

## A STUDY OF FEMINISM IN INDIA

**Nazim Mohi Ud Din Wani**

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of Political Science and Public Administration

Annamalai University, Tamil Nadu

### **Abstract**

*Sadly, women in India have faced significant violations of their human rights for centuries. In the case of gender inequality, India is one of the worst countries in south Asia after Afghanistan. From rape and domestic violence to forced labor and denial of educational opportunities, the struggle for rights and empowerment is a daunting one for Indian women. In the world's second-largest country, hundreds of millions of women are still affected by some of these issues. Women's rights are vital to the success and growth of developing nations, making projects that empower Indian women vital to the well-being of the entire country. In India, feminist movement was started as a reform movement for women and its credit goes to some great social reformers who were mainly men e.g. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatama Gandhi, Justice Ranade and Ishwar Chand Vidhyasagar etc. Later on it was joined by some great women icon of India as Sarojini Naidu, Indira Gandhi and many more. While Indian women and girls technically have constitutional rights equal to men in many regards — including citizenship and access to primary education — the reality is often radically different. Socially, women can be regarded as lesser humans, and face frightening levels of sexual assault and violence. Because India has a population of 1.2 billion, and has many distinct cultural groups, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to generalize about the population of the entire country. However, it is entirely clear that overall, women need advocates and allies across the country that will fight with them for not only their safety and health, but also for access to further opportunities for empowerment and autonomy.*

### **Introduction**

In the mid-1800s the term ‘feminism’ was used to refer to “the qualities of females”, and it was not until after the First International Women’s Conference in Paris in 1892 that the term, following the French term feminist, was used regularly in English for a belief in and advocacy of equal rights for women based on the idea of the equality of the sexes.

Feminism is a range of political movements, ideologies, and social movements that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve political, economic, personal, and social rights for women. This includes seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment.

Feminist movements have campaigned and continue to campaign for women's rights, including the right to vote, to hold public office, to work, to earn fair wages or equal pay, to own property, to receive education, to enter contracts, to have equal rights within marriage, and to

have maternity leave. Feminists have also worked to promote bodily autonomy and integrity, and to protect women and girls from rape, sexual harassment, and domestic violence.

Feminism in India is a set of movements aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights and equal opportunities for Indian women. It is the pursuit of women's rights within the society of India. Like their feminist counterparts all over the world, feminists in India seek gender equality: the right to work for equal wages, the right to equal access to health and education, and equal political rights. Indian feminists also have fought against culture-specific issues within India's patriarchal society, such as inheritance laws and the practice of widow immolation known as Sati.

The history of feminism in India can be divided into three phases: the first phase, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, initiated when male European colonists began to speak out against the social evils of Sati; the second phase, from 1915 to Indian independence, when Gandhi incorporated women's movements into the Quit India movement and independent women's organizations began to emerge; and finally, the third phase, post-independence, which has focused on fair treatment of women at home after marriage, in the work force and right to political parity.

Despite the progress made by Indian feminist movements, women living in modern India still face many issues of discrimination. India's patriarchal culture has made the process of gaining land-ownership rights and access to education challenging. In the past two decades, there has also emerged a trend of sex-selective abortion. To Indian feminists, these are seen as injustices worth struggling against.

As in the West, there has been some criticism of feminist movements in India. They have especially been criticized for focusing too much on women already privileged, and neglecting the needs and representation of poorer or lower caste women. This has led to the creation of caste-specific feminist organizations and movements.

### **Definition in the Indian context**

Women's role in Pre-colonial social structures reveals that feminism was theorised differently in India than in the West. In India, women's issues first began to be addressed when the state commissioned a report on the status of women to a group of feminist researchers and activists. The report recognised the fact that in India, women were oppressed under a system of structural hierarchies and injustices. During this period, Indian feminists were influenced by the Western debates being conducted about violence against women. However, due to the difference in the historical and social culture of India, the debate in favour of Indian women had to be conducted creatively and certain Western ideas had to be rejected. Women's issues began to gain an international prominence when the decade of 1975–1985 was declared the United Nations Decade for Women.

