
UNIT 2 EMPOWERMENT, EMANCIPATION AND POLICIES IN INDIA

Contents

- 2.1 Introduction
 - 2.2 What is the Meaning of the Term ‘Emancipation’? Understanding its Meaning and Relevance in the History of Women’s Struggles in India
 - 2.3 What is ‘Empowerment’? Examining the Concept and its Origins
 - 2.4 Tracing the Trajectory of ‘Empowerment’! Engaging with Women, Public Policy and Development in the Context of the State-women’s Movement Relationship, and Five Year Plans in India
 - 2.5 Is Public Policy Sufficiently Engendered? Case Study of Towards Equality (1974) and Mahila Samakhya
 - 2.6 Unraveling the Politics of Women’s Empowerment
 - 2.7 Summary
- References
Suggested Reading
Sample Questions

Learning Objectives



After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- explain the meanings of the terms ‘empowerment’ and ‘emancipation’;
- trace the struggles for emancipation and empowerment, especially in the context of the state and women’s movement in India;
- assess whether and how public policies have contributed to women’s empowerment;
- unpack the politics and discourses of women’s empowerment and
- understand feminist approaches to gender and development.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The terms ‘emancipation’ and ‘empowerment’ are both used when referring to women’s movements, gender and development. However, these terms have different meanings and are associated with specific periods in the women’s movement and approaches to gender and development. We shall first take a look at the term ‘emancipation’, and engage with its meaning and relevance in the history of social reform movements and nationalist struggle for freedom from colonial rule in India. We shall then turn our attention to the concept of ‘empowerment’, examine its linkages with power, and theoretically locate its origins. Further, we shall attempt to trace the trajectory of the concept in India, with particular attention to the state-women’s movement relationship and the Five Year Plans. With the aim of delving deeper into whether and how public policy is sufficiently engendered, we shall take a closer look at the making of

Towards Equality (1974) and the country-wide state-sponsored women's education and empowerment programme, Mahila Samakhya. Last but not least, we shall unravel different facets of women's empowerment in conjunction with the politics of NGO expansion, projects and funding in the context of post-liberalisation India.

2.2 WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE TERM 'EMANCIPATION'? UNDERSTANDING ITS MEANING AND RELEVANCE IN THE HISTORY OF WOMEN'S STRUGGLES IN INDIA

'Emancipation' refers to liberation from oppression or bondage of any kind. When used in conjunction with women, it can also be taken to mean escape from narrow gender roles into which women get typecast and which perpetuate gender-based inequalities. The period of 19th and 20th centuries is often referred to as one of social, sexual, economic, political and legal emancipation of women in not only India but also the West. Below are a few instances of key actors who made efforts towards women's emancipation in pre-independent India:

Raja Ram Mohan Roy is regarded as the 'maker of modern India'. He founded one of the first socio-religious reform movements in India, namely, the Brahmo Samaj. He campaigned for the rights of women, in particular, for women's rights to property and education, and against polygamy and sati. His efforts are said to have borne fruit when in 1929, sati was legally abolished (Sarkar and Sarkar 2008).

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar championed the cause of women within mainstream Hindu society. He opened a number of schools for girls' education in Bengal. His writings and activities are said to have helped create public opinion in favour of legalising widow remarriage and abolishing polygamy, which in turn led to the passage of the Hindu Widows Remarriage Act of 1856 and the Civil Marriage Act of 1872 (Basu n.d.).

Pandita Ramabai was amongst the few female leaders of the movement for women's emancipation. She advocated for women's education and shed light on the plight of child brides and child widows. She founded Arya Mahila Sabha, which is known as the first feminist organisation in India. She set up Mukti Mission for young widows, and Krupa Sadan and Sharda Sadan for destitute women (Kosambi 1988).

Sarala Devi Chaudhurani formed Bharat Stree Mandal (The Great Circle of India Women) with the aim of bringing together women of all castes and classes to promote women's education. She is remembered for her speeches at the Indian National Congress meetings in favour of women's right to vote. She was involved in not only petitioning the government to give women the right to vote but also in bringing about changes in laws pertaining to marriage, divorce and property rights (Basu n.d.).

These and other such actors were primarily concerned with issues such as purdah, sati, education, age of marriage, polygamy and widow remarriage, which affected Hindu upper caste, middle class, urban women. While they encouraged women to come out of their homes and work for the nation, there was no questioning of traditional gender roles of mother and wife that women were expected to conform to. They contended that women's uplift was crucial as women were the mothers of future generations. The state was expected to play a paternalistic role by 'protecting' women and women's interests.

In comparison to the 19th century social reform movement, the 20th century nationalist movement somewhat widened its ambit; the latter brought into its fold poor, illiterate, rural and urban women too, not only engaging in social and legal reform but also campaigning for women's political and economic rights and encouraging participation in the struggle for freedom from colonial domination. While the social reform movement had been predominantly led by male leaders, women leaders and women's organisations began to emerge later on (Basu n.d.; Sarkar and Sarkar 2008). Several women's movement scholars regard the period of emancipation of women as the beginnings of the women's movement in India (Kumar 1993; Sen 2002). We shall delve into important aspects of the contemporary women's movement in section 2.4 of this unit.

