

An Overview of the Complexities in Indian Feminism

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Abstract

The paper aims to highlight the complexities that are dominant in Indian society. The variety of issues that makes Indian feminism different from western feminism is also explored. The present paper presents a brief overview of western feminism, however, a large portion discuss the Indian feministic concerns and issue. The paper is not limited to any particular writer or writing of an author but it is an eclectic approach to present the subtle difficulties of Indian feminism in the best possible way. The focus is largely on the third and fourth wave of feminism. Giving the increasing insecurities of women even in this digital era, the paper therefore is a humble effort in that direction to bring some of the merging issues and concerns of women in general and Indian women in particular to the forefront. An eclectic approach has been used for the evaluation of the issues and concerns therefore the paper highlights various feministic issues like cultural social, economic individual, Islamic etc. associated with different branches of feminism.

Keywords- Feminism, Equality, Effeminate, Patriarchy

Introduction

Feminism is a term derived from a Latin word - i.e. “*Femina*” which means having effeminate qualities. Etymologically the word Feminism is a French word, *Feminisme*. The dictionary meaning of the word “feminism” is ‘the state of being female.’ *The Oxford Dictionary* 7th edition offers the meaning of “Feminism” as the advocacy of women’s rights on the grounds of the equality of the sexes’. It is hard to tell when it came into existence. However, feminists believe that the word ‘Feminism’ was first used in a French Medical Text in the year 1871. It was attributed to those men having effeminate traits or qualities. For a comprehensive understanding of feminism let’s record some of the definitions of it. “Feminism” in *Encyclopedia of Sociology* (2010) is defined as, “A movement that attempts to institute social, economic and political equality between men and women in society and end distortion in relationship between men and women” (Ryan 12).

Freedman in his book *Feminism* (2002) states, “The term feminist seems to have been used in 1871 in a French Medical Text to describe a cessation in the development of sexual organs and characters in the male patient, who was perceived as thus suffering from the feminization of their bodies.” (2) However, in the year 1872 French producer, Alexander Dumas File wrote a book titled as

I Homme –Femme (1872) wrote on the theme of ‘Adultery’. In this book, he used the term feminism for such “women whose behaviour resembled a lot with men, whose behaviour was masculine” (316). Since Alexander was himself anti-feminist he used it for those women who behave as men do. It is even thought that the word “Feminism” was first used in England in the year 1891 in their fight against equal rights. However, initially, it did not represent the rights of women. Feminism is the product of Western society.

There is no unequivocal definition of feminism because it has been more described than defined. Feminism is neither a science nor a philosophy. It is without the contours of dogma and doctrine. In common parlance, Feminism is known as a movement “of women, by women, for women” to achieve women’s rights. It is also known as women’s Liberation Movement. There is no defined and specific definition of the term Feminism because it is indigenous. Kamla Bhasin says, “Feminism is the name of the feelings that women are subjected to multiple atrocities in society and are exploited. The attempt to change this situation is generally referred to as Feminism” (Interview, Kamla Bhasin). She goes to the extent of saying that feminism is basically the feeling that ours is a patriarchal based society. Irritant in her views, she says women are exploited in every aspect of life and those people whether the men or women who desire to bring the change in such situation are referred to as feminists. Bellington believes that “Feminism is a women’s movement which aims at re-ordering of human relationship.” While Anderine Rich says, “The aim of feminism is to recognize the wrong perceptions created by men about women”. John Desrochers opines that “Feminism is the act of creating awareness about the dependence and exploitation of women which continues at both places inside the family and outside the family.” Barbara Smith says, “Feminism is a political perception and the act of liberating women.” It even talks about all types of women, women of a different colour, creed, working women, physically challenged women, economically unsound women and even elderly women. Feminism talks about all their relevant issues. Hence it is obvious that there is no proper or definite definition of feminism.

It is a concept or idea which focuses on various issues like patriarchy, inequality, protection, the defeat of marital relations and empowerment of women and many more which are at the centre of feminism. Generally, people associate feminism with a directionless movement which teaches women to hate men, extremism and destroy the traditional values of the family system. The reason for this is that people look at it only from a radical feminist perspective or wear the radical lens of feminism. While the truth is that ever since the birth of feminism many philosophers along with theories came into being. Their way of thinking was different from each other but all acknowledged that a woman should be given the due rights that she deserves in society as a human being. They were common on this point that a woman should not be treated like other sex. Such treatment to women by society is condemned by the feminists. Therefore, all feminists endeavour to comprehend and address the issues and problems of women. Further, they raise their voice against the atrocities and exploitation done to women since ages. The idea is to fight against domination, discrimination and subordination. It is through this movement they question the conventional and traditional attitude of society. According to feminists, “In all societies which divide sex into different cultural, economic or political spheres women are less valued in comparison to men.” The word feminism tantamounts to sexual equality combined with a commitment to exterminate sexual ascendancy and to transform the society. They are against the sexual discrimination and sexual segregation of women at workplaces and in domestic life. They question the superiority of man and his polygamous nature at the expense of the subordination of women. Now that we have some idea about western feminism, one wonders how far

can this be applied to Indian society and situation, to imitate a mistake will be more dangerous. The role of women in the pre-colonial structure exhibits that feminism was theorized differently in India than in the west.

