

Feminism and the Emergence of Women's Movement in India: An Overview

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In the pre-independence era, the Women's Movement began as a social reform movement in the 19th century. At this time, the western idea of liberty, equality and fraternity was being imbibed by our educated elite through the study of English and the contact with the West. This western liberalism was extended to the Women's question and was translated into a social reform movement. The reform movements were not homogeneous and varied a lot in terms of the ideas and changes that were to be fostered. They did however share a common concern for rooting out the social evils, partly in response to charges of barbarity from the colonial rulers. This was a period of the hegemonic control and influence of colonial ideology.¹ This was a time of transition, one of the emerging bourgeois society and values of new modes of thought.

The colonial intervention in the 19th century was no longer confined only to the market or polity but was intruding into the areas of our culture and society, and this could affect transformation in the social fabric of Indian society. This potential threat was sensed by the Indian intellectual reformer, exposed to western ideas and values. At this juncture, the Indian intellectual reformer, sensitive to the power of colonial domination and responding to the western ideas of rationalism, liberalism and civilized society on one hand, also sought ways and means of resisting this colonial hegemony by resorting to Cultural defense.

This cultural defense resulted in a paradoxical situation. Spurred by new European ideas of rationalism and progress, the reformers tried to create a new society, modern yet rooted in Indian tradition. They began a critical appraisal of Indian society in an attempt to create a new ethos devoid of all overt social aberrations like polytheism, polygamy, casteism, sati, child marriage, illiteracy – all of which they believed were impediments to the progress of women. All the social reformers shared the belief common to many parts of the world in the 19th century that no society could progress if its women were backward. To the reformers, the position of Indian women, as it was in the 19th century, was abysmally low and hence their efforts were directed at an overall improvement in the status of women through legislation, political action and propagation of education. This was mainly spurred by the first wave feminism of the west and concentrated on basic rights for women.²

The social reform movement did not radically challenge the existing patriarchal structure of society or question gender relation. They picked up for reform only those issues which the Britishers were pointing out as evidence of degeneration in the Indian society. Even the women's institutions and organizations that sprang up during this period did not have an independent ideology but only took off from what the men were stating. This is understandable because it was primarily the wives and sisters of the reformers who had initiated the establishment of these organizations. The direction and content of reform as laid down by the reformers was accepted by the women's organizations without any question. As a result, even when women were speaking for themselves they were speaking only the language of the men, defined by male parameters.

Women were seen as passive recipients of a more humanitarian treatment to be given by western educated elite males. There was thus an attempt to reform the women rather than reform the social conditions which opposed them. There were no attempts to alter the power structure and the man-woman relation in society. This was but natural since the change in the status of woman was being sought only within questioning patriarchy itself. The attempt was to create a new Indian woman, truly Indian and yet sufficiently educated and

tutored in the 19th century values to suit the new emerging society. Thus education for girls was not meant to equip them to be self-sufficient, independent and emancipated and train them to follow some profession but to be good housewives, the mistress of the home and the hearth.

The social reform movement had its own paradox: on the one hand there was a preoccupation with western ideas to emulate, assimilate or reject; on the other hand there was also the element of revivalism or a need to reassert and reinforce a cultural identity distinct from the British colonizers. Besides seeking reforms through legislation, education was seen as an important means of changing women's situation. Women's education, which saw its beginnings, now was visualized for creating appropriate wives for the men of the newly emerging westernized elite. Women also joined in struggle against colonialism, but while they were encouraged to participate by leaders like Gandhi, their work in the struggles was just an extension of their domestic work. Very few women were allowed to join the front ranks with men, and the ones that did spoke of the isolation they felt at times. As a form of backlash to these new ideas that colonialism brought to India, women's roles were being pushed to a more traditional way of life. Women traditionally became emblematic of tradition, and the reworking of tradition is largely conducted through debating the rights and status of women in society. On account of this common view on women, whenever culture is being threatened an immediate response is an enforcement of women to remain in roles that are more traditional.³

One is certainly not belittling the contributions of the social reform movement. In spite of its limitations, it cannot be denied that the social reform movement did help in removing prejudices against women's education and provided a secular space for women in the public realm. The only space available to a woman earlier was in the religious sphere and in the ancient period, Buddhism and Jainism provided this space, but women had to choose between this and the family and if they chose religion they had to move out of the families by becoming a part of the *Sangha*. In medieval period the bhakti movement declaring that God dwells in each individual and one could attain God through faith and many of the bhakti saints brought religion to the downtrodden and henceforth marginalized sections of society and women. Bhakti provides women a space and to move out of the daily life of patriarchal control and in the process they get their independence. For all these women bhaktas the rejection of the power of the male figure whom they were tied to in subordinate relationship became the terrain for struggle, self assertion and alternative seeking. Yet the women saints had to choose between marriage and a life of domesticity and their love of the supreme God.⁴