2.3 WHAT IS 'EMPOWERMENT'? EXAMINING THE CONCEPT AND ITS ORIGINS

What is central to the idea of empowerment is 'power'. Power operates at various levels such as the family, the household and other social structures. Power operates in the following different ways as:

- *power over*: This power involves an either/or relationship of domination/subordination. Ultimately, it is based on socially sanctioned threats of violence and intimidation, it requires constant vigilance to maintain, and it invites active and passive resistance;
- *power to*: This power relates to having decision-making authority, power to solve problems and can be creative and enabling;
- *power with*: This power involves people organising with a common purpose or common understanding to achieve collective goals;
- *power within*: This power refers to self confidence, self awareness and assertiveness. It relates to how individuals can recognise through analysing their experience how power operates in their lives, and gain the confidence to act to influence and change this (Williams et al. 1994 as cited in Oxaal and Baden 1997).

Apart from 'power', the notion of empowerment is constructed around a cluster of other recurring concepts: choice, agency, achievements, women's interests, gender, participation, and rights-based approaches.¹ The term 'empowerment' has been used by various actors across the ideological spectrum, including individuals, international development institutions, state actors and policy-makers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and women's movements. Below are a few instances of how different actors interpret 'empowerment' differently (Oxaal and Baden 1997):

Empowerment is about participation. Development must be by people, not only for them. People must participate fully in the decisions and processes that shape their lives... Investing in women's capabilities and empowering them to exercise their choices is not only valuable in itself but is also the surest way to contribute to economic growth and overall development (**UN Human Development Report, 1995**).

Empowerment is about challenging oppression and inequality. Empowerment involves challenging the forms of oppression which compel millions of people to play a part in their society on terms which are inequitable, or in ways which deny their human rights (**Oxfam, 1995**).

Empowerment is a transformative process that challenges not only patriarchy but also the structures of class, race, religion and ethnicity, which determine the condition of women and men in society (**Batliwala 1994; Kabeer 1994**).

Empowerment has its origins in Socialist feminist discourse and Third World organisations like Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN).

DAWN is a network of Southern activists, researchers and policymakers (e.g. by Moser, 1989), founded in the mid-1980s. The empowerment of poor and marginalised women is central to DAWN's vision of development. It envisages empowerment as being a collective rather than individual process. It has sought to link micro-level activities, i.e. grassroots and community level initiatives to a macro-level perspective.

Empowerment is essentially a bottom-up process rather than something that can be formulated as a top-down strategy. This means women must empower themselves; empowerment is not something that can be done to or for women. The feminist slogan "the personal is the political" roots the process of empowerment in an expansion of women's consciousness. When women recognise their 'power within' and act together with other women to exercise 'power with', they gain 'power to' act as agents (Cornwall 2007).

Over the years, the term empowerment has risen in popularity. The reasons for this are the changing role of the state and planning; and donor governments, multilateral funding agencies and international development institutions embracing NGOs as partners in development. UN conferences too have successively advocated women's empowerment as being central to the project of development. Significant in this regard was the UN World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. The Conference Report called its Platform for Action 'an agenda for women's empowerment' (UN 1995). The World Bank, the UK Department for International Development (DFID), USAID, Oxfam, and other bilateral and private donors have all embraced the concept. It is argued that northern development institutions and aid agencies find the concept of empowerment appealing. After all, the concept originated in the South, and espousal of the concept would ensure that they are not accused of cultural imperialism.

2.4 TRACING THE TRAJECTORY OF 'EMPOWERMENT': ENGAGING WITH WOMEN, PUBLIC POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF THE STATE-WOMEN'S MOVEMENT RELATIONSHIP, AND FIVE YEAR PLANS IN INDIA

'From at least the 19th century, the role of the state in defining and influencing the status of women has informed the many struggles for women's equality. The state, its policies and programmes continue to be the focus of much of the energies of the women's movement in post-independent India as well... The relationship with the state has been fraught with conflicting emotions - fears of co-option, subversion of the feminist agenda, of becoming reformist rather than enabling radical social change. The dilemmas of this interaction have not, however, prevented an interaction with the state. What has varied is the nature of issues and the degree of involvement... This engagement involved lobbying, pressurising and highlighting women's issues/ contributions to inform policy formulation... and challenge state policy. There were [also some] examples of a direct involvement with the government and its development programmes... Despite fear of co-option by the state, a few women both as individuals and in groups decided to participate in government-sponsored programmes as a means to mainstream the gender question. ... The Women's Development Programme (WDP) in Rajasthan launched in the early 1980s and the subsequent Mahila Samakhya programme launched towards the end of the 7th Plan period [in the late 1980s] demonstrated that spaces were available even within the formal state structures to try and bring about change from within...' (Jandhyala 2001).