The diverse issues of women were addressed when the state commissioned a report on the status of women to a jury of feminist workers and activists. It recognized the fact that in India women are oppressed under established hierarchy and injustice. It was this period that Indian feminist were influenced by some hot debates of western feminists like violence against women. However, given the socio-cultural difference and history of our country, the debate had to be very creatively conducted, so that the essence of socio-culture is maintained, therefore some of the ideas of the west were rejected altogether. The same historical circumstances and values in India lead to a different form of feminism, which differs from the west in many ways. As in the case of 'self', it connotes a competitive individualism where 'people are believed to be free but everywhere in chains'. However, here in India, an individual is considered as one of the larger social collectiveness. Survival of individual banks upon association and self-denial for a greater cause is appreciated and valued.

Indian women negotiate survival through an array of oppressive patriarchal family structures, age, and relationship to men through the family of origin, marriage and procreation as well as patriarchal attributes. However, it must be mentioned that there are several communities in India such as, Nairs of Kerala, Shettys of Mangalore, and some Bengali families exhibit matriarchal tendencies in these communities. The head of the family happens to be the most elderly lady rather than the old man. In India among communities recognized by constitution as a scheduled tribe "Some... are matriarchal and matriarneal and thus have been to be more egalitarian" (Mukherjee 9).

According to interviewer, Anuj Kumar 'Manipur has a matriarchal society' but this cannot be said as scholarly judgment or assessment. The simple reason for this is that many mothers have taken the front in most of social activism. Their society has been patriarchal. Their women power is visible because of historical reasons. Manipur was ruled by strong dynasties, therefore, in an attempt to avoid any invasion or threat of crushing the boundaries their men had to stand like a rock, safeguarding the borders, which allowed women to take charge in household chorus. In Muslims, men and women are considered equal, however, not in the westernized sense. The *Al Quran* imparts that the minds of men and women work differently and are different biologically. Therefore, Islam grants different rights to husband and wife. One such right, wife owes to her husband, is being the head of the family.

The heterogeneity of Indian experience exposes that there are multiple patriarchies, contributing to the existence of multiple feminisms. Hence, feminism in India is not a singular theoretical orientation but it has altered owing to historical and cultural realities, further to levels of consciousness, perception of individual men and women as a group. The widely acclaimed definition is awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at the workplace, within the family and conscious attempt to change this situation. "Acknowledging sexism in daily life and attempting to change and eliminate through deconstructing mutually exclusive notions of femininity and masculinity as biologically determined categories opens the way towards an equitable society for both men and women" (Kamla Bhasin, Interview).

The contribution of women in the nationalist movement was not small. It is evident that many places women organized themselves into many groups and were willing to join processions, face police firing and ready to be in jail. They broke the salt law, picketed shops selling liquor and foreign manufactured clothes. While evaluating the response of Gujarati women to Gandhi from 1920 to

1942, Aparna Basu comments that it was an impressive record. She remarks in her book *Women in Indian Society*:

Women indulged in various kinds of activities ranging from mass scale popular agitation, constructive work among Harijans and Adivasis to formal institutionalized electoral politics. In short, it is useful to note that the movement for the emancipation of women in Indians began in the 19th century when the social reformers initially were critics of outmoded social practice and they attempted to change some of these practices by applying the national and humanitarian criteria to the problems. They further laid great stress on the education of women as a liberalizing activity. The nationalist movement not only drew a large number of women to political activity but it also generated strength and confidence among women which helped them to organize and to fight for their cause, rather than depend upon the benevolent men in society to promote their cause. The formation of the All India Women's Conference in 1927 was crucial in women's march towards equality. (37-38)

Therefore, it is fit to mention here that the doors for circulating awareness to remove social disabilities of women were created and education was made available to them. To represent the needs of middle-class women, certain women organization came into being. There was an increase in the percentage of political participation by women. But this consciousness and eagerness did not last long and disappeared soon after independence. There was a period of slackness and laziness among Indian women. When the din and dust of independence struggle settled down, women also drew to settle down in their respective houses. For two decades there was no women activity in India.

