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Women and philanthropy in India

Abstract

Women's philanthropy has deep roots in India. A historical survey shows that despite their generally low socio-economic status, Indian women made significant contributions to social progress even while outside the formal power and profit structure. This article also analyses the role of religion, custom, caste and class, political and social movements, and the legal and political structure in motivating and facilitating as well as in restraining women's philanthropy. It is lack of economic independence and an enabling socio-legal structure that has inhibited social entrepreneurship among women, while socio-political movements have encouraged it.

Introduction

Although the Indian state plays a major role in meeting welfare and development needs, its reach – in terms of need or geography – is limited. The gap between need and state provision has been met by philanthropy: the giving of time, effort and money for promoting the public good, without expectation of return. Until the break-up of self-sufficient village communities began under British colonial rule (1757-1947), individual welfare was primarily the responsibility of the family and of the village community. Although the state began to play an increasingly important role in people's lives as British rule progressed, alien government and limited resources ensured that provision of welfare services remained dependent on private charity, albeit more formally organised in charitable institutions. These charitable organisations, endowed by the wealthy and dependent on volunteers and donations, worked both for the relief of distress and for lasting social improvement. They mark the beginning of modern philanthropy in India.

Unfortunately, although the practice of philanthropy is almost as old as Indian civilisation, serious scholarship has concerned itself hardly at all with this topic. This is even more true of women's role in philanthropy, where the field of women's studies has yet to make any inroads. Recent studies of the Indian women's movement (e.g. Shah, 1984; Gandhi and Shah, 1991; Kumar, 1993) have touched on women as 'doers', and some historians of social work have glanced at voluntary social work by women, but there are no historical studies, theoretical analyses or empirical surveys of women as philanthropists.

Despite the low socio-economic status of the Indian woman, and contrary to popular perception, women's philanthropy has deep roots in India and women have made significant contributions to social progress even while remaining outside the formal power and profit structure. The examination here is chronological, treating somewhat separately the colonial and post-Independence periods. Women are considered as donors, as volunteers/social entrepreneurs, and as beneficiaries. These categories are not exclusive: a woman may be both donor and volunteer, and when the organisation's work improves the position of women generally, may also be a beneficiary. The focus is on middle- and upper-class women, for historically only these women had money for donation or time for volunteering. Only since the 1960s have poor women organised themselves into self-help and support organisations, contributing money (often as membership dues) and volunteering for organisational work.

The religious basis of philanthropy

In India charitable giving was a social obligation nurtured and sustained by religion. Intrinsic to Hinduism are the concepts of *dharma* or sacred duty expressed in right behaviour, and *karma*, the law of moral and physical cause and effect which brought the good and bad results of behaviour. Compassion or *karuna* was a virtue, and the Hindu was enjoined to undertake *yajna* (sacrifice), and *dana* (charity). Social obligation is also engendered by discharging the three debts or *rina*: *rishi rina* or debt to the sages (discharged by advancement of knowledge), *deva rina* or debt to the gods (discharged by service to humans), and *pitra rina* or debt to the ancestors (discharged by propitiation of ancestor spirits).

In the Vedic period (c. 1500-500 B.C.) *dana* and *yajna* were prescribed to acquire religious merit and a place in heaven. The Upanishads and the Bhagvat Gita, the most sacred Hindu texts, modified this motivation; the Gita enjoined selfless service to fellow humans to realise the Divine in oneself and to experience the unity of Life. The Gita's recasting of

yajna and *dana* into the ideals of *loka sangraha* or universal human welfare became the basis for all subsequent Hindu social work (see Lokeshwarananda, 1968, pp.75-81; Ranganathananda, 1968, pp.46-52). Buddhist and Jaina religious canons had analogous prescriptions for charity. Islam, which came to India in the twelfth century and preached similar ideas about charity, brought with it a system of *zakat*, which required individuals to pay a certain percentage of their income to charity.

