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WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND EMANCIPATION

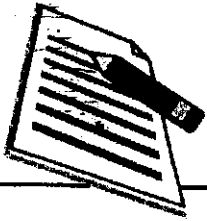
You must have heard the word *Women's Empowerment* being mentioned everywhere during the year 2001. You must have also seen in the newspapers and on television reports of many programmes organized in connection with the Women's Empowerment Year. Did you ever wonder what this women's empowerment was all about? Many friends and students asked me this question – 'Were women powerless all these years? We thought that women had all the rights that men had, and now all of a sudden, we are told that one whole year is going to be dedicated to empowering women. Please explain'. These questions are perfectly justified. We will try to answer these questions in this lesson. By empowering women it is also possible to tackle and effectively solve all the problems that were discussed earlier.



OBJECTIVES

After studying this lesson, you will be able to:

- explain the meaning of the terms empowerment and emancipation;
- analyse the need for empowerment of women;
- trace the history of the struggle for women's emancipation from the 19th century upto 1947, when India gained independence;
- discuss the efforts made in India after independence to empower women both by the state and voluntary groups and
- review from a critical viewpoint, the achievements and gaps in the efforts at empowering women.



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35.1 WHAT IS WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT?

We all know that the Constitution of India has conferred equal rights on women and men. We are also aware of the fact that discrimination on the grounds of gender is prohibited by the Constitution. For the last 175 years, several laws have been passed to liberate women from the clutches of customs and practices which have been oppressing them for centuries. Yet, we see that many women face discrimination from birth to death. Laws are no doubt very important to emancipate women from oppression, but it is equally important to create an environment in which equality can be enjoyed equally by all women. It is the creation of this environment which is the goal of empowerment.

35.2 WHO IS AN EMPOWERED WOMAN?

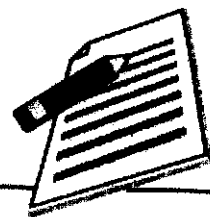
An empowered woman is one who:

- Has the freedom to make choices and take decisions in matters relating to her life as well as society at large.
- Is not a victim of violence either in her family or any other social institutional setting.
- Can live her life in such a way that her self-respect and dignity are protected.
- Has equal access (equal chance) to opportunities in all spheres of activity.
- Is in a position to make use of the laws formulated for safeguarding her honour and rights.

Mere provision of opportunities for women is not enough. They must have the freedom to make use of these opportunities. Let me give you an example. Six-year-old Leena lives in a village. She wants to go to the village primary school like her friends, but her family wants to send her to work as a domestic help in the neighbouring city. Being a citizen of India, Leena has as much right as any other girl in the country to go to school, but due to poverty and family pressure she is forced to give up her ambition. Leena is not empowered to make use of her rights. So empowerment is a condition when women/girls have the freedom to enjoy a right in practice and not just in theory.

35.3 WHY SHOULD WOMEN BE EMPOWERED?

Women constitute nearly half of India's population. So, unless an environment is created in which women are able to enjoy all their rights and live without fears or restrictions, India cannot progress. When women are empowered, an emancipated and enlightened (*liberal/open-minded*) society is created. Even today a large



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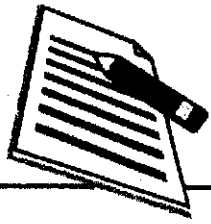
number of women are forced to confine (*limit/narrow*) their lives within the four walls of their homes. Though there are no legal hurdles to their emancipation, social and cultural restrictions have prevented them from using opportunities for their development.

Human history is full of examples of women who have taken leadership positions and guided the destinies of their nations. Women have made a significant contribution for the survival and sustenance of communities. Women's work both in the domestic sphere and outside has helped the society move ahead. Hence women need to be empowered both in their personal lives and as members of society. We can quote here the UNFPA (*United Nations Fund for Population Activities*) Report titled the State of World Population 1992, which said that there can be no sustainable development without development for women, because it is women who contribute more for the development of children. Empowerment of women has multiple benefits not only for the environment but for humanity as well. Ensuring sustainable development requires women's empowerment and their full, equal and beneficial involvement in decision-making process related to sustainable development. It also requires their participation as planners, managers, scientists and technical advisors in all fields.