The social reform movement provided a secular space for women in other areas by looking at various issues which were culturally imposed on women by society and making them crippled. Raja Ram Mohan Roy argued that sati was not supported by shastras and was nothing less than female murder. He argued against polygamy and for property rights for women. Ravindra Nath Tagore submitted a memorandum to the Legislative council for the removal of legal disabilities of remarried Hindu widows and the establishment of girl's schools in every suburb of Calcutta. Keshav Chandra Sen was instrumental in getting the Native Marriage Act passed in 1872, which forbade early marriage between boys under 18 and girls under 14; it also forbade polygamy and encouraged widow marriage. It allowed inter-caste marriages for those who declared that they did not belong to any recognized faith. Ishwar Chandra VidyaSagar also was very critical of the system of early marriage and supported literacy for women; many women's organizations also took up these reforms.

Pandita Rama Bai's Sharda Sadan (1892) in Poona, Shri Mahipatramrupramanathashram in Ahmedabad (1892), Shri Zorastrian Mandal in Bombay (1903), maternity and child welfare league in Baroda (1914), BhaginiSamaj in Poona (1916) all were established and worked with the particular objective of improving the lot of women and removing the various ills in society. These regional organizations were followed by national organizations like Women's Indian Association (1917), the National Council of Women in India (1920), All India Women's Conference (1926) which went on to organize 12 women's conferences till 1937 and Federation

of University Women in India (1920), with the sole objective of stimulating the interests of women in civic and public life and the removal of disabilities of women whether legal, economic or social and the promotion of social; civil, moral and educational welfare of women and children.⁵

The second phase saw the birth of three major organizations: Women's India Association(WIA), National Council of Women in India (NCWI) and All India Women's Conference (AIWC). All these organizations were formed by women in between 1917 and 1927 after World War. During this period struggle against colonial rule intensified. Nationalism became the preeminent cause. Gandhi legitimized and expanded Indian women's public activities by initiating them into the nonviolent civil disobedience movement against the Raj. In the decades that followed, women showed active participation in freedom movement paving the way for some women organizations only. There were organizations by women like Saraladevi, who set up the Bharat Stree Mahamandal. It met for the first time in Allahabad in 1910. Soon many branches in Delhi, Lahore, Karachi, Amritsar, and Hyderabad were set up and it addressed many problems including Purdah, which to them was a stumbling block to accept female education.⁶

When Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi came on the political scene, he could draw in a large number of women to the political arena by giving a very broad meaning of *swaraj*, and helping them find dignity in public life and a new place in the national mainstream. His views on many issues installed a new confidence among women and a consciousness that they could fight against oppression. As a result, a large number of women joined the civil disobedience movement during the thirties. Besides Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, there were thousands of other who were now readily participating in the freedom struggle. In 1931 the picketing Board in collaboration with Bengal Provincial Congress Committee was started to popularize the home industries, especially the spinning and weaving of khadi. Punjab saw the inauguration of the Civil Disobedience movement by taking a procession of five thousand women at Lahore in 1930 under the leadership of Lado Rani Zutshi and Parvati, the daughter of Lala Lajpat Rai. Durga Bai Deshmukh organized the women in Madras to carry forward the policies of the congress. The manufacture of salt, in defiance of the British laws prohibiting such manufacture, had a lot of symbolic value for the women. Here was a very private issue linked to the daily lives of the people in the kitchen, brought to the forefront of the public realm and a large number of women from villages also joined Gandhiji at Dandi. Gandhiji firmly believed that by nature women were non-violent and hence would be more successful in carrying out his programmes of picketing and non-cooperative movement.⁷

Therefore when Gandhiji brought India's freedom struggle to the masses, women were very active participants in it. Throughout the freedom struggle when a large number of women were coming and participating they were only there in support roles. The male leadership at this time did not encourage a second line of leadership and women could assume leadership only when the men were in prison. Nehru refers to this in his discovery of India: most of us men folk were in prison and then a remarkable thing happened. Our women came to the front and took charge of the struggle. Women had always been there of course, but now there was an upsurge of them, which took not only the British government but their own men folk by surprise. Here were these women, of the upper or middle classes, leading sheltered lives in their homes, peasant women, working women pouring out in tens and thousands in defiance of government order and police lathi. It was not only their display of courage and daring but what was even more surprising was the organizational power they showed. This was also the first time in Indian history when a large mass of women were mobilized for political purposes in a mass organization. Many of the women felt that their struggle was two pronged. They were fighting not only the British overlords but they had to fight against patriarchy in their homes too.⁸