According to the ancient texts, the most precious gifts were those which enhanced spiritual knowledge, followed by secular knowledge; the least meritorious giving satisfied physical needs. Thus, in pre-British times, the most popular gifts were land, housing or money to build or maintain temples, and endowments for maintenance of monasteries and educational institutions. Giving to Brahmin teachers, maintaining poor students, and presenting copies of manuscripts to schools and monasteries were popular gifts of secular knowledge. Other charitable activities included provision of food and drink to pilgrims at sacred places, and the care of the sick.

Women, no less than men, were motivated by religious ideals to donate time and money in the service of the needy. That they did so is clear from legends, inscriptions and religious texts. While the charity of the average woman in pre-British times was probably limited to alms-giving to mendicants and students, there are several instances on record of wealthy women, especially queens and wives of wealthy merchants, giving wealth and houses to monastic orders, endowing temples, and building tanks and wells for public use.

Shifts in traditional values

The British introduction of Western ideas and Christian ethics, new land and judicial systems, and modern industry and commerce dramatically affected traditional philanthropy. Missionary educational and charitable institutions established to spread the Christian message of service to humankind both reinforced and transformed indigenous charitable traditions. Liberals in the new elite were also influenced by English utilitarianism and evangelism, which stressed education as a panacea for India's problems. Thus, education became the most favoured field for philanthropy in the colonial period. This was not a departure from traditional values, but instead of supporting temples and Brahmin priests, philanthropy was directed to modern secular schools. Imperialist theory held that 'moral and material progress' was only possible through British institutions. Public resources could not support such institutions and, moreover, the British were proud of

their charitable institutions which stood 'as a monument to the superiority of voluntary action' (Owen, 1964, p.164). British civil servants in India endeavoured to create the same ethos by encouraging prominent Indians to donate to 'productive' causes.

Although they continued the older forms of giving, both the traditional merchant elite and the new Western educated elite took to new philanthropic ventures, which not only gave them social prestige but was also good for their business and social advancement (see Haynes, 1987). These shifts in general philanthropic attitudes and values inevitably influenced women as well as men, so that those who could, endowed or donated to new institutions, especially educational institutions. Most, however, were constrained in their giving by having no independent economic means. Many therefore turned to volunteering.

Women and reform

Of greater consequence to women's philanthropy than shifts in traditional values was a change in belief about women's social position, as the rights of women became an issue in the nineteenth century. Almost up to the beginning of the Christian era, Indian women enjoyed a high social position, but by then women were beginning to be pushed to a subordinate status. Manu, the famous Hindu law-giver of the early Christian era, decreed that:

> By a young girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent (*Manusmriti*, v, 147-56, quoted in Sarasvati, 1888/1984, pp.58-9).

Girls began to be denied education, and were married off in childhood. If widowed they could not remarry and led such a harshly austere life that many preferred to commit *suttee* (immolate themselves on their husband's pyre), which came to be considered an act of meritorious devotion. Wage work was taboo, so women of the upper castes and class had no economic independence, and had limited property rights. Most of India followed a patrilineal system: a joint family with common property ruled by the eldest male was the norm.

Even where women enjoyed some rights in property, they had only a life interest and did not enjoy full ownership rights and could not alienate, sell or mortgage it. After the death of her husband, a widow had only a right of maintenance and could not claim any other rights in joint family property. A widow's right of usufruct over her husband's

landed property was also subject to her not remarrying. But there was one class of property over which women had full control: the *stridhana* (women's wealth) given at the time of marriage. A woman was considered the absolute owner of such property and could dispose of it any way she liked. It usually went to her daughter after death. Theoretically, a woman had absolute control over her *stridhana* but, in practice, it was often managed by the husband and used for the family.

In contrast, Muslim women in India enjoyed full property rights, although their share in the property was limited to half the share of the male of the same degree, and a widow's share was limited to one-eighth. A woman was entitled to a dower from her husband which she could, theoretically, dispose of as she wanted, whereas she could dispose of her other property only up to a third (see Mehta, 1987; Singh, 1989). Although they had better property rights, Muslim women suffered many of the same disabilities as Hindus – limited social mobility due to confinement within purdah and lack of education – so that the property rights were again more apparent than real. With such restrictive property rights, it is not surprising that there were few women donors. Although a strong religious motivation to philanthropy would have prompted women to engage in philanthropic activities, their low position in society would have decidedly restricted their ability to act in the public domain. Only women with a sizeable *stridhana* could indulge their philanthropic impulse on any significant scale; it is noteworthy that many of them did devote their wealth to good purposes.

