

WOMEN'S LIBERATION THOUGHTS AND FEMINISM IN MODERN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Today, the world is perceived as an inclusive and progressive community moving forward from social disparities and challenges embedded in prevailing traditions. This paper intends to explore, the evolution of women's liberation thoughts and feminist moments in modern India. It underscores, the historical background and diverse perspectives that have shaped Indian feminism, and discuss unique contributions of Indian feminist to the global disclosure on gender equality. It will also analyze the achievements and limitations of feminist activism in India, considering issues such as legal reforms, social attitudes, and the ongoing struggle for women's empowerment. This paper dives into oppressive social, political, and the economic structures of society, and investigates the complexities of women's liberation and feminist thoughts, focusing on the crucial role of intersectionality and gender roles. It also highlights on how marginalized sections shaped feminist discourse and activism in India, challenging dominant narratives and advocating for inclusive social change, and furnish the contributions of feminist organizations and individual activists in advocating for legal reforms, raising public awareness and empowering women. The paper actively considers the ongoing debates and controversy surrounding within the context of Indian feminism, and reiterate how global feminist ideas have been adapted and reinterpreted, to consider the potential for cross cultural exchange and collaboration in the pursuit of gender equality. The main objective of this research is to bring attention of people on the struggles and battles fought in furtherance, to seek justice and foundational liberty, and advocating for fundamental rights for women such as reproductive rights, education rights, political & representation rights etc.

Key words – Modern feminism, feminism activism in India, women empowerment, women liberation.

1. INTRODUCTION

A fundamental right guaranteed to every citizen in India is a right to personal liberty, enshrined in the Constitution of India within its article 21. Liberty to express oneself freely & fearlessly, liberty to get access to literacy and educational training to grab employment opportunities, liberty to live life with dignity, and to make independent choices, this may sound basic, but if we go back a few decades, and land up in a dominant patriarchal society, that tends to suppress and oppress women, and leave behind rare opportunities for women to earn bread to lead their life independently. It may be astonishing to see that then, women were barely recognized as human beings and had any set of rights for their development and security. This is disturbing to say that, before any legal reforms and change in society which we witness today, in earlier times, women were seen as mere objects to fulfill certain jobs as per patriarchal beliefs. Women did not have any right to foundational literacy, or any empowerment supporting for their social development, or to even furnish them with any right to employment to feed their families, set everything aside there were no rights guaranteed to them pertinent to motherhood such as pregnancy or abortion or infanticides. If we talk about social struggles, women were barely entitled to expression in every aspect of life, and they had a few or nearly no solid rights to remedies against social injustice.

B.R. Ambedkar once quoted in his speech – **"I measured the progress of a community by the progress that women have achieved."** This reflects his ideology supporting women empowerment which will ultimately contribute in building an educated and progressive society. Similarly, an inspirational quote from Michelle Obama (first lady American Attorney) states, **"There is no limit to what we as women can accomplish"** in this she reflects a belief in women's potential and her commitment to empowering women and girls. In 2014, delivering a speech on gender equality UN women Goodwill Ambassador, Emma Watson quotes **"Feminism isn't about hating men, it's about equality."**

Social evolution has undoubtedly transformed social perception, by eradicating discrimination through promotion of gender-neutral norms and laid down a landmark pioneering step to bridge society and remove gender disparities, by recognizing individual rights. Amid evolution, modern feminism has paved way for significant progressive changes in every facet of women's life. As it includes, legal reforms securing fundamental rights and constitutional rights guaranteed to every individual by efficacious administration and enforcement, feminism also creates awareness about gender equality, and seeks to get social and cultural change, challenging patriarchal norms by breaking the ice on gender visibility and representation. The contribution of women to the economy was also not adequate, due to lack of opportunities and access to literary and training for employment purposes provided to women. In earlier times, both economic and education opportunities were only entitled to men of society, and even if there were few opportunities

given to women for work, it would highly discriminate based on gender roles and offer unfair wages and work to women for their livelihood. There were no rights recognized in the context of equal pay for equal work, which ultimately would result as exploitation by men at workplace.