The first two decades after Independence were a period when the women's movement considered the state its ally. The postcolonial Indian state defined itself as the primary vehicle for social transformation. It was, in fact, strikingly innovative in creating institutions to guarantee development for all (Frankel 1978; Kohli 1990; Kothari 1970). With respect to women's development, in particular, the Central Social Welfare Board was set up at the national level in 1953. Similar Boards were set up at the level of the states too whose responsibilities included provision of counselling, legal services and short-stay shelter homes for women (Gopalan 2002). The boards and the constitutional guarantee of women's rights satisfied many women who had participated in the social reform and nationalist movements in pre-Independence India. Regarding the state as a key instrument, they laid emphasis on seeking solutions from the state through the passage of 'progressive' legislations (Sen 2002; Jandhyala 2001) and not surprisingly shared a welfarist approach with the government.

By the 1970s emerged a generation of women who criticised the approach to women's development and to the place accorded to women in state-led development processes (Desai and Krishnaraj 1987). These were mostly educated, urban, middle class women, strongly influenced by either the Left or by Gandhian

movements. They questioned the supplementary place allotted to women in the Community Development Programmes of the 1950s and '60s, 'which involved training women in the skills of "family management" and "home economics"' (John 2001: 109). According to them, such programmes failed to challenge traditional gender roles. Their critique was bolstered by the publication of the *Towards Equality* Report in 1974 that discussed the condition and status of women in India. Commissioned by the Indian government, the report was intended for the 1975 United Nations International Women's Year World Conference. It documented the widening of gender inequalities in employment, health, education and political participation since Independence.

Such critique formed part of a general dissatisfaction with the developmental state. It was felt that the state had failed to deliver the promise it had made about social transformation and elimination of poverty. Accounts of these years have rightly seen them as a period of crisis for the Indian state, the clearest indication of which was perhaps the rise of a range of social movements. Rural and urban women, especially from the poorer sections of the society, got organised in affiliation with or as part of social movements of peasants, workers, and tribals (Desai 2002; Sen 1990). In 1975, the Congress government declared a state of emergency. Consequently, from 1975 to 1977, women's organisations, along with other political organisations, were driven underground. The suspension of fundamental freedoms and the lack of governmental transparency during this period led to a deep suspicion of the state among women's activists. Scholars (Gandhi and Shah 1991; John 1996; Menon 1999) identify the declaration of Emergency as marking the end of an era in women's and social movements' activism.

Post-Emergency, there was a realisation that the women's movement's explicit commitment to gender issues had taken a backseat to class issues in not only state policy but also in the social movements and party organisations that they had been a part of. As a result, autonomous women's groups, sans party affiliations and hierarchical organisational structures, were formed in towns and cities. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, these groups organised and led public consciousness-raising campaigns around issues of violence against women (Desai 2002; Kumar 1993). These campaigns specifically addressed the issues of dowry and (custodial) rape. Within months, the Union government passed new laws on dowry, rape and domestic violence; introduced new policy measures, including the creation of national and state-level programmes and resources for addressing violence, a ministry of women and child welfare, and support groups within the criminal justice system to help abused women (Jandhyala 2001). The government hoped that these laws and policy measures would go some way towards satisfying the movement's expectations that it knew it was increasingly unable to meet. Women's movement activists had a mixed response to the steps taken by the government. Some activists felt these steps reflected the success of agitations in getting the state to take cognisance of the movement's demands; they were now prepared to work with state structures to influence policy and legislation. Others considered the laws to be dubiously progressive. There were also those who felt that the new laws and policy measures would only contribute to increase in state control to the detriment of the people's freedoms (Menon 2004).

An increase in emphasis on 'gender' in the international development agenda too affected the state-movement relationship. Proponents of the Gender and

Development framework, led by Third World women's groups, campaigned to make grassroots 'empowerment' the favoured strategy for undoing social inequalities and for enabling development globally (Kabeer 1994). Autonomous women's groups turned NGOs were the chosen vehicles for implementing the strategy in Third World countries (Chaudhuri 2004). India was no exception to this trend. The international focus on women's and gender issues, indeed, played an important role in the Indian state taking up these issues through policy and legislative measures. The United Nations' declaration of 1975-1985 as the International Women's decade was significant in this regard. 'As a member country, India was required to report its efforts in working towards women's equality and [in creating] what the UN called "national policy machinery for the advancement of women"' (Desai 2002: 74).

The basic assumption that development processes impact men and women in the same way had begun to be questioned. There was a gradual recognition that the overall goal of development of a country cannot be achieved unless women's status and condition, and women's involvement in development processes are not taken into account. In the Sixth Five Year Plan (1975-80), a whole chapter was devoted to women and to resources to be allocated for women's issues. The Plan recognised women's role in national development as partners/contributors rather than recipients/beneficiaries (Lingam 2002). Post-Emergency, the Janata party government promoted rural-based NGO efforts by setting up semi-governmental bodies such as the Council for the Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology (CAPART). By the mid-1980s, the Congress government had begun to make funding available to NGOs. In 1985, the government set up an exclusive Department of Women and Child Development under the Ministry of Human Resource and Development. In 1986, the National Policy on Education directed that education be used as 'an agent of basic change in the status of women' (GOI 1992). In 1989, the Development for Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA), a pilot project was extended across the country.

