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Women's Movement In India

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Abstract:

Feminism has become truly a global movement, shaped by and reflecting the interests of women in every region of the world. It symbolizes an awareness of oppression on domestic, social, economic levels, accompanied by a willingness to struggle against subjugation and subordination, oppression and suppression. They have focused their attention on equalizing strategies, which represents attempts to improve women's access to existing education, employment, health care, credit and other opportunities, and ultimately to make resources more responsible to women's needs.

Key words: Gender, Feminism, Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Socialist Feminism

1.Introduction

Women's Studies as a separate discipline started in India in 1975 soon after the publishing of the report "Towards Equality" by the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI).¹ This report put status of women forcefully on national agenda by arguing that position of Indian women had declined, not improved, since 1911 (Committee on the Status of Women, 1974). As a result development and progress became gender issues.

The recognition of gender as issue powered the post-colonial women's movement supported by feminist critiques and women's studies in academia. Women mobilized to protest violence, legal discrimination, rising price and agitated for better living conditions through higher wages, the prohibition of liquor, and the provision of drinking water. These women represented a wide range of castes, classes and communities, rural and urban.²

There is a conviction that women are oppressed and discriminated against. It is variously defined as "studying women with a women's perspective or looking at women in the world from women's point of view." The aim is not to substitute women for men or add women where they are not found, but to give rightful place to women as a sex in society. The driving force behind women's studies is feminism. It is a movement to arrest the interest of women as a sex. This does not mean that feminists want to dominate men or that they are anti men. Basically, feminism is a humanistic concern. It is a demand to restore to half of humanity its rightful place in human society, to restore to women their humanity. A feminist perspective is to become aware of the situation of women, of the relation of women to the world, of the oppression and discrimination to which women have been subjected and to use this as a power to change the situation.³

The 1920s and 1930s witnessed the peak of the so-called first feminist movement. This was the period when women began to organize and mobilize on issues of social reforms and civil and political rights. It was a phase of remarkable unity, albeit one achieved at the cost of major social and ideological exclusions.⁴ In India women's movement was born out of the social reform movements of the 19th and 20th Century. At first philanthropic men initiated welfare programmes for women, later on women took the lead themselves by starting All India Women Conference. Gandhiji encouraged women taking part in the freedom struggle gave a new confidence to women and helped the women's movement.

Feminist authors, Maithirji Krishna raj and Neera Desai write that all feminists are concerned about women's subordination and want to find out its causes. Within the women's movement there have been three major ideological positions described as Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism and Socialist Feminism. They differ in their analysis of the causes of the subordination position of women and consequently in their action programmes.

Liberal Feminism started in 18th Century in Europe during enlightenment period. Liberal philosophy was based on reason, equality and individual freedom.⁵ This idea was deeply entrenched only when Mary Wollstonecraft published her book entitled "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" (1792). Indeed, it was not until the emergence of the women's suffrage movement in the 1840s and 1850s that feminist ideas reached a wider audience. This is very popularly known as the first "wave of feminism".⁶ The basic idea of liberal feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft was that women are first and foremost human beings and not sexual beings. Women are rational creatures. They should have freedom to act according to their wishes. The liberals accepted the sex role differences and expected a woman to take care of the home and thus contribute to well being of society. But they contended that both sex roles are equal, hence women should have civil rights like men. Indian social reformers of 19th Century had similar thoughts.⁷

The main view of liberal feminist is that all people are created equal by God and deserve equal rights. These feminists believe that oppressor exists because of the way in which men and women are social, which supports patriarchy and keeps men in power positions. Liberal feminists believe that women have mental capacity as their male counterparts and should be given the

opportunity in political, economic and social spheres. Liberal feminism believes that personal rights should predominate over concern for the social good. This political view goes back to the early feminism of John Stuart Mill, who believed that government should stay out of the private affairs of its citizens. Liberal feminists try to respond the question of patriarchy in terms of injustice fostered by gender roles, which favor men over women. The liberal feminists want to free women from oppressive gender roles.