1 Legal reforms and Women's rights to liberty in India

Even when the country has adopted constitution and guaranteed certain set of rights to everyone, there was no equity in distribution and entitlement of those rights, for instance, reproductive rights to women were barely recognized and they had no personal choice in making decisions pertinent to usage or access to contraception and abortion, even in cases of pregnancy, it would majorly be not their decision to conceive a child. They were not even entitled to marital rights, this caused huge injustice and exploitation of women body as commission of marital rapes became a normalized act and not a crime. A women would barely get a chance to express her consent for conceiving or upon abortions. A huge number of abortions took place based on gender bias and male-child preference leading to fetus infanticides which adversely impact women emotionally and physically, and sometimes even causes death. The stigma around menstruation made women life even worse with cultural disbelief and mainstream customs illogically treating women with hardships. In a speech by Hilary Clinton he quoted, "It is a violation of human rights when babies are denied food, or drowned, or suffocated, or the spines are broken, simply because they are born girls. It is a violation of human rights, when women and girls are sold into the slavery of prostitution. It is a violation of human rights, when women are doused with gasoline, set on fire, and burn to death, because their marriage dowries are deemed too small. It is a violation of human rights, when individual women are raped in their own communities, and when thousands of women are subjected to rape as a tactic or prize of war. It is a violation of human rights, when a leading cause of death worldwide among women ages 14 to 44 is the violence, they are subjected to in their own homes. It is a violation of human rights, when young girls are brutalized by the painful and degrading practice of genital mutilation. It is a violation of human rights, when women are denied the right to plan their own families and that includes being forced to have abortions or being sterilized against their will. If there is one message that echoes forth from this conference, it is that human rights are women's rights, and women's rights are human rights, let us not forget that among those rights are the right to speak freely and the right to be heard."

As Former U.S Secretary Hillary Clinton stated "There cannot be true democracy unless women's voices are heard. There cannot be true democracy unless women are given the opportunity to take responsibility for their own lives. There cannot be true democracy unless all citizens are able to participate fully in the lives of their country." In democracy women needs to be participated. Women had limited political influence and they were not entitled to political representation and participation, to raise concerns about women safety and independence ultimately contributing in their growth. Voting rights, decision-making rights, holding offices were also inaccessible to women during earlier time. It was commonly accepted that women must be confined to household and support families. The women's suffrage movement in India began in 19th and 20th centuries wherein, Indian women's organizations and individual activists began advocating for the right to vote and argued on unequal representation of women. The demand for political voting rights increased and as it was realized that, women should have a say in the governance of the country. As political participation is essential to achieving both women's rights and national liberation, initially in 1919, the Government of India Act allowed provincial legislatures to enfranchise women, and in 1921 Madras became the first province to grant women limited voting rights, by 1935, the Government of India Act extended voting rights to some women but with restrictions, and post 1947, India gained independence and framers of the Indian Constitution recognized the importance of gender equality, and enshrined universal adult suffrage in the constitution. In 1950, the constitution came into effect rendering all adult women the right to vote, regardless of caste, religion, or social status. Modern feminism builds upon this foundation, advocating for gender equality and challenging patriarchal norms, that perpetuate discrimination and recognizes divers experiences of women acknowledging intersectionality and addressing issues like fundamental rights, economic empowerment, and political representation of women. In a book by BR Ambedkar it is quoted that "Democracy is not merely a form of government.. it is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen."