Historical circumstances and values in India have caused feminists to develop a feminism that differs from Western feminism. For example, the idea of women as "powerful" is

accommodated into patriarchal culture through religion, which has retained visibility in all sections of society. This has provided women with traditional "cultural spaces".

The male and female dichotomy of polar opposites with the former oppressing the latter at all times is refuted in the Indian context because it was men who initiated social reform movements against various social evils. Patriarchy is just one of the hierarchies. Relational hierarchies between women within the same family are more adverse. Here women are pitted against one another. Not all women are powerless at all times.

There have been intense debates within the Indian women's movements about the relationship between Western and Indian feminisms. Many Indian feminists simultaneously claim a specific "Indian" sensitivity as well as an international feminist solidarity with groups and individuals worldwide. The rise of liberal feminism in the West in the 1970s focused deeply on demands for equal opportunities in education and employment, as well as ending violence against women. To a large extent, the emerging feminist movement in India was influenced by Western ideals. These called for education and equal rights, but also adapted their appeals to local issues and concerns, such as dowry-related violence against women, Sati, sex selective abortion and custodial rape. Some Indian feminists have suggested that these issues are not specifically "Indian" in nature but rather a reflexion of a wider trend of patriarchal oppression of women.

### **Indian Feminists**

- **Savitribai Phule** (1831-1897) - Perhaps the earliest Indian feminist. Started the first school for girls in the subcontinent.
- **Tarabai Shinde** (1850–1910) – Activist whose work *StriPurushTulana* is considered the first modern Indian feminist text.
- **Pandita Ramabai** (1858-1922)- Social reformer a champion for the emancipation of women in British India.
- **Kamini Roy** (1864-1933) – Poet, suffragette, and first woman honours graduate in India.
- **Sarala Devi Chaudhurani** (1872-1945) – Early feminist and founder of the *Bharat StreeMahamandal*, one of the first women's organisations in India.
- **Saroj Nalini Dutt** (1887-1925) – Early social reformer who pioneered the formation of educational Women's Institutes in Bengal.
- **Chandraprabha Saikiani** (1901-1972) - A major woman activist cum writer who played vital role in establishing the sense of women right in Assam. She is the founder of Assam State Women Association. She was a strong leader of freedom movement of India in Assam.
- **Durgabai Deshmukh** (1909-1981) - She was a public activist for women's emancipation and was also the founder of *Andhra Mahila Sabha*.
- **Barnita Bagchi** – Scholar and sociologist with a focus on women's education.
- **Jasodhara Bagchi** (1937-2015) – founder of the School of Women's Studies at Jadavpur University.

- **Rita Banerji** – Feminist author and founder of The 50 Million Missing Campaign, an online, global lobby working to raise awareness about the female gendercide (femicide) in India.
- **Prem Chowdhry** - Social scientist, feminist, Senior Academic Fellow and critic of violence against couples refusing arranged marriages. She is a Life Member of the Center for Women Studies. She is a well-known scholar of gender studies, authority on the political economy and social history of Haryana state in India and daughter of Hardwarilal, the renowned educationist and Indian National Congress member of parliament for Haryana.
- **Mira Datta Gupta** – Activist for women's issues and one of the founding members of the All India Women's Conference.
- **Padma Gole** – Poet whose writings faithfully depicted the domestic lives of Indian middle-class women.
- **Devaki Jain** – Founder of the Institute of Social Studies Trust and scholar in the field of feminist economics.
- **Brinda Karat** – First woman member of the CPI (M) Politburo and former Vice President of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA).
- **Madhu Kishwar** - Founder President of ManushiSangathan, a forum that will promote greater social justice and strengthen human rights, especially for women. She founded the magazine Manushi: A Journal about Women and Society devoted to feminism as well as to gender studies and activism in 1978 with Ruth Vanita.
- **Vina Mazumdar** – Secretary of the first Committee on the Status of Women in India and founding Director of Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS).
- **Uma Narayan** - Feminist scholar, and Chair of Philosophy at Vassar College.
- **Asra Nomani** - Indian-American journalist, author of Standing Alone in Mecca: An American Woman's Struggle for the Soul of Islam
- **Medha Patkar** - Feminist social worker and politician who advocates for women's rights in post-independence India.
- **Manasi Pradhan** - Founder of Honour for Women National Campaign, a nationwide movement to end violence against women in India
- **Amrita Pritam** – First woman to win the Sahitya Akademi Award for literature.
- **Gita Sahgal** - writer and journalist on issues of feminism, fundamentalism, and racism, a director of prize-winning documentary films, and a women's rights and human rights activist.
- **Manikuntala Sen** – Politician in the Communist Party of India whose memoir described her experiences as a woman activist.
- **Vandana Shiva** – Environmentalist and prominent leader of the Ecofeminist movement.
- **Sophia Duleep Singh** - Prominent suffragette and daughter of Maharaja Duleep Singh. She was a firebrand feminist and is best remembered for her leading role in the Women's Tax Resistance League, but she also participated in other women's suffrage groups including the Women's Social and Political Union. Secret documents revealed her identity as a firebrand "harridan law breaker" for her diaries revealed that she maintained contacts with

