



## The Women's Movement in South Asia: An Overview

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### ABSTRACT

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the women's movement in South Asia played significant roles in the innovative activities all over the country and the freedom of their particular nations. Movements involve unbendable accomplishment through a crowd of people giving out aspirations, acting jointly toward bringing essential changes designed to understand the aim. The Report of the Women's Movement in Asian Countries eventually shows the capacity of activism as well as a group of Asian women and their position within reach of peace and justice. Studies of women's socio-political participation in Asian countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka tell us that the women's movement in these countries played a significant role in attaining human justice and rights. Several of these movements are said to be in subsistence in support of women's rights in the nation with the purpose for which they live. For the most part, the women's movement in Asia struggles along several related routes, consisting of gender-based violence, equal labour rights, health rights, and equal education for all. On the other hand, the women's movement in Asian countries has also faced many challenges due to the customs and political systems of various Asian countries.

### Women's Movement in India

The women's movement in India was founded by social reformers. The social reform movement was the initial attempt to eliminate barriers from women's lives. It increased awareness among many of the



populace of the need to liberate and equalise women and men. As a result of the social reform movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a considerable number of middle-class women with and English education had been generated through the development of women's education and their admission to institutions of higher learning, and they began to actively participate in politics. The movement's main objective focus on giving women more political rights, access to education, and employment within the framework of the colonial state. Numerous social reformers targeted particular problems to raise women's rights. Reformers opposed practices like sati, polygamy, child marriages, and perpetual widowhood. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chand Vidya Sagar, are two such social reformists. The Brahmo Samaj also encouraged widespread female and girl's education. Upper caste Bengali women were generally in charge of the campaign for social and educational change. As a result, the reformist movement brought about a number of social advancements, including the legislation of widow remarriage in 1856 and repeal of sati. The movement membership was restricted to women from upper caste and aristocratic classes in the latter stages of the fight because it remained obsessed with questions of property and inheritance. The women's movement in India has passed through various phases. Although we cannot directly call it an organised movement, there are many other movements in which parts of the women's movement are visible.

**Anti-Price Rise Movement:** After independence, we can see some movements in which women have led, along with participation. One such movement was the movement against price rises of the 1970s. One such movement was the sharp rise in the price of commodities in rural areas of Maharashtra. The Socialist and Communist parties of India founded the United Women's Anti-Price Rise Front. The campaign quickly gained momentum. They demanded the government fix the price of goods and provide useful things. Since it directly affected everyone, many housewives take part in this demonstration. It was a *Thali Belan* movement with women in it with spears and wages, and street answers which were revealed to the housewife community. They went to government employees, parliamentarians, and businessmen and gave them bangles to wear. The movement was also seen in Gujarat under the name of *Navnirman Andolan* of 1974. At the same time, it was mainly seen in the form of students' demonstrations against corruption, inflation, and black marketing. Women took part in this movement, and it became a part of the *Thali Belan* struggle.

**Chipko Movement:** Chipko was an environment movement that existed from 1972 to 1973. The activists of the movement used to cling to the trees as protectors of these trees. It first appeared in the Garhwal region of Uttar Pradesh and later spread to Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Orissa, and Karnataka. The Chipko movement is often known as a women's movement because most of its activists were



women, and at the same time, this movement was based on feminine qualities, but despite all this, only the men involved in it got framed and came to light. This movement showed the commitment and moral strength of the women living in the hilly areas that not only got entangled with the local contractors there to protect trees but also stood up against the police. Chipko was not only the environmental movement, which was related only to the protection of trees, but it, was also a struggle against the alcoholism of men and increasing work pressure on women. This was because these problems were also closely related to deforestation. The reason behind this was that the men used to get a lot of money from the contractors for the felling of trees in the forest. These people used to use this money to drink alcohol. Because of their alcoholism, not only the women and children in the house had to go hungry. Rather, it also encouraged domestic violence. Therefore, the movement against alcoholism was also included in the Chipko movement. Thousands of women started protests in front of liquor shops. Later, it was banned in five districts. In 1973, 300 trees were auctioned for the manufacture of sporting goods, but the women clung to the trees and did not allow those who made the goods to cut trees. A 72-year-old elderly woman, Shyama Devi, gathered the women, and the whole forest reverberated with the slogan of Chipko.

