

A case study of feminism in India

Krishna Balraj Sahay¹ & Snehil²

Abstract

The recent appointment of Justice Indira Banerjee as a Supreme Court judge was indeed a historic moment. This is because it is for the first time in the history of the Apex court that there are 3 sitting women judges. Apart from that the present ruling party of our country has also appointed a number of female cabinet ministers. Further every year we listen to the news that how girls outshine boys in high school and university examinations. This proves us that how modern day women are breaking the traditional patriarchal social norms and are excelling in both personal and professional spheres when given a chance. Things like these would not have been possible without the Feminist Movement. Thus, it can be said that the Feminist Movement has played a very crucial role in the upliftment of women in our country. This short article deals with the case study of Feminism in our country. The present paper is divided into five chapters. The first chapter deals with the conceptual discussion on feminism. The second chapter deals with the history of Feminism in India. The third chapter deals with the various schools of Feminism. In the fourth chapter, authors have discussed about the rights available to women under the Constitution of India and lastly the authors have discussed about the impact of feminism and the way which lies ahead.

¹Student, Chanakya National Law University, Patna.

²Student, Chanakya National Law University, Patna.

Feminism: A conceptual discussion

For ages women were side-lined from the mainstream society. The society in the Early as well as in the Medieval Age was a patriarchal society, i.e. a society completely dominated by man. However, Indian women enjoyed a better position in the society during the Early Vedic age. She played an important role in the day to day affairs of both family and society. But, during the latter Vedic period the position of women deteriorated and they got side-lined from the mainstream society. This continued till the late Eighteenth century. The position of woman at that time period was nothing less than that of a puppet operated as per the whims and fancies of the man. She had no voice of her own, she lacked Identity. As a result Feminist Movement became popular.

Feminism in India can be defined as a range of political movements, ideologies and social movements that share a common goal which is to define, establish and achieve political, economic, personal and societal equality of both the sexes in India.³

Feminist Movement is one the major factors behind the historical societal change in terms of Women's rights. It initially originated in the Western part of the World but, later became a global phenomenon.

History of feminism in India

The history of feminism in India can be divided into three phases. The first phase began in the mid-eighteenth century wherein the male European colonists began to speak out against the existing social evils against women especially Sati practice. In support with the native Hindu social reformers the Britishers abolished many such evil practices which curbed the fundamental rights of women.⁴

The second phase of the Feminist Movement in India lasted from 1915 to 1947, till the time of our country's independence. Mahatma Gandhi incorporated women's movements into Freedom struggle. As a result independent women's organisations began to emerge and the position of women improved.⁵

The third phase of Feminist movement in India started post-independence. The Feminist Movement now entirely focused upon fair treatment of women at home after marriage, in the work force and right to political parity.⁶

³CHRIS BEASLEY, WHAT IS FEMINISM 3-11 (1st ed. 1999).

⁴RADHA KUMAR, THE HISTORY OF DOING: AN ILLUSTRATED ACCOUNT OF MOVEMENTS FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND FEMINISM IN INDIA 1800-1990(1st ed. 1993).

⁵*Id.*

⁶*Id.*

Schools of feminism

Over the years numerous feminist ideologies have developed. Some of the popular schools of Feminism practiced in India are as follows:

Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism is an individualistic form of feminist theory which entirely focuses upon women's ability to maintain their equality through their own actions and choices. Its emphasis is upon making the legal and political rights of women equal to men.⁷

Liberal feminists conceive the idea of freedom as personal autonomy and political autonomy. Feminists belonging to Liberal School of Feminism hold the view that the exercise of personal autonomy depends upon certain enabling conditions that are insufficiently present in women's lives.⁸

Radical Feminism

Radical feminism is a school of Feminist philosophy which emphasizes upon the patriarchal roots of inequality between the men and women. The Radical feminism philosophy views patriarchy as dividing rights, privileges and power primarily by sex. As a result women are continuously oppressed by man.

According to Radical feminists, technology will play a very important role in removing the divide between the two opposite sexes.⁹

Socialist Feminism

Socialist feminism is a branch of Feminism which states that capitalism strengthens and supports the existing sexist status. Presently it's the men who possess and own power and wealth. Further they believe that these men are more willing to share their power and money with other fellow men than women. As a result women are left with fewer opportunities and resources. Therefore, Socialist Feminists aim to eliminate the existing capitalist system and replace it with the socialist model to improve the present situation of women.¹⁰

Women rights under Indian Constitution

The Indian Constitution prohibits any sort of discrimination on the basis of sex and gender. Articles 15 and 16 of our Constitution grant special rights to women for their social

⁷Suzanne M. Marilley, *Woman Suffrage and the Origins of Liberal Feminism in the United States, 1820-1920*, HARVARD (Aug. 3, 2018, 7:00 PM), <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674431331>.

⁸Amy.R.Baehr, *Liberal feminism*, STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY (Aug. 4, 2018, 6:00 PM), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-liberal/>.

⁹Ellen Willis, "Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism". *Social Text 9/10: The 60's without Apology*, JSTOR (Aug. 5, 2018, 8:30 PM), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i220048>.

¹⁰Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, *Socialist Feminism: What Differencedid it make to the History of Women's Studies*, 34(3) *Feminist Studies* 497, 497-525 (2008).

upliftment.¹¹ Apart from that seven five-year plans were developed to provide health, education, employment, and welfare to women. Further the sixth five-year plan even declared women as partners in development.

Impact of feminism in India and way ahead

Feminist Movement is certainly one of the most revolutionary and influential socio-political movement of our country. Feminists in India have posed challenges to established patriarchal institutions such as family, dominant social values and legal structures especially in regard to violence against women. It is because of the Feminist Movement that today women have the right to vote in modern day democracies; it is the courtesy of the Feminist Movement that today women have the right to hold the public offices. It is due to the feminist movements that we have witnessed a series of social, cultural and educational reforms in our society which improved the living standards of woman.¹²

However, despite the Feminist Movement and other such reforms, a large population of women are still living a substandard life in our country. Thus, it's the need of the hour that the governments at National level promote feminism. It is because when women and men would live same standard of life with equal opportunities and rights, then only the mankind would progress and our country will move forward.

Apart from this we also need to change the perception of people in general towards Feminism. The subconscious of our culture automatically associates "feminist" with "man-hating." As a result today both women and men refuse to identify themselves as Feminist. This understanding of the concept of Feminism is entirely contrary to the original meaning. Apart from that the mainstream society has the tendency to be blinded by fear (In this case the fear is of change). We are unable to digest the fact that while feminism is freeing women from patriarchal oppression, men are being freed as well. Feminism has also freed men from the patriarchal oppression, just like women, men were also harmed by traditional gender roles. Thus, it can be said that Feminism has advantaged both the sexes.¹³ Therefore, it's high time for us that we not only promote Feminism in society, but also explain the concept Feminism to the society so that no one lives in ignorance anymore.

¹¹CONST. India art.15, art. 16.

¹²Madhumita Pandey, *Exploring 'Feminism' and the real life impact of feminist movement in India*, SUNDAY GUARDIAN (Aug. 8, 2018, 4:00 PM), <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/lifestyle/9216-exploring-feminism-and-real-life-impact-feminist-movement-india>.

¹³ H. Maren, *How Feminism Helps Everyone (Not Just The Women)*, WOMEN MEDIA CENTER (Aug. 6, 2018, 3:34 PM), <http://www.womensmediacenter.com/fbomb/how-feminism-helps-everyone-not-just-the-women>.