the leaders of the Indian nationalist movement like Gopalkrishna Gokhale, Sarala Devi and Lala Lajpat Rai.

- **Nivedita Menon** - Contemporary feminist and academic. Author of Seeing like a Feminist.
- **Ruth Vanita** - Academic, activist and author who specializes in lesbian and gay studies, gender studies, British and South Asian literary history. She founded the magazine Manushi: A Journal about Women and Society devoted to feminism as well as to gender studies and activism in 1978 with Madhu Kishwar.
- **Ramarao Indira** - Academic, critic, rationalist who is an expert in modern feminism thoughts. She has written many articles and books on feminism in Kannada and English.
- **Theilin Phanbuh** - Chairperson of the Meghalaya State Commission for Women and Padma Shri awardee.

### Important Facts

- Despite of all this, many problems still remain which inhibit women from fully taking advantage of new rights and opportunities in India.
- There are many traditions and customs that have been an important part of Indian culture for hundreds of years. Religious laws and expectations, or "personal laws" enumerated by each specific religion, often conflict with the Indian Constitution, eliminating rights and powers women should legally have.
- India is also a patriarchal society, which, by definition, describes cultures in which males as fathers or husbands are assumed to be in charge and the official heads of households. A patrilineal system governs the society, where descent and inheritance are traced through the male line and men are generally in control of the distribution of family resources
- The female-to-male ratio in India is 933 to 1000, showing that there are numerically fewer women in the country than men. This is due to several factors, including infanticides, most commonly among female infants, and the poor care of female infants and childbearing women. Although outlawed, infanticides are still highly popular in rural India, and are continuing to become even more prominent. This is due to the fact, most especially in rural areas, that families cannot afford female children because of the dowry they must pay when their daughter gets married. Like infanticide, the payment of dowry is also illegal, but is still a frequent and prevalent occurrence in rural India. Women are considered to be "worthless" by their husbands if they are not "able" to produce a male child, and can often face much abuse if this is the case
- Most of the average Indian woman's life is spent in marriage; many women are still married before the legal age of 18, and the incidence of non-marriage is low in India. Childbearing and raising children are the priorities of early adulthood for Indian women.
- Western-educated Indians introduced equality in the early nineteenth century. However, the term did not gain meaning or become an operational principle in Indian life until the country gained independence in 1947 and adopted a democratic government. The Indian

Constitution then granted equality, freedom from discrimination based on gender or religion, and guaranteed religious freedoms. Also, seven five-year plans were developed to provide health, education, employment, and welfare to women. The sixth five-year plan even declared women "partners in development."

- **Employment;** In general, in the uneducated and rural sections of Indian society, which form a major percentage of the total population, women are seen as economic burdens. Their contributions to productivity are mostly invisible as their familial and domestic contributions are overlooked.
- **Globalisation;** Feminists are also concerned about the impact of globalisation on women in India. Some feminists argue that globalisation has led to economic changes that have raised more social and economical challenges for women, particularly for working-class and lower-caste women. Multinational companies in India have been seen to exploit the labour of 'young, underpaid and disadvantaged women' in free trade zones and sweat shops, and use "Young lower middle class, educated women," in call centres. These women have few effective labour rights, or rights to collective action
- **Education;** Some of the main reasons that girls are less likely to reach optimal levels of education include the fact that girls are needed to assist their mothers at home, have been raised to believe that a life of domestic work is their destined occupation, have illiterate mothers who cannot educate their children, have an economic dependency on men, and are sometimes subject to child-marriage. Many poor families marry their daughters off early to get the dowry money so she is unable to complete her education.