**Narmada Bachao Andolan:** While Medha Patekar read in 1985 that the Sardar Sarovar Dam, which was being built on the Narmada River, had not been approved, she was taken aback. With the exception of the offer of rehabilitation, she realised that the people who would be impacted by its development were unaware that they would be. Later, the reporters learned that the people had only been offered money for their current standing crops rather than rehabilitation. She organised a 36-day solidarity march, a 22-day fast, and other protests that led the World Bank to establish the Morse commission and declare that the project broke the bank's resettlement and environmental policies, forcing the bank to end its involvement in the project in 1993. Despite the Narmada Tribunal's promise of compensation and the dam's official completion on in 2006, Medha persisted in her fight for the rehabilitation of those who had been forcibly deported and for the payment of that recompense. The Narmada Tribunal was established to settle the conflict between states over the distribution of Narmada water.

**Demonstration of Women in Manipur:** This was the first protest of its kind in the history of independent India, which shook the powers in Delhi. Its effects were so deep and lethal that after the government, police and security forces began to be reined in. This is the incident of July 2004, when a 32-year-old woman named Thangjam Manorama was picked up from her house by the Assam Rifles soldiers of the Indian paramilitary forces in the middle of the night, and her body was found in the fields the next morning, riddled with bullets. The post-mortem revealed that she had been brutally raped. She had deep wounds in her private parts. Thangjam Manorama's murder shook the entire state. At a nude



demonstration by women in front of the Assam Rifles headquarters in Imphal held five days after the incident, 30 women demonstrated naked outside the Assam Rifles office in Imphal. They were shouting slogans like, “The Indian Army rapes us too. We are all Manorama mothers.” But this demonstration in Manipur became a historical example. One thing happened from this incident: the government woke up from its sleep. Police began to identify and question the dastardly.

### **Women’s Movement in Pakistan**

The women’s movement in Pakistan has been a dynamic force in the historical and political contexts and has risen to the challenge with each wave. It recognises that it needs a fresh wave of ideas, aspirations, members, reflections and collective solidarity, overriding personal and political differences to emerge with informed strategies and action that will push the women’s agenda beyond tokenism into concrete long term rights and ensuring equality and justice.

In Pakistan, women continue to be marginalised in almost all spheres of life. Due to uneven socio-economic development and the effects of tribal, feudal, and capitalist social institutions on women’s lives, there is a huge disparity in the condition of women across classes, provinces, as well as rural-urban divisions in Pakistan. The conflict between their roles and social aspects gives Pakistani women social status and values. While female family members are taught household skills to be fine mothers and wives, male family members are provided access to better education, nutritious foods, and freedom of movement, and skills to compete for resources in the public sphere. Men in Pakistan are able to regulate women’s labour because of the unequal social standing and authority between men and women, which defines women's status as dependent and submissive.

In Pakistan, the 1980s were unquestionably the decade of women. Pakistan’s political outlook was significantly impacted by a strong women’s movement. The women’s movement not made much progress in its fight against the Islamisation-related measures that General Zia’s military administration enacted that targeted women. Under the cover of Islamic rules, there were attempts made during the Zia era 1977-88, to undermine any advancement made by women and to reduce them to second class citizens. One of the most significant outcomes of these difficult decades is that, the conflict between faith-based politics and the politics of women’s movement to question that. By this time, more middle-class women were joining the movement, and they were examining the impact of the religious campaign being used to deny opportunities to women in the workplace and elsewhere. The *Hudood Ordinance* 1979, the Law of *Qisas* and *Diyat* 1983, and law of Evidence 1984 were put into place to obstruct women’s attempts to get progressive rights.



While a large number of women from the middle class joined the movement at this point, they began to examine the implications of the religious campaign that had been used to refuse women access to employment and other opportunities. In 1981 when Fehmida Allah Bux was sentenced a hundred lashes, as an Islamic punishment, women realized that if they did not raise a voice, their very existence would be threatened, apart from the right to education and participation in political and cultural activities.