It was primarily due to the efforts of women and their role in the freedom struggle that women got the right to vote and complete equality in the constitution in India. Article 15(3) empowers the State to make special provisions for women. There were also a large number of policy documents which followed, but what really happened was that a great gap arose between the theoretical status of women and their rights as defined in these and what existed in reality. Immediately after independence, India had to deal with a variety of problems. The joy of Independence was tempered by the sadness of partition and the migration of a large majority of people and the breakup of communal violence in Punjab and Bengal. This was followed by war in Kashmir, the danger of territorial fragmentation, the dispersion of power among 600 princely states and, last but not the least, economic dislocation which was to affect women the most. Years of colonial domination had destroyed our indigenous crafts and depleted our natural resources. Industrialization, changing technologies, illiteracy, lack of mobility – all resulted in the inability of women to cope with the new order. Once their labour was regarded as unimportant in the productive market, their role in the family also became marginal, giving them a raw status, which became abysmal with the passage of time.

The Period of Accommodation (1947-1960s)

Women's participation in the freedom struggle developed their critical consciousness about their role and rights in independent India. This resulted in the introduction of the franchise and civic rights of women in the Indian constitution. The state adopted a patronizing role towards women. Women in India did not have to struggle for basic rights as did women in the West. This was a period primarily of accommodation. Some of the organisations took up constitutional measures such as The Marriage Act of 1954 and The Hindu Code Bill of 1955-56, These bills took up the issue of marriage, divorce, succession, guardianship and adoption. The Hindu Marriage Act made monogamy legal, outlawed polygamy among all Hindus, and conferred equal rights of divorce on both men and women. It also made intercaste and interreligious marriages legal. It fixed the marriage age for boys and girls. It also made child marriage punishable. The Hindu Succession Act, 1956, The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956, The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, The Maternity Benefits Act, 1961 were some other acts during this period. The NFIW (National Federation of Indian Women), wing of Communist Party of India, established in 1954 by several leaders including Aruna AsafAli, worked for the empowerment of women and women's rights. The National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) is affiliated to the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), composed primarily of women from socialist countries.⁹

The Period of Crisis (late 1960s-1975)

This period from the late sixties has been marked by economic crisis and stagnation, rising prices, increasing landlessness and generalised discontent both in rural and urban areas. This period is also associated with the Green revolution, which dramatically improved scientific agricultural techniques aimed at improving agricultural yield. It was very successful in India. Although food was more plentiful, farmers not wealthy enough to keep up with the technology got left in the dust. In 1971, the CPI(M) set up the Shramik Mahila Sangathana (Working Women's Organization), to mobilise women of the lower middle and working classes affected by the growing economic crisis and economic hardship. The anti-price rise movement (1973) was a united front composed of women from the CPI(M), Socialist, Congress and non-party middle-class housewives from urban areas in Western India, founded in 1974. The population base of this movement was the rural and the toiling.¹⁰

In 1973-74 Maoist women formed the Progressive Organization of Women, initiating a self-consciously feminist critique of radical leftist politics along with an overarching analysis of gender oppression. This led to other Maoist women's organizations in Pune and Bombay, culminating in the first major celebration of March 8 as International Women's Day in 1975. They took up issues like anti-dowry campaign, protests against eve

teasing (the harassment of women in the street), obscenity, price rise, and against the hardships suffered by women living in slums. With the repression of the Emergency period, the organization disintegrated within only two years of its formation. However, this period saw the rise of many autonomous groups with different agendas and issues. Some of the common issues included the division of housework, party politics, rape, and dowry deaths. The issues of violence, popularly called atrocities against women, became the centerpiece of the movement in the early eighties and the cause for the movement's expansion. In the 1970s the New Women's movement attempted to revive the Uniform Civil Code within the framework of gender politics. But women's rights became articulated within a state-led reform agenda, reinscribing the concerns of national integrity, modernity, and progress.⁸

