

Feminism or Nationalism: Indian Women in the 20th Century

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Abstract – The Indian Women's Movement can claim to be a hundred years old as of now. During a span of a century several changes have taken place within it. Apart from several ups and downs the movement also saw an expansion in its scope, a variation in the themes and issues tackled by it and a definite broadening of its base over the years to include the women from all the spectrums of society. Feminism in colonial India was essentially entwined with the issue of nationalism – an idea that was the driving force of anti- colonial movements not only in India but other countries grappling with the juggernaut of colonialism. The feminist movements of some of the other countries in the world are much older in terms of being organized efforts at reform. The attempt here is to define what a 'movement' is and how it emerges and then merges to attain a larger connotation of the 'movement'.

The other emphasis in this paper is on the historiographical and ideological evolution that has taken place in the writings on these movements both by indigenous as well as international scholars. There is no dearth of writing and the enormous amount of literature present makes the task of writing on women's movement extremely demanding. This paper tries to analyze, although rather briefly, the various aspects related to the women's movement viz. its varied achievements over the century on the issues concerning women. As the story unfolds one gets an impression of a movement that underwent several changes over the years not only in terms of its nature but also in terms of the ideological trends involved namely, revivalist, reformist, nationalist, imperialist influence before independence; liberal, Marxist and socialist during both the phases i.e. pre and post-independence period and post-colonialists and post - modernist in the contemporary context.

Women's movement forms a part of the larger social movements which are understood by sociologists as a type of group action undertaken by large groups of individuals or organizations focused on specific political or social issues. This is a key word used by the political scientists and sociologists to describe the mobility of the newly emergent forces prodded on by the 19th century forces of industrialization and urbanization. They have developed a variety of theories and empirical research on social movements which argue that the freedom of expression, education and economic independence, considered as the hallmarks of Western culture are responsible for the variety and flagrancy of the social movements.

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HISTORIOGRAPHY

Any attempt at examining the historiography involves theoretical issues. The women's movements the world over had to grapple with the various conceptual frameworks prevalent over different periods of time. For instance in the US , the left termed it a bourgeois struggle as different from 'the true class struggle' and the right called it a 'socialist disease'. There have been several similarities as well as dissimilarities between the women's movements of the world which are evident from the works of feminist scholars, which also bears witness to the multiplicity of feminist theories.¹ There is a vast plethora of problems and the nature of these problems also has remained the

same. For instance, the contest over what is public and what is private, the position of women as compared to the rest of the society and across groups like race, caste and community are issues more or less common to both the hemispheres. This appears to make the task of globalizing of women's issues much easier although in one's enthusiasm it should not be forgotten that women of the world do not constitute a homogenous category. The very common counter argument for this statement is that even if they are not a uniform group there is one aspect which is common and that stems from their being women.

Here, an attempt has been made to delineate the major theories that appear to influence Indian Women's history writing although by no means they are followed rigidly. On the contrary any

¹ Kachuck Beatrice, 'Feminist Social Theories: Themes and Variations', Sociological Bulletin, 44(2), September 1995.

attempt to classify Indian Women's historiography into slots is replete with difficulties often resulting in failure because in India there has always been more emphasis on issue based struggle and activism instead of on developing of theoretical perspectives. But more recently this trend is changing in favour of increasing theorization in order to assist action-based programmes that form the backbone of women's movement in India. The best approach would be to bring together the best of both the worlds in order to enrich both.

The major historiographical trends that are generally used by feminists are Marxism, socialism, feminist liberalism (that appear to encompass nationalism and imperialism within its fold), essentialism and post- structuralism, post- modernism, post-colonialism combine. Feminist liberalism is the most sought after concept the world over as is believed it allows for the growth of personality and development. Essentialists on the other hand lay emphasis on the essential differences of women from men, who might be superior according to some. Socialists and Marxists see it essentially as part of the wider class struggle and emphasize the oppression of women by men. Postmodernism rejects the belief in rational self-functioning according to universal laws, rejects the claims of science and philosophy in providing an objective, reliable foundation for knowledge and society and thus opens up the forum for further debate and enquiry. Under this influence Indian feminism and Western feminism appear to be two streams of one universal phenomenon.