In order to combat the trend of the state discriminating against women, the Fehmida Allah Bux lawsuit was filed by *Shirkat Gah*, Karachi. Political parties were forbidden under the Zia dictatorship, and there was a general feeling of fear and unease. There was no freedom of speech and the democratic forces were being crushed. The press was subject to strict censorship, and there was total silence. The women came together during this oppressive period and collectively spoke out against the discriminatory legislation. The Women's Action Forum was the name given to this group of voices. The WAF spoke out in support of women's rights as well as against the military dictatorship and for the return of democracy to Pakistan. The constitution of 1973 must be reintroduced, according to the Women's Action Forum (WAF). Additionally, it is claimed that only elected officials have the authority to enact laws. These actions gave the politics of the women's movement a powerful boost.

The WAF's demands and action inspired those speaking up for democratic freedom and minority rights. Students, lawyers, cultural institutions, and certain political party members came together to form a united front against authoritarianism and martial law. The media was subject to stringent restrictions under the Zia dictatorship. The autonomy of association as well as the right to non-violent meeting was both restricted. They mobilized to defend against the proposed Law of Evidence on 12 February 1983 in Lahore. The police baton charged and used tear gas on them as they made their way to the Lahore High Court to file a case. Many of them were also threatened and arrested. The majority of women's leaders, according to Gen. Zia was educated in the west and represented alien values, so they should not be taken seriously.

Benazir Bhutto was elected as Pakistan's prime minister in 1988, making history as the first woman to hold that position in a Muslim nation. She had raised her worries regarding prejudice towards women health's challenges, and social issues affecting women during her election campaign. She also disclosed her intention to establish women only courts, women police stations, and women development banks etc. In addition, Benazir pledged to repeal the disputed Hudood Ordinance of 1979, which restricted the women's rights. Benazir Bhutto, who served as Pakistan's prime minister for two partial terms (1988-90 and 1993-1996) did not, however, put forth any legislation to enhance the social benefits provided to



women. She was unable to overturn even one of the Islamization measures passed by Gen. Zia. Due to Gen. Zia's imposition of the eighth constitutional amendments, these measures were shielded from both routine legislative change and judicial examination.

When Nawaz Sharif came into power in 1990, the state's attitude towards women also changed. Nawaz pledged to both educate and empower women workers while also promising to improve the nation's economic situation. Because of his educational background and support of Islam, Nawaz was unable to advance the policies that one might anticipate. Instead, he promised to advance Islamisation programmes, promoting Islam and supporting *Shariat* law etc. Numerous issues for women have arisen under Nawaz Sharif's leadership, including the persistence rise in violence against women. The press reported on incidents of violence against women every day. When elections were announced in 1993, Nawaz government in Pakistan was in trouble and political parties began to make announcements about women's development. However, these parties knew that women understand that none of these parties would prioritise women's empowerment once they gained power but would instead support orthodox Islam.

Gen. Pervez Musharraf's policy towards issues of women was more liberal and bolder, as compared to the earlier governments. Gen. Musharraf took a number of steps towards the active participation of women in all socio-cultural and political spheres of life. Keeping the political participation of women in mind, both at national and local level, various seats were reserved for them in the representative bodies: 33 percent in the national and provincial assemblies reserved for women, which was a bold and remarkable step.

### **Women's Movement in Bangladesh**

The women's movement in Bangladesh is classified as a strategy with its own unique process of formation as a result of its tremendous diversity in regard to its objectives. Different women's rights organisations fought against gender inequality in the social, cultural, political and economic realms long before Bangladesh gained its independence in 1971 and they were successful. However, while people circulated equally among men and women and the organisations inside these sectors are typically more supportive of men, supremacy, wealth and power. Additionally, a growing, all-encompassing backlash against emancipation and fair opportunity for everyone confronts women's rights movements. The movement for women's rights in Bangladesh faces additional difficulties from a number of national and global crises including increasing inequality, natural disaster, and fundamentalism. Harmony and



alliance, together with the many movements in Bangladesh and South Asia, are crucial for advocating for openly now as.

The women's movement in Bangladesh grew during the 1980s and engaged the government on a number of controversial concerns. A particular law on providing deterrence punishment for brutality towards women and the call for the establishment of the family court are among examples. The women's movement was at the forefront of the objection against Eighth amendment of the Constitution in Bangladesh under General Irshad's rule, which stated Islam as the state religion. They created an association headed for the objection against these developments as well as filed a court case and challenged the Eight amendment. Islamisation and violence against women in Bangladesh were the two themes of the women's movement resolve all the way through the decade of the 1990s.