When women are empowered, they empower society. They have concerns not only for their families but also for the entire community. When women are given access to resources they generally spend it on the well being of larger numbers, be it their family or neighbourhood. The example given below will make it clear.

Empowered women create an empowered society

The elderly women of a village called *Shantigrame* started a Day Care Centre for small children. They pooled their small savings and rented a small place to start this Centre. An NGO working in the village also gave them some financial support. ~~There were a number of young girls in this village who were forced to drop out of school because they had to take care of their younger siblings.~~ When the day care centre was started, the infants and very young children were being left there and the young girls went back to school. The parents of the children gave a small token amount to the elderly women who ran the day-care centre, and this small earning gave them resources to improve their own lives. School drop-out numbers reduced considerably and in course of one year, life in the village changed. During the next four years, a high school and a junior college were also started in Shantigrama and every girl in the village attended school or college, as the case may be. Do you now see, how a few women who were empowered and encouraged to look for means of supporting themselves, also empowered other women and girls in their village.



It is thus necessary to empower women. An empowered woman creates a better home and a better society. If she herself is in bondage, how can she help others? So a woman must have the strength and support to lead her life in a free and just atmosphere.

35.4 EMANCIPATION

The term emancipation refers to a condition of release from any form of oppression or bondage (*oppression/control*). The removal of hurdles or constraints for achievement of one's goals in life can also be called emancipation. Emancipation can be achieved through legal or social action. Many a time social action leads to legal action.

Example 1: With the passage of the Widow Remarriage Act in 1856, the legal hurdles to widow marriage were removed. Until this period, even if a widow wished to be married, she was not permitted to do so. Today, if a widow wishes to marry she cannot be legally prevented from doing so either by her family or social group. This is an example of legal action leading to emancipation.

Example 2: Mathura, a tribal girl, was raped in a police station. The policemen who were responsible for this act were not punished for this offence, because until then, rape in police custody was not included in the list of offences considered rape. But protests by women's groups and the pressure built on the government to consider rape committed in police stations also as a punishable offence resulted in the inclusion of custodial rape as an act of rape, when the rape law was amended (*See lesson 36.8, Section 36.8.2 for details*).

INTEXT QUESTIONS 35.1

Fill in the Blanks

1. The year _____ was known as the Year of Women's Empowerment.
2. Freedom from oppression is known as _____
3. When a woman has the freedom to take decisions and make choices she is identified as an _____
4. An empowered woman builds an _____ society.

35.5 STRUGGLES FOR THE EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN IN INDIA - THE BEGINNINGS

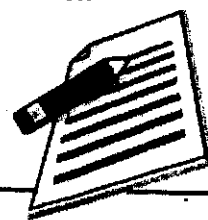
On the eve of British conquest of India, the position of women was very humiliating. Social evils such as female infanticide, *sati*, child marriage, restrictions on female education, polygyny and ban on widow marriage flourished. In the name of religion, women were kept away from all efforts to seek empowerment. For more than two hundred years after they set foot in India, the British did not interfere with the religious and social life of the people they governed because of their policy of non-interference. But as their position in India was strengthened (*became strong*), the British started responding positively to the efforts of enlightened Indian social reformers who had launched a struggle to emancipate women from the clutches of evil social practices and customs. The period between 1829 and 1947 saw the enactment of many laws, which aimed at emancipating women from the clutches of oppressive social customs. Indian social reformers had to work against heavy odds and stiff social opposition. A change-resistant (*opposing change*) society did not accept the ban on Sati or the legal sanction for widow marriage so very easily. Though *sati* was legally banned in 1829, incidents of *sati* continued and even as late as 2002 cases of *sati* were still being reported. If an inhuman practice like *sati* could exist even in the 21st century, when so much progress has been made in the fields of science and technology, you can well imagine how difficult it must have been to fight for women's emancipation over one hundred and seventy years ago.

