

A Brief Study on the Growth of Feminism in the Indian Scenario during the Colonial and Post-Colonial Period till 1970s

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Abstract:

Traces of the development of feminist ideology can be seen in the Indian context since the time of arrival of the colonial powers of the west in the motherland. For constituting almost half of the population of each society, women deserves equal share in almost all the aspects of the human society. Earlier, women in the societies of India enjoyed relatively inferior position as compared to its male counterpart. Existence of traditional patriarchal norms and customs has legitimized the male domination in the Indian societies. Under the banner of reformist agenda, the seeds of feminism initially grew in the colonial land since the nineteenth century. With due course of time, the grip of feminist ideology gradually became stronger than ever which is evidential in the various writings as well as activities performed by the prominent figures of the land.

Keywords: Feminism, ideology, patriarchal, legitimized.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To examine the position of women in the early Indian societies.
2. To examine the development of feminism in the colonial land of India.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. What is the scenario of women in the early Indian societies?
2. How does feminism develop in the land of India?

METHODOLOGY:

The present research work is primarily descriptive and analytical in nature. For the purpose of conducting the study, data is collected from secondary sources such as books, articles and websites.

INTRODUCTION:

The forces of colonialism brought alongside the doctrine of nationalism and the underlying ideas for the liberation of women into the colonial land of India. The Post-colonial theorist Kumari Jayawardena rightly stated that, “feminism was not imposed on the Third World by the West” but it took place as a result of important material and ideological changes upon the lives of women living in third world countries. She further talks about the nature of early feminism in India and argues that it lacked a proper “revolutionary feminist consciousness” might be due to its amalgamation with the nationalist discourse of India. As the purpose of this proposed research work is to examine the history of feminism in India, being influenced by the colonial rule, since colonial period to till 1970s, one needs to study carefully the status and position of women in India during that particular phase of time.

Women in Indian societies and the growth of feminism till 1970s: an overview

Since ancient period, due to the domination of the patriarchal institutions the women of the Indian societies had to spend a miserable life. Apart from their projection as the inferior sex in the society, their symbolic representations are always associated with submissive qualities. The vibrant women figures of the colonial era, Rani Laxmibai, Jind Kaur, Rani Chennama, and Qudisa Begum, had to struggle hard in initiating the process of women empowerment in India as their path was not smooth. While heading towards the direction of achieving the desired goal of women emancipation they had to face stiff attacks from the society at large. Women across the societies of India, irrespective of class, caste and religious distinctions were subjected to male domination in the name of established norms and customs of the traditional society which were primarily backed by existing social conventions of a patriarchal structure. As mentioned earlier, the experience of women subordination for the preservation of traditional sanctity was not confined to only lower class or higher class women rather they had to face it irrespective of any differences of class, caste and religion. For example, Rani Laxmibai was a victim of child

marriage and early widowhood. The social evils such as child marriage, miseries of widowhood, polygamy, sati and purdah, which were the products of a society that is based on patriarchal rules and regulations, had been growing stronger due to hold of conservative ideas and beliefs in the minds of illiterate people. The relation between men and women in both public and private domain was that of superior-subordinate, initially on the basis of their biological differences which was further exaggerated by the forces of patriarchal domination. In other words, the institute of patriarchy even went into the bedroom of a family whereby woman had to lose her control over sexuality and was governed by the wish of her husband. The believers of an egalitarian society felt the need to reform such an exploitative scenario that prevailed almost in all spheres of society. The dream of women emancipation got an expressive way with the coming of colonial forces into the native land.

