



WOMEN MOVEMENTS IN POST INDEPENDENT ERA IN ANDHRA PRADESH

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolution and impact of women's movements in Andhra Pradesh during the post-independence era, tracing their trajectory from the early years of nation-building to the contemporary period. Building upon a strong foundation of pre-independence social reform and participation in the nationalist struggle, the post-1947 period witnessed a significant diversification and radicalization of women's activism. A key phase was the integration of women's issues with left-wing and communist movements, exemplified by the Andhra Rashtra Mahila Sangham, which broadened the base of the movement beyond urban elites. The paper analyses how the 1970s and 1980s marked a pivotal shift with the emergence of autonomous women's groups (AWGs) that foregrounded feminist perspectives, challenging both patriarchal structures and the ideology of party-affiliated women's fronts. This period brought private concerns like dowry, domestic violence, and alcoholism into the public sphere, culminating in significant mass movements such as the anti-arrack agitation of the early 1990s. The study also explores the role of state-led initiatives, particularly the large-scale mobilization of women through Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in the 1990s, which, while creating economic opportunities, also depoliticized collective action in some ways.

Keywords: Anti dowry Movements, Gender discrimination, Women organisations, Mahila Mandals, Self help groups,

Introduction

Social movements can be classified into women's movements, dalit movements, tribal movements, agrarian and farmers' movements, regional identity movements, and human rights movements etc. on the basis of the socio-economic characteristics of the participants and the issues involved. All these movements are aimed at acquiring due spaces for different sections of populations and regions. Social movements may sometimes determine public policy. The state of Andhra Pradesh has a distinct place in the history of social movements in India. The state has witnessed many social movements involving marginalized and disadvantaged groups and regions, these movements have expanded social and political spaces of the women. Andhra Pradesh is the only state with a vibrant women's self help group movement. The presence of a strong women's movement probably provided a base for this.

Objectives of the study

- To understand the promote the gender equality and eliminate discrimination towards women
- To study the campaign against alcoholism, particularly through the anti-arrack movement
- To ensure economic empowerment through employment, self-help-groups and skill development
- To analyze the eradication of social evils such as dowry, child marriage and domestic violence

Methodology

Data collection both primary and secondary sources from various libraries and Archives

Data interpretation

Women Movements in Post independent Andhra Pradesh

The roots of the women movements in Andhra Pradesh dates back to the nineteenth century. In Andhra Pradesh women in early 50s joined struggles for the rural poor such as the Telangana movement. Women played an important role



in the Telangana struggle. They actively participated in the land movement, in agricultural labour wage struggles, in seizure of landlords' grain etc. They acted as couriers, as political agitators, and in new centre's as organizers of people's movements and mass organizations.

They had to face molestation and rape, apart from beatings on a large scale. The story of their heroic and stubborn resistance in defence of their personal dignity, against molestation, torture and rape, is an inspiring one.

The transition of the economy in rural areas from semi-feudal to capitalist relations from the 1960s has created a need for the poor in general and rural women belonging to landless agricultural labour and poor peasant households in particular to participate in women movements. During the 1970s the left parties organized agricultural labour, peasants and women on class lines. Higher wages for agricultural labour, access to land, and protection against famines were the issues focused upon. The extreme left parties were more sensitive than the Left parties to issues of caste and gender oppression although they too worked within the party rather than in separate women's organizations in the early 1970s.¹

The women of Andhra Pradesh joined the Naxalite Movement also. Naxalite movement had its presence in many states like Andhra Pradesh and it was found that CPIM (Maoist) has a significant cadre of women from Andhra Pradesh. The women cadre of CPIM (Maoist) from Andhra Pradesh participated in the Naxal operations at AOB, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar and Bengal (Red Corridor). In the Naxalite movement, women have played various roles as couriers, combatants, peace builders, activists and politicians.²

The mid-1970s autonomous women's groups (AWG) were brought in to light. These groups claimed to focus more sharply on gender and feminist issues, it was increasingly realized that women's movements needed to be organized from a feminist perspective with autonomy of organization, some of the earliest autonomous women's groups were the Progressive Organization of Women (POW, Hyderabad), The POW in Hyderabad organized new and fresh protests against dowry.³

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed increased violence on women. In the pre-emergency period (early 1970s) the Progressive Organization for Women (POW) emerged and brought to the fore problems and issues of middle class women. The movement organized middle class women on social and cultural issues like dowry, alcoholism, relief from the double burden of housework and outside work and economic issues like equal pay and the right to work. All the major political parties, the Congress, BJP, CPI, and CPI (M) in Andhra Pradesh have their Women's wings, their political commitment is more leftist than Liberal.