In fact, women's NGOs had expanded dramatically in the Indian subcontinent after the 1975 declaration of the United Nations' International Decade for Women. By the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90), the government had (at least on paper) embraced the idea of NGOs as the 'third sector', complementing government agencies and private businesses (Purushothaman 1998). The 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing gave a further fillip to this strategy, which was subsequently picked up by women's movement organisations. Some developed partnerships with the state to expand their outreach. Others started accepting direct and indirect funding from bilateral donors, international NGOs and development institutions. Several women's movement activists and organisations felt that attempts to 'engender' the state needed to go beyond simply advocating for policy change to opening up spaces for women themselves to actively engage with officials of different state agencies and branches in restructuring state policies, programmes and practices. The collaboration with the state was seen as a means to expand reach to marginalised women on a scale that women's groups by themselves could never achieve (Jandhyala 2001). The Women's Development Programme of Rajasthan (WDP) and Mahila Samakhya (MS) are examples of joint initiatives of the women's movement and the state.

WDP, set up in 1984, was a result of collaboration between state and central governments, local voluntary organisations, and the women’s studies wing of the Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur. It functioned with considerable autonomy in the initial years. It mobilised rural women to perform leadership roles in the community, especially as volunteer sathins (helpers) in development projects. It refused state-defined priorities like family planning and engaged instead in various consciousness-raising activities around employment and wages, political participation, challenge of child marriage customs, and promotion of education (Sunder Rajan 2003; Jandhyala 2001).

In the following section, we delve deeper into the making of *Towards Equality* (1974) and the aforementioned joint initiatives, especially Mahila Samakhya, to closely examine whether and how attempts have been made to sufficiently engender public policy in India. But before we do so, below is a snapshot view of the shifts in perception regarding the attention paid to women and gender-related concerns in India’s Five Year Plans (Patel 2004):

Plan	Activity	Approach
First Plan (1951-56)	Set up the Central Social Welfare Board	Welfare work through voluntary organizations and charitable trusts
Second Plan (1956-61)	Supported the development of Mahila Mandals at the grassroots	Rural development
Third, Fourth and Interim Plans (1961-74)	Provisions for women’s education, pre-natal and child health services, supplementary feeding for children, nursing and expectant mothers	Women as “targets” of family planning and social sector “beneficiaries”
Fifth Plan (1974-78)	Programmes and schemes for women in development	Shift in the approach from welfare to development
Sixth Plan (1980-85)	Separate chapter for women in the Plan	Accepted women’s development as a separate agenda; took a multidisciplinary approach with a three-pronged thrust on health, education and employment
Seventh Plan (1985-90)	Working group for employment of women; statistics on women: quota for women in development schemes	Bringing women into the mainstream of national development
Eighth Plan (1992-97)	The core sectors of education, health and employment outlay for women rose from Rs. 4 crores in the first plan to Rs. 2,000 crores in the eighth	Paradigm shift from development to empowerment and benefits to women
Ninth Plan (1997-2002)	Concept of a women’s component plan to assure that at least 30% of fund benefits from all sectors flow to women	Empowerment of women as its strategic objective
Tenth Plan (2002-2007)	Self-help groups	Suggests specific strategies, policies and programmes for the empowerment of women

2.5 IS PUBLIC POLICY SUFFICIENTLY ENGENDERED? CASE STUDY OF *TOWARDS EQUALITY (1974) AND MAHILA SAMAKHYA*

The Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) was constituted by a resolution of the ministry of education and social welfare, Government of India on 22 September 1971 with Phulrenu Guha, then Union Minister of Social Welfare as chairperson. The Committee was set up to review the changes in Indian women's status that were expected to result from constitutional equality, government policies and social reform since Independence. Vina Mazumdar critically reflects on the review exercise. She observes that the entire emphasis was on social status, education and employment, to the exclusion of the political; the focus was on rural areas rather than urban; the Committee was only asked to find out the reasons for the slow progress of women's education but it also looked into the content and method of education; while the terms of reference asked that the implications of discrimination in employment and remuneration, and population and family planning programmes on women's status be studied, it omitted health. To quote Mazumdar, 'How are we going to define status? Status means different things in different contexts... [The] drafting committee was to draw up and put before us an approach. The committee imposed a self-denying ordinance on itself: not to be influenced by any other country reports or any feminist literature and philosophy... We also refused to reopen the equality debate, despite Naik sahib's suggestion that we look into questions such as: Does equality mean identity or similarity? Does it mean that women do all the things that men do? After all, men cannot do all the things that women do. We refused to reopen this debate because we adopted a very firm position on the Constitution... as a deliberate departure from the inherited social, economic and political systems... How did we interpret inequality? We related it first to the variety of social, economic and cultural inequalities inherent in our traditional social structure, making specific references to caste, class and community. Second, we related it to the increasing forces of disparity through structural changes in the economy... We referred to the urban, middle class bias of planners and social scientists and identified the state, intelligentsia, in general, and the educators in particular, for their blindness and indifference to the declining conditions of the majority of women... But we failed to see that our rejection of the modernization process as an unmixed blessing was also a critique of the dominant development paradigm' (2008: 30-31).