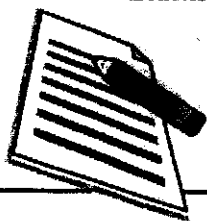
Lifting the ban on widow remarriage was another major step in the struggle for the emancipation of women. While the ban on *sati* was somewhat effective, the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 could not be effectively implemented because of social opposition. But the freedom, which the law gave widows to marry was definitely an achievement in the struggle for women's emancipation. With a ban imposed on *sati* and the ban on widow marriage removed, an environment for liberating women was created.

One of the greatest obstacles to women's emancipation was child marriage. The enactment of the Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1929 prescribed the minimum age at marriage for a girl as 14 and a male as 18 years. Though 14 years is by no means the right age for a girl to be married, this Act at least took the bold step to put an end to the evil custom of infant marriages. When girl children did not have to be married off at an early age, they could go to school which is a very effective instrument of emancipation. The 1929 Act was the single most significant piece of legislation that sought to emancipate women in the pre-independence era.

Most of the social reformers of the 19th century strongly advocated women's education, for they saw education as the single most important tool for liberating women. The opening of schools, especially meant for girls was a major step in

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efforts at emancipating women. When women got an opportunity to move out of their homes and also an exposure to the world at large, they were lifted out of ignorance. Though conservative parents did not really accept the idea of sending their daughters to school easily, the fact that efforts began to be made for providing education to girls, was itself a major step in the direction of women's emancipation.

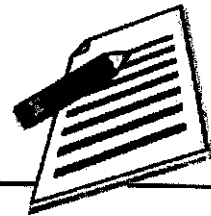
The social reform movements of the 19th century, the efforts made in the early part of the 20th century and also the 19th century women's movement in Europe and North America laid the foundation for the emergence of a strong women's movement in India. The freedom struggle brought many women out of their homes and the newfound awakening created the right atmosphere for fighting for their rights. Liberation from colonial rule and freedom from oppressive social customs were the twin goals of the struggles for women's emancipation. Initially the movement for women's equality was spearheaded by men, but during the later years the leadership passed on to women. Between 1880 and 1930, a number of women's organizations sprang up all over the country. By the time India won her freedom, the stage was set for launching the women's movement on a firm footing.

What is the women's movement?

Women's movement refers to the struggles launched by individuals and groups for liberating women from the clutches (control) of social evils and also for establishing equality between men and women. Women's movement is also referred to as the Women's Liberation Movement. The ideology of the women's movement is that women have equal rights and opportunities available in society. Women's movement believes in activism or action directed at ensuring that women get their rightful place in society. The women's movement fights against oppression of women in all social institutions. It also acts as a pressure group (a group whose voices and actions influence public policy and public opinion) and urges the state to enact laws, which give women their due share in the economic and political affairs of the country. The ultimate goal of the women's movement is to create an environment in which women's self-dignity is safeguarded both in private and public sphere.



Poster made by the National Coordinating Committee, Kerala, for the Fourth National Conference on Women's movement held at Calicut, Kerala between December 28 and 31, 1990.



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INTEXT QUESTIONS 35.2

Answer in brief

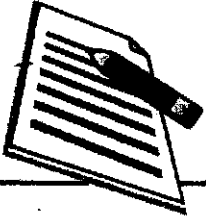
1. In which year was the most recent incident of *sati* reported?
2. What is women's movement?
3. When was the Widow Re-Marriage Act passed?
4. What was the minimum age at marriage prescribed for a boy and a girl by the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929?

35.6 WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT EFFORTS IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

The ongoing efforts to empower the women of India are made by the state, voluntary organizations and women's groups. Voluntary women's groups are also known as autonomous women's groups. The common element in efforts being made both by the state and autonomous women's groups is the recognition of the fact that there is gender discrimination in our society and that special emphasis must be placed on eliminating it. If the Constitutional guarantee of equal opportunities and prohibition of discrimination has to become a reality (*put into practice*), there has to be a constant effort to identify and remove gender inequalities. The approaches and strategies of the state and voluntary efforts, however, are different. So, it is important to study the two separately. Let us first see what the state has done to empower women.