Before independence, most feminists accepted the sexual divide within the labour force. However, in 1970, feminists challenged the inequalities that had been established and fought to reverse them. These include unequal wages for women, the relegation of the unskilled sphere of work and restricting women as a reserve army for labour. On the other hand, feminist consciousness was promoted which acknowledged the inequalities not only between men and women, but also within power structures such as religion, region, class etc. This also posed a challenge to feminists, while shaping their overreaching campaigns it was made sure that fulfilling gaps of one group should not create gaps for another. It is in the 20th century that their focus has persuaded treating women not only as members of society and a right to parity but having the power to decide the course of their personal lives and right to self-determination.

It was in 1970 that women organization sprouted and laxity of women group was replaced by activism. It was the purpose of these groups to take up the issues of women. In India, these organizations bifurcated into two channels; one associated with women's problems and issues, while the other mainstream group fought in a wider context. The active group combated against oppression, injustice, and exploitation. It was during this period that the Indian women were influenced by western women's liberalization movement. The literature and issues raised by them influenced many women in India. This influenced women activist groups to promote them, to popularize their feminist attitude. This is how feminism was born in India. Now the question of relevancy of feminism arises here. There is neither feminism nor feminists in India. In India, we do not have people like Simmon De Beauvoir, Shaulasmith Firestone, or Betty Friedan in India. It is only some women here and there who make some sort of noise about western feminism and its supposed arrival in India. They claim that feminism arrived in India in mid-seventies. It is a fact that women received considerable attention during the sixties and seventies from Government, Press, and Women. United Nations declared 1975 for women as International Women's Year. Further, the period from 1975-85

was declared as the women's decade. The establishment of the National Committee on the status of women in 1972 was another important move in this direction. Its report "Towards Equality" was submitted during 1975. The report was an attempt to understand and appreciate the status of women. Focusing on women's problem did not mean the familiarization of feminism in India.

Women were compelled to be under control in ancient times and medieval periods. It was a cultural, historical and social necessity because there was no way out for them. It was assumed a duty by men to protect women from evils and dangers, however, at a little less expense of freedom given to them. But it would be in the fitness of things to say that more freedom would have ruined the entire society. Sitting at the far end of the 20th century the feminists cannot claim that what was done during the last three thousand years was wrong. They have done it to safeguard society and humanity. The legal enactments and welfare measures by reformers provided by the British Government and Independent India made Indian women more equal than men. However, the neo-feminists in India did not comprehend the full repercussions of these processes. They just adopted the western ideology without any intimation that there is a difference between the West and the East. In addition to this, there is also a gap of three thousand years between the actual presence of so-called evils of society and the lower status of women. It needs to be rectified. The Indian feminists are attempting to discover equality for women in ancient Indian society by current standards in modern India. They heard a voice in darkness without realizing where did it come from, west or east? But they imitated this sound without knowing what were its credentials, substance, value and purpose. Therefore, Indian feminists copied the western sisters, while the feminists in the west had no idea about India and Indian society. We have seen western feminism and its hollowness. But Indian feminists have hallucination about it. This is not a scientific and reasonable approach. Every system must be checked with identical apparatus and with contextual ideology. But this is not what feminists in India do, they use a thermometer to measure the pressure of higher compression rather than the temperature and results are going to be different. It is strange that Indian feminists though very few characterize a huge ignorance about the culture of their own country, history, its customs, convention, and mannerism so on and so forth.

It is said that feminism ushered into India during mid-seventies. There is no evident source which could reveal who introduced this feminism in India. As such it could have come through the Himalayas or Khyber Pass or through western waters! But the truth is that it came through papers in India and it is still a paper tiger with no teeth. In the west, there were only men and women, the only dividing line between them. But that's not the case with India; here the same men and women are divided into several castes, sub-castes and groups. One is separated from the other in all aspects of life. Therefore, in India, it is not the simple question of men and women alone. If it was so, then feminism would have been easy here. As we know India has graded inequality of caste superiority and inferiority. There is no concept of equality between different castes in India. There is no scope of equality between men and women in India. To add more, there is no equality even within castes or communities between men and women. Unless these inequalities are eradicated on the ground level, the perception of equality between men and women is a faint idea then. All these differences need to be wiped out, and then we may proceed to think about the issues of feminism or gender equality and freedom for women. A few women here and there will not be able to do anything in the matter. The Indian feminists should try to level up the society, remove the difference in caste and class. They must free women and men from shackles and restraints to transform them into good human beings, and

then they can think of removing the difference between men and women. Once this is done, then there is every possibility to restructure society and development process becomes evident.