We now turn to the Mahila Samakhya programme, whose guiding philosophy carries the imprint of the CSWI report. Mahila Samakhya was inspired by the vision and methods of WDP, and was the first state-sponsored, national-level programme for rural women's empowerment. It was initiated in 1989 by the Department of Education, Government of India with joint funding from the Dutch government under the banner of 'Education for Women's Equality'. It aimed at actualising the 1986 National Policy on Education (NPE) through the Programme of Action. Below are relevant excerpts from the same:

EDUCATION FOR WOMEN'S EQUALITY

4.2 Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of woman. In order to neutralise the accumulated distortions of the past, there will be a well-conceived edge in favour of women. The National Education System will play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women. It will foster the development of new values through redesigned curricula, textbooks, the training and orientation of teachers, decision-makers and administrators, and the active involvement of educational institutions. This will be an act of faith and social engineering. Women's studies will be promoted as a part of various courses and educational institutions encouraged to take up active programmes to further women's development.

4.3 The removal of women's illiteracy and obstacles inhibiting their access to, and retention in, elementary education will receive overriding priority, through provision of special support services, setting of time targets, and effective monitoring. Major emphasis will be laid on women's participation in vocational, technical and professional education at different levels. The policy of non-discrimination will be pursued vigorously to eliminate sex stereo-typing in vocational and professional courses and to promote women's participation in non-traditional occupations, as well as in existing and emergent technologies (NPE 1986).

1.1.1 Education for Women's Equality is a vital component of the overall strategy of securing equity and social justice in education. Paras 4.2 and 4.3 of the National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986 are very strong and forthright statements on the intervening and empowering role of education. *Inter alia*, they emphasize the provision of special support services and removal of factors which result in discrimination against women at all levels of education. The POA clearly spells out the actions which need to be taken to promote education for women's equality; it can hardly be improved upon. What is sought to be done is to modify the contents of the POA wherever appropriate. What comes out clearly is the need for will to implement and institutional mechanisms to ensure that gender sensitivity is reflected in the implementation of educational programmes across the board. Education for Women's Equality is too important to be left to the individual commitments or proclivities of persons in charge of implementing programmes. It should be incumbent on all actors, agencies and institutions in the field of education at all levels to be gender sensitive and ensure that women have their rightful share in all educational programmes and activities (Programme of Action 1992).

Mahila Samakhya started as a pilot project in 10 districts in Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Karnataka. Mahila Samakhya currently operates in over 30,000 villages in 9 Indian states: Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Uttaranchal and Jharkhand. The programme is considered as an innovative one not only because of its focus on grassroots women's 'empowerment' but also because of its hybrid government-organised NGO (GONGO) form. This form is aimed at merging the benefits of small NGOs with large-scale government development programmes (Sharma 2006). Women's movement activists and organisations and civil servants have played a crucial role in Mahila Samakhya from the time of its conception.

Activity

Carefully read the text below (Jandhyala n.d.) on the Mahila Samakhya programme and answer the questions that follow.

The Mahila Samakhya experience over the past twelve years offers a unique case of trying to explore and understand the issues of women's education and empowerment and the inter linkages thereof in different regional and rural contexts within India. It offers an example of the importance of empowerment of women as a critical precondition to facilitate greater inclusion of women and their daughters into education. Further, it provides an alternative paradigm to women's mobilisation and empowerment to the current and dominant focus on economic interventions as the principal strategy for women's empowerment. The uniqueness of the MS strategy was pithily captured in the Programme Appraisal Report of 1989. "There is no programme comparable to the Education for Women's Equality programme in terms of the scale and mix of activities, in terms of organisational location and form, or in terms of the long term ambition to grow into a major vehicle for women's empowerment throughout India." Has this euphoric expectation been met? Successive evaluations have generally concurred with this early expectation with some limitations. The organisational form and diversity of activities has been an effective vehicle for women's empowerment and education in the areas where the programme is being implemented. However, it has a long way to go to have an impact across the country.

...Through successive plan periods, MS has not deviated from [its] basic objectives

that have been articulated in a set of non-negotiables that are to be accepted by any new state to which the programme is extended. Essentially they state that the pace of women's mobilisation shall not be hurried, women's concerns and problems as articulated by them will be the starting points for the programme, and project personnel will play a facilitative than a directive role. Given the radical nature of the approach, it was clear that such a programme cannot be implemented through the normal governmental departments but would require a structure that would allow for women from outside government to be part of the implementation process. Autonomous project societies, therefore, have been set up at individual State levels.

Further efforts are made to find women committed to the cause of women's empowerment and with experience of having worked with poor women to steer the programme at different levels. This enabled capturing the "worm's eye view and not a bird's eye view" of situations of poor women. Grassroots level workers are in almost all cases poor women themselves from within the communities the programme works in and hence bring a radical edge to the interventions.

...Dave and Krishnamurthy's study, *Home and the World* (2000) that explores women's perceptions of empowerment has been one of the few attempts to examine the changing relations within the household. Change in relations within the household has often been softly and tentatively

articulated. The sharing of household work and responsibilities has emerged out of men acknowledging the right of their women to attend sangha meetings. Looking after children, milking the cow, cooking are some of the tasks men have taken over when women are not there.” It is evident that the changes in the relationship with the husbands are not the direct result of confrontation... women engage in strategic planning to maintain relationships. ‘We allow men their illusions.’ This enables them (women) to negotiate a place for themselves without disturbing the surface of things.”¹ Women have reported not only changes in their relationship with husbands but also in the relationships with mothers-in-law. And how they are able to assert themselves with respect. For the women the institution of family and marriage continue to be a defining element as they negotiate and tease out spaces ad autonomy of existence and action for themselves.