35 STATE INITIATIVES FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Law has been viewed as a powerful instrument of social change. The process of emancipating women from the clutches of oppressive social customs started even before India became independent. Since 1829, when the Sati Prohibition Act was passed, a number of laws have been passed to remove the legal hurdles to women's empowerment. We have also seen that amendments have been brought to many of the existing laws in order to make them stronger and more stringent. But law alone cannot bring about a change in the position of women. Constant and special efforts have to be made to improve their standards of living. This was mainly sought to be done through the Five Year Plans.



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35.7.1 The Five Year Plans

The planning process was started in India in 1951 with the primary objective of removing the hurdles for emancipation for all sections of India's population. Each Five-Year plan had identified certain priority areas, and improving women's status was only one aspect of the plan programmes. We are now seeing the X Plan in operation and in order to understand what each Plan has done for women, let us go through the approaches and achievements of the different Five Year Plans.

From Welfare to Development to Empowerment

Over the years the planning strategies (line of action) for women have shifted from Welfare to Development and to Empowerment. It is this shift which needs to be critically examined if we wish to understand the role of the state in women's empowerment.

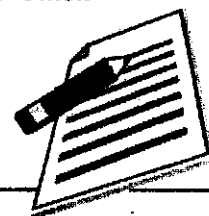
35.7.2 First to Fifth Five Year Plans

The approach of the First Five Year Plan (1951-56) was to provide adequate services to promote the welfare of women so as to enable them to play their legitimate role in family and community. Here, the emphasis was on welfare and hence women were treated as mere recipients of incentives, which the state chose to give. The Plan called for setting up of special organizations both at the central and state levels for promoting the welfare of women. The Central Social Welfare Board was set up in 1953. It has its branches in the states. These boards have been supporting and conducting a number of programmes, mainly with a thrust on (*with an emphasis on*) economic advancement.

The approach of the Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth Five Year Plans was in no way different from that of the First Five Year Plan. The welfare approach still guided policies and programmes, which were launched for women's development. Only two special schemes were introduced during this period. These were, the condensed Course of Education and Women and Socio-Economic Programme introduced during the second Plan (1956-61) and Working Girls Hostels and Short Stay Homes introduced during the Fourth Plan (1969-74).

Towards Equality – A Report, which Actually Set the Government and Voluntary Groups Thinking

In the year 1974, the Committee on the Status of Women in India submitted a report, which was aptly titled *Towards Equality*. This Report, paved the way for serious thinking on the status of women in different social institutions in India, because it showed that women were far behind men in enjoying the



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equal rights conferred on them by the Constitution. This Report led to a debate in the Parliament and showed the failure of the welfare approach, which treated women as recipients of benefits and not as equal partners in the development efforts.

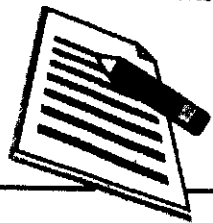
The new consciousness that emerged after the publication of *Towards Equality* has to the setting up of the Women's Welfare and Development Bureau in 1976 under the Ministry of Social Welfare. Four separate working groups on employment of Women, Adult Education Programmes for Women, Women in Agriculture and Rural Development were also set up to work out strategies for action.

35.7.3 Sixth Five Year Plan: The Shift from Welfare to Development

From the *Sixth Plan (1980-85)* onwards, a marked shift took place from the Welfare to a Development approach. How are the two different? While the welfare approach treated women as beneficiaries or recipients of benefits, the development approach recognized women as participants in development and not as development targets. It was not enough to introduce a few women specific schemes, but there was need to strive for an all round development of women. Look at the examples given below:

Example 1: A woman in the village was given tailoring lessons under one of the government schemes. But, she had no other means of economic support to buy either a sewing machine or other accessories (*items*) needed to open a small tailoring business. So her training was going waste. She was treated as a target of a welfare programme and afterwards nobody asked her what she really wanted. This is an example of the welfare approach with fixed targets.

