of personal laws in the Supreme Court (Sreenivasulu, 2019). However, with the growing time, the overall number of housewives and educated working women from various religious backgrounds has been approached by the "secular women's organization". The vital problems faced by those women were inter-religious and inter-class marriages, property disputes, forcible marriage, custody of children, and others. Especially tribal women from Bihar and Maharashtra have filed a petition demanding land rights within the supreme court of India. However, numerous women groups besides human rights lawyers had prepared a draft that contains the technical brief of gender alongside

the laws of secular families. In 1996, AWAG, further known as Ahmedabad Women's Action Groups, filed a writ petition for declaring "Muslim personal laws". The law has allowed polygamy as void according to articles 14 and 15 regarding the Indian constitution (Himanshi, 2022). Thus, in this way, women have a significant role in human rights movements.

### **Contribution of women to human rights movements**

In order to retain human rights, a large number of women's organizations have been built up from the last time. One of the party-focused women's organizations was "All-India Women's Conferences", which were associated with the Congress. The organization was founded in 1927 as regards social organization that was committed to the promotion of women's education. Besides, many AIWC members were active in a few nationalist movements (Mahanta & Gupta, 2019). Moreover, under the leadership of CPI, the NFIW, further known as the "National Federation of Indian Women", was developed in the period of 1954. However, following the split of the Communist party, the CPM women have been working within the "All working women coordination committee". However, after some time, the organization was called an "All India democratic women's Association". Women groups were more effective and had more potential for the human rights movements as they were connected with the mass organization. However, some grass root human rights movements have been located in India, in which political women played a vital role. This political movement further involves the Chipko movements in India, primarily by women (Saikia, 2021). The movement protested against deforestation in the era of 1978. In Dhulia districts of Maharashtra, activist "Bhil women beside the other women organization" had stood against harassment, male drinking, and broad beating as well. Dalit women activists were also vital for pressuring the "J.P. Narayana formed Yuva Sangarsh Vahini" in Bihar to indicate the issues of wife-beating and drunk-nesses. Thus, it could be asserted that in the past time, women activists have taken a vital role in human rights movements in India.

### **III. Methodology**

Research methodology is a vital portion that assists in defining a suitable approach that needs to be adopted to complete the study paper. In other words, research methodology assists in a better and deeper analysis of the subject matter. However, for the research approach, this research study would follow the inductive research approach. A research approach can be defined as a gathering of strategies and procedures to decide the whole research structure (Chen *et al.*, 2022). There are three kinds of research approaches which are inductive, deductive, and abductive. However, for the research design, this study would follow the descriptive research design. Research design assists in elaborating the overall framework of a research paper which further assists in the selection of analysis and collection patterns (Sileyew, 2019). There are three research design types: exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive. The descriptive research design primarily focuses on obtaining the brief details of a particular research and providing a proper description of the study.

The research paper would follow the pragmatism research philosophy for completing the study. Data collection is a specific procedure of collecting data through all kinds of relevant data sources to provide a proper outcome to a study. The data collection procedure can be divided into two parts which are primary and secondary methods of data collection. Primary data is a kind of data that is mainly based on mathematical figures and calculations within different kinds of formats (Budianto, 2020). However, secondary data is a type of data that is already published within online portals, journals, magazines, newspapers, and books. This study is descriptive and based on secondary data sources. Those secondary sources are books, newspapers, e-journals, and journals from 2000 to 2017 for reviewing the role of women in human rights movements. During data collection, it has been ensured that the collected data sources are taken from the relevant sources.

### **IV. Findings and Discussion**

#### **Theme 1: Nature and dynamics of the women's movements**

According to Kumar (2019), women activists and intellectuals were primarily involved in a few progressive movements which took numerous initiatives to develop an "Anti-price rise women committee". Besides, it further organized a direct activity towards some individuals who developed artificial scarcity regarding essential goods. Many lower-middle-class and poor women had joined the movements that were mainly under some women's leadership. Those women leaders were from the socialist and left backgrounds who took significant initiatives. Manju Gandhi, Ahalya Ranganekar, and Mrinal Gore had developed a remarkable impact in the eyes of a large number of poor and struggling women. Their unique ability to reach out to women's different backgrounds has made a unique mark in society. Their simple lifestyle, ability to relate micro problems to macro-political reality, and self-sufficiency have been role models for the younger generation of India. However, at the same time, the "women's liberation movement committee" was primarily organized in Pune. This organization was even larger concerning to cultural and socio-political base regarding the rights of

industrial working women, temple prostitutes, tribal women, professionals, and different backgrounds of women.