...MS consciously took a decision not to exhort sangha women to acquire literacy skills. Instead waited till the sanghas themselves felt the need to acquire the basic skills of reading and writing. Over the past few years with an increasing number of women standing for elections in panchayat elections, and sanghas also federating at block levels, each sangha recognises the need for at least some of their members to be fully literate.

A song composed by sangha women in Gujarat says, “we thought we were uneducated but we were only illiterate. Now we know we can learn reading and writing-we know we are not inferior. We are part of this world!”

- What do you learn about the programme from the text before you?
- What is the programme structure like?
- Whom has the programme sought to mobilise?
- Has the programme brought about a difference in the lives of those it has mobilised?
- What do we learn about the state-women’s movement relationship from the text?
- Is education about literacy for Mahila Samakhya programme planners?
- What forms the content of the Mahila Samakhya programme?
- Which are some of the problems in the idea and implementation of the programme?

2.6 UNRAVELING THE POLITICS OF WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

It is important to place all of these developments in the larger context of economic liberalisation. In popular perception, liberalisation of the Indian economy is associated with the reforms initiated under the leadership of the then Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, part of the Congress government, in 1991. Generally speaking, economic liberalisation implies privatisation and withdrawal of the state from several economic processes. Indian women’s movement scholars and activists’ discussion on how economic liberalisation has changed the character

of the movement today invariably tends to be focussed on NGOs or 'NGOisation' (Chaudhuri 2004; John 2001; Menon 1999 and 2004; Ray 2000; Subramaniam 2006; Sunder Raj an 2003).

NGOs have been broadly defined as self-governing, private, not-for-profit organisations that are geared towards improving the quality of life of disadvantaged people (Vakil 1997). Whereas 12,000 Indian NGOs were registered with the Home Ministry in 1988 (a subset of the total number of NGOs), their number is said to have risen to around two million by 2002 (Kamat 2002). These include groups providing social welfare services, development support organisations, social action groups struggling for social justice and structural changes, and support groups providing legal, research or communications support. Some are big in terms of membership and funding. But many are small and are locally based. A lot of these big and small NGOs work with women.

Almost every donor operating in South Asia has set aside a significant proportion of resources for women's organisations and projects on women. Availability of donor funding has contributed in no small measure to the expansion of NGOs in the field of women's empowerment, with a focus on self-help groups and micro-credit financing.

For most governments, donors and international financial institutions like the World Bank, sponsoring development, women's active participation in the market economy is a vital sign of empowerment. Empowerment is basically interpreted as economic empowerment or the ability to earn an income. It has come to be synonymous with projects that give women small loans and enlist them in small-scale business activities such as producing handicrafts for sale. Credit schemes have certainly brought millions of women out of their homes and into the public domain. They are seen as having the potential to link women with the formal banking sector and thereby integrating women in mainstream development (Von Bülow et al. 1995).

But critics (Cornwall 2007) of such an approach argue that focus on women's economic empowerment conflates power with money, and imbues the acquisition of money with almost magical powers - as if once women have their own money, they can wish away overnight social norms, institutions and relationships part of their lives. Economic empowerment policies may bet on women pouring their resources into their households, expanding their roles as mothers and wives to meet their family's needs.

But much depends on how they choose to spend such newly-acquired economic power, and whether, where and how entry into the market offers women sufficient resources to begin to challenge and transform the persistent institutionalised inequalities that shore up the established gender order. The empowering effects of work need to be better understood and contextualised given the enormous differences between the countries and the women that are the targets for development's one-size-fits-all interventions.

Another approach to supporting women's empowerment is the promotion of women's participation in politics. This includes promoting women in government and national and local party politics as well as supporting women's involvement

in NGOs and women's movements. Increasing the number of women in formal politics is by itself not enough. Women in politics may be elites, in positions due to their personal connections with male politicians and be unable or unwilling to represent women's gender interests. There are a range of possible mechanisms to increase women's participation in and empowerment through political life. These include: reform of political parties; quotas and other forms of affirmative action; training to develop women's skills and gender sensitivity; work with women's sections of political parties; and the development of women's political organisations. Critics argue that this approach fits well with the broad programmes of democratisation and good governance, and strengthening of civil society that the neo-liberal framework seems to promote. They claim that this approach does little to redress the power issues that lie at the very heart of the matter - such as in the cultures and conduct of politics itself. Opening up the debate on women's political participation means asking new questions about what is needed to democratise democracy. It calls us to ask whether greater representation of women within flawed and dysfunctional political orders can really do the trick.

Almost every development NGO, today, claims to be working with the 'poor and marginalised' women. At the international level, development institutions and aid agencies claim that they are promoting the empowerment of 'poor and marginalised' (Parpart 2004). But who are these poor and marginalised women? There is a tendency in development discourse to universalise the category of 'poor and marginalised'. But just as the universalisation of the category 'women' and presumption of homogeneity of interests among all women at all times and in all contexts have led to complications, there are problems with presuming the homogeneity of 'poor and marginalised' women. Poor and marginalised women could be upper-castes or ex-untouchables, urban or rural, Muslim, Christian or Jewish, young or old, engaged in paid labour or otherwise.