During the movement against the rape of women and girls by police while they were in jail, the use of acid against girls and women, and the trafficking of women, children, and women, Bangladeshi movement players were also at the forefront. The *Nari-e-Shishu Nirjatan Doman Ain* of 1998, which was revised in 2000, is one of the unique laws addressing cruelty towards women and children that were made possible by this women's movement. Concerns about coalition forming around issues like reproductive and health rights were also present in the 1990s. Women's organisations in Bangladesh given that lawful support to women as well pushed in favour of changes also reform of family laws. This was partly encouraged through the Convention of Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Furthermore, to a certain extent through the understanding of the lawful aid organisations so as to try to help women in matters related to divorce, legacy etc. Actors and attorneys from women's movement conducted research, drafted a Uniform Family Code, and had state and local discussion. On the other hand, the draft of Uniform Family Code was resisted by spiritual minority groups; in addition the state was reluctant to improve on religious laws in fear of an Islamist reaction.

During the democratic transition, in the 1990s, and throughout the decade, Bangladesh saw a potential for space along with various discussions amongst feminists and actors in the women's movement about whether the movement should be inclusive or not. These inclusive discussions were held with great care to assess if problems relating to women, as well as various classes, religious minorities, groups, and marginalised populations, are appropriately represented. Additionally, the women's movement was felt through other political changes that made it easier to highlight the friction between various groups.

In Bangladesh, the discussion over the creation of a Uniform Family Code brought to light the legal disparity that existed between who belonged to various spiritual organisations. As an illustration, Hindu



women in Bangladesh do not have the same legal access to divorce as Muslim women. On the other hand, The Uniform Family Code was written with the intention of amending the framework of spiritual individual law. Due to the fact that they frequently oppose their community efforts to defend their religious liberty and preserve distinctiveness within a Muslim majority state, women's rights activist in Bangladesh who belong to religious minority groups find themselves in a tough position. The women's movement leaders disagreed regarding how to treat their family in light of the Fatwa that was issued against Taslima Nasrin (a writer who has critiqued various provisions in the Quran). These actors split up over the writer's carelessness at the same time they resolved to defend the fundamental principles of freedom and support the act of Fatwa against author.

### **Women's Movement in Nepal**

The women's movement in Nepal began in the 1950s together with the wider political move toward democracy. It had at this time included a large section of women as well as a sophisticated programme of gender equality along with communal exclusion. It has also included a sharper study of patriarchy in Nepal, as well as differentiated experiences of women belonging to marginalised communities.

Numerous academics think that Yogmaya Neupane's upsurge in opposition to Rana rule in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century marked the beginning of feminism of Nepal. Yogmaya is a poet and a spiritual leader for Hindu woman who writes poetry critical of the patriarchal caste structure, the sati system, and the authoritarian Rana reign. From Prime Minister Juddha Shumser, she demanded a Dharm Bhiksha, with the intended purpose to stop corruption, gender as well as caste inequity, and a promise of truth. Yogmaya is furthermore supposed to have formed the first women's rights association, the *Nari Samiti* (Women Committee) in 1918. She is thought to have played a vital role in the elimination during 1920 of sati - the custom of Hindu women burning themselves on the funeral pyre among their dead husbands. Yogmaya's attempted individual immolation in objection of inequalities, however her challenge was disrupted through the Rana rule. Although in 1941, Yogmaya and her 67 followers committed mass suicide by jumping into the River in remonstrance.

A woman has been at the forefront of several of Nepal's political movement, still despite the fact that they are frequently not as visible as men. An imprisoned democracy activists along with the emerging democratic movement led by the Nepali congress in India, Rabanti Kumari Acharya organised the *Adarsh Mahila Sangh*. One of the first women rights activists in Nepal, in the mid-1940s Mangla Devi Singh, formed the *Mahila Sangh* and demanded the right to vote. A large number of women marched to sustain the democratic movement in 1950 and were consequently jailed as a result.



The Women's movement becomes to a large extent further energetic demanding right to education, right to property, and right to equality before the law, after democracy comes to Nepal in 1950s. Tara Devi Sharma was active to demand that polygamy be proscribed and ensuring the right to divorce. Sahana Pradhan, Mangla Devi, Hira Devi, and Kamaksha Devi, among others, were active organising women politically even were effective within the social area to encourage women and do away with communal ills.