ORGANISATIONS

The term movement denotes an organized activity undertaken with a view to achieve a set of goals or to attain certain objectives. But a 'woman's movement' in this sense of the word appeared, in India, only by the second decade of the previous century with the formation of such women's organizations like the Woman's India Association in 1917 and the All India Women's Conference in 1927. However there is more to it than meets the eye. The efforts for improving women's conditions are often linked to the national movement for Indian's freedom. The freedom struggle led to mass mobilization of people and some great women emerged from the churning like Sarojini Naidu, Aruna Asaf Ali, Mridula Sarabhai and others. Another unique feature of women's struggle in Indian is that men made the beginnings towards reform in women's conditions as early as 19th century. Popularly known as the socio-religious reform movement or the Indian Renaissance, which began under the influence of Western liberal democratic ideas as well as Eastern revivalist ideology, this movement covered a wide range of socio – religious evils ailing the Indian society and made a breakthrough in the field of societal reforms.

While the international scene had already matured in terms of a women's movement the impetus provided

by the social reforms led to the rise of women's movement in early 20th century, which allied with the movement for national liberation after the 1920s. An assessment of the Indian and World women's movement shows that there was a marked difference in the problems and issues taken up by each. While the latter was initially concerned with issue such as education, voting rights, prohibition and temperance the former was engaged with different concerns like sati, widowhood, child marriage, female education and so on.² Generally, the emphasis was on the upliftment of women from the degenerated conditions in to which they had sunk.

Another noticeable change that was visible was the increasing participation of women by the early and more so by the mid-20th century so much that by now it has assumed a thoroughly organized colour and has become a major social pressure group. Several new issues emerged by this time like the women's reservation Bill, the right to property for women, the bill on violence against women and many more. The momentum provided by the socio-political events till 1947 further provided the much needed push in the postcolonial context indeed this appears to be an ongoing process without which there is no possibility of any solutions or answers.

THE PUSH TOWARDS 'MOVEMENT'

In ancient India, during Vedic and post Vedic periods when most of the sacred texts were written like the Vedas, Upanishads, Brahmanas, Sutras and Smritis, it is generally believed that women had an exalted status in society³ as against the argument of some modern women scholars who have shown that all was not always well with the lot of women in ancient India.⁴ Most of the major changes in policy regarding women and legislation concerned with them originated in the early 20th century. Issues like women's marriage age, property right, widow remarriage their right to adoption and maintenance, right to representation right to education and many more were propelled by the reform movements of the previous century and started taking definite shape by now. A 'women's movement' in India in the true sense of the term was actually discernible only in the second decade of the previous century and has been linked with the women's organizations that came up during this period.⁵ A look at the colonial context would help highlight the various nuances of this problem. In the Indian set up the colonial era is very important and relevant. It not only released new forces of change but also many of the features of the Western society were

² Everett, J.M., 1981 or 1979, *Women and Social Change in India*, p.14.

³ Altekar, A.S., 1938, *Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 1973.

⁴ Chakravarty, Uma, 'Conceptualising Brahminical Patriarchy in Early India', in *EPW*, Vol. 28, No.14, 1998.

⁵ Mishra, Yuthika, 'The Indian National Movement and Women's Issues: Century of Social Reforms: 1850-1950,' *Trends in Social Science Research*, 5 (2), Dec. 1998, pp. 47-62.

assimilated in the Indian society, sometimes wrongly associated with modernization, giving it a new color. Here the role of English education and socio-religious reform movements may be mentioned for they apparently acted as the motivators of transformation. This effort created the base for a gender sensitive society, which if not missing previously, was dormant.

It will be observed that change has been imminent all through in the Indian colonial socio-cultural set up and was carried out in the form of reform and revival movements. Women's issues formed the main plank of the nineteenth century socio-religious reform movements that are considered as one of the hallmarks of modern India. It is generally believed that with the arrival of the British in the mid-18th century, which is also considered as the period of beginning of modern India, things took a turn for the better for the Indian women. Several changes also took place in the socio-political and economic set up, which were the direct result of a complex interplay of indigenous forces and the forces of British impact. The Indian response to the imperial stimulus was the Indian National Movement, by no means an isolated phenomenon, which grew in the first half of the twentieth century. This movement, for the first time saw the shattering of community identities and their social boundaries. Despite the differences of caste, class, gender and community the struggle for national liberation brought various groups together with the common objective of banishing the enemy.

The position of Indian women was affected in a big way by the British influences and ideologies like the Anglicist, Orientalist and Utilitarians. The status of women in Indian society began to -concern many especially during the 19th century. Several social practices like the Purdah, Polygamy, female infanticide and sati were criticized. Women's property rights, child marriage, lack of female education, widowhood and practices which debarred women from public life were questioned mainly in the second half of this century. In India social reforms in the nineteenth century led to the rise of a 'women's movement' in early twentieth century, which in turn allied, with the movement for national liberation after the 1920s.⁶ It has been argued that they both drew from the strength of each other.