Women's movements, in general, and grassroots women's organisations, in particular, have a vital role to play in promoting women's empowerment and resistance. They build bottom-up pressures on policy makers and governments. They are much closer to realities on the ground than official agencies of development, and can avoid the one-size-fits all model of empowerment. The gains of the empowerment strategy are that with more funding, more committed women can be full time activists, and can have time for documentation of and reflection on activism. However, critics claim that this has also resulted in feminism becoming a 9 to 5 job, with those with hardly any commitment to the cause of women and gender getting involved because of the salary that a NGO job can fetch. Critics also lament NGOs' lack of autonomy from getting and retaining funding. These developments, they argue, result in the depoliticisation of women's activism (Batliwala 2007; Menon 2004).

2.7 SUMMARY

What we shall attempt to do in this section is to employ the conceptual lens of gender and development approaches to re-present some of the salient points presented in this unit². My reference to gender and development approaches pertains to the shifts in focus from Women in Development (WID) and Women and Development (WAD) paradigms to the more recent Gender and Development (GAD) paradigm. Generally speaking, WID draws on liberal feminist ideas, WAD

on Marxist feminist ideas, and GAD is said to have emerged as an alternative to both WID and WAD. The WID and WAD perspectives arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s. WID proponents articulated the concern that women had been left out of development, and needed to be ‘factored’ in (Pearson & Jackson, 1998) whereas WAD proponents saw ‘women’ as a class and sought to create ‘women only’ projects (Connelly, Li, MacDonald & Parpart, 2000).

It was in the time of WID and WAD that a new generation of women emerged in India who questioned the supplementary role allotted to women in development programmes, most of which involved training women in the skills of ‘family management’ and ‘home economics’. In India, their critique was bolstered by the publication of a report titled *Towards Equality* in 1974. Documenting the widening of gender inequalities in employment, health, education and political participation since Independence, the report was intended for the United Nations International Women’s Year World Conference to be held in 1975.

By the 1980s, GAD had emerged as an alternative to WID and WAD. It drew on the grassroots organisational experiences and writings of Third World feminists (Sen and Grown 1988) and on the analysis of Western socialist feminists (Moser 1989). The GAD perspective emphasises the interconnections between gender, class, religion, race and ethnicity, and the social construction of their defining characteristics. Its emphasis is much more on the relationships between women and men rather than on women alone. Proponents of GAD have campaigned to make ‘empowerment’ the favoured strategy for undoing social inequalities and for enabling development globally (Kabeer 1994). NGOs have emerged as the key institutional mechanisms of the GAD approach. They have significantly grown and diversified in the last two decades. It is important to note that the availability of donor funding, especially with liberalisation of the Indian economy, has significantly facilitated the expansion of NGOs (Ray 2000). The 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing too has been catalytic in this regard. A number of other factors have also mattered such as the choice of a section of the women’s movement to collaborate with the state in the Indian context.

Notes

¹ You may be already familiar with several of these concepts; others shall be tackled as we move along in the unit.

² This section draws substantially on Govinda (2012 forthcoming) ‘Mapping Gender Evaluation in South Asia’, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*.

References

Basu, A. (n.d.) “Indian Women’s Movement”,

http://www.du.ac.in/fileadmin/DU/Academics/course_material/hrge_15.pdf (last accessed 29th November 2011)

Batliwala, S. 2007. “Taking the Power out of Empowerment - An Experiential Account”, *Development in Practice* 17 (4-5): 557-65, August

Chaudhuri, M. (ed.). 2004. *Feminism in India*, New Delhi: Kali for Women & Women Unlimited

Connelly, M. P., Li, T. M., MacDonald, M. & Parpart, J. L. 2000. "Feminism and Development: Theoretical Perspectives". J. L. Parpart, M. P. Connelly and V. E. Barriteau (eds.) *Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Development*, http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-9419-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html#begining (last accessed on 11 May 2010)

Cornwall, A. 2007. "Buzzwords and Fuzzwords: Deconstructing Development Practice". *Development in Practice* 17 (4-5): 471-84

Desai, M. 2002. "Multiple Mediations: The State and the Women's Movements in India". D. S. Meyer, B. Robnett and N. Whittier (eds.) *Social Movements: Identity, Culture and the State*. Oxford: OUP, pp. 66-84

Desai, N. and M. Krishnaraj. 1987. *Women and Society in India*. Bombay: Ajanta Publications

Frankel, F. 1978. *India's Political Economy, 1947-77: The Gradual Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press

Gandhi, N. and N. Shah. 1991. *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women's Movement in India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women

Gopalan, S. 2002. *Towards Equality - The Unfinished Agenda, Status of Women in India, 2001*. New Delhi: National Commission for Women, Government of India (GoI)

Government of India. 1992. *National Policy on Education 1986 (with modifications undertaken in 1992)*. New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD)

