**Women’s movements**

* The Indian women’s movement has its origins in the 19th century when male social reformers began addressing issues related to women and established women’s organizations. Women began forming their own organizations at the local and national levels towards the end of the 19th century. Prior to India’s independence, their primary concerns were political rights and the reform of personal laws.
* Women’s involvement in the struggle for independence expanded the scope of the women’s movement. After India gained independence, numerous independent women’s groups emerged, challenging male dominance and addressing various issues such as violence against women and increased representation in political decision-making. This activism occurred both at the grassroots level and in academic circles.

**Timeline of Women’s Movements in India**

* In contrast to the women’s movement in the Western world, the Indian women’s movement had its beginnings during the period of colonial rule and was closely tied to the struggle for independence from colonial rulers.
* The quest for independence and the fight against colonial rule were closely intertwined with the awareness and activism of the Indian women’s movement. This movement was characterized by a consciousness among women about their role in society, which extended beyond their relationships with men to encompass broader societal concerns.
* During the 19th century, the initial efforts to reform the living conditions of Indian women were primarily led by Western-educated men from the middle and upper classes. Over time, women from their own families joined in these reform efforts.
* Together, both men and women initiated organized movements aimed at challenging oppressive social practices like female infanticide, sati (widow self-immolation), child marriage, and laws that prohibited widow remarriage. These movements sought to bring about positive changes for women in Indian society.
* In the early 20th century, the active involvement of women from middle and high castes and classes played a significant role in the formation of women’s organizations. These organizations focused on advocating for women’s rights and status, with their efforts firmly aligned with the broader goals of the Indian freedom struggle.
* Simultaneously, another dimension of the women’s movement began to take shape. This aspect was influenced by Left-leaning ideologies and found its roots in activities among working-class women.
* Women who embraced Leftist political perspectives were engaged in the labor movement and participated in revolutionary peasant struggles, like the one in Telangana.
* The late 1960s and early 1970s marked a resurgence of the women’s movement in India. This resurgence was influenced by national issues like rising prices and women’s active participation in international movements. The struggle against the state of Emergency in India led to the emergence of new women’s groups that rejected the politics of earlier women’s organizations.
* These new groups initially formed as part of the broader movement for democracy and against gender discrimination. They later evolved into autonomous organizations without explicit party affiliations, although many of their members came from political parties.

Their primary goal was to raise feminist issues within mass organizations such as trade unions or farmers’ associations.

* Additionally, a number of women-only groups were formed, which did not have party affiliations or traditional hierarchical structures and primarily addressed domestic issues like domestic violence.
* During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the women’s movements in India were primarily led by autonomous women’s groups, which were predominantly located in urban areas. However, during the same period, there was also a growing feminist consciousness within some of the rural movements in the country

**Pre-Independence Women’s Movements**

* The Indian women’s movement has its origins in the early 19th century when social reformers like Ram Mohan Roy started addressing issues related to women. These reformers made improving the status of women a primary goal of the broader Indian social reform movement. They highlighted problems such as women’s low social standing, enforced seclusion, early marriages, the plight of widows, and lack of access to education.
* The women’s movement in India is closely connected to both the social reform movements and the struggle for independence from colonial rule.

**Socio-Religious Reform Movements**

**Women’s Organizations Started by Men:**

1. **Brahmo Samaj**:established in 1825 by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the organization aimed to eliminate various restrictions and biases against women. These included practices like child marriage, polygamy, and limited property inheritance rights for women. The organization believed that education was a crucial factor in improving women’s status. Raja Ram Mohan Roy also played a significant role in the abolition of the practice of Sati.
2. **Prarthana Samaj**:Established in 1867 by MG Ranade and RG Bhandarkar, this organization had goals similar to the Brahmo Samaj but operated primarily in western India. Justice Ranade expressed criticism of practices such as child marriage, polygamy, limitations on widow remarriage, and the lack of access to education for women.
3. **Arya Samaj**: Established in 1875 by Dayanand Saraswati, this organization advocated for reforms in the caste system, mandatory education for both men and women, legal prohibition of child marriage, and the remarriage of child widows.
4. Social reformers such as **Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar**, **Jyotirao Phule**, and **Lokhitwadi Gopal Hari Deshmukh** played significant roles in promoting women’s education and encouraging widow remarriage.
5. **Syed Ahmad Khan** and **Sheikh Abdullah** in Aligarh, as well as **Karmat Hussain** in Lucknow, led movements to enhance women’s education.
6. Visionaries like **Dadabhai Naroji**, **K.R. Cama**, and others led efforts to improve the status of Parsi women by abolishing the purdah system, increasing the marriage age, and promoting education.
	* The organizations led by men played a valuable role in educating women and introducing them to public work. However, they did not prioritize gender equality as an agenda in any of the movements mentioned earlier. Their focus was primarily on changing women’s roles within the family through education.

**Women’s Organization Started by Women**

Towards the end of the 19th century, some women from reformed families began to establish their own organizations.

1. One of the early pioneers in this regard was **Swarnakumari Devi**, the daughter of **Devendranath Tagore**, a Brahmo leader, and the sister of the renowned poet Rabindranath Tagore. In 1882, she established the **Ladies Society in Calcutta** with the aim of providing education and vocational skills to widows and underprivileged women, enabling them to achieve economic self-reliance. Swarnakumari Devi also served as the editor of a women’s journal called **“Bharati,**” making her the first Indian woman to hold such a position.
2. In 1882, **Ramabai Saraswati** established the **Arya Mahila Samaj** in Pune. She also initiated the **Sharda Sadan** in Bombay a few years later.
3. In 1910, **Sarala Devi Chaudhurani**, the daughter of Swarnakumari Devi, established the **Bharat Stree Mandal** (Great Circle of India Women). Its aim was to unite women from all castes, creeds, classes, and parties based on their shared interest in the moral and material progress of Indian women.

**National Freedom Movement**

* During the time when women’s organizations were working to secure women’s political and economic rights and improve their status through education and social reforms, a new phase of the women’s struggle began with the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian politics.
* Women had been involved in the freedom struggle even before this. In 1887, the National Conference was established during the third session of the Indian National Congress to provide a platform for discussing social issues.
* The Bharat Mahila Parishad was the women’s wing of this conference and was founded in 1905. It focused on issues like child marriage, th
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* It focused on issues like child marriage, the condition of widows, dowry, and other harmful customs. These women had also attended Indian National Congress sessions and participated in movements like the Swadeshi movement in Bengal from 1905 to 1911 and the Home Rule Movement.
* Women’s active participation in the national movement played a significant role in breaking down traditional barriers and customs. Women’s organizations also raised their voices against the social injustices they faced.
* As a result, the **Indian National Congress** passed a resolution on the fundamental right of equal rights for both men and women at its **Karachi session** in 1930.