

From Struggle to Strength: Women Reformers of Maharashtra Shaping India's Gender Equality Movement

Sarika M. Jagtap^{1*}, A.K. Patil², Dipali R. Wagh³, Sneha C. Kardile⁴, Monika P. Kshirsagar⁵

Abstract

The issue of gender equality has been a persistent problem all over the world for a very long time. India has made significant progress in this area, primarily as a result of the efforts made by social reformers and activists. Among them, women from the state of Maharashtra have been the driving force behind the advancement of gender equality. They have frequently challenged the norms of society in order to elevate and empower women. This paper emphasizes the efforts of important women, including Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, Ramabai Ranade, Pandita Ramabai, Lakshimbai Rajwade, and Chhaya Datar, who campaigned against gender inequality and worked towards women's empowerment. They provided the groundwork for educational reforms, legal changes, and social justice movements in India through their efforts. The suggested paper covers Indian women's struggles and movements from the past to the present. Women currently hold a major position in politics, thanks to women's movements. The women's movement progressed alongside the fight for national liberation. Women's contributions to the independence fight led to constitutional guarantees for equal rights and adult suffrage. However, constitutional provisions have not materially improved the lives of most Indian women in terms of social and material changes. The women's movement originated from patriarchy and gender inequity in society. The women's movement aims to outlaw patriarchy and gender injustice within and beyond the home. Despite various women's movements, patriarchy persists in India, which is terrible. The purpose of this research is to analyze the causes that led to the formation and emergence of the Indian women's movement. Historical depictions of 'sati' and widespread feticides show Indian women's backwardness. India, however, has many 19th- and 20th-century reform movements. Essentially, this history affects present women. This study explores the evolution of the Indian women's movement from pre-independence to post-independence and modern times.

*Author for Correspondence

Sarika M. Jagtap
E-mail: jagtap.sarika@kbtcoe.org

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Electronics and Telecommunication Engineering, Karamveer Adv. Baburao Ganpatrao Thakare College of Engineering, Nashik, Maharashtra, India

²Associate Professor, Department of Electronics and Telecommunication Engineering, Karamveer Adv. Baburao Ganpatrao Thakare College of Engineering, Nashik, Maharashtra, India

³UG Scholar, Department of Electronics and Telecommunication Engineering, Karamveer Adv. Baburao Ganpatrao Thakare College of Engineering, Nashik, Maharashtra, India

⁴UG Scholar Department of Electronics and Telecommunication Engineering, Karamveer Adv. Baburao Ganpatrao Thakare College of Engineering, Nashik, Maharashtra, India

⁵UG Scholar Department of Electronics and Telecommunication Engineering, Karamveer Adv. Baburao Ganpatrao Thakare College of Engineering, Nashik, Maharashtra, India

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INTRODUCTION

The fight for gender equality in India has been significantly influenced by women from Maharashtra who broke societal hurdles to guarantee that women have equal rights and

opportunities. Maharashtra has been a stronghold for women's empowerment, producing several reformers whose contributions have shaped the feminist discourse in India.

This research paper explores the contributions of these women, examining their impact on education, legal reforms, and social justice movements. Their pioneering efforts have inspired modern feminist movements and continue to influence policies aimed at achieving gender equality.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF WOMEN REFORMERS IN MAHARASHTRA TO GENDER EQUALITY

Savitribai Phule [1](1831–1897): A Pioneer in Women's Education

In addition to being India's first female educator, Savitribai Phule was a stalwart supporter of gender equality in the classroom. Through the efforts of her husband, Jyotirao Phule, she was able to overcome the opposition of society and establish the first school in Pune for female students in the year 1848. Her activism extended beyond education; she also championed widow remarriage and fought against caste and gender discrimination. Her work laid the foundation for future educational reforms for women in India.

Tarabai Shinde [2](1850–1910): A Feminist Voice Against Patriarchy

Tarabai Shinde authored *Stri Purush Tulana* (A Comparison Between Women and Men) in 1882, one of the earliest feminist critiques in India. She challenged the patriarchal norms of the time and criticized the double standards that oppressed women. Her work remains a significant milestone in feminist literature and continues to be studied as a foundational text in gender studies.