### Conclusion

India is a country that is very male-dominated. Although many women of India have broken this concatenation and proven that women are not property inclined to be housewives, there are still women that have not been given the opportunity to make a change. Compared to other countries, such as the United States, the women of India have limited rights. Many laws have been ratified and added as time has evolved, but the women are still restrained from being important in many Indian homes due to the country's culture. Women there are unsheltered from harm and sorrow as well due to their limited rights and have very little protection. The gender inequality in India is severe and needs to be addressed immediately so females in India can begin to live safely and happily, knowing that simply walking down the street will not put their life at risk.

Here comes the need to fight against the social taboos to revitalize the social system and to uplift the status of women in present Indian scenario. In fact, awareness can do those wonders that can't be accomplished by humiliating women. Although there is no end of discussion about influential women included both contemporary women who are changing today's world and those whose contributions have endured through the ages (though they lived centuries ago yet alive), still, the Indian women are struggling for their name and existence. Why? What are the reasons behind this bitter truth that most of the women in India are deprived? Who is accountable for this scarcity- male dominance or female faults or both or none? Is this disparity adoptable or should be changed? How can the position of Indian women be improved? What type of

methodologies should be implemented to get better results? These and many more analogous questions always knock at the door of everyone's mind and every person knows what are the answers but a pin drop silence says to each and every woman that- "You and only you have the power to change your status as well as your sister's status; so wake up dear not to suppress others but to be on your feet which will be with other's feet with a concern of humanity not gender discrimination."

### **Suggestions**

Feminism sometimes suffers from misinterpretation, social trolling, and a sort of xenophobia (as if it's a strange object) and hence its voice needs to reach the male audience, who play a significant role inside the patriarchal cage. It is nice to see that male authors are coming up with topics of men's role in feminist movements and whether busting marketing ploys in the name of men's rights. Motivated by this, I decided to list a few suggestions which may help to connect to feminism, in a more sorted manner:

#### **1. Know that feminism is not restricted to women's issues only**

- Though the feminist movement started with women's rights related issues, it is no longer limited to a particular gender boundary. It includes all the issues that are affected by patriarchy. Quick crash courses can be found here and here.

#### **2. Sense that women's issues are your issues too**

- It is humanity that leads you to look at others' problems and help them when you can. To get a feel, start with your family; does your mother, daughter, sister, or wife face oppression or injustice? Stand up for their rights. You can begin smashing patriarchy from home and then give it a try outside as well.

#### **3. Don't hesitate to call yourself a feminist if you indeed support it**

- You shouldn't be in a situation who talks about equal rights of men and women, but finds it difficult to wear a feminist T-shirt. Feminism doesn't associate itself with a religious group or a political party. It's more about the ideology than an association. There's no membership, and you must proudly stand for it.

#### **4. Follow other male feminists**

- It isn't a bad idea to take note of other male feminists' views and acts. That way you won't feel like you are alone in this. Find allies in other men.

#### **5. Use your social position to right wrongs**

- If you are in a position to influence the outcome in a certain debacle or just help out somebody in need, do so. As a man, you can set an example for other men in your circle or office. Be it a politician, a lawyer, a teacher, or a doctor, or any other person of influence; anyone can help pave a pathway for getting justice for gender equality. So if you're a judge, don't let a rapist get bail. Even if you're not in a position to act, at least show your solidarity to the people who are fighting for it.

#### **6. Express, share, converse, and learn more**

- It's very important to share your thoughts and emotions. However, generalised statements like “Ladkiyaaisi hi hotihai” (Girls are always like this) “do not help anyone”. Accept that human beings are both bad and good, and one shouldn't generalise based on a few personal experiences. Talk to people, share your problems and express thoughts to others without judging their gender or sexual orientation. Don't make your gender or sexual orientation your religion. Respect the diversities in human form and keep your mind open to learn and accept more.

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