It was in the year 1974 that the official Status of Women Commission published their report, *Towards Equality*, on women's low and ever decreasing status in Indian society. It focused attention on the fact that, despite many progressive social legislations and constitutional guarantees, women's status had indeed not improved much. It pointed out that women continued to have an inferior status in many areas like political, economic and social. It also stated some alarming facts with regards to employment, political participation and health status. The report pointed out to the sad fact that society had not yet succeeded in framing the required norms and institutions to enable women to fulfill their multiple roles. The increasing incidence of practices like dowry indicate a further lowering of the status of women. They also indicate a process of regression from some of the norms developed during the freedom movement. The report also pointed out that the concern for women and their problems which received an impetus during the freedom movement had suffered a decline in the last two decades. To operationalize the recommendations of the *Towards Equality Report of 1974*, "A Blue Print of Action Points and National plan of Action for Women 1976" suggested measures in the area of education, health, family planning and nutrition, employment, social welfare and legal status and provisions. A separate chapter on Women and Development 1980-85 in the sixth five year plan resulted in women being perceived as productive contributors to the national economy. The seventh five year plan had a chapter on "socio-economic programmes for women" (1985-1989), which moved further away from a welfare approach to a more positive developmental one. The Indian parliament adopted a national policy on education (1986) which included a chapter on education for women's equality. A national perspective plan for women was released in October 1988. The SAARC decade plan of action focused on the girl child (2000).

The Report pointed that the deep foundation of inequality is built in the minds through a socialization process, which continues to be extremely powerful. If education was to promote equality it must make a deliberate, planned and sustained effort. The educational system had not even attempted to undertake this responsibility. UGC (University Grants Commission), which was the nodal authority of higher education then, sent letters suggesting the starting of a program of Women's Studies and incorporating them in the curriculum of Social Sciences for teaching and research. Many conferences, workshops and discussion groups took place to formulate clear guidelines, in order to help Universities, faculties, colleges and other institutions of higher learning to start such units.¹¹

The *Towards Equality Report* also raised the question of the Uniform Civil Code, appealing to earlier arguments but also squarely in the context of gender equity and justice. "The absence of the Uniform Civil Code, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, twenty-seven years after independence, is an incongruity that cannot be justified with all the emphasis that is placed on secularism, science and modernism. The continuance of various personal laws which accept discrimination between men and women violates the fundamental rights". In India, we have a criminal code that is equally applicable to all, irrespective of religion, caste, gender and domicile. However, a similar code does not exist especially with respect to divorce and succession and we are

still governed by the personal laws. These personal laws are varied in their sources, philosophy and application. Thus, a major constraint arises while bringing people governed by different religions under one roof.

In the post Independence period during the first few decades, the major concern was for overall economic growth. This was immediately followed by another decade, which witnessed an increased concern for equity and poverty alleviation. Gender issues were subsumed in poverty related concerns and there were no specific programs which aimed at women. Women during this period were involved in such movements as the anti price, law and famine relief movement but did not start to pick up issues involving their oppression as women until the 1970's. Now increasingly there has been an emphasis on the promotion of Non-Governmental, grassroots level organizations (NGO's) for women's development. Some of these organizations have varied in their scope, objectives and vision but they have nevertheless provided women avenues of collectively voicing their concerns. These grass root organizations have questioned the welfare approach to women whereas they are primarily seen as beneficiary or recipients of programs and instead incorporated an empowerment participatory approach. While questions about the success of these organizations are often raised, it is often seen that women exposed to some amount of mobilization show great potentialities, receptiveness and defining capacities.¹¹

Since 1975, there has been a steady increase in the number of women's welfare organizations in India. There were various issues that the Women's movement took up during this period against Liquor, missing girl children, violence against women, to name a few. Dalit women's and marginalized women's rights, growing fundamentalism, women's representation in the media have also been taken up by the Women's movement. From mid to late 1980s, women's groups concentrated on providing services to individual women to enable them to gain advantages already given in law. This is significantly different from the welfare dispensed by earlier women's groups. The earlier groups sought amelioration; the new groups sought recognition and realization of rights. Some of the important women's organizations in this period included, SEWA, National Commission of Women (New Delhi), National Council of Women (Pune), Joint Women's Program (Delhi), Kali for Women (Delhi) and several others.

Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) was founded by the Civil Rights leader Ela Bhatt. Its aim is to provide full employment and self-reliance to women. Its aim for its workers is to be able to hold against tyranny from employers or the state and provide social security. Social security includes basic services that provide protection to workers and promote their wellbeing. It is the means through which workers can make their lives secure, safe and productive. It is an economic support to them. In fact, it is an economic security, as with these services and protection their economic situation is safeguarded. Once they have some social security, they do not slip deeper and deeper into poverty. A National Commission for Women was also set up on 31 January 1992. It hears complaints from women on refusal of rights, cruelties and other atrocities and redresses their grievances. In the post-independence period, the women's movement has concerned itself with a large number of issues such as dowry, violence against women, women's work, price rise, land rights, political participation of women, etc.

