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Feminist Dilemma in 21st Century: Indian Perspective

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ABSTRACT: The present review looks at the challenges to feminism in the 21st century and gives an Indian perspective. All over the world there has been a close link between the women's movement and feminism, each inspiring and enriching the other. While the women's movement is a much earlier phenomenon, the term Feminism is a modern one. Feminism comprises a number of social, cultural and political movements, theories and moral philosophies concerned with gender inequalities and equal rights for women. The present review looks at the challenges to feminism in India. These can be referred to as the three G's - the attitude towards, Girl child, Gender violence and Globalization. India is home characterized by high economic growth for the past 10-15 years yet poverty is also a reality along with illiteracy, backwardness and a large population. In the absence of a State support structure, the family plays a major role in this culture and this affects women more than men. All Indian cultures are patriarchal. There is a lot of value placed on the birth of a son and one of the major problems facing the family today is the declining sex ratio. Gender-based violence is a universal reality of India regardless of income, class and culture. The liberalization of the Indian economy in the wake of Globalization in many states has vastly diminished traditional livelihood means for the poor. The dominance of rich nations, multinational corporations and international capital over markets, resources and labour in the developing countries through trade, aid and technology transfer has greatly weakened the capacity of nation states and governments to promote human development and offer protection to the poor people. The paper concludes by stating that feminism is as relevant as ever before and the biggest challenge of 21st century feminism is to how do we integrate difference with an interdependent world.

KEYWORDS: feminist, challenges, india, culture, girl child, gender, globalization, sex ratio

**This is not a men vs.
women issue. It's about
people vs. prejudice.**

Laura Bates
Everyday Sexism



I. INTRODUCTION

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its preamble, fundamental rights, fundamental duties and directive principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women but also empowers the state to adopt measures, a position; indiscriminate in favour of women. Within the framework of democratic polity, our laws, developmental policies, plans and programmes are aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. India has also ratified various international conventions to secure rights of women. The women's movement and a widespread network of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) having strong grass-root presence and deep insight into women's concerns have contributed in inspiring initiatives for the empowerment of women. Women today are

trying to understand their position in the society. Women have become increasingly aware of sexual inequalities in every sphere of life and are seeking ways to fight them.[1]

Though feminists share common commitments to equality between men and women, feminist jurisprudence is not uniform. There are three major schools of thought within feminist jurisprudence.[2]



Mrs. Indira Gandhi-our first women prime minister

1. Traditional, or liberal, feminism asserts that women are just as rational as men and therefore should have equal opportunity to make their own choices.
2. Another school of feminist legal thought, cultural feminists, focuses on the differences between men and women and celebrates those differences; this group of thinkers asserts that women emphasize the importance of relationships, whereas men emphasize abstract principles of rights and logic. The goal of this school is to give equal recognition to women's moral voice of caring and communal values.
3. Radical or dominant feminism focuses on inequality. It asserts that men, as a class, have dominated women as a class, creating gender inequality. For radical feminists gender is a question of power. Radical feminists urge us to abandon traditional approaches that take maleness as their reference point. They argue that sexual equality must be constructed on the basis of woman's difference from man.

II. OBSERVATIONS

Cultural institutions in India, particularly those of patrilineality (inheritance through male descendants) and patrilocality (married couples living with or near the husband's parents), play a central role in perpetuating gender inequality and ideas about gender-appropriate behaviour. A culturally ingrained parental preference for sons — emanating from their importance as caregivers for parents in old age — is linked to poorer consequences for daughters.[3,4]

The dowry system, involving a cash or in-kind payment from the bride's family to the groom's at the time of marriage, is another institution that disempowers women. The incidence of dowry payment, which is often a substantial part of a household's income, has been steadily rising over time across all regions and socioeconomic classes.



Saina Nehwal

This often results in dowry-related violence against women by their husbands and in-laws if the dowry is considered insufficient or as a way to demand more payments.