Liberal feminism encompasses two genres of political thought; classical liberalism and welfare liberalism. Classical liberalism believes that ideally, the state should protect civil liberties, but also give individual the opportunity to determine their own within the market. Welfare liberals on the other hand, believe that state should focus on economic justice rather than simply on civil liberties. Classical liberal feminists want to overcome these obstacles by erasing gender discriminatory laws and policies from the books, enabling women to complete equality with men. Welfare liberals, on the other hand, want society to believe that women should be compensated for past injustices as well as eliminating socio-economic and legal barriers. Liberal feminists create and support act of legislation that remove the barrier for women. These acts of legislation demand equal opportunities and rights for women, including equal access to jobs. Feminists believe that removing these barriers directly challenges the ideologies of patriarchy, as well as women. Liberal feminists are responsible for many important acts of legislation that have greatly increased the status of women, including the reforms in welfare, education and health.

Unfortunately, liberal feminists have been able to concentrate only on the legislation aspect in the fight against patriarchy. Critics argue that even within its own terms liberal feminism has failed. They argue that women have manifestly failed to gain real equality with men in the worlds of work and politics, for the publicity received by a few token women conceals the overwhelming pre dominance of men in position of power and authority. Despite their effort, women do not earn much and goal of full legal equality has not been met yet.

2.Radical Feminism

‘Radical’ in radical feminism is used as an adjective, meaning the root, radical feminists seek the root cause of women oppression. The traditional radical feminist standpoint may be expressed as viewing the division in all societies as that between men and women and stating that men are the oppressors of women. These concepts were first developed in the late sixties as a significant part of second wave feminism. The impetus towards this development came from women’s experiences in the civil rights, anti war, Europe and Australia. In 1967, the first radical women’s groups were formed in America the influenced by Maoist ideas current, in left wing circles. They came formed to express and share personal experience so as to bring out their political implications and to develop a political strategy for change. This approach is famous as ‘Consciousness raising’. It was very significant, keeping in view the fact that women broke years of silence to discover the shared nature of problems. Earlier, they considered it to be there alone, later, some women tended to use consciousness raising as a form of therapy, which articulated problems to which individualistic solutions would be found. However, originally, it was a self -consciously political on the premise that women’s problems were shared and they could not be ended by collective political action. As new groups spread rapidly, the key message was that ‘personal is political’.⁸

The issue of women and gender justice is one of the cornerstones in some of the discourse on social reforms. The origins of social reforms are clubbed around through out the early and mid 19th Century, pioneered by Raja Ram Mohan Roy’s campaign against widow immolation and Vidasagar’s endeavors to legalize the widow remarriage. However, the spilt of Brahma Samaj twice on the issue of marriage law and age of consent, has made the disappearance of such issues from the agenda of public debate towards the close of the century. But the spark created by these movements laid the foundations for the discourses on the issue of women.⁹ Jawaharlal Nehru had a better understanding of the gender problem, and set the tone for a radical view of the problem. Next to raja ram Mohan Roy, it was Nehru who had contributed to the advancement of Indian women –the former saved the Hindu widow from sati and latter liberated the Hindu widow from the patriarchal bondage.

Some writers oppose the radical view of the status of women. There are biological and psychological differences between men and women, and therefore they conclude men remain men, women remain women. They suggest that women can uplift themselves by developing their psychic power, which is alleged to be stronger than physical power. But Hans Enoksson says that biological difference exist but there are no psychological differences, because if boys and girls are brought up would be more and less the same. Seema Mustafa, a well known columnist, supports Enoksson when she wrote ‘there is no difference between men and woman other than biological. Karl Marx remarked it is not the consciousness that determines the being. On the contrary, it is the being that determines the consciousness. History is replete with examples of women who proved their merit in politics, social service (Mother Theresa). We are familiar with the saying ‘that behind the success of a man there is a woman’.¹⁰

The second wave of feminism emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Women’s organization set up at this time did not make a bid for hegemony. These were autonomous groups, joined not through the structure of formal association but through informal networking, local leaderships an emerging feminist press and an intensification of multi voiced exchanges. This panoply of organizations represented women from all classes, castes, communities and locates defined by if anything, a common commitment and a language that is more leftist than a situation not very different from that in most European feminist movements. This movement can make no singular claim to represent all Indian women, but it has, collectively, a national profile and presence. The various all India campaigns launched by women encouraged a cultural radicalism in which a broad range of issue and multiplicity of voices could be articulated.