In India, the traditional society takes charge of the women's sexuality for many reasons. As we know there is caste difference, a man of one caste can marry a woman of the same caste only. He cannot marry a woman from a different caste hence no inter-caste marriage is permitted. A lower caste man cannot aspire to marry a girl from a higher caste. However, if this happens it is not only that the purity of that woman is supposed to be lost but the whole caste is degraded in estimation to another caste. Further, the parenthood has to be authentic so that the ancestral property is transferred to the actual blood relation. He is supposed to perform the last rites of his father when he dies. If it is done by someone who is not the actual blood of the deceased, then it is presumed that the soul of the man does not go to heaven, instead goes to hell. It is for this purpose only that a boy is sought by parents, for a girl cannot perform the last rites of the deceased.

According to Indian social norms, a woman is not allowed to move and roam free with a man she likes unlike in the west. She must be a faithful, honourable woman; therefore, a loose character cannot be tolerated at any cost. Once she fulfils all these credentials she is fit to be a true wife. Their free movement is restrained only by society and their sexuality is controlled with the sole purpose of sanctity. The western feminists ask Indian women to be the agents of change, to demand the rights to be treated as human beings, not as stone idols of Devi! However, worshipping women in India is a tradition, but modern women want to be flesh and blood. Feminists urge women to expand their horizons and contours because; sustainable development is possible only through the development of women. But what has halted the growth of their horizons in India? What has clogged its sustainable development? They are equal in law; they have leaders, form 50 per cent of the Indian population. They are themselves responsible for it, and simply their inactiveness, indolence and no doubt indifference to themselves.

Conclusion

It is cogent to mention what we witness in the third-wave of western feminism; in the same fashion we see many challenges in Indian feminism during its third-wave. Despite advancement on paper, there is still a hard task on the ground to be done. We know India is a multicultural country where people of different cultures, and religions, live together. Customs and traditions have always been a part of Indian culture. Religious laws enumerated by each specific religion often conflict with the constitution, eliminating rights and powers of women. However, instead of these legal crossovers, the constitution of India does not interfere with religion and personal laws. But it must also be admitted and acknowledged that of late the issue of 'Triple Talaq' was thoroughly discussed and questioned, which amounts to the interference of the government in the personal laws or religious laws to a large extent.

India is a country largely composed of hierarchies within communities. These hierarchies can be broken down into age, sex, ordinal position, kinship relationship and caste lineage, wealth occupation and relationship to the ruling power. If the hierarchies are created within the family, based on social convention and economic needs, girls from poor families suffer twice the impact of vulnerability and stability. Girls are expected to be inferior to their brothers; they have less access to economic assets of the family.

The birth ratio is another important issue, if we look at the statistics; India has a ratio of 943 females available as against 1000 men as per 2011 census. It is because a number of factors contributed to this cause. Infanticide is one, and it is the most common among female infants, poor

care of children and child-bearing women, etc. Although infanticide has been banned in India, there are still many cases that emerge, this is because the people living in villages think, they cannot afford to pay dowry at the time of their daughter's marriage. Therefore, they do this to save themselves from inviting any kind of trouble. Another fact is that those women who cannot produce children for one or the other reason, they are looked down by their in-laws or even by their husbands and are considered as *Manglik*. This is another challenge for Indian feminism.

Marriage is yet another case; most of the life of a woman is spent in the pious commitment. A girl is believed to be biologically capable of producing children after 18. However, here in India, we have girls being married before they attain the age of puberty. Urban Indian men reach the peak of their labour force participation between the ages of 25-29 while urban women do the same between the ages of 40-44. This results in less acquisition of skills and fewer job opportunities for women.

Muslim Personal Law is a composition of '*Sharia*' (Islamic law), it is also known as Muslim family law. Some of the theoretical issues, how Muslim Personal Law has been formulated include polygamy, divorce, and custody of children, maintenance and marital property. In the Hindu religion, there has been a partial success in terms of gender equality, reforms and family law. While this is a major improvement in comparison to other religions, but this should not be treated as a complete triumph in terms of relieving oppression and feminism. Gandhi came up with the idea of 'Sree Shakti' (women power) for the concept of womanhood. As we know that in Hindu religion gods are not exclusively male. Therefore, we can admit that Hinduism sheds a positive light on feminism. Females are considered to complement and complete their male counterparts. It is important to note that both deities of knowledge and deity of wealth are females, (Saraswati and Lakshmi).

Besides, the above-mentioned things, there has been criticism from Dalit groups that Indian feminism represents the upper class or caste Hindu women, which results in negligence of concerns of the marginalized section, especially Dalit women. Feminism received criticism from various minorities for not taking into consideration the issues and problems of many minorities. It was apprehended that the mainstream feminism in India is upper class Hindu oriented and did not incorporate the problems of minority women. All these factors tell and show us how Indian feminism is varied from Western feminism.

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