From the mid-1990s the strategy of women's organizations shifted to a 'Joint Action Committee' as an issue-based expression of solidarity, having their individual identities. In Andhra Pradesh, India, an anti-arrack movement in the 1990s was created which grew out of the awareness brought about by the mass-literacy campaigns of the National Literacy Mission (NLC). It began as a spontaneous movement against alcoholism in a remote village in Dubaganta, supported by the NLC in Nellore and adopted by the other districts of Andhra Pradesh. It is noted that there was no organized leadership to start within the anti-arrack movement. Most of the groundwork was done with local initiative, with women collectively protesting against arrack in their villages. With the movement gathering momentum, political parties entered at the very last stage. Eventually, the movement resulted in the declaration of total prohibition of liquor in India. In addition, it provided a change in the party in power in the state. It also showed a feminist way of looking at issues, especially politics, thus aligning women's issues to the larger issues of state and society.⁴

However, as a result of the deeply rooted problem of alcoholism and its political dynamics the agitation could not be sustained for long. Issues of such nature need a broad based movement though sporadic agitations against arrack by women still continue. The Women's movement in the state has created a political space for itself, and generated political consciousness and an understanding of political processes among women.

By the nineties the state had effectively taken over the women's movement by mobilizing them around thrift issues. In the context of globalization, the state treats women as a homogenous group to address any action or programme for women. The creation of women's self-help groups on a mass scale seems to nurture depoliticized collective action that is



not threatening the power structure and political order. On the other hand there is a shift within the women's movement from the 'one women's movement' of the late 1970s to 'several women's movements' from various perspectives of regional, local, caste, ethnic and minority specific issues.

In 2000, with World Bank support, the government of Andhra Pradesh expanded the program as thrift based program where women could make small savings, revolve their own resources, and meet their families' critical consumption and food needs. The program has since evolved into a movement for the all-round empowerment of poor women-social, legal political, and economic promotes women's social, economic, legal and political empowerment to reduce poverty among the poor and the poorest of the poor.⁵

Self Help Group Movements in Andhra Pradesh

The World Bank-supported initiative has significantly expanded the Self-Help Group (SHG) movement across all 22 districts of Andhra Pradesh. These women's groups conduct regular weekly meetings, maintain savings and loan repayment practices, and employ trained bookkeepers to ensure proper financial management. SHG members collectively uphold social principles such as opposing child marriage, child labour, domestic violence, and unnecessary expenditures.

The groups have also brought about changes in women's decision-making power within families. Women actively discuss issues related to family planning, including the number of children they wish to have and appropriate spacing between births, demonstrating increased reproductive autonomy. In addition, they address critical social concerns such as domestic violence, human trafficking, and the exploitation of women through the Jogini system.⁶

Women's SHGs have played an important role in preventing child marriages and reducing child labour. They create safe spaces to discuss sensitive topics like gender-based violence, identify victims, and support them in rebuilding their lives through livelihood opportunities. These efforts toward social empowerment have laid a strong foundation for the economic empowerment of women.

The programme has also strengthened women's leadership and organizational skills, enabling them to engage with market institutions and access various financial services. Many grassroots women leaders who emerged through SHGs have entered public life by contesting local government elections. As a result, around 9,500 women from SHGs and their federations have been elected to different levels of local governance.