Example 2: Before sanctioning women's development programme in a village, a meeting of the women who were residents of the village was called. They were asked to name a few programmes which they thought would be helpful to them to better their economic status. They were also asked to give suggestions as to how best these programmes could be implemented. Since the women identified the setting up of a milk-cooperative and basket weaving as their priorities, the development agency started a milk cooperative and provided the initial funding. Training in basket weaving, especially keeping the market needs in view was also given. In this case women were not treated simply as beneficiaries or receivers of a welfare programme, but they were consulted about their choice of a programme and also involved in managing the programme. This is an example of the development approach.



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Towards the end of the Sixth Five Year Plan i.e., in 1985, the Department of Women and Child Development was set up as part of the Ministry of Human Resource Development. This Department was created to function as a central agency to formulate and implement plans, policies and programmes for the development of women and children.

35.7.4 The Seventh Five Year Plan

The Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-1990) laid emphasis on generation (*creation*) of employment opportunities for women. Two new schemes – Support to Training and Employment (STEP) and Awareness Generation Programme for Rural and poor Women (AGP) were introduced. Three important Reports, which were to serve as useful guidelines for future development programmes of the government, were also released during the Seventh Plan period. These were:

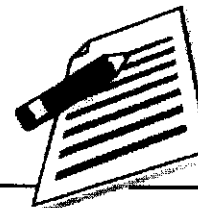
- Shram Shakti (Report of the National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector).
- National Perspective Plan on Women (1988-2000).
- SAARC Guide Book on Women in Development.

The Decade 1990-2000 was declared as the SAARC Decade of the Girl Child and as part of this event, programmes laying special thrust on (*giving special importance to the*) the overall development of girl children were launched.

35.7.5 Landmarks (highlights) of the Eighth Plan

The Eighth Plan (1990-95) period saw the creation of two major organizations, one aimed at social empowerment and the other at economic development of women. The National Commission on Women is a statutory body constituted under the National Commission for Women Act 1990. Its main duties are the protection of the interests of women by safeguarding their rights. The Rashtriya Mahila Kosh was set up in 1993 mainly to facilitate credit support and micro-finance to poor women.

The Eighth Plan Period also saw a revolutionary amendment to the Constitution of India, which provided for the reservation of one-third of the seats in Panchayatiraj institutions and urban local self-governing bodies such as municipalities and corporations to women. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments, which made this reservation possible, have gone down in the history of women's empowerment in India as a 'democratic revolution'. Today, there are more than 40,000 women in local governing bodies across the country, a phenomenon (an occurrence), which would never have been possible, if a provision for reservation of 1/3 seats for women had not been made.



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INTEXT QUESTIONS 35.3

Answer in one word

1. When was the First Five-Year Plan started?
2. Name the approach adopted by the First to Fifth Five Year Plan with reference to women.
3. Name the Organization set up in the year 1990 to safeguard the rights of women.
4. During which plan period were the 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments passed?

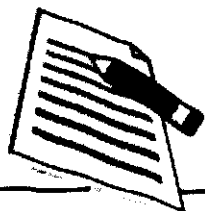
35.7.6 From Development to Empowerment – The Ninth Five Year Plan

It was during the period of the Ninth Five-year Plan (1997-2002) that two significant developments took place in the field of women's development. The first relates to the shift that took place in the framework (outline) for chalking out women's development programmes. Hitherto, women were either being treated as targets for development programmes or as participants. But not much attention was paid for creating an environment that would enable women to exercise their rights or enjoying their freedom. The Ninth Plan put forth the concept of Empowerment, which would create an enabling environment where, women can experience freedom not just in letter, but also in action. To achieve this goal a National Policy for the Empowerment of Women was accepted by the Government of India in 2001. The second significant development, which took place during the Ninth Plan period, was the adoption of a Women's Component Plan. This Plan directed both the Central and State governments to earmark (set apart) atleast 30 per cent of the funds/benefits in all sectors for women's development.

Women's Empowerment Year, 2001

The Government of India declared 2001 as the year of Women's Empowerment. Three primary objective were set to be achieved during this year. These were:

- Creating and raising large scale awareness of women's issues with active participation and involvement of women and men.
- Initiating and accelerating action for improving access to and control of resources by women.



