

DIFFERENT FACES OF THE INDIAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

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According to The Economic Survey, there are about 1.2 crore SHGs in India, most of which are all-women. File photo | Photo Credit: The Hindu

The vibrancy of the [Indian women's movement](#) is acknowledged worldwide. However, its gradual transformation has received much less attention. Over the years, its thrust has moved from serving as the beacon for the nationalist movement to a rights-based civil society movement to a state-led movement for economic empowerment. What does this portend for the future of the Indian women's movement?

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“When woman, whom we call *abala* (weak), become *sabala* (strong), all those who are helpless will become powerful.” This clarion call by Mahatma Gandhi to the 1936 All India Women's Conference was the hallmark of a nationalist movement that relied on women to serve as its face. The political history of the Indian women's movement is written in photographs of wave after wave of women satyagrahis being arrested during the salt satyagraha and the Quit India movement; Mrinal Gore and her women protesters carrying rolling pins and protesting against the price rise; Chipko, one of the earliest ecofeminist movements in the world broadcasting pictures of women clinging to trees to protest logging; and, Nirbhaya, Shaheen Bagh and Sabrimala protests of more recent years. Some were overtly aligned with political parties, others sought to reshape political discourse but were not affiliated with party politics.

However, these images of protest are not the only ones that characterise women's activism. While public mobilisation is highly visible, the quiet revolution of the 1970s probably did as much to enhance attention to women's specific needs as street protests. For example, the Self Employed Women's Association began to unionise women in the informal sector leading the advocacy for reforms in legal and social protection for women workers; feminist advocacy highlighting sex-selective abortion and discrimination in inheritance patterns led to legal reforms; and women's formal and informal collectives have worked hard to reform and implement laws against sexual harassment in the workforce and in public spaces. Arguably, the greatest success of this mobilisation came when the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution was passed, reserving one-third of seats in panchayat and leadership positions in local bodies for women.

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The latest epoch in women's activism is distinct from the strident politics of protest and quietly organised rights-based movements. The government has invested heavily in building and supporting Self Help Groups (SHGs). The Economic Survey notes that today there are about 1.2 crore SHGs in India, most of which are all-women. These SHGs are typically supported and mentored by Community Resource Persons paid by the state. SHGs function mainly as thrift and credit institutions, where members deposit small amounts of savings per month and can borrow in an emergency. In some cases, they also support entrepreneurship through bank loans.

These different strands of the women's movement — political movements, grassroots organising for legal and policy reforms, and state-led organisations for economic empowerment — each have addressed various dimensions of women's lives. The question is, should one be privileged over others?

Women's incorporation in the nationalist movement set the stage for the acceptance of women's leadership in politics. While some of this leadership rested in familial connections, many women leaders of modern India do not owe their positions to fathers or husbands. Most of these leaders focused on pressing issues of the day, which generally did not include women's empowerment. Nonetheless, their very presence created space for women's increased participation in electoral politics, setting the stage for grass-roots mobilisation.

Civil society mobilisation around legal and policy reforms directly affecting women's lives tried hard to remain non-partisan and build a rights-based agenda as a bulwark against persistent patriarchal institutions. However, this right-based agenda ultimately sought to reform state policies and legal institutions. In contrast, and possibly in response, over the past two decades, the state chose its distinct path to mobilising women.

About 12 million SHGs, consisting of 10-15 members each, are organised under the aegis of government programmes in the Indian countryside. They replaced women's groups under the older programme, Mahila Samakhya, which was explicitly designed to mobilise women and sensitise them about their rights. Evaluation of Mahila Samakhya by researchers from Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Ahmedabad noted the programme's success in mobilising women but highlighted its relative ineffectiveness in enhancing vocational skills and entrepreneurship. This is a deficiency the current generation of the SHG movement, in close connection with the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), seeks to address.

Evaluating the current version of state-sponsored programmes under the NRLM by Imago and 3ie teams paint a mixed picture. Reliance on high-interest loans from moneylenders has declined. In some states, there is a slight increase in incomes (largely men's wage incomes), often because NRLM participation was layered with MGNREGA. However, there is limited evidence of increased incomes due to entrepreneurship or women's empowerment within the household. Participation in SHGs was, however, related to increased involvement in gram panchayat meetings, creating a potential for greater political power.

These diverse phases of the women's movement in India present an exciting challenge. Does the state's intrusion in women's movements weaken civil society-led programmes? Can the state-led movement transform women's lives by taking economic empowerment programmes to scale? Perhaps the answer lies in the distinction between women's practical and strategic needs. If the state-led movement can effectively enhance women's access to income-generating activities, it can serve women's practical needs and improve their economic power. Increased economic power will set the stage for serving their strategic needs, including reshaping discriminatory laws and policies and disrupting patriarchal forces within the household.

However, most of the activities of SHGs are limited to micro-credit. Unless this massive mobilisation of women is supported with other programmes that provide enhanced livelihood opportunities, they will remain toothless. Nevertheless, there are some silver linings. In some parts of the country, SHGs under the NRLM have been able to use funds under MGNREGA to build income-earning assets for women, such as cattle sheds and poultry sheds. In other areas, women's cooperatives run by SHGs have been able to supply meals and products to various government-run programmes. When convergence with other government programmes that build infrastructure or procure goods and services can be achieved, SHGs can enhance women's incomes substantially.

However, when viewed holistically, the SHG movement is neither fish nor fowl. Its potential for enhancing women's incomes has been underutilised. Simultaneously, by its vast expansion, the movement has carved into the base of women members who historically fuelled grassroots civil society movements and undermined these movements. Sometimes it has also been used as a political weapon by ruling governments — for example, the ruling CPI(M) government's use in Kerala of SHG women in constructing a human wall during the Sabarimala protests in the State.

The silver lining is that regardless of the outcome, the growth of SHGs has brought a large number of women into the public arena. If a strong civil society-led women's movement continues to thrive, this enormous army of SHG members may be able to draw strength from government programmes that empower them economically and civil society institutions that empower them socially and politically to create a formidable force for India's development. The key, however, is to not put all eggs in the single basket of state-led programmes and to ensure that other spaces for women's activism are preserved.

(Sonalde Desai is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland and Professor and Centre Director NCAER-National Data Innovation Centre. Views are personal).

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