With the spread of Western education, the emergent bourgeoisie found Indian religion and society wanting in many respects, particularly regarding the position of women. The subsequent reform movement campaigned against polytheism, caste, idolatry and the exploitation of women. The early campaigners for education of women, for abolition of child marriages, and for removing the disabilities suffered by widows were *men*; significantly, most were more concerned with improving the position of women in the family than their position in society.

The most important measure for improvement of women's rights was education. The first missionary girls schools opened in the 1810s in Bombay and Bengal, and thereafter education of girls became an important plank of reform. In 1854 only 25,000 girls were enrolled in schools; by 1902 the number had risen to 256,000 (Shah, 1984). The impact of education was quickly visible. The mid-century organisations to educate women, to ameliorate the lot of widows and so on were almost entirely at the initiative of male reformers. By the late 1800s women began to form their own organisations. Several Christian

missions – among them Bengal's Serampur Mission and Bangalore's Good Shepherd Convent – set up welfare organisations for destitute women, and in Pandharpur one of the first homes for abandoned babies was set up in 1875. D.K. Karve, one of the leading male reformers campaigning for widow remarriage and women's education, set up the first university for women in 1916.

More significant from the point of view of volunteering was the emergence of a new public activity: social service by widowed women for themselves and for the country. One of the most remarkable of these was Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922). In 1882 she formed a women's organisation in Pune, and in 1889 started Sharada Sadan, a home and school for widows where they were taught skills to rehabilitate themselves (Kumar, 1993). In central India, Kamlabai Hospet, herself a child widow, trained herself as a nurse and started the Matru Sewa Mandir in 1904 to serve the maternity and other medical needs of poor women. Many widows themselves became volunteers in such organisations and helped run them. For instance, the widows' home set up by Karve expanded largely due to the efforts of his sister-in-law, Parvatibai Athavale, who was widowed at the age of 20. In her autobiography she describes her travels throughout India to raise money for the Home. In all, she collected some 70,000 Rupees (a large sum for the time) in 20 years, a difficult feat since more public attention was given to political causes, and non-female institutions, than those for women (Athavale, 1928).

In Bengal, too, women were setting up associations to rehabilitate destitute women. One notable woman philanthropist was Swarnakumari Debi of the elite Tagore family. In 1886 she founded the Ladies Association to promote a spirit of service among Indian women, and to help widows and orphans by educating them. She raised money by holding women's handicraft fairs at which products made by women were sold to women. Later, she set up the Hiranmoyee Widow's Industrial Home (Kumar, 1993). Among the few women who endowed institutions for charitable causes was Maharani Chimnabai of Baroda State. She was actively involved in welfare activities for women and set an example for aristocratic philanthropy by founding several women's health, political and education organisations.

Until the late 1800s, women's agendas were largely welfare-oriented and non-political. Between 1880 and 1930, a women's movement emerged (Kumar, 1993), interwoven with the dominant events and ideologies of the day. In particular, the question of women's emancipation became enmeshed with emergent nationalism. On the one hand, women were concerned with the subordinate social condition of women. On the other, they saw themselves as mothers of the nation with a responsibility to emancipate the country from political

bondage. Therefore, action by women took two forms: welfare work, and struggle for political rights and social reforms through legislation. The early twentieth century saw a proliferation of widow's homes and orphanages with an emphasis on education and training for employment. Women also expanded their role in relief work during plagues, famines and floods. At the same time, several significant national organisations were established to provide a political platform for women.

