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## Socio-Historical Factors of Indian Feminism

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### Abstract :

It remains a fact that legal sanction can only offer a guideline to society. It cannot change the social mindset and prejudices altogether. The age long patriarchal conditioning has affected the psyche of men and women alike and their feelings, thinking, actions, and reactions have got shaped accordingly. In this way, Indian society remains highly patriarchal, endorsing various anti-women stereotypes. Thus the socio-cultural ills related to women (both in traditional and modified form) inflict our society. Feminism, as a social movement, throws light on removing gender inequality, advocating the rights and interests of women, and other issues related to women

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The unjust condition of women prevailing throughout the society and subsequent women right movements paved the way for the rise of feminism - the ideology that stood for empowering women to the extent of bringing them at par with men. This led to the movement of libration for woman. The women's movement in India began as a social reform movement in the nineteenth century. The western ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity were being nurtured by the educated class through the study of English. They started to challenge the situation of women and brought about revolutionary changes in the context of feminism in India. Western liberalism was to extend to the women's questions which more focused on the awareness of the status of women in the society. In India, the tradition of women's struggle and movements against male-controlled institutions of gender in justice have been weak with compared to the women's movements in the European and Western societies.

Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi proclaimed the concept of 'ARDHANARESWAR' which means that 'Prakriti' (the nature) and 'Purusha' (male) are one. It is worth mentioning great words said by reformer of that time Swami Vivekananda.

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“The best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women. There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. Woman has suffered for aeons, and that has given her infinite patience and infinite perseverance.

The idea of perfect womanhood is perfect independence. There is no hope of rise for that family or country where there is no estimation of women, where they live in sadness.”  
(Swami Vivekananda).

India’s struggle for freedom is one such instance in history where women had stepped out of their regular roles as home-makers, mothers and wives to shoulder the responsibility of sculpting the concept of a new nation amidst the conflict between the people and the colonial state. While they were at it, they had stood shoulder to shoulder with their men-folk to rally the masses to the cause, face bullets, picket shops, participate in propaganda making. They embodied self-sufficiency as Gandhi had first visualised through the skill of spinning using a “charkha” (spinning machine for household spinning of cloth)

Almost all the reformers like Ram Mohan Roy, Jyoti Rao Phule, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, etc. fought for the betterment of women. Their persistent efforts finally bore fruit and the British rulers retracted their previous position of turning a blind eye to evil practices on the pretext of non-interference in Indian religious practices. Hence Raja Rammohan Roy's efforts led to the abolition of Sati in 1829. The crusade of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar for improvement in the situation of widows led to the enactment of Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. Passing of Female infanticide Prevention Act in 1870 was another victory of the social reformers. Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekanand, Sir Saiyad Ahmed Khan - all worked for improving the conditions of women of their respective communities. Jyotiba Phule, with his better half Savitri Phule, worked rigorously in the field of women education, especially the education of weaker sections of women. All this brought in considerable improvement in the condition of women in India. After getting freed from certain regressive practices, now a significant number of women from well-to-do families got access to education.

As a result, The Constitution of the Republic of independent India did not disappoint this expectation and sure enough, women found their rights consolidated on paper, in laws and constitutional provisions giving them equal rights to all aspects defining a quality

life. However Organized feminism did not kick off until The National Council for Women was arranged in 1921; then in 1927 Indian Women's Conference also strictly protested against women's subjugation and also challenged the stereotypes created by patriarchal norms. Earlier in 1920 the Government of the State of Cochin gave women the right to vote. This was perhaps one of the greatest achievements of the century for women. Later on, women's rights got protected by different laws like Hindu Succession Act of 1956, Dowry prohibition Act 1971 etc. So, post-independence, social changes gave women much relief and encouraged them in their struggle to assert their rights. Hence It was mainly after the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s that the contemporary feminist ideology evolved and the female voice was heard with special concern.

Hence, the history of feminism in India can be divided into three phases:

The first phase - commencing from the mid nineteenth century, when there were protests against the social evils of Sati by the male European colonists.

The second phase - beginning from 1915 to 1947 i.e. the period of Gandhian movements in India, when Gandhiji included various women's movements into the comprehensive ongoing movements for attainment of Indian independence. It was the time of making of various independent women organizations including their radical left wings.

The third phase was post-independence, which emphasized fair treatment of women in their homes after marriage, equal and justifiable conditions for work as well as women's right to political parity.