These practices create incentives for parents not to have girl children or to invest less in girls' health and education. Such parental preferences are reflected in increasingly masculine sex ratios in India. In 2011, there were 919 girls under age six per 1000 boys, despite sex determination being outlawed in India.[5,6]

This reinforces the inferior status of Indian women and puts them at risk of violence in their marital households. According to the National Family and Health Survey of 2005-06, 37% of married women have been victims of physical or sexual violence perpetrated by their spouse

“Constitutional guarantees of equality and nondiscrimination are confounded by discriminatory personal laws that institutionalise gender inequality,” avers feminist lawyer Adv. Indira Jaising (2005). While providing support to women facing problems concerning marriage, divorce, maintenance, alimony, property rights, custody of child/children and guardianship rights, the activists realised that the existing personal laws and most of the customary laws were discriminating against women. Hindu daughters were deprived of coparcenary rights in parental property as per the codes of Mitakshara. Christian women could not get divorce on the grounds of adultery committed by the husband; it had to be coupled with cruelty, bestiality and sodomy. On the other hand, Christian husbands could simply declare their wives as adulteresses and divorce them. These antiquated laws were enacted in the Colonial period to serve the interests of the British bureaucrats who had their legally wedded wives in England and were cohabiting with the Indian (in their language ‘native’) women. Parsi daughters who married non-Parsi men lost their property rights and non-Parsi wives of Parsi husbands got only half the share in the husband's property as per the Parsi Personal Law. The sharia subjugated Muslim women by imposing purdah, allowing polygamy and unilateral divorce by man to his wife/wives and by depriving divorced Muslim women of maintenance rights.



The underlying philosophy of all these personal laws was that: women are not equal to men. They are governed by the patriarchal ideology. Irrespective of their religious backgrounds, these personal laws perpetuate patrilineage, patrilocal, double standards of sexual morality for men and women and perceive women as dependent on men. Therefore, all personal laws on marriage, inheritance and guardianship of children discriminate against women in some form or the other. Individual women from different communities have challenged the constitutional validity of the discriminatory aspects of the personal laws in the Supreme Court. An increasing number of educated working women and housewives from all religious backgrounds have been approaching secular women’s organisations. [7,8]

III. DISCUSSION

The 2012 fatal gang rape of a 23-year-old student in Delhi became a tipping point. An unprecedented number of millennial youth launched a rallying cry for women’s unconditional freedom. They asserted that women have absolute right to their choices, their bodies and to their movement in public spaces at any time of day or night. They challenged outmoded cultural beliefs that women invite sexual violence through their clothes and behavior. By bringing the discourse of freedom, sexuality, choice and desire into the public realm – in the streets and through social media – this agitation forced the government to expand its legal definition of rape, introducing harsher punishment for rapists and criminalizing stalking and voyeurism.



“Mee too campaign”-the fourth wave

What is unique about this movement is that it is a multilayered struggle. It combines freedom from sexual oppression with freedom from caste, ethnic and religious oppression. Often referred to as India's "Arab Spring," this movement created a ripple effect for other struggles to break out. The Chalo Dilli or #NotInMyName movements rose up against the right-wing state led violence against Dalits and Muslims. In this sense, this new feminist agitation represents an impressive level of maturity, inclusivity and political sophistication.[9] I see this new movement as the rise of "fourth-wave" feminism in India. I borrow the idea from the British journalist and writer Kira Cochrane and the American feminist blogger Jessica Valenti. While Cochrane and Valenti define the fourth wave in the West as online feminism, fourth wave in India, I claim, is a mostly social media-led holistic movement that combines women's freedom with a wider call for social justice for minority men and women.[10]

IV. RESULTS

"Discrimination," 'exploitation,' and 'suppression' are no words to be used as weapons in the battle of sexes. Work is the right of everyone. Women have the right and duty to organize themselves for better protection, and work together with peace, justice and equality for the progress of the nation. When we do this we do not need International Women's Years, decades, demonstrations and processions," said K. Lakshmi Raghuramaiah, President of The All India Women's Conference.[11]



Mrs. Raghuramaiah reacted very strongly when asked what she thought of the Indian women's role in society. "It is the woman who is not doing enough for herself; not as popular opinion gives out that men are exploiting women," she declared, "Women should shake themselves out of their laziness and complacency and demand equal rights. They should be the ones to decide about abortions and about being on the pill, for even in sex a woman has no independence."

"A drastic change in the social customs is necessary," said Mrs. Raghuramaiah. "Often women as qualified as men find it impossible to get the same jobs. The employer consciously or unconsciously feels he gets more wage value when he engages a man. When he employs a man he is really employing two people for one wage. He is employing the man and his wife who is looking after him and preserving his energy to do his job well. He has the satisfaction of knowing that his employee has his own servant, guard, cook and housekeeper." [12]



Mrs. Raghuramaiah shrugged off the notion of men hating the idea of being financially dependent on women. She pointed out that for centuries women have accepted many things they have disliked so there is no reason why a woman today should be worried about shattering a man's ego.