Women were realising the importance of influencing the political process to make larger and lasting changes in women's position. Inspired by the Western suffrage movement, Indian women's organisations campaigned for the vote and for representation in legislative bodies, and once this was achieved they lobbied for legislative reforms from within and without political bodies (see Basu and Ray, 1990; see also Shah, 1984). Many of the women leaders of the day were involved both in politics and social work. They thus ensured that women and children's needs would be on the national agenda. But few women held political power, and women had more impact upon the national agenda through demonstrations and filing of memoranda. Women also moved into the the newly available avenue of publishing opened up by the nationalist struggle. Many started or funded the publication of journals with a view to raising the self-awareness of women.

Most of the women's associations were privately funded from individual donations and gifts by the wealthy, and hardly any funding was offered by the state. State attitude towards such organisations was ambivalent. On the one hand, it encouraged women's volunteering, the formation of women's organisations, and their participation in public life as signs of women's awakening and the success of its education policy. Wives of rulers were active in founding or in volunteering in women's and other charitable organisations, such as the YWCA, industrial homes and the Red Cross, and this provided an example to other Indian women. At the same time, since women's emancipation and the agendas of women's organisations were inextricably bound up with the freedom struggle, it viewed them with disfavour, especially those with a more political agenda.

Women and Gandhi

With the entry of Mahatma Gandhi on the Indian political scene in the 1920s, women's philanthropy entered yet another phase. Gandhi's emphasis on non-violent means of struggle inevitably made him turn to women to participate, both in the freedom struggle and in the task

of reconstructing and regenerating Indian society. He sought to achieve both national freedom and emancipation of women by encouraging women to take an active part in social and political life, but as purely volunteer and not paid work. He believed the primary duty of women was to raise the next generation of the nation. Equally, he believed that they should become self-confident and develop their full potential through volunteer work. He therefore advocated women's social education, self-direction and self-help.

The result was a tremendous unleashing of woman power. Many women were inspired to found new organisations and to involve themselves in work, not only for other women but also for all the underprivileged and the disabled in society. Among those influenced by Gandhi were several women from wealthy families. Janaki Devi Bajaj, widowed wife of a leading industrialist, became a great worker in the Bhoodan movement for more equal land distribution in rural India. The Sarabhai family, leading mill owners in West India, were also deeply influenced by Gandhi, and both women and men took to philanthropic work, each contributing to their own field of interest.

Gandhi cast his spell not only on the aristocratic but also on the average Indian woman. Although it is impossible to record the names of the many Hindu and Muslim women who contributed or raised money to found charitable organisations for women in pre-Independence India, mention needs to be made of Durgabai Deshmukh who raised women's volunteering to new heights. After an initiation in the freedom struggle, Durgabai became a lawyer and fought many cases on behalf of women. She simultaneously founded one of the biggest women's welfare organisations, and as member of India's Planning Commission influenced government policy and set up the Central Social Welfare Board to co-ordinate, help and develop existing voluntary social work in India.

It is important to note that all these social entrepreneurs and philanthropists accepted the Gandhian ideology that women's prime function and responsibility were to be housewife and mother and that, while men and women had equal rights, their duties were different. The organisations they belonged to believed in a complementary ordering of gender relations in society and were not seeking a radical change in these. Women's volunteering was an extension outside the home of their traditional role of nurturing and caring, and charitable giving by women followed a similar pattern in the types of organisations endowed and assisted. To summarise several points of interest about philanthropy in the colonial period:

- The period represents a transition from individual charity to organised philanthropy distinguished by a faith in collective action to bring about social change.
- Although the period was rich in the development of women's philan- thropy, it was not necessarily distinguished by endowments of large fortunes by women for charity. Women's organisations, both activist and welfare, were funded almost entirely from private funds since no largesse could be expected from an alien government, especially for nationalist causes. This means that the bequests and donations which funded women's organisations during the period came largely from *stridhana*.
- The most distinctive characteristic of philanthropy during this period was the emergence of volunteering and social entrepreneurship. A generation of educated women took on social responsibility in the public domain for the first time, and collected funds and volunteered time in large numbers.
- In the emancipation of women, men played a significant role. Even when women began to take charge to fight for their rights, there was no overt or organised gender confrontation or conflict as in the Western world at the time, although undoubtedly women in the vanguard faced some opposition or criticism at home and in society.
- Philanthropic effort was largely concentrated in three areas: the education of women and girls; the relief of distress, especially of vulnerable women such as child widows, unmarried mothers, orphans and deserted women through provision of shelter and schemes for economic independence; and the political and legal emancipation of women.