The turning point came in 1970s, when several events -some within and some outside India-gave a radical turn to the women’s movement. The new feminism in developed western countries led in 1971 to the international year and then the decade of women. Te focus was on development. One of the issues to receive countrywide attention from women’s groups was violence against women, specifically in the form of rape, dowry deaths- the killing of young married women for dowry or money/ goods they brought with them at marriage. This was also the beginning of a process of learning for women: most protests were directed at the state. Because women were able to mobile support, the state responded, seemingly positively knowledge began, by changing the

law on rape and dowry, making both more stringent. This seemed, at the, like a great victory. It was only later that the knowledge began to sink in that mere changes in the law meant little, unless there was a will and a machinery to implement these.

In the years, euphoria of the 1970s and early 1980s, symbolized by street –level protests, campaigns in which groups mobilized at a national level, the sense of a commonality of experience cutting across class, caste, region and religion –all this seems to have gone, replaced by a more considered and complex response to issues. In many parts of India, women are no longer to be seen out the street s protesting about this or that form of injustice. This apparent lack of a visible movement has led to accusation that the women’s movement is dead or dying.

The reality is somewhat different. While the participation of urban and middle class women is undeniable, it is not they who make up the backbone of the movement, or the many, different campaigns that are generally seen as comprising the movement. The anti-alcohol agitation in Andhra Pradesh and similar campaigns in the part of India were started and sustained by the poor, low caste, often working class women. The movement to protect the environment was begun by poor women in a village called Reni in the northern hill regions of India, and only after that did it spread to other parts of the country.

The most significant development for women in the last few decades has been the introduction of 33 per cent reservation for women in local, village –level elections. In the early days, when this move was introduced, there was considerable skepticism. How will women cope? Are they equipped to be leaders? Will this mean any real change, or will it merely mean that the men will take a backseat and use the women as a front to implement what they want? While all these problems still remain, in a greater or lesser degree, what is also true is that more and more women have shown that once they have power, they are able to use it, to the benefit of society in general and women in particular.

The first of these was the Shahabad Movement in the Dhulia district of Maharashtra, initiated by Bhil (tribal) landless labourers. In 1972, with help from activists of the new left, the labourers formed Sharmik Sangathana, which initiated a vigorous campaign against domestic violence. In the same year Gandhian socialist broke away from the Textile Labour Association to form the Self Employed Women Association under the leadership of Ela Bhatt. In 1973, Mriinal Gore from the Socialist Party of India (Marxist) to form the United Women’s Anti- Price Rise Front, which turned into a mass movement of women seeking consumer protection. A student movement against price rises in Gujarat developed along the same lines to form Nav Nirman led by middle class women.¹¹

3.Marxist Feminism

Marxist feminism arises out of the doctrine of Karl Marx. According to Marxist feminists, the oppression of women is not directly caused by an individual’s international actions, but rather by social, political, and economic structure within which the individual lives. Women, because of the second class role in which they are placed, form negative concepts of themselves due to the socially and economically subordinate roles assigned to them by their family and workplace.

In the recent year, there has been an increasing upspring among Marxist feminists when it comes to the idea of women’s work. Not only were women required to do such things as cooking and cleaning in the private sector, but as the need for labour increased outside of the home, women were expected to do domestic work for commercial use as well. It was not the concept of women working outside of the home that angered Marxist feminists, but rather the trivialization of ‘women’s work’ itself. Women were working long hours in poor conditions of little reimbursement. Many Marxist feminists proposed paying women for housework, but many people thought this would simply trivialize husband wife and mother child relations. Other Marxist feminists believed that payment for husband chores would decrease the incentives for working outside of the home.