Social movements had started to emerge in India particularly in the states of Bengal and Maharashtra. These movements were largely influenced by the western ideals of liberty, justice, equality and freedom. Since early nineteenth century, these two states had come under the influence of progressive Western ideas by the Colonial power. This is much earlier when comparing with other parts of the land. These movements kept women issues at their central arena of reform. After the British arrived as the colonial authority of the land, reforms were being carried out in the social sphere also that primarily focused its attention in the removal of such degenerating practices from the societies of India that would be benefiting for the cause of emancipation of women of these societies. During that period, the liberal feminists of the west were actively involved in the process of emancipation and empowerment of women. Though the context of the third world nations differ from the developed European nations, yet the impact of first wave feminism which is developed in the west was felt more or less by the non-western countries where women had been largely subjected to dual form of domination. Along with legal measures like adoption of the Sati Abolition Act of 1829 by William Bentinck who was the then Governor-General of India, the British missionaries took up the responsibility of educating the women so that they could speak for their liberation. In this process of social reform they got assistance from the progressive section of the Indian society. They had to struggle a lot in the process of reforming the society as when they spoke fiercely against the domination of the prevailing social evils that aimed to maintain the exploitative patriarchal hold upon all spheres of the society most of the women population remains ignorant. The main cause behind their

ignorance was lack of education. Because of their inability to read the sacred religious texts and the scriptures of Indian society that has acted as the backing force of all the exploitative social practices, they were unable to raise their voices for the purpose of maintaining equality in society. Thus, they primarily focused their attention to impart education among all sections of women in the society so that it would help them to secure freedom. People like Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, Pandita Ramabai, Raja Rammohan Roy and others made efforts in the direction of educating the girl child. As noted by Radha Kumar in her book *The History of Doing*, English and American missionaries started the first schools for girls in the 1810's and the first text on women's education in an Indian language i.e. Bengali was written by Gourmohan Vidyalamkara in the year 1819. The wave of social reform was deeply nourished within the societies of Bengal and gradually penetrated to other parts of the land. The first school for girls at Poona in the year 1848 was set up by Jyotirao Phule. The Satyashodhak Samaj was also formed by him in the year 1873 that worked for widow remarriage and inter-caste marriage apart from the other reform activities. The first home-cum-school for widows in Maharashtra was set up by Pandita Ramabai in the year 1889 which is named as the Sharada Sadan. Throughout her life Ramabai struggled hard for the cause of women education in India and suggested for the training of teachers and the appointment of women inspectresses when a commission was appointed by the colonial authority in the year 1882 to look into Indian education. The scenario of social reform movement in India during this period was mainly occupied by the women issues of widow immolation, widow remarriage, child marriage, inter caste marriage and polygamy. These issues were basically centered upon the question of the status and position of women in the social sphere of the country. Attainment of equality in the private domain of the family was the main purpose of the reformers of that period. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the place shared by women's reformist agenda was taken by the nationalist discourse for the purpose of attaining political independence. In the article *Major Trends of Feminism in India* Sarbani Guha Ghosal highlighted the construction of a new concept of womanhood by the nationalist writers on the basis of some particular past that has allowed women's involvement in the nationalist paradigm within a defined space. However, beginning of the twentieth century had opened a new phase in the history of women empowerment in India as since this period, women had started to express themselves on organizational line through the formation of various Women's Associations and their involvement in the various programmes of