Women as donors in contemporary India

The nationalist and Gandhian fervour that motivated women's philanthropy ceased to be a strong motive force after Independence (1947). Centralised planning was adopted in the 1950s to foster modernisation. As the state increased its role in welfare and development activities, there was a corresponding decrease in both voluntary action and philanthropic giving, accelerated by urbanisation which diminished the sense of kinship and community responsibility. Inflation, the rise of consumerism, and the high tax regime instituted to finance government programmes all reduced private wealth and donations. Taxes were considered akin to charitable contributions by many wealthy families. Misuse of funds by some charitable organisations and the use of trusts as tax dodges by some businesses also discredited

philanthropy. Disinterest in philanthropy extended to women as well; immediately after Independence, women largely stopped taking an active interest in social issues.

In the late 1960s, however, the picture changed. There was a growing impatience not only with the government's inefficiency and ineffectiveness, but also with the apathy and dependent mentality of the masses. People turned once again to charitable activity as an instrument of social change. There was a notable growth of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to undertake relief and developmental work. Once again, businesses and wealthy individuals began to support voluntary action with donations, especially once tax policy developed exemptions for philanthropy. Women's philanthropy, however, remained lethargic. The 1956 Hindu Succession Act greatly enhanced women's property rights but left important loopholes which perpetuated women's inequality. The 1975 National Committee on the Status of Women reviewed these loopholes and the inferior status of women of other religions. The committee made proposals to remove discrimination, but the picture has not changed substantially. The net result is that in practice women have not been able to inherit and bequeath family fortunes.

Whether women's charitable donations would have increased if property laws were more favourable is difficult to say, but the fact is they are still scant. With rare exceptions, no trust, foundation or institution of any size has been endowed by women in contemporary times. The tradition of philanthropy for women by male benefactors has continued. The first women's university in India, started by D.K. Karve in 1916, was endowed by the wealthy Sir Thakersay in memory of his mother, and is today known as the Srimati Nathibai Damodar Thakersay (SNDT) University. More recently, the Chameli Devi Foundation was set up to give scholarships to deserving women journalists, and the Neerja Bhanot Foundation to give awards to women of exceptional courage in memory of an air hostess who died in a hijacking. But women-exclusive institutions commemorating female relatives are still rare.

Women and volunteering

Women's volunteer work was dominated by Gandhi-influenced traditional women's organisations, and remained listless until the 1960s. In the late 1960s and early 1970s there was a sudden mushrooming of women's organisations, very different from the earlier ones, in response to a sudden acceleration of women's interest in social and economic issues. Women began to participate in public campaigns to protest at inefficiency and corruption in government, and the failure

of the development model to ease poverty and inequity. The Western women's liberation movement, the human rights movement, the International Women's Year in 1975, and the National Committee on the Status of Women which highlighted the disadvantaged position of Indian women all led to a radicalisation of women. The 1975 National Emergency and the repression it caused led to a focus on civil liberties, in particular violence against women. The focus of campaigns to improve women's lives shifted from needs to rights; not only the right to parity but also to self-determination (Kumar, 1993, p.3).

Initially the struggle was led by women activists working with progressive, radical and leftist organisations fighting caste and class domination, and was more anti-state than anti-patriarchy. Women activists soon saw that progressive organisations' concerns did not extend to gender discrimination, and formed independent autonomous organisations of women. A further development was the growth of participatory groups of poor and low-caste women who realised that self-help would bring more enduring results than handouts. The result was a proliferation of women's organisations, in three broad categories:

- *'Women in development' organisations*, which sought to introduce new skills and technologies for women's employment and strategies to see that women were not exploited by forces of caste, class and patriarchy. The emphasis was on empowerment and development.
- *Radical social action groups*, which asserted that the gender-based division of labour and inheritance laws oppressed women. They concentrated on protest, and political and social pressure to achieve their objectives.
- *Support groups*, which offered legal aid and advice, credit, research and documentation, counselling and relief during crises.