As Marxist feminists became less interested in the sexual division of the household and more interested in workplace politics, the idea of equal pay for equal work came to the forefront. Many Marxist feminists were angered by the lack of equality in wages and demanded that all people, where they be man or woman, be paid the same amount of money for comparable work. Marists feminist support this idea for two sets of reasons. The first, dealing directly with the concept of the ‘feminization of poverty’, states that a single woman heads nearly half of all poor families. Because these women are not paid what their job are worth, they are forced to accept government assistance in order to support their families or, in worse case scenario, depend on a man to help sustain life for them and their children.¹²

4.Socialist Feminism

Socialists feminists like to challenge the ideologies of capitalism and patriarchy. Much like the views of radical feminists, socialist feminists believe that although class, race, ethnicity and religion divide women, they all experience the same oppression simply for being a woman. Socialist feminist believe that the way to end this oppression is to put an end to class and gender. Women must work side by side men in the political sphere. In order to get anything accomplished, women must work with men, as opposed to ostracizing them. There must be a coalition between the two and they must see each other as equal in all spheres of life. In contrast to ideals of liberals feminism, which tend to focus on the individual woman, the socialist feminists theory focus on the broader context of social relations in the community and included aspects or race, ethnicity and other difference.¹³

Socialists feminists believe that powerless of woman is rooted in four basic structures: those of production, reproduction, sexuality and socialization of children. Unequal sex roles operate in family as well as economy. Some socialist feminists think that women’s oppression is based on paid domestic work. They are not anti man. They believe in collaboration, if the men support their cause. They propose women’s movements but only as part of wider struggle of oppression.¹⁴

One of the dilemmas of feminists discourse has been how to distinguish between Marxists feminism and socialist feminism. Socialist feminism challenges Lenin for rebuking Clara Zetkin for permitting discussion of sexual and family matters instead of focusing on the class struggle. Socialists oppose this standpoint. Both agree that humans are defined by their production of the means of existence. However, their disagreement revolves round definitions of women’s domestic labour and everything they do at home. Marxists argue that domestic labour has exchange value since it has its utility both in the family and outside the family. This is again a point of debate over which Marxist feminists themselves debate among themselves.¹⁵

At this juncture especially in Indian context, Indian feminism is not anti man, nor should be. Men and women complement each other and together make life wholesome. Feminism was driving force behind women's studies both in India and abroad. In India a myth had developed after independence that women's status was very high because the progress made by some middle class women in education and employment was more visible than the actual deterioration of women's position in all most all spheres. It was only after the Committee on the Status of Women in India presented its report that the shocking state of affairs came to light and myth was shattered. The report said that women were found in least paid jobs, working long hours and bearing full responsibility for the home by fetching fuel and water and working in family production units without being paid and caring for children and old. Violence and crime against women were on the rise. Sex ratio was decaling, so was economic participation rate.¹⁶

5. Conclusion

Women's movement in India today is a rich and vibrant movement, which has spread to various parts of the country. It is often said that there is no one single cohesive movement in the country, but a number of fragmented campaigns. Activists see this as one of the strengths of the movement which takes different forms in different parts. While movement may be scattered all over India, they feel it is nonetheless a strong and plural force.

Despite the longstanding and vigorous women's movement, patriarchy remains deeply entrenched in India, influencing the structure of its political and social institutions and determining the opportunities open to women and men. The negotiation and conflict between patriarchy and the women's movement are central to the constitution of the nation state.

The development of revolutionary movement in the country marks a great hope for women all over the country. Women too must move forward collectively, united to demand what is theirs by right, to oppose the continuing atrocities and discrimination, to participate in the struggle for a new democratic society. If the women's movement moves forward hand in hand with the revolutionary movement for new a democratic revolution only then the root causes of women's oppression can be smashed and concrete steps taken for the emancipation of women. Women liberation can be achieved as part of the transformation of the entire socio economic set-up.

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