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- Creating an enabling environment for enhancing self-confidence and autonomy of women.

A number of policies and programmes were initiated during this year to ensure equal participation of women and men in the social, economic and political life of the nation.

Two prominent schemes that were launched for women during 2001 were: *Swayamsiddha* and *Swadhar*.

Swayamsiddha is an integrated programme, which supports the empowerment of women through a network of Self-Help Groups of women. It was hoped to bring together all the women related schemes of the central and state governments at the block level. The government also launched the *Swashakti* Project to help the setting up of women's Self-Help Groups in villages by giving financial incentives. In many villages, Self-Help Groups have been doing great work in not only encouraging savings but also mobilizing women to fight against oppression in their families and villages. Self-Help Groups also offer easy credit to members to start or improve small-scale business enterprises.

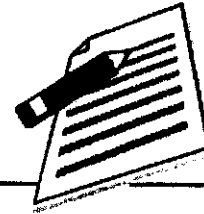
Swadhar was launched to provide rehabilitation to women in difficult circumstances such as destitute widows, women prisoners released from jail and without family support, women survivors of natural disaster and victims of sexual crimes. Shelter homes are planned to be constructed in which rehabilitation programmes will be offered on a holistic basis.

Activity: Visit a Self-Help Group, during one of its meetings and interact with the members. Prepare a report of about 250 words on their activities.

35.7.7 The Tenth Plan

The Tenth Plan (2002-07) became operational from April 1, 2002. A Working Group on Empowerment of women was constituted to prepare a base paper, to provide guidelines for future programmes for women's empowerment. This paper has made the following recommendations:

- Women must be helped to equip themselves to face the challenges being thrown up by globalization.
- Even though a number of development policies and programmes have been formulated to empower women, not all women could make use of these programmes because of the prevailing social discrimination against them. So investments on health, education and capacity building must be stepped up in future.
- During the last 10 years there has been a decline in expenditure on health, education and welfare. Since this affects women's development seriously, efforts



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must be made to increase investments on those sectors, which actually help women's development.

35.7.8 The Plans Reviewed

Since the planning period began in 1951, a number of programmes have been designed and implemented for women's empowerment. But all these efforts have not been able to remove gender discrimination inherent in such sectors as family life, health, education, employment and political participation. Dedicating one year to women's empowerment or one decade to girl children will not automatically bring about women's emancipation. There must be a commitment to make all these programmes functional in a way as to remove gaps between men and women on the one hand, and among women of different groups on the other. The need of the hour is an Action Plan, which believes in action and not just in talking about women. We will have to wait and see what the tenth plan does.

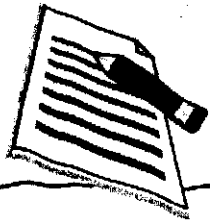
INTEXT QUESTIONS 35.4

Match the Following

A	B
1. Women's Empowerment Year	Networking of Self-Help Groups
2. Swayam Siddha	2001
3. Swadhar	Setting apart 30% of the funds for women's development in different sectors
4. Beginning of Tenth Plan	Programme for women in difficult situations
5. Women's Component Plan	2002

35.8 WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH VOLUNTARY ACTIONS

The women's movement in India has been a strong force in the struggle for empowerment of women. Prior to independence, organizations such as All India Women's Conference, Bharat Stri Mandal, Women's Indian Association, National Council of Women in India came into existence. These organizations no doubt raised issues of women's inequality, but their thought and action were not radical enough to question patriarchy. However, they organized campaigns against child marriage, *purdah* and demanded voting rights for women. These organizations



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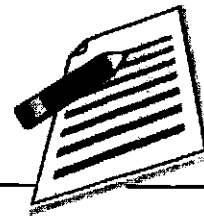
were founded and managed mostly by women of middle or upper classes. By 1940 when the freedom struggle was at its height, the All India Women's Congress had raised this question. 'Today our men are clamouring for political rights at the hands of an alien government. Have they conceded to their wives, their own sisters, their daughters, 'flesh of their flesh, blood of their blood', social equality and economic justice'. The sentiment echoed in this question is that political freedom does not necessarily bring to women freedom from oppression. Though the pre-independence women's movement could not organize the masses, it had definitely set the stage for a strong women's movement to emerge in India after the country gained independence.