Women have also been volunteers in a number of other welfare and development agencies working with and for the poor and disabled, such as the Red Cross and the YWCA. No discussion of contemporary women's philanthropy would be complete without mention of Mother Teresa and her workers, a majority of whom are women. Women also constitute a large part of the paid employed staff of the non-profit sector. The jobs are relatively lower paid than comparable jobs in the government or in the for-profit sector, but women have gravitated to them in part because of the flexibility they offer them to combine home and career.

It is impossible to estimate with any degree of accuracy the current number of women's organisations in India. The Indian Social Studies Trust estimates nearly 50,000 women's organisations in India, although it lists only 50 as being significant in degree of participation and

outreach among women. The directory of NGOs published by the Industrial Development Bank of India (IDBI) numbers less than 144 exclusively women's NGO's, but if charitable welfare organisations for women are included, the figure is likely to be much higher. There are also no statistics on the number of women volunteers or paid employees working in women's or other non-profit organisations, and therefore there is no way to quantify the value of women's volunteer or paid work. Nor is it possible to estimate the charitable contributions which women's organisations represent, or identify the favoured fields of donation.

The new women's organisations are as much an expression of women's philanthropy as the older organisations, but there are important differences between them. In the pre-Independence period, many of the women's charitable organisations were the result of one outstanding personality who either donated her own money or collected funds from different sources. Although some new organisations are also born of the vision and leadership of one individual, many are the result of collective effort by students and professionals motivated by feminist ideology, rather than by religion, liberal ideals or nationalism. They view themselves not as charitable workers but as members in a common cause with a shared ideology[1] (Kumar, 1993, p.144).

In contrast to the earlier women's groups which were confined to the urban middle and upper classes, the new women's groups mobilise and sensitise women at all class and caste levels to the realities of women's lives, and have created in them a desire to challenge social and legal conventions. The new volunteers are not necessarily urban, or upper class and caste, although many wealthy women donate their time and money to charitable organisations.

The newer groups also differ from those of the earlier period in the pattern of their funding. While the earlier groups depended almost entirely on private contributions, the sources of funding today are more varied. Unfortunately, there are few detailed studies on how women's organisations are funded. An exception is a study by Gandhi and Shah (1991), who examine funding as an important issue for sustaining the women's movement, although there are no quantitative comparisons of different funding sources. On the basis of conversations with some women's groups and the Gandhi and Shah work, it is clear that outright and regular donations or bequests count for less than other means of funding. In general, women's groups rely on raising funds from membership fees, from special charitable events and sale of goods, and from government or foreign funding organisations.

There are no overall figures to indicate the total size of government or foreign funding of NGOs, either general or women-exclusive, nor

of their relative importance in the sector, or relative to individual giving. Impressionistically, the importance of different sources of funding appears to vary from organisation to organisation, depending particularly on its ideological stance and its skill in accessing one source or the other. Women's welfare and development agencies seem to depend more on government and foreign funding than do radical social action groups, who are more particular about their sources of funds since these can influence the direction of programmes. Largely due to fear of ideological subversion, most radical organisations prefer to forgo government and foreign money and to generate funds from membership dues, fundraising events, and the sale of goods or services.

Gandhi and Shah point out that there is a positive side to this mode of fundraising since it ensures active involvement and participation of donors, and also acts as political education and consciousness-raising. A problem is that it takes much time and raises limited amounts of money (Gandhi and Shah, 1991, pp.298-9). Moreover, although there are no supporting data, it appears that the average woman does not necessarily want to give to women's causes alone and is drawn to general welfare-oriented charities, especially those concerned with children. Although men also endow and donate to institutions in memory or in honour of women, they are less enthusiastic about contributing to women-exclusive organisations or causes, especially if they are considered radical in any way. From Gandhi and Shah's study, it appears that business donors are less likely to favour radical women's organisations and vice versa, although businesses contribute more readily to traditional anti-poverty programmes for women. The study observes that, in general, women's groups find that businesses are interested in getting political mileage through their funding and are uninterested in small 'non-aligned' groups and their alternative development models (Gandhi and Shah, 1991, pp.300-301).