Ramabai Ranade[3] (1862–1924): Advocate for Women's Self- Reliance

Ramabai Ranade played a crucial role in women's empowerment through education and self-reliance initiatives. She established the *Seva Sadan Society*, which provided vocational training to women, enabling them to achieve financial independence. Her advocacy laid the groundwork for women's social and economic progress in India.

Pandita Ramabai [4](1858–1922): A Champion for Widows' Rights

A social reformer, Pandita Ramabai was the founder of the Arya Mahila Samaj, which was created with the purpose of advancing the education of women. She established the Mukti Mission, which is a charitable organization that offers a safe haven and vocational training to widows and women who are without a home. She also worked towards legal reforms for women's rights, particularly focusing on inheritance laws and child marriage abolition.

Lakshmibai Rajwade [5](1887–1984): A Crusader for Women's Suffrage

Lakshmibai Rajwade was an advocate for women's suffrage and was instrumental in integrating family planning into India's national agenda. She played a crucial role in the All-India Women's Conference, promoting legal reforms that enhanced women's rights in India.

Chhaya Datar [6](Born 1944): A Contemporary Feminist and Social Activist

Chhaya Datar is a modern-day feminist whose writings and activism focus on women's labor rights and rural development. She has contributed extensively to feminist literature and continues to influence policy-making for women's welfare.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

The gender inequality that exists in India continues to exist in areas such as salary discrepancy, gender-based violence, and underrepresentation in leadership posts, despite the tremendous progress that has been made. While government policies and social movements have sought to address these issues, there is still a need for continued advocacy and reform. The contributions of historical figures like Savitribai Phule and contemporary activists like Chhaya Datar provide a foundation for ongoing efforts toward gender equality.

Gender Equality: A Journey from the Past to the Present

Gender equality has been a long battle, with women in India historically fighting for basic rights such as education, property ownership, and freedom of speech. Reformers like Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai, and Tarabai Shinde laid the groundwork for women's empowerment at a time when society imposed severe restrictions on them. Today, while many barriers have been removed, new challenges have emerged in the fight for true gender parity.[1-4]

Education: Then vs. Now

It was almost impossible for women to receive an education during the 19th century. People flung stones and cow dung at Savitribai Phule as she traveled to school in Pune in 1848, when she started the first school for girls in the city. She was faced with tremendous resistance upon her arrival. Despite this, she persisted in her mission, demonstrating that education was the most important factor in leading to the empowerment of women.[7-8]

Women's literacy rates in India have increased from 8% in 1951 to approximately 70% in 2021, indicating that education for women has considerably improved in recent years. In order to increase the number of female students enrolled in schools, the government has implemented programs such as Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya.[7-8]

Additionally, the rise of online learning platforms like Coursera, Udemy, and NPTEL has made higher education and skill development accessible to women, especially those in rural areas. However, dropout rates among girls due to early marriages, domestic responsibilities, and lack of access to menstrual hygiene products remain major concerns.[9]

EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

Contrarily, in contemporary India, women are increasingly holding positions of leadership at both the federal and state levels. This trend is expected to continue. There are both positive and negative aspects to this movement. Pratibha Patil, the first woman to ever assume the position of President of India, was born and raised in the state of Maharashtra in India. [10-13]She is the first woman to ever hold this historic position. Since just 14.4% of members in India's parliament are female, the gender gap between men and women in the Indian parliament is growing. This is due to the fact that women make up a smaller percentage of the total membership. In accordance with the Women's Reservation Bill, which has been in the works for a very long time, thirty-three percent of the seats in the legislature would be set aside for female representative representatives. It would be a tremendous step forward in terms of the political representation of women if this were to occur.[14]

Today, women have entered diverse fields, from corporate leadership to technology and entrepreneurship. In Maharashtra, cities like Pune and Mumbai have become hubs for women entrepreneurs, with many benefiting from government initiatives like *Stand-Up India*, which provides financial support to women-led startups.