Even after independence, it took nearly 25 years for the emergence of women's groups and organizations, which took up women's issues from a feminist viewpoint. The observance of the International Women's decade between 1975-1985 led to the starting of courses on women's studies in many universities and colleges as well as action programmes organized by women's groups to sensitize the society to women's issues. A number of women's groups emerged in different parts of the country to raise basic questions about gender inequality and initiate action to counter these inequalities. These groups, known as autonomous (independent) women's groups did not have a connection with any political party. These autonomous women's groups did not believe in simply submitting representations or sending delegations to meet political leaders and request for action. On the contrary, they created a forum for women to meet and discuss issues that were affecting them and chalk out strategies to tackle all forms of oppression in society. Though educated middle class women took the initiative in forming and managing these groups, they took up the problems of working class women, tribal women, peasant women and dalit women. Yet another unique feature of the autonomous women's movement was the participation of women from all castes and classes. The autonomous women's groups also joined hands with other progressive movements, such as student movements, tribal movements, environment movements, anti-price rise movements or movements for equal wages.

35.8.1 Empowerment through action

The autonomous women's groups believe in fighting oppression, injustice and discrimination against women in all social institutions. The groups do not compromise their principles for any political, social or economic policies or programmes, which bring indignity to women. They are not entirely dependent upon government funds. They are fully aware of the fact that empowerment cannot be achieved until basic gender inequalities in family, economy, education and political institution are removed. The autonomous women's groups have two strategies for women's empowerment – awareness and action. Autonomous women's groups

have taken up issues such as dowry, rape, family violence, alcoholism, sexual harassment at work place and many others. These groups are very active in their areas of location and work, and are being approached by women in need of support and help. They interact with the police, government representatives, employers or politicians to seek justice for women and uphold their self-respect.



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Street play depicting victimization of women

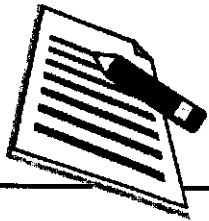
A women's meet organized on women's day

The strength of the autonomous women's groups has been realized by the state and its agencies, which often invite these groups to offer their advice on how matters relating to women could best be solved. The involvement of women's groups is also being sought in creating awareness among different groups, which the state is trying to empower through its policies. Women's groups may join hands, but only after they are convinced that their basic principles are not compromised.

INTENT QUESTIONS 35.5

State whether the following statements are 'True' or 'False'

1. The International Women's Decade was observed between 1975-1985.
True False
2. Autonomous women's groups do not interact with the police nor are they a part of the government.
True False
3. Women's movement is meant only for urban women.
True False
4. Women's empowerment is an ongoing process.
True False



Notes

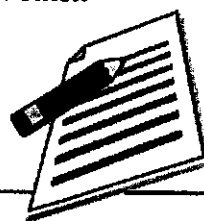
35.9 WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IS A PROCESS AND NOT A FINISHED PRODUCT

In a country, which has a history of 3000 years of women's oppression, the attempts at emancipating women from this oppression are only about 175 years old. Given the volume and diversity of the problems, which women face in India it requires a very committed and continued effort on the part of all of us to reach the goal of women's empowerment. Empowerment is a light, which has to be lit in every heart and only then will it become a mass movement. Neither the state nor the women's groups, by themselves can solve all the problems, which women face. For women to be empowered we need an enlightened society, and that includes each one of us, wherever we are.



WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

- For the past 175 years many laws have been passed to free women from the clutches of oppressive social customs and practices.
- Women can experience liberation only when they live in an environment, which enables them to enjoy the rights conferred on them. It is the creation of this conducive environment, which is the goal of empowerment.
- An empowered woman is one who has the freedom to take decisions in matters relating to her life. She is also free from violence in her family and all other social institutions.
- Women must be empowered, so that not only do they enrich their lives but can also build an enlightened society.
- Emancipation refers to freedom from all forms of oppression. But if a woman has to be emancipated from oppression, she has to be empowered.
- The social reform movements of the 19th century such as the movements against *sati*, removal of ban on widow marriage and ban on child marriage were the first systematic attempts to emancipate women from oppressive social customs.
- Progressive laws did not bring immediate changes in the attitudes of people. Though women became legally emancipated, there were still many obstacles to their emancipation in the true sense of the word.
- After India became independent both the state and the autonomous women's groups made efforts to change the situation of women.
- The state initiatives came mainly through the Five Year Plans. Till date, nine Five Year Plans have been completed and the tenth Five Year Plan has commenced on April 1, 2002.
- The first five plans adopted what was called the welfare approach in dealing with women's issues and problems. This approach treated women as mere targets of welfare programmes and not as participants in the development process.



Notes

- From the Sixth Plan onwards the shift took place from welfare to development. Women were considered as key participants in the development programmes.
- Towards the end of the Sixth Plan the Department of Women and Child development was set up.
- During the Seventh and Eighth five year plans three major documents and two major commissions relating to women's development were created.
- During the Ninth Plan the shift took place from development to empowerment approach. The year 2001 was declared as the Year of Women's Empowerment and a number of programmes were started during this year. Special mention may be made of *Swayamsiddha* and *Swadhar*. Women's Self-Help Groups, which are a real source of empowerment of women, are doing great work in a large number of India's villages in building capacities of women.
- All over India, a number of autonomous women's groups have been working to fight oppression of women. These groups do not receive financial support from the government, but generally mobilize their own human and financial resources to fight for the cause of women.
- Women's empowerment is a process and not a finished product. The light of empowerment has to be lit in every heart.



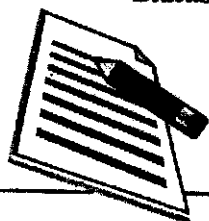
TERMINAL EXERCISE

Answer the following questions in 200-300 words.

1. What are the main achievements of the social reform movements of the 19th century in emancipating women?
2. Critically examine the role of Five Year Plans in women's empowerment.
3. Explain the role of autonomous women's groups in the women's movement.
4. Show how Self Help Groups can empower rural women.

GLOSSARY

1. **Autonomous Women's Groups:** Groups of women, which are independent of any form of state control or state financial support. They approach women's issues from a feminist point of view.
2. **Emancipation:** Freedom from any form of bondage or oppression.
3. **Empowerment:** Freedom to make choices, take decisions and enjoy freedom from violence in all social institutions.
4. **Five Year Plans:** The development plans drawn by the Planning Commission to bring about all round development of Indian Society.
5. **Towards Equality:** The Report submitted by the Committee on the Status of



Notes

Women in India in 1974, which showed that women were far behind men in enjoying equal rights conferred on them by the Constitution.

6. **Women's Movement:** Struggles by individuals and groups for liberating women from the clutches of social evils and for establishing equality between men and women.
7. **73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments:** The amendments to the Constitution of India, which reserved one third of the seats in local governing bodies such as Panchayats and municipalities for women.



ANSWER TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

35.1

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| 1. 2001 | 2. emancipation |
| 3. empowered woman | 4. enlightened |

35.2

- | | |
|---------|--|
| 1. 2002 | 2. Struggle for women's liberation. |
| 3. 1856 | 4. 14 years for a girl and 18 for a boy. |

35.3

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------|
| 1. 1951 | 2. Welfare |
| 3. National Commission on Women | 4. VIII Plan |

35.4

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| 1. Women's Empowerment Year | 2001 |
| 2. Swayam Siddha | Networking of Self-Help Groups |
| 3. Swadhar | Programme for women in difficult situations |
| 4. Beginning of Tenth Plan | 2002 |
| 5. Women's Component Plan | Setting apart 30% of the funds for women's development in different sectors |

35.5

- | | |
|----------|----------|
| 1. True | 2. False |
| 3. False | 4. True |