She said, "It is time women did something concrete to regenerate the concept of the New Woman: No replica of East or West, past or present, but really a new woman resplendent with the strength of equality, moral courage and dutiful freedom."

V. CONCLUSION

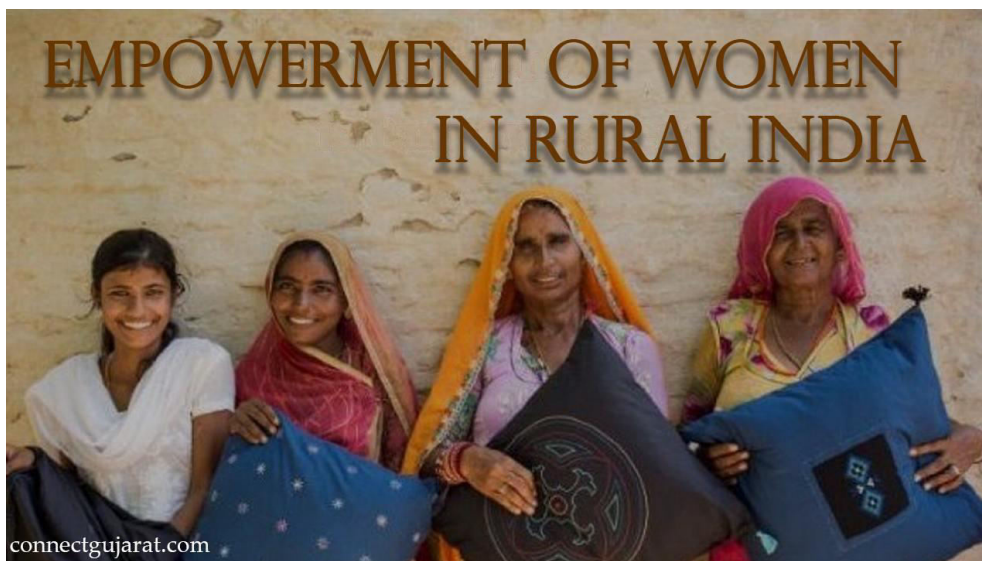
Feminism has been all over the place since women realized their importance in a patriarchal society. While once it found its voice in seminal texts like Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Women, John Stuart Mills' The Subjection of Women, Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own, and Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex, in the 21st century you may come across it on social media, fashion magazines, Hollywood, and pop music etc. Though the medium of expression may have changed, feminism is still going places and supporting women empowerment.



In the 21st century, it is facing various threats: be it some people saying that feminism has failed or women themselves being apprehensive of embracing the tag of feminism. More or less, it has always helped women realizing their social roles in patriarchal societies across the globe.[13]



Meninist' was coined by feminist.com, and it was started as a movement where men too stand up against atrocities against women. Now under a twitter Hashtag, it has been used to ridicule women for their obsession with feminism. "Tiresomely, these early meninists once again bemoaned 'the patriarchy'— i.e. men — for being responsible for just about every human problem, be it war, colonialism, racism, homophobia and capitalism. . . . So far so light-hearted. But more recently, the movement has heated up by piggybacking serious hashtags such as WomenAgainstFeminism and YesAllMen."



It's always been a messy affair to come to a conclusion on a subject that is too new to decide on its fate: Feminism in the 21st century is hardly close to feminism that we witnessed in the 19th century and 20th century. We talk about it, we read about it, we write about it, but the palpability of feminism observed in previous centuries is hard to come by. There are innumerable research papers written on feminism (third wave feminism, eco-feminism specially) in the academia, but we hardly talk about fourth wave feminism, and interestingly fifth wave feminism, if any. We have seen how feminism is losing its relevance as far as its trajectory is concerned outside the academia. But feminism exists in various forms as we have read in the paper; it's an issue worth a debate as women are still suffering at the hands of patriarchy, notwithstanding a lot has changed in comparison to previous centuries. Women need to take a stand against what is not acceptable, and get called a feminist should be an honor, rather than a stigma. And now feminism means an inclusion: equality for all— women, men, gays, lesbians, transsexuals, intersexuals and queers. We have a very short-sighted view of feminism in the 21st century as we have just entered into it; we shall be able to have a better understanding of it in upcoming 25 years hereupon.[14]

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