A review of recent research done on this subject throws up many new and diverse viewpoints. According to one of them the reform movement played an important part in the formation of a new set of patriarchal gender-based relations, essential for a society with a majority of middle class in it.⁷ The society at this juncture was changing. Western ideas and influences were reformulating the middle-class set up. Hence the demands of such a society on

women were also changing, hence the need for reforms.

At this point it would be well to point out that British encounter alone was not responsible for the amelioration of women's ills. The 18th century was a period of major changes in India. The old order, as symbolized by the Mughal dynasty, was crumbling leaving space for the development of new and indigenous ideas. Thus the impact of 18th century changes combined with western rationalism.⁸ It is argued that the early attempts at reforms were not so much the outcome of Western liberal or rationalist values, but more an expression of some 'acute problems of interpersonal adjustments within the family among the western -educated men'. Tampering with socially imposed boundaries is very obvious from the statement where it is said that changing social norms drove them to a 'limited and controlled emancipation of wives as a personal necessity for survival in a hostile social world'.⁹ Apparently, nationalism took up women's issues selectively. This explains to some extent the disappearance of women's issues from the nationalist agenda in the beginning of the twentieth century and its subsequent refusal to take up women's issues for negotiation with the colonial state.¹⁰ While nationalism provided an opportunity for Indian women to come out from private sphere into public, at the same time it limited the extent of 'their rights and opportunities outside their homes'. However, women were equal partners in the freedom struggle and they took part alongside men. It has been aptly remarked that women, 'played a pioneering role in changing the image of woman without consciously emphasising on gender. In as orthodox a country as India, these women showed that a woman's place was not just inside the home; that women could fight shoulder to shoulder with men in the streets and in the battlefields. But these women saw themselves as freedom fighters first, and only then, if at all, as women. They did not seek any special privileges or considerations. It was by their actions and their courage that they gained the respect of their male comrades, and inspired countless women'.¹¹

By the second decade of the 20th century things changed with the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi. Known for his simplicity, charisma and self-control, his creed of Satyagraha (soul force) and ahimsa (non-violence) turned the nationalist struggle into a mass movement. Women had started participating in the national movement on a large-scale way

⁸ Ray and Sarkar, 1975, Raja Ram Mohun Roy and the Break with the Past.

⁹ Sumit Sarkar, 1973, The Complexities of Young Bengal, pp. 504-534.

¹⁰ Chatterjee, 1989, The Nationalist Resolution of the Women Question, pp.233-253.

¹¹ Chatterjee, Manini, 1930: Turning Point, *Social Scientist*, 2001, pp. 39-47.

⁶ Chaudhuri, 1993, *Indian Women's Movement*, p. 9.

⁷ Radha Kumar, 1993, *The History of Doing*, pp.8-10.

back in 1905, when they protested against the partition of Bengal, but with the emergence of Gandhi, women from all sections of society joined the movement in thousands. Historians in different hues have analyzed this broadening of the horizons of women in the wake of the national movement and the subsequent appearance of Gandhi, acting as the cementing force between the two. Some believe that Gandhi's approach to women was 'revolutionary' and he greatly contributed towards raising their status thus placing them on an equal footing with men. Another group believes that 'Gandhi used women as politically expedient tools.'¹² At one place Gandhi remarked: 'Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities...By sheer force of vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying a superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have.'¹³

By the second decade of the century the reforming efforts of previous century bore fruit and women also came forward to take up their own cause. Along with women's organisations several prominent reformers also took up issues like women's education, marriage law reforms, women's property rights, the right to divorce and the provision for civil marriage. Often the interests of nationalists clashed with those of the reformers and it was foregone conclusion that the former would always score over the latter. 1940s saw the next phase of hectic reforming activity concerning the Hindu Code Bill, which covered most of the major issues effecting Hindu women. Community identity played a strong role in determining the nature of these issues in post-independence India. While this codification remained confined to the Hindus, the more orthodox among them delayed its enactment till 1955-56.