Despite of incorporating education rights, the country faced for a long-time span discrimination based on gender to get accessibility of Education, and further securing future employment opportunities. Historically, by being a Patriarchal Society women's role largely confined to domestic sphere ultimately isolating them from learning and employment opportunities. However, it is indeed a rich and complex history of India pertinent to women's education, as in ancient India during the Vedic time, women had relatively equal status with men in some areas including education, and they, were scholars and philosophers by studying Vedas and participating in religious ceremonies. However, gradually there was a decline in that equality status and access to education, and during medieval time women were largely excluded from accessibility to education, and were prone to religious and domestic restrictions. During British time as well,

women's education was confined to elite class and it was a mere dream for everyone to access educational opportunities. Despite getting freedom and accepting our own constitution, India still faced significant challenges to overcome gender and social inequalities to become a progressive state free from disparities. The education of women in India is a complex and multifaceted issue with a long and rich history and significant challenges and setbacks. Kofi Annan says, **“Educational is a human right with immense power to transform, on its foundation rest the cornerstones of freedom, democracy, and sustainable human development.”** In his other book he quotes, **“Education is the premise of progress.”**

In a book by Maurice he quotes, “Knowledge is power, information is liberating, education is the premise of progress, in every society, in every family.”

Women barely had a right to property, or participation in economic activities, or to engage in trade and commerce businesses. The economic rise of women gradually declined during earlier time, while they still had some property rights but their ability to independently engage in economic activities were more restricted, due to patriarchal social structure. Women's economic independence was limited and they were majorly dependent on male relatives for economic support. Economic empowerment of women is much evident in modern India but as compared to earlier time it was not adequate and typically more confined to household. Prime minister of Iceland Johanna Siguroardottir quoted- “Gender equality and empowerment of women is key to the success of the Millennium Development Goals. Not only as a specific target. but for the goals in general. Women bear a heavier burden of the world's poverty than men because of the discrimination they face in education, health care, employment, and control of assets.”

Modern feminism has inevitably influenced legal reforms across the globe, as it encourages gender neutral laws affirming equality, and addressing discrimination. It also amplifies voices of underprivileged classes and focus on criminalizing various forms of violence against women, for instance, domestic violence, sexual assault, and harassment, it seeks reforms with an aim to enhance support services for women, and to re-ensure that, perpetrators are held accountable. Also, modern feminism has paved way for workplace equality and safety with punitive laws, prohibition of discrimination, assuring equal pay for equal work, and ensuring protection standards against sexual harassment and workplace exploitation. Modern feminism has also transformed family law by recognizing fundamental laws of women pertinent to women-hood be it reproductive choices, domestic violence & abuse, or property rights, for advocating women's liberation modern feminism has enabled political representation of women, and influenced legal reforms to embark as a vital instrument for achieving a more just and equitable society for all. As Kofi Annan (UN Secretary-General) quoted **“There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of woman.”**

2. MARGINALIZED SECTIONS CONTRIBUTIONS IN MODERN FEMINISM AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION

- 2.1. Marginally sections are played a vital role in shaping modern feminism and bringing new perspectives and experiences to encourage intersectionality my challenging dominative and resisting stereotypes. These groups have been at the forefront of feminist thought and action and challenge the mainstream movement to be more inclusive and intersectional. The term “intersectionality” was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw.
- 2.2. Marginalized feminists have advocated for promoting inclusivity by amplifying their voices feminism, and strives to create a more just and equitable society for all genders. On equality in the book by DC Ahir he quoted “Equality may be a fiction but nonetheless one must accept it as a governing principle.” There is a significant impact of oppressive social standards and feminism. Sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy fueled resistance leading to attacks on feminist activities and setbacks. Sexism the prejudice and discrimination based on gender has a profound impact on women's liberation, and feminism as reinforces inequality and perpetuates men's superiority to women, justifying the discrimination in various aspects from employment to education and political representation and social interactions and reinforces systematic inequalities. Hillary Clinton says, “Sexism is all the big and little ways that society draws the works around women and says ‘you stay in there’..” in his book.
- 2.3. These sections have been pivotal in shaping modern feminisms by introducing the concept of intersectionality, and focusing on their unique experiences of oppression, and broadening the feminist agenda to include issues like reproductive justice, economic justice and recognizes gender equality, leading to a more inclusive and comprehensive movement that strives for the liberation of all women, regardless of their race, class, or other social fragmentations. Ambedkar in his book stated “A just society is that society in which ascending sense of reverence and descending sense of contempt is dissolved into the creation of a compassionate society.”
- 2.4. It is well quoted by Marian Wright Edelman (president and founder of children's defense Fund) that, “The challenge of social justice is to evoke a sense of community that we need to make a nation a better place, just as we may get a safer place.”