Summing up, many socio-historical factors have led to the birth of feminist movement in India. However here it is important to differentiate between western feminism and Indian feminism. The feminist prospects and the feminist movements in the west have had some influence on the women's movements in developing countries like India. Unlike the western feminist movements, India's movement was initiated by men and later joined by women. Indian feminism differs from Western feminism in terms of philosophy and culture, existence and living styles, custom and standards. In the Indian context, several feminists have realized that the subject of women's emancipation in India should not be reduced to the contradictions between man and woman. The woman, in order to liberate herself and

advance, needs to empower herself to confront different institutional structures and cultural practices that subject herself to patriarchal domination and control. The idea of women as 'powerful' is accommodated into patriarchal culture with traditional 'cultural spaces'. Another consideration is that in the west the notion of 'self' rests in competitive individualism where women are described as 'born free yet everywhere in chains'. By contrast in India the individual is usually considered to be just one part of larger social collective, dependent for its survival upon co-operation and self-denial for the greater good. On the contrary, western feminist pay great attention to sexual life, sexual customs and the influence of sexual culture, there even appeared a trend of 'sexualism'

Indian feminism functions within the boundaries of Indian society. It does not try to defeat all arrangements. It has never denied and even now does not deny religious conviction but fights against communalism and downgrading of women. It stresses societal reorganization. It also demands mutual understanding, good relationship between man and woman and coordination among family members. It never supports man and woman separation. The feminist of India are well aware of the fact that Indian women can be happy only with their families and cannot on her own. But what is fundamental and significant for them is that there should be full reverence towards women and parity with their counterparts. According to Sagarika Ghose, a member of the URMUL Trust of Rajasthan:

*"The Indian feminist movement has operated within communities, not among individuals. ....Their struggle that are perhaps more pragmatic than ideological."*<sup>1</sup>

In fact the western feminism was born out of the tendency to focus on one's own interests, thoughts and feelings as well as de-polarization. Indian feminism has some precise concerns to contest against. According to Indu Agnihotri:

*"Unlike in the west, Indian feminism has never really been anti-family, although we oppose patriarchy within family structure."*<sup>2</sup>

Actually women in India have gained equal status with men directly with the introduction of the Constitution whereas in the West women had to fight a long battle for equal status with their counterparts. Secondly even today the institution of marriage and family is held as necessary in India. Perhaps it is because it provides both men and women

the safety and social status. In fact in India both the sexes find it hard and upsetting to break away from the institution of marriage and family. Therefore there is difference in Indian feminists and Western feminists. Though the feminist of all shades and nationalities share the basic paradigms of feminism with the western feminists, they have been conscious of maintaining their own identities independent in their own respective ways.

Indian feminists through their writing register their frustrations against the social injustices, suppression and subjugation of women. They don't ask for their freedom from the institution of marriage and family. Indian feminism is basically against the patriarchal culture which identifies masculine as active, dominating, adventurous, rational and creative; the feminine is to be identified as passive, timid, emotional, irrational and conventional. Hence the radical feminists argue that it is the cultural creation of the concept 'woman' that keeps her in a subordinate position. One's sex as a man or woman is determined by anatomy but gender is a social construct that is generated by the pervasive patriarchal biases of our civilization.

Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Indian feminism has gone hand in hand with activism relevant to Indian society. Feminists have sought the liberation of woman by advocating a ban on certain social customs such as polygamy, child-marriage, sati and purdah and by demanding educational and legal rights for the woman. Contemporary feminists are working for the eradication of social evils such as dowry deaths, female feticide and infanticide, rape, wife beating and desertion. At the same time, they are also fighting for education, equal wages and economic independence of the woman. The issues may have altered since the 1930's, but the nature of the battle against her oppression remains the same.

It is sure that all the feminists talk about the position of women in the society but no single definition can encompass it. Rosalind Delmar in his article, "What is Feminism" observes:

*It is certainly possible to construct a base-line definition of feminism and feminist which can be shared by feminists and non-feminists. Many would agree that at the very least a feminist is someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs which remain negated and*

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*unsatisfied, and that the satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change (some would say a revolution even) in the social, economic and political order.*<sup>3</sup>

As more and more young girls and women are being aware of their rights and strongly voicing their concerns about oppression of woman in society, the same can be traced in literature of post-independence era. Indian writers too started to express their views about the status of a woman in society. Veena Noble Dass describes in her book-

*“Feminism in Indian literature, particularly in Indian English writing is a by-product of the western feminist movement. But we cannot totally negate the contribution made by our freedom struggle, independence, spread of education, concern for economic development and stability, employment opportunities and above all the resultant new awareness of our women. As far as feminism is concerned regional literatures too fall in line with this pattern. The Indian women caught in the flux of tradition and modernity bearing the burden of the past and the aspirations of the future is the crux of feminism in Indian literature. A search for identity and a quest for the definition of the self, have become the prime features of women in literature under the sway of feminism.”*<sup>4</sup>

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