In the post-independence period there has not been any dearth of documents as far as women are concerned. We can see various shifts in position with regards to policy approach to women. There has been a shift from welfare to development to integrating women in development, of the earlier decades to empowerment in the present. The 73rd and 74th amendments of 1993 to Indian constitution, providing for reservation of seats for women in *panchayats* and municipalities, are a giant stride in the empowerment of women. With 33% reservation for women in rural and urban local bodies, fifteen years down the line today we have 1.2 million elected women representatives in the institutions of local governance in rural India. Yet we are also witness to the hurdles and obstacles placed in passing the Bill providing for reservation in the Parliament. It is a well-known fact that the Parliament is a policy making body and the *panchayati* only an implementing one and hence

the delay. The setting up of the National commission has also helped in creating an environment for the realization of women's equality.¹²

Doing Gender in India

The setting of Women's Studies was part of the women's movement. It aimed to provide information and analysis about the lives of women, which would end gender inequalities and women's subordination. It would critique existing knowledge forms to show how and why women's lives, views and perspectives remained largely hidden in the existing academic disciplines. It emerged more as an offshoot of the concern of the society towards women's position and problems. Its birth can be traced to the recognition of a failure on the part of Social Scientists to enquire into women's issues, their lack of questioning of the assumptions, theories and tools of analysis borrowed from the West and to bridge the glaring gaps in data that might help orient policy changes. This was because many of the Social Scientists and educational planners had not found it necessary to reexamine the concepts and methodological approaches in terms of the social reality obtained in India. Women's Studies thus started as part of a larger social movement and the growing social concern among few academicians with the widening issues of poverty, unemployment, inequality and underdevelopment. Its aim gradually evolved into bringing about greater knowledge on the social basis of women's inequality, their marginalization in development and their exclusions from centers of power and power structures. In sum, the evasion of the women's question or the unsatisfactory treatment of this issue was a major cause that simulated a yearning for the subject. The introduction of Women's Studies into the university system has been a path breaking event for social scientists and other scholars who want to see a comprehensive and balanced presentation of our social reality. Women's Studies is viewed as an instrument for social and academic development that will help the university community and the society at large acquire a better understanding of the multi-dimensional roles played by women and look into the causes for gender disparity.¹³ For the past few decades, the world community is focusing on the issues concerning gender disparity leading to serious social imbalances. The education system all over has responded by establishing Women's Studies to develop new scholarship and a body of studies from the perspective of women.

Across the world today Women Studies have continued to critically engage with the notion of power and to radically transform the intellectual landscape. There has been recognition that knowledge is also a form of capital, to which some individuals and groups have better access than others. This then becomes a source of power for exerting control. As a result, social structural inequalities of race, nation, class, caste or gender correlate with asymmetries in the production, reproduction and deployment of social scientific knowledge. Fundamental to feminism is the premise that women have been left out of codified knowledge, where men have formulated explanations in relation to themselves and have generally rendered women invisible or classified them as deviant. The description and analysis of women as autonomous human being has been one of the most significant contribution made by feminism. The emphasis on a feminist perspective meant a realization of power relations inherent in current knowledge frameworks and practice in terms of who has access to that knowledge, how it was distilled and eventually how meaning was encoded.¹⁴ Though feminism has made critical use of past male theories despite their gender blindness, it was recognized that it was necessary to develop feminist theories and concepts which saw women as primary to theorizing. But it meant not being content with this but opening a new world.

Conclusion

Hence, to conclude, it is the women's movement in India that has been the force behind the long struggle of women's advancement from subordination to gender equality and finally to women's empowerment. The cause for women's freedom was first espoused by enlightened males who had imbibed liberal ideas. Up to the twenties of the last century the struggle was carried on by men and women followed. It was only after Gandhiji's entry into politics, when the nationalist movement under his leadership was transformed from a middle class movement into a mass movement, that women themselves for the first time raised their voice against the disabilities from which they suffer, questioned and struggled against not only the British rule but patriarchy itself. In the process, women secured many rights and social freedom and realized many other rights as grants. Though a lot still needs to be achieved and there are various impediments in making this reality available to a large section of women, the women's movement has brought women's issues center stage and made them more visible, contributing immensely to women's struggle for equality.

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