In spite of this, there are still obstacles that need to be overcome, such as the difference in salary that exists between men and women currently. As an illustration, in India, women receive payments that are around twenty percent lower than those that males earn for performing almost equal job. Additionally, *female labor force participation in India is only around 25%*, one of the lowest in the world. Societal expectations, workplace harassment, and lack of work-life balance support structures continue to hinder women's professional growth.

LEADERSHIP AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

When the country was still under British administration and in its early years of independence, women did not participate in politics to a significant extent. Reformers such as Lakshmibai Rajwade and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay were among those who fought for the right of women to vote and equal representation in political positions. Despite this, women continued to be substantially

underrepresented in positions of authority for a considerable amount of time after these programs were initiated.

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SOCIAL JUSTICE AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENTS [8-10]

Social reformers in the 19th and early 20th centuries fought against deeply ingrained patriarchal norms. Pandita Ramabai, for instance, was a vocal critic of child marriage and widow oppression. Tarabai Shinde's *Stri Purush Tulana* was one of the first feminist critiques of gender inequality in India.[2]

In modern times, the fight for gender justice has taken new forms. Movements like *#MeToo* and *#TimesUp* have exposed workplace harassment and challenged gender discrimination at global levels. Laws like the *POSH Act (2013)* now provide legal protection against workplace harassment, but the implementation remains inconsistent.

The increase in *cybercrime against women*, including online harassment and cyberstalking, is a new-age challenge that earlier reformers did not face. Social media has empowered women to voice their concerns, but it has also become a space for gender-based abuse. Governments and organizations are now working on stronger cybersecurity laws to protect women in digital spaces.

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN GENDER EQUALITY

Technology has evolved into a potent instrument that can be used to advance gender equality. Notable developments include the following:

- *Artificial intelligence and bias correction:* AI-driven hiring processes are being used to eliminate gender bias in recruitment. However, studies have shown that some AI algorithms reflect existing societal biases, indicating a need for gender-sensitive AI development.
- *Women-centric safety apps:* Mobile apps like *bSafe* and *MySafetipin* help women navigate cities safely by providing real-time location tracking and emergency alerts.
- *Digital financial inclusion:* Women entrepreneurs now have better access to funding through fintech solutions, digital banking, and microfinance programs. Startups led by women in Maharashtra are leveraging digital payment systems to expand their businesses.
- *STEM initiatives for women:* Programs like *Girls Who Code* and *She Loves Tech* encourage more women to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), fields where they remain underrepresented.

CHALLENGES THAT STILL PERSIST

Although there has been considerable improvement, there are still certain problem areas:

- *Pay Gaps and lack of employment opportunities:* To this day, men still make significantly more money than women do for doing the same actual work. A number of companies still favor men over women when choosing their executives.
- Persistent issues with gender-based violence, such as sexual harassment and domestic violence, persist. As part of this, there is violence against women. Crimes perpetrated against women in India have been increasing, according to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), even though many legislative changes have been put in place.

- Obstacles to women's rights persist in rural areas due to deeply held cultural beliefs. As proof, consider the presence of cultural barriers.
- Early marriage, preference for male children, and social restrictions on mobility still affect many women.[15-16]
- *Digital divide*: While technology is advancing gender equality, a significant number of women in rural India still lack access to digital devices and the internet, limiting their educational and financial growth.[13]

CONCLUSION

Women reformers from Maharashtra have played a crucial role in India's fight for gender equality, breaking barriers in education, legal rights, and social reform. Because of their achievements, contemporary feminist movements have been shaped, and they continue to inspire future generations to confront inequality that is embedded in the system. Their legacy ensures that gender equality remains a key priority in India's social and policy discourse. The struggle for gender equality has evolved over time, from fighting for basic rights like education and voting to addressing complex issues such as workplace equity, cyber safety, and economic inclusion. Reformers like Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, and Pandita Ramabai laid the foundation for women's empowerment, and their legacy continues to inspire modern movements.

While technological advancements, policy changes, and social activism have contributed to progress, true gender equality remains a work in progress. Continuous efforts are needed to challenge existing biases, ensure legal enforcement of gender rights, and create a society where women and men have equal opportunities in every field. The future of gender equality in India will depend on the collective efforts of individuals, policymakers, and organizations to ensure that progress continues in all spheres of life.

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