

## **A Brief History of Indian Feminist Movements**

The Indian women's movement is part of a dynamic struggle that spans centuries and cuts across class, caste, languages and gender. The movement is also diverse in nature, and not without its setbacks. Feminist activism in the country varies in scope depending on geographical area, level of organizing (from individuals to whole communities), ideological perspectives (Muslim women's groups versus Hindu women's groups, for example) and even activists' tactics in tackling the problems that Indian women face. At a most basic level, Indian women's rights advocates seek to change the political, social, and economic conditions that work to oppress modern Indian women. These conditions include inadequate educational access, access to health care (including family planning and reproductive justice), endemic violence (domestic or otherwise), property rights and financial instability, and social and political participation. Tactics for social change range from direct action campaigns to petitioning for policy change and more.

Despite India's characterization in popular western culture as an exotic and monolithic place, the nation is vast and complex, and the lives of Indian women cannot be easily encapsulated. Western society often sees Indian women cast solely as the victims of patriarchal and religious oppression. Images of widow immolation, or *sati*, and stories of female feticide have shaped the stereotypical image of "backward" Indian women, in need of salvation. But in reality, there is a rich history linking Indian women to the country's social reform movements during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While still under British colonial oppression, women fought alongside men to push

England out. After gaining independence from hundreds of years of British rule in 1947, India was in political and economic disarray. According to Indian feminism scholar Radha Kumar, “the immediate aftermath of Partition and Independence saw a steadily increasing sense of betrayal on the part of workers and peasants, communists and socialists. The delays in Congress in the fulfillment of its promises of speedy and efficient land redistribution infused [activists] with a new spirit of opposition” (Kumar 97). Many of the women’s organizations that had formed to combat colonial oppression now shifted gears to advocate for worker’s rights and political representation. The first expressly feminist groups at this time were founded out of university student coalitions, civil liberties organizations, and independent trade unions.

Between the mid-1950s until about 1978, the aforementioned feminist groups had been primarily engaged with small-scale, local, direct-action organizing for legal rights and increased political representation in India’s relatively young democracy. But the goals of many feminist groups across the new nation were consolidated and reorganized at the 1978 First National Conference of Socialist Feminists in Bombay. In order to heal growing rifts between spatially disparate feminist activists, the largest feminist organizations resolved to focus their efforts toward broader social justice initiatives, mainly by working to combat manifestations of patriarchy in India’s most populace regions. As Kumar puts it, “the two campaigns which, in effect, launched the contemporary feminist movement, were the campaigns against dowry deaths and rape, both of which focused on...violence against women” (114).