Conclusion

In many societies, religion is an enabling factor in philanthropy, opening 'space' for women and legitimising their role in the public domain. In India, however, religion has played an ambiguous role. While Hinduism and Islam have motivated women to be more charitable in the sense of donating money for the public good, they have restrained women from acting in the public domain, limiting their mobility and independence of action. The superimposition of a Christian ethic has been somewhat different. It encouraged women's volunteerism and enabled the emergence of women's volunteerism outside the home, but its values were patriarchal and did not encourage women

to play a more active role in other spheres, especially where this was likely to lead to changes in gender relations in society. Moreover, for the younger generation of urban, upper- and middle-class women, religion is beginning to count for less than a secular humanitarian ethic. Among lower-class and caste women too, participation in women's organisations represents more a secular desire for self-betterment and an expression of sisterly solidarity than religious belief.

Given that their existing disabilities were sanctioned by traditional and religious influences, it was not unnatural that women gravitated towards 'maternalist' agendas, in the institutions they supported with time and money, and in the causes they lobbied for change in laws and policies. Although both men reformers and the government – colonial and national – showed concern for women's plight and welfare, this was, and continues to be, paternalistic concern within a patriarchal framework. For this reason women are likely to continue to focus on issues of women and children, though not exclusively. With more secularisation and greater mobility, their agendas are likely to become more diverse, especially since even in the past Indian women have served not only women's interests but also wider causes such as freedom from colonial rule, maintenance of civil liberties, and elimination of government corruption and inefficiency.

In both the colonial and post-Independence periods, the state has represented strong centralised authority, but this has not made much difference to women's philanthropy either directly, or indirectly through affecting public policy. The different political conditions made a difference of degree rather than substance in the nature of women's philanthropic activities. Since there is no point of comparison, it is difficult to prove the thesis that women's organisations have more authority in weak states than in centralised ones. If one talks of authority relative to men's, then in neither period can women's organisations be said to have had more power, political or otherwise, than other national organisations in India, and it is improbable that they would have had relatively more power with a weaker central authority.

It is not necessarily through direct political participation that women have made an impact on national agendas, especially on women's matters. If anything, the presence of women at the head of government or in legislatures has counted for less than their organised presence outside. By exercising their vote in large numbers, women – especially poor women in rural and urban areas – have voted out governments they did not like. And through research, use of the media, public demonstrations and lobbying, they have brought women's issues to centre stage. At the same time it cannot be denied that women's

achievements in the social and political sphere would have been greater if they had had direct access to political power.

The history of women's social entrepreneurship also shows that women in India, as elsewhere, have used multiple organisational strategies to carve out a niche for themselves, and to exercise power indirectly, in the absence of direct access. They have created women-exclusive organisations, and women's political parties, trade unions and so on, but equally they have worked through gender-neutral non-profit organisations like the Red Cross. But clearly it is women-exclusive organisations which not only enable women to exercise more power both within and without the organisation but also allow *more* women to exercise or share that power. The women-exclusive organisations confer an identity, a sense of worth and a feeling of solidarity on numbers of women and enables some leaders to move on to other more important positions, elected or appointed. In this sense, women's volunteering or social entrepreneurial activity enables them to create alternative or parallel power structures and to use them for politicising and socialising women, either directly or indirectly.

It is also clear that, in their struggle for recognition of their rights and needs by the state and society, Indian women have been influenced and helped by liberal and feminist movements outside India, as well as by foreign funding. Although one cannot go so far as to say that these have played a crucial role in opening a 'space' for civil society, undeniably they have contributed ideas and helped women sustain causes or organisations until their acceptance by the government and society. More importantly, perhaps, they have been instrumental in setting up pressures on the government to move in the desired direction.

Notes

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