Jandhyala, K. 2001. "State Initiatives". *Seminar*, 505, <http://www.india-seminar.com/2001/505/505%20kameshwari%20jandhyala.htm> (last accessed on 1 December 2011)

John, M. 1996. *Discrepant Dislocations: Feminism, Theory and Post-colonial Histories*. Berkeley: University of California Press

John, M. 2001. "Gender, Development and the Women's Movement: Problems for a History of the Present". R. Sunder Rajan (ed.) *Signposts: Gender Issues in Post-Independence India*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, pp. 100-124

Kabeer, N. 1994. *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*. London: Verso

Kamat, S. 2002. *Development Hegemony: NGOs and the State in India*. New Delhi: OUP

Kohli, A. 1990. *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability*, Cambridge: CUP

Kothari, R. (ed.). 1970. *Caste in Indian Politics*. Delhi: Orient Longman

Kumar, R. 1993. *A History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990*. New Delhi: Kali for Women

- Lingam, L. 2002. "Women's Movement and the State". G. Shah (ed.). *Social Movements and the State*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 310-34
- Mazumdar, V. 2008. "The Making of a Founding Text". M. John (ed.). *Women's Studies in India: A Reader*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, pp. 27-32
- Menon, N. (ed.). 1999. *Gender and Politics in India*. Delhi: OUP
- Menon, N. 2004. *Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics Beyond the Law*. Delhi: Permanent Black
- Moser, C. 1989. "Gender Planning in the Third World: Meeting Practical and Strategic Gender Needs". *World Development*. 17 (11): 1799-1825
- Oxaal, Z. and S. Baden. 1997. "Gender and Empowerment: Definitions, Approaches and Implications for Policy". *IDS Working Paper* 40, Brighton: IDS
- Parpart, J. 2004. "Lessons from the Field: Rethinking Empowerment, Gender and Development from a Post-(Post-?) Development Perspective". K. Saunders (ed.) *Feminist Post-Development Thought: Rethinking Modernity, Postcolonialism and Representation*. New Delhi: Zubaan, pp. 41-56
- Patel, V. 2004. "Gender in State and National Policy Documents - A Case Study of India". Grassroots Participation in Governance, Reconstructing Governance: The Other Voice organised by Karnataka Women's Information and Resource Centre in partnership with UNDP and Gender Studies Unit, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore on February 20-21, 2004
- Pearson, R. & Jackson, C. 1998. "Introduction: Interrogating Development: Feminism, Gender and Policy". C. Jackson and R. Pearson (eds.) *Feminist Visions of Development: Gender Analysis and Policy*. London: Routledge, pp. 1-16
- Purushothaman, S. 1998. *The Empowerment of Women in India: Grassroots Women's Networks and the State*. New Delhi: Sage
- Ray, R. 2000. *Fields of Protest: Women's Movements in India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women
- Sarkar, S. and T. Sarkar (ed.). 2008. *Women and Social Reform in India*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press
- Sen, I. (ed.). 1990. *A Space Within the Struggle: Women's Participation in People's Movements*, New Delhi: Kali for Women
- Sen, S. 2002. "Towards a Feminist Politics? The Indian Women's Movement in Historical Perspective". K. Kapadia (ed.) *The Violence of Development: The Politics of Identity, Gender and Social Inequalities in India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, pp. 459-524
- Sen, G. & Grown, C. for DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era). 1988. *Development Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*. London: Earthscan Publications
- Sharma, A. 2006. "Cross-breeding Institutions, Breeding Struggle: Women's Empowerment, Neoliberal Governmentality and State (Re)formation in India". *Cultural Anthropology* 21 (1): 60-95

Subramaniam, M. 2006. *The Power of Women's Organizing: Gender, Caste, and Class in India*. Oxford: Lexington Books

Sunder Rajan, R. 2003. *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law and Citizenship in Postcolonial India*. Durham and London: Duke University Press

Vakil, A. C. 1997. "Confronting the Classification Problem: Towards a Taxonomy of NGOs". *World Development* 25(12): 2057-70

Von Bülow, D., E. Damball and R. Maro. 1995. "Supporting Women Groups in Tanzania Through Credit: Is This a Strategy for Empowerment". *CDR Working Papers*, Copenhagen: Centre for Development Research

Suggested Reading

Batliwala, S. 2007. "Taking the Power out of Empowerment - An Experiential Account". *Development in Practice* 17 (4-5): 557-65, August

John, M. 2001. "Gender, Development and the Women's Movement: Problems for a History of the Present". R. Sunder Rajan (ed.) *Signposts: Gender Issues in Post-Independence India*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, pp. 100-124

Kumar, R. 1993. *A History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990*. New Delhi: Kali for Women

Sample Questions

- 1) What does the term 'women's emancipation' mean? Explain with examples of issues and actors.
- 2) What is women's empowerment? Discuss the steps taken by the Indian state and the women's movement to actualise the goal of women's empowerment.
- 3) Briefly analyse the shifts in perception regarding the attention paid to women and gender-related concerns in India's Five Year Plans.
- 4) List three gains and shortcomings each of the empowerment strategy.
- 5) Describe the salient features of the different gender and development paradigms and state which is the one with which 'empowerment' is associated.