In the beginning of the 1940s the political parties established struggle not in favour of the dictatorial Rana regime set awake the women's wings furthermore, even though women's contribution within the political parties remained for the most part, their participation in political efforts was noticeable in a significant way. The large conquest of voting rights for women in Nepal was achieved in the 1951, however these women's organisations have as well raised other significant issues such the end of child marriages, freedom for widows to remarry, polygamy and the right to education for girls.

Like all movements, the women's movement in Nepal was severely constrained during the period of party-free panchayats. Many female leaders were merely co-opted through the state-sponsored All Nepal Women's Organization. After the political transition of 1990, the women's movement started to speak in political terms. The wives of powerful politicians and bureaucrats, who predictably represent the upper caste, elite of Nepali society, run practically every woman's wing of the political parties and other state-sponsored women's organisations.

After 1990, the accessibility of foreign financial support led in the direction of the production of NGOs, this outside sustenance became a significant element of women's enlistment. Women's associations were created; with income-generating actions as well as awareness spreading to distant corners of the country. NGO's behaviour furthermore fostered studies and media support for the awakening rights of women in Nepal.

In 1992, marking a landmark for women's rights in Nepal, it ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The international human rights community's increased commitments made it possible to legitimise and broaden the scope of the fight for women's rights. For both state and non-state actors, the 1995 signing of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Achievement was significant. The Beijing Declaration and the ensuring United Nations mechanism for interim evolution of CEDAW have both proven to be important tools for keeping track of the movement's progress and filling its promise to advance women's empowerment.



## Women's Movement in Sri Lanka

The women's movement in Sri Lanka is playing a very important role in the achievement of human rights along with justice. Sri Lanka's women's movement has a long history. Between 1880 and 1910, women participated in the illuminating revitalization. In general, women were more educated and started working, and in the 1920s, the Women's Franchise Union spearheaded the fight for women to have the right to vote, which was secured in 1931. Many organizations, like the Women's Political Union and All Ceylon Women's Conference, fought for the same rights for women the following year. In the early 1920s and 1930s, women were just as active in labour unions. They joined the imperial battle and fought for their basic social and economic rights with one of the communist parties of the day. The *Eksath Kantha Paramuna* (EKP), founded in 1948 and led by women from leftist political groups, was the first independent women's feminist communist organisation.

Women writers and poets raised issues with the purpose of dealing with women's subordination, as well as also challenging patriarchal structures. Women's education extended all along with opening for employment, as well as the coming out of the first women doctors in the 1890s. However, it was during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century - probably too encouraged through suffrages and women's rights in the West and in India - so Sri Lankan women protested for the right to vote, which was obtained in 1931.

In Sri Lanka the women's movement began in the 1930s. Liberal middle class women's groups were active, in the 1940s and 1950s. One of their encouragements was Canadian Dr. Mary Irwin Rutnam, from Toronto, a leading doctor of the time who married a Sri Lankan and came to the Island in 1896. She brought with her a lot of knowledge of the women struggles in Canada, as well as the effort for the suffrage. In 1931, she encouraged the *Lanka Mahila Samiti*, a village women's organisation, which expanded to the entire of Sri Lanka. As a doctor she campaigned for women's and children education, cleanliness, hygiene with child care. There were important social messages beside the caste system and child servants as well as in support of women rights and being energetic in community affairs. Women of left ideologies were too lively on or after the 1930s onward; through in 1948 they formed a small lived socialist organisation with the purpose of independence. The Left party's woman members were active in parliamentary politics from the 1950s onward.

## Conclusion

Women's movements have been entangled with the democratic fight for civil rights at different times and in diverse parts of the South Asian countries. In the modern day, they are seen as the main component in



the battle for human rights. Women's in South Asian countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka face distinctive challenges because they have long been unable to criticise patriarchy. Sexuality and the institution of marriage may be structures of oppression, but in South Asian society, they are considered the norm. From a theological perspective, female sexualities have likewise been subject to strict regulation. South Asian women's silence, embarrassment and hesitation strengthens patriarchy and prevents them from being in charge of their bodies and sexualities.

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