national independence. During the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, growth of local and regional women's organizations was seen in the colonial land namely *Banga Mahila Samaj* and *theAghorekamini Nari Samiti*, *theSatara Abalonnati Sabha*, *the Mahila Seva Samaj*,*the Bharat Mahila Parishad* and *the Prayas Mahila Samiti* in Bengal, Maharashtra, Bangalore, Benares and Allahabad respectively. In the year 1917, the *Women's IndianAssociation* was formed by Annie Besant, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Malati Patwardhan, Ammu Swaminathan, Mrs Dadabhoy and MrsAmbujammal which was described as 'the first purely feminist organization to arise in India' by Rajkumari Amrit Kaur in the year 1932. During this period of their involvement in the various activities and plan of actions undertaken for the cause of national liberation some had lost their lives and lots were either kept in jails or in house arrest. Some expressed their talents of influential orators, leaders, profound intellectual writers as well as critiques for example Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Sushri Lajjavanti, Durgabai Deshmukh and others. With the engagement of Mahatma Gandhi in the larger discourse of national independence, the women's cause got a positive impetus due to his laden emphasis upon the programmes for national empowerment which has also included the women. For the cause of national independence women have sidelined their cause of emancipation and rendered several selfless services both as a nurturer as well as warrior or fighter of the struggle for independence. This period had marked an entry of women into the arena of Indian political life. After India attained political freedom from the colonial control, the cause of nation-building got special attention by the agents of nationalist paradigm. For the development of the country, the process of nation-building needs to be inclusive in its approach which guarantees the principle of equality for all but in India due emphasis was not given to the women's question despite the fact that the Constitution of the land delicately addressed the issue of women empowerment and linked it with the principle of equality and positive discrimination. For the process of nation-building, efforts were laid upon the economic and political spheres of the country rather than its social sphere which largely involved the issues of women liberation.¹⁸ Women's engagement in the Political field was not encouraged by many at the initial stage of post-independence era. Presence of strong women leader in the politics of India somehow managed to give a turn to the cause of women's question. Indira Gandhi set the example of such empowered women which was dreamt of by many when she became the first lady Prime Minister of independent India in the year 1966. Sarbani Guha Ghosal in her article stated that in

the initial decades of post-independence era women were considered as the targets of development and not as participants as defined by Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnaraj. They further quote, “women’s position was worsening in practically every sphere with the exception of some gains in education and employment for middle class women” and at the same time, “the declining value of women was surfacing in almost every aspect of life.” When discontentment arose against such negligence of women issues, the decade of 1970 saw the reemergence of feminist cause in India which is no longer confined to the basic issues of women emancipation. Apart from political and social empowerment they also started to give attention upon the economic self-reliance of women. The role of women as a productive worker outside the realm of family was not get recognized by the society as pointed out by Leela Kasturi and Vina Mazumdar in their article “Women and Indian Nationalism” as “despite the growing evidence of a decline in a poor women’s economic opportunities and consequent distress available from Census and a few other sources, official planners, social scientists and other continued to view women as economically inactive and dependent consumers, whose basic needs were confined to ‘education, health and welfare’ not employment.” The registration of the *Self Employed Women’s Association* (SEWA) in the year 1972 as a trade union of self employed women by Ela Bhatt marked a positive step in the direction of women’s economic empowerment. It is seen that though in the post-colonial era of India women were accorded constitutional guarantee to provide equality in social, political as well as economic spheres of the society yet state authority put little efforts in that area, rather women themselves took up initiatives in that direction. During that period, women were largely associated with the various movements that have been taking place in the different parts of India. Constructive efforts came up in the academic sphere also as stated by Ghosal in her article as “since 1975 both in academics and in administration a serious change crept in. From this time women’s study, to some extent, provides the theoretical basis for the women’s movement and sociopolitical context of ‘gender politics’.”

CONCLUDING OBSERVATION:

Thus, in the conclusion one can say that the development of early feminism in India is influenced by the principles of liberty, equality and freedom. Initially the stage was set by the various reform activities such as abolition of Sati, widow remarriage, abolition of child marriage and so on that were carried out by the social activists of that period like Jyotirao Phule,

Pandita Ramabai and others. Impact of first wave feminism of the west is clearly visible in the Indian scenario too. Since the decade of 1970 the struggle of feminist ideology in the context of Indian nation has started to assume a new character and at the same time opens an era of intellectual revolution. Such a revolutionary gesture is backed by constructive approaches which are being taken for the deconstruction of patriarchal structures by the genera of feminist writers and critiques such as Ismat Chughtai, Uma Chakravarti, Kumkum Roy, Sharmila Rege, Ritu Menon, Neera Desai, Vina Mazumdar, P. Lalita Kumari, Manikuntala Sen and so on.

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