“The progressive organization of Women” and “Stree Mukti Sangathana” were developed in 1974. However, in Delhi, few leaders within the women's groups had evolved through the radical student movements besides the movement of democratic rights. Every woman in various political grouping across India felt disoriented regarding the patriarchal biases within their organization. In India, in 1974, young individuals who had not participated in the national movement faced numerous crises. That crisis involves political, social, and economic aspects, unemployment, inflation, drought, and corruption. Those movements further assist in raising a diverse issue regarding employment, wages, and land rights as fundamental human rights. Many women have participated in these movements with responsibility and enthusiasm to solve those issues. Aside from this, during 1975, “the U.N. Declaration” concerning international women's years coincided with emergency rule within India. However, when the emergency rule was primarily uplifted in 1977, numerous women groups supported the issue regarding democratic rights. Horrible cruelty had been committed against the females and women in the period of emergency. Those crimes were further openly reported and documented in the press. That cruelty has stuck within a significant number of women's life in the political party, in the street, and in the workplace. Thus, in this way, women's groups have supported fundamental human rights for a prolonged time.

### **Theme 2: Women activists in human rights in India**

As per the view of Menon, 2019, the “Status of the Women's Committee” appointed by the Indian government released a report in 1974. The report was addressed as a “towards equality” developed by the scholars alongside an interdisciplinary perspective. The report was primarily represented by the parliament of India, in which it gained a massive number of responses through the decision-making procedure bodies. In the report, many factors have been elaborated, such as the shocking descriptions of women's reality, the high rate of female morbidity and mortality, alongside the decline of the sex ratio. From 1977 to 1979, upgraded women's groups and organizations emerged in major cities in India, such as Bombay, Hyderabad, Bangalore, and Delhi. They developed protests and activities against the sexist portrayal of females in India and against the dowry murders. Those women's organizations were multicultural by nature regarding their protest composition. For this reason, as an outcome, their overall political agenda reflected the composite reality of Indian women that was further constructed through ethnicity, religion, caste, and class. The collective wisdom of those leaders provided a primary backbone for the movements.

According to Calman (2019), in the 1960s, the state-led infrastructure programs were mainly intended to achieve social and economic growth. It further tried to prevent the emerging income dissimilarities by providing health, educational and public services which started to fall. At a similar time “Prime Minister Indira Gandhi” had significantly attempted a top-down and personal leadership which leads the decline of the Congress party ruling. These specific events have majorly sparked the overall growth of civil organizations that were mainly politically motivated and few movements in which both women's and men participated. The main objectives of those organizations were the mobilization and organization of marginalized Indians and poor Indians. It further focused on amplifying the overall dissatisfaction growth of political and economic growth. Individuals from marginalized communities and poor women were basically intended to indicate the outcome of economic failures and the consequences of failed schemes regarding state developments rather than dealing with gender injustice. Aside from this, the unintended result of those more significant numbers of women has become first time politically active in order to increase gender awareness.

The effect of famines during the 70s eras on Indian women has been further felt in the urban areas of Maharashtra. “The united women's anti-price rise” has influenced many women in Bombay to join in the campaign against violence, economic exploitation, and rising food prices. Around 20,000 females from different backgrounds joined to indicate their solidarity by beating the metal plates with rolling pins. This event adequately indicates that the food crisis was particularly accompanied by the small-scale activism group that focused on the corrupt minister and leading businesses that failed to prevent the food crisis through development. Aside from this, in recent times, the self-help organization, further called a “Self-employed women's association”, has been expanded with an activism form to support people with low incomes and struggling women in India.

From the above findings, it has been found that women activists and intellectuals were mainly involved in a few progressive movements that took numerous initiatives. Among those movements, many poor women and lower-middle-class families have joined to solve social and political issues. In Pune and Delhi, some specific women's organization has been developed, such as the “women's liberation movement committee”. Those women had evolved through the radical student movements alongside the movements of democratic rights.

## V. Conclusion

The above studies further represented that, in the period of the 1974 crisis, when different types of crises occurred, a majority number of women has been participated in resolving those issues. Even in the U.N. Declaration of 1975, emergency rules were established in India. During that time, a lot of women protesters adequately supported the issues regarding democratic rights. However, the study also represents that, from 1977 to 1979, new women's organizations emerged in the big cities of India, such as Delhi, Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Bombay. They significantly developed activities and protests against the sexist portrayal of women and dowry murders against females. Those women's organizations were multicultural based on the nature of the members of those from different backgrounds and communities. However, in 1960, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi took over numerous activities to amplify the dissatisfaction growth besides economic and political growth. Thus, from the above study, women's movements are vital in civil rights and addressing different social issues. Those issues were unemployment, food crisis, gender equality and discrimination.

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