PRESENT DAY CONTEXT

With political change and independence, in the mid-20th century, the movement and its theorization also underwent change. According to Forbian Classification this period, from 1947 to end of 20th century, may be divided into three phases. First, from 1947 to 1969 was the phase of synthesizing the past and assessing the then present. Second, 1970 to 1985 focused on a critique of the present and efforts to excavate the past and the third, 1986 to 1997 was a time for questioning categories and colonial past leading on to the post-colonial phase where the views on Third World Women are brought under the scanner and revised.¹⁴ This is not a new exercise and different scholars have been classifying the women's movement according to their perception and ideological frameworks. Neera Desai observed that 'the women's movement is the organized effort to achieve a common goal of equality and liberation

of women and it presupposes sensitivities to crucial issues affecting the life of woman'. She thus recognizes the importance of 'Some unifying ideological thread for various units, in order to achieve set goals.'¹⁵

Similarly Gail Omvedt has classified women's movements into two types, one, women's equality movements and two, women's liberation movements. The former never challenged the existing structure and aimed at equality for women within it, whereas the latter directly challenged the sexual division of labour in the society.¹⁶ Jana Everett classified these movements on the basis of two different ideologies of feminism, namely corporate feminism, which assigns a greater role to women in politics because of the very fact that they are women and liberal feminism, which claims that since women are equal to men they should have the same rights.¹⁷ Some of the Indian feminists have categorized the women's movements on the basis of their approach towards the unequal position of women in the contemporary society and the ways to liberate them from subjugation. These categories are viz. those that are Moderate on women's rights and those that are known as Radical feminists and Social feminists.¹⁸ They make a distinction of women's movements into two theoretical categories: first emphasizes the modernization of patriarchal mode of regulating women and the second stresses the democratizing of gender relations in both the private and the public spaces. They also emphasize the greater democratizing role of lower class movements. Efforts has also been made by some scholars to divide these movements into periods or waves, like the social reform movement during the freedom struggle, the movements from 1947 to 1975 the movements that emerged during and after the international women's decade, 1975-85.¹⁹

Major shifts in the movement could be seen towards the end of the 20th century. In the 1970's initiatives in the area of economic development were taken by the women's movement as was done by other social forces too. The 1980's saw cultural problems emerging like the Shah Bano case, the Roop Kanwar Sati episode and the anti-Sikh riots. In the 1990's, economic liberalization got clubbed together with the Mandal agitation, the demand for women's reservation in legislatures and the Ayodhya issue. Thus minority politics seemed to engulf within its fold the politics of feminism, each group taking up different issues, irrespective of the fact of its suitability to its womenfolk.

¹⁵ Neera Desai, 1988, *A Decade of Women's Movement in India*, p. ix.

¹⁶ Gail Omvedt, 1979, *We Will Smash this Prison*.

¹⁷ Jana Everett, 1979, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Kalpana Shah, 1984, *Women's Liberation and Voluntary Action*, Sangari and Vaid, *Recasting Women*, 1989.

¹⁹ Kumar 1993, *op. cit.*, Chaudhuri 1993, *op. cit.*, Gandhi and Shah, 1991, *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women's Movement in India*.

¹² Basu, 1995, *A Nationalist Feminist: Mridula Sarabhai*, p.3.

¹³ Gandhi, 1942, *Women and Social Injustice*, Karuna Chanana, Gandhi, *Women's Roles and the Freedom Movement*, 1984.

¹⁴ Geraldine Forbes, 1999, *Women in Modern India*, pp. 242- 254.

In the past few decades a number of micro and macro struggles initiated by autonomous women's groups have taken place addressing the issues and questions of women's emancipating. The issues of rape, sexual harassment in the work place, violence against women in the family and public sphere have been on the forefront. More recently legislation is being extensively used to address issues of equal property rights, violence at home, reservation of jobs for women for their empowerment, laws against dowry and bride during, ban on fetal sex determination tests, female infanticide and so on. Of course the effectiveness of these is questionable but they do act as protection for women to some extent. In the contemporary scenario identity issues have assumed a critical position and have impacted women's question as well. Coherence of women as a category has come to be debated within the movement itself. At the same time in a clash between identity politics and feminist politics the solution is premised on the belief that a women's identity and her rights can be disassociated from the religious, ethnic, national or cultural context of her existence, however the answers are not so simplistic.

ENDNOTE

A number of women's organizations have mushroomed in India with or without state support. With different kinds of programmes and functioning they claim to work for the empowerment of women and at times are at loggerheads with each other posing questions and raising dilemmas for social scientists as to whether these multipronged and diverse movements are strengths or weaknesses for the women's cause. Should they restrict their focus and retain their autonomy? Since there is no one single women's movement and there are varied views on the state, the concept of equality in such diversity is justified. But it is important to bring out the theoretical aspect that emerges from this diversity as well as the meaning of emancipation for these groups and finally how the various theories of women's emancipation stand challenged. In India at least it is felt that feminism has not been able to go beyond the perspective of the middle class. So far as the majority is concerned it remains more of an idea than a reality.

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