3. MERITS AND DRAWBACKS OF FEMINIST ACTIVISM AND DEBATES ON FEMINISM

- 3.1. On one hand, feminist activism in India made significant changes for advancing women's right and opposing patriarchal norms, by way of legal reforms, increased awareness, and women empowerment & education, it has positively impacted social change and enabled a progressive outlook for gender equality and promotion of inclusivity. In furtherance, it believes in fostering dialogue openly about gender roles and equality for greater understanding and empathy between social groups, and it makes a global impact to bring world together for collaborated and supported network and gender-neutral environment. However, on the other hand, it has also faced certain limitations such as socio-cultural barriers due to intense patriarchal attitudes and social norms which continues to hinder the progress of feminist movements, and backlash and resistance by conservative groups (who perceive feminism as threat to traditional values in social order). Conservatives have contradictory impact on feminism as they lead to resistance against feminist lead initiatives and propose alternative frameworks for gender equality with more emphasis on traditional roles and responsibilities potentially undermining feminist goals.
- 3.2. It is a unanimous debate on modern feminism that it lacks solid goals, unity, and focus. Critics point out that, there is an overemphasis on victimhood by portraying women as victims rather than emphasizing on their power and resilience, it primarily focuses on issues relevant to classes, neglecting major socio-economically underprivileged groups and relies more negative portrayal of men. Over time it has been noticeably too focused on the concerns of upper caste urban women, neglecting the experiences of marginalized groups and detrimental to traditional values some practices are controversial in name of feminism.
- 3.3. By embracing intersectionality, modern feminism can move beyond its limitations and become a more powerful force for social change, working towards a world where all women are truly equal and free from oppression. Intersectionality promotes inclusivity, and emphasizes the importance of centering the voices and experiences of other groups, and ensuring varied perspectives included in the discourse of feminist activism. Kofi Annan states "Tolerance, inter-cultural dialogue and respect for diversity are more essential than ever in a world, where people are becoming more and more closely interconnected."
- 3.4. The major challenge in women's liberation moments is the deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes in social norms, which continues to hinder the progress of achieving an equitable platform for all the genders, regardless of their backgrounds. These norms often perpetuate gender stereotypes and limit the opportunities available for individuals and impact economic conditions, due to disparities in social structures. To fill the gender gaps which persist, women are often forced to work in an unhealthy environment with low paid jobs and exploitation in the name of opportunity and advancement, also various forms of exploitation and violence persists therein making it even worse for them to sustain.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper garnered secondary information from various books and perused speeches of well-known personalities to quote their ideologies. This paper intends to unfold philosophical ideologies of scholars by way of reasonable comprehension.

5. CONCLUSION

As rightly pointed out by legal scholars and political leaders, women's liberation is led by feminism, which actively seeks to transform women life, and pave way for opportunities and reforms to liberate women. It has not only supported women for their survival & livelihood but also encouraged them to get educated & build successful career. Earlier, in a patriarchal society the position of women was not adequately respected and represented, which caused social injustice and imbalance. However, gradually with evolution women-centric laws evolved, and their existence & rights were recognized and safeguarded by statutes. The need for incorporating intersectional approach, and respect for gender neutrality and social equality was realized. This helped to transform the world for everyone and promote inclusivity. Gradually, women were entitled to their fundamental rights and took stand against injustice and exploitation in the name of obligations. Women empowerment enabled many to become bread-earners for their families. Though, misuse of the rights granted to women began to get exploited by few in the name of feminism, which evidently has raised concerns and questions on the liberties guaranteed to women leading to a controversial debate. It is important to stick by the rights that are vital, and refrain from any transgression of those rights negatively.

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