Impact on Violence against Women

Over the past decade, women's movements in Andhra Pradesh have achieved notable progress in addressing issues such as domestic violence, harassment by in-laws, crimes against women, eve-teasing, trafficking of women and children, child labor, the protection of girl children, and the eradication of the *Jogini* system. Several incidents, including the Sri Lakshmi murder case in Guntur, the rape and death of Ayesha in Tenali, and the murder of a Dalit woman in Tenali while protecting her daughter from eve-teasers, drew widespread public attention. In the latter case, the offenders were prosecuted under the Nirbhaya Act for the first time in Andhra Pradesh, marking an important step in strengthening legal action against gender-based violence.⁷

Initiatives for Women Empowerment in Andhra Pradesh

Empowerment of women is the hall mark of the approach of the Government in its development initiatives (social, political and economic). The State Empowerment Policy for women aims at the following objectives:-

- Gender equality
- Gender justice
- Social security
- Elimination of discrimination against women in all walks of life
- Economic development and integration of women into main stream of economy.



As a token of state's commitment to remove all barriers in the way of women's participation in the main stream of development, the State Government declared 1997 as the year of Gender Equality with Social Justice'. Steps have been taken to provide specific provisions for women towards equality in all fields, political, social, economic and cultural.

The Department is playing a conscious role in empowering of women by striving to enforce:

- Empowering women and promoting the welfare of girls and children. One of the significant measures is the reservation of one-third (33.3%) of jobs in government and public sector organizations for women, along with a carry-forward policy to ensure that unfilled positions are reserved for future recruitment.
- To support women's development, one-third of the budget allocated to all government departments is earmarked for programmes that directly benefit women.
- The state has also implemented the Girl Child Protection Scheme to safeguard and improve the well-being of girls.
- Women are encouraged to participate in development activities through mothers' committees and Income Generating Activity (IGA) groups, enabling them to contribute actively to community development and decision-making processes.
- The year 2001 was observed as the 'Year of Women Empowerment,' while 2003 was dedicated as the 'Year of Adolescent Girls' to highlight issues related to young women's development.
- In local body elections, 50 percent of seats are reserved for women, ensuring greater political participation and representation. The State Mahila Commission was established to protect women's rights and address issues affecting their welfare.
- In 2013, the Government of Andhra Pradesh launched the Bangaru Talli Programme, which was given legal recognition to promote the overall development of the girl child through educational, health, and welfare support.

Additionally, the Andhra Pradesh government has adopted an integrated approach by coordinating programmes across various departments to enhance healthcare, nutrition, water supply, and sanitation services for women and children. The state's emphasis on inter-departmental collaboration to improve the health and nutritional status of women and children has gained recognition at the national level and has also attracted the attention of the Central Government.⁸

The Status of Women in Andhra Pradesh

Compared with the national average, women in Andhra Pradesh have shown higher participation in the workforce, lower unemployment rates, and a greater presence in non-agricultural wage employment. The gap between male and female workforce participation is also relatively smaller in the state. These indicators suggest that women in Andhra Pradesh have a stronger role in the state's economy, even though policies supporting women's land ownership were introduced only in recent years. Overall, women in the state occupy a comparatively more influential position within social and economic structures than women in many other parts of India.

Studies have also shown that women in Andhra Pradesh enjoy greater autonomy in household decision-making and experience comparatively lower levels of domestic violence than the national average. Their active involvement in government-sponsored wage employment and self-employment programmes further demonstrates their stronger engagement with state institutions and development initiatives.⁹

At the same time, Andhra Pradesh has recorded one of the highest rates of cognizable crimes against women among Indian states. This situation may partly reflect the social tensions that arise when traditional patriarchal norms are challenged by women's increasing participation in public and private spheres. As women gain greater visibility and assert their rights, conflicts with entrenched gender attitudes can become more pronounced.

Women's movements in Andhra Pradesh have significantly expanded opportunities and spaces for women in economic, social, political, and household domains. Compared to the national scenario, women in the state have achieved



higher levels of participation and autonomy, although challenges related to gender-based violence continue to demand attention.

Conclusion

The women's movements in post-independence Andhra Pradesh played a significant role in promoting gender equality, social justice, and women's empowerment. Through campaigns against dowry, domestic violence, and alcoholism especially the Anti-Arrack Movement and by strengthening self-help groups and encouraging political participation, women became active agents of social change. These movements improved women's awareness of their rights, increased their economic and social status, and contributed to the state's overall development, although challenges such as gender discrimination and violence continue to require sustained efforts.

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