
Feminism in India: Some recent trends

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Abstract

Feminism is a concept, which arose parallel with the rise of the women questions and movement. India is no exception. Prior to the 20thC the women issues were not considered important by the society as well as writers. Women issues were private issues but now-a-days gender issues have a different dimension, which has given a new direction to feminism.

KEYWORDS: feminism, gender, environment

INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a concept which evolved in Europe around 1960s. The main issues focused by feminism are based on equal rights for both sexes and suffrage. The writings of women like Mary Wollstonecraft(1759-1797)ⁱ, Virginia Woolf(1882-1941)ⁱⁱ and Simone De Beauvoir(1908-1986)ⁱⁱⁱ are considered watershed of the feminism. In India the feminism took its shape in the 19th C. The social reform movements like ban on Sati, prohibition of Child marriage, spread of education and widow remarriage were the major issues addressed in colonial India.

HISTORY

Feminism as a concept was intertwined with the upper class during the colonial age. Anupama Rao considered it as, 'Brahmanical Feminism'^{iv}. She focused mainly on the reforms like widow remarriage confined to women. Through these reforms elite or bhradramahila got certain benefits atleast within home. Mahatma phule and his wife dealt with problems relating women of downtrodden castes. Later Tarabai Shinde did not consider family and marriage as sacred institutions as it is portrayed. Women were (including Tarabai) victims of patriarchal society. They were portrayed with a typical male stereotype. But in the 19th C the concept of feminism changed. They were identified with nationhood and nationality. Nationalism now required women as "Mother India" which accompanied the concept of physical purity. This model was reinforced among women. Here we bring into notice the concept of 'Matribhumi'. Here we find the concept women revivalism as against Hindu and Muslim revivalism. Our traditions of enlightened women were highlighted like Gargi, Maitrayee. The issues of women emancipation took a back seat. In other words feminism took an u-

turn to nationalism.^v This argument was raised to free our colonial minds from the concept of “White Mans Burden” and the colonial “civilising mission”. So the feminism in this stage was a bit blurred, by the notion of nationalism. In contrast women were portrayed as a unit fighting for the cause of nationalism. Amidst all these there we find the contributions of Rasusundari Devi who in her limited way contributed to feminism. After independence the situation was all the same, till 1971 when the ‘Committee on the status of Women in India’ was set up under the recommendation of UNO. They published a report named ‘Towards Equality’^{vi} and it was placed before the parliament. It was the year of the declaration of the International women’s day. Towards Equality focused on Equality of women on socio-economic and political grounds, protection of society during child bearing and rearing practices. Even the society should also move towards women’s achieving these goals following the lines of the constitution. Though the violence meted out to women were out of the purview of this report.

Feminist issues were part of the human rights issues, Feminism during this period was in dilemma. During this period NGOs and women groups came into existence, along with this we hear the involvement of women in environmental movements (eco feminism). Along with government, non government organisations came forward to redress the feminist issues. The feminist issues got political overtones during this phase, and demands were raised for legal actions against any injustices meted out to the women.

CASE STUDY

In this regard the Roop Kanwar^{vii} case of Rajasthan deserves special attention. The government responded to it immediately by banning sati, but still intermittent cases were reported where women were forced to commit Sati. Similar examples can be cited of the Delhi Rape victim (Nirbhaya) was considered nameless, there are a lot of similar cases of social inequality and stigma attached to women. Similarly the unequal sex ratio in Himachal Pradesh, Punjab hints towards female infanticide. The women trafficking from West Bengal and Bangladesh all hint towards the above claim.

ECOFEMINISM

Another important issue in the 1970s was the growth of Eco-feminism. Vandana Shiva propagated this theory and the great example of it was Chipko movement. Vandana has drawn a connection between women and nature whereby this concept arises. She is perhaps best known for her book, ‘Staying Alive’^{viii}. In this book Shiva analyses the

results of the introduction of Green revolution in India. Shiva has used the chipko movement as a basis for this analysis. The book focuses on the struggle of the Indian women in her efforts in sustaining and conserving life. Although nature is central to human survival, progress that threatens survival. With colonialism this ecological concept was undermined. Modern economic life interrupted the symbiotic relationship between women and nature. In its place the patriarchy introduced a knowledge system, which uses methods that undermine women and exploit nature. To institutionalize the system, management of nature was centralized with the purpose of promoting economic growth. In this economic model the wealth created by nature and women's work became subsidiary to men. But when nature is exploited maximum problem comes over to women and children. The result is environmental crisis, natural calamity, marginalization of women, dispossession, migration, poverty, violence and loss of lives. In order to make development sustainable, Shiva added feminine aspect to environmentalism.

From 1990s militant aspect of feminism came to forefront. The focus of this period was creating feminist space within fundamentalist agenda. Here Hindutva ideology came to the fore front where male of community were considered as threatening for any hindu women. Tanika Sarkar has pointed out to the fact that this righteous women's organization indirectly started controlling the women's life in the name of protection.^{ix}

The feminist movement at a certain point got linked with social issues like Narmada Bachao Andolan, compensation for Bhopal Gas victims, Price rise movements, bringing changes in PNDT Act and other sorts domestic abuse issues.

THIRD WORLD FEMINISM

Then in a multicultural and multilingual country like India feminism has got a new name called Third world Feminism. The feminism in India is not a by product of the west and secondly it is not a homogenous category. So the issue of feminism can't be explained simply. Feminism is facing lot of challenges from the ingrained patriarchal heritage, economic dependence of women on men, illeracy of women, and finally religious and caste identities pose lot of threat to the development of feminism in India. So feminism in India has to go a long way towards realization of its goal.^x

RECENT TRENDS

Besides discussing the gloomy aspect feminism in India, the positive side has been brought in limelight i.e. the various initiative taken by the government in promoting

“gender” issues in primary ,secondary school text books, as well as the introduction of women studies courses in India’s Higher Education has made the matter easier.^{xi}The literature written nowadays also depict the changing trends ,like Ram Mehta’s “Divorced Hindu Women”^{xii}, Manisha Roy also point towards the tussle of women between family and career. Padmini Sengupta’s “Women Workers in India” points towards the work culture in modern world-All these hints towards new trends in women history writing which create a “new culture”, with new analytical tools, methods and sources. Besides these feminine issues like concepts of physiology, sexuality, birth control are also brought to light.

Still there are flaws and empediments in the study like lack of biographical materials in the study like lack of biographical materials like memoirs, diaries from Indian women .Even topics like “Women in Hinduism”, “Women in Islam” are being discussed. But there is no debate regarding the existence of the problems of the women in the past and present. Nowadays a recent trend is noticeable i.e not seeing women issues through the eyes of the occident, it has now become more women centric and region centric rather than anti male, anti family and creating unnecessary gender bias. So these researches have not eliminated the problems faced by the women in India but atleast changed the outlook of the society and researchers towards the issue.

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ⁱⁱ She wrote ‘A room of One’s own’also indicate to feminism.

ⁱⁱⁱ ‘The second sex’ written by her is a foundation to feminism.

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