

# Feminism in the Democratic Republic of India: A Critical Study

**Krishna Sannigrahi**

*Ph.D. Research Scholar*

*Department of English, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune-411007*

*E-mail: krishna.sannigrahi@gmail.com*

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**Abstract**—*Feminism as a socio-political movement originated in the West. It is with the advent of the third-wave feminism or the age of feminisms that the idea of intersectionality became evident. Feminism in India was primarily brahmanical in nature right from its inception. The marginalised women or the subalterns among subalterns did not find any space in this discourse as they were relegated to the periphery. Democratic Republic of India is marked by its heterogeneity in terms of caste, sub-caste, class, gender etc. Hence this grand narrative of mainstream feminism could hardly do any justice to these subject positions facing triple subjugation of caste, class and gender. Even the contributions of some of the Indigenous social thinkers in bringing about emancipation of women were hardly referred to. Critics like Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege voiced their concerns regarding the grand narrative of brahmanical feminism which was elusive of these layered undercurrents. However, tracing the history of feminism in the works of certain notable social thinkers and the need to revive their ideals in the modern times to reconsider the base of feminism in India is something which needs more attention. So, this research would focus on the intersection of caste, class and gender in the fabric of feminism in India and justify the need to decanonize our study of feminism. It would further focus on the works of social revolutionists who were visionaries in charting the way for emancipation of women in general and particularly on the works of Mahatma Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar who pertinently focussed on the nexus of caste, class and gender. Irrespective of the space and time which they occupied; their philosophies find reverberance even in the modern times in order to raise feminist sensibilities and pave the path for actual liberation of women.*

## 1. Introduction

Heterogeneity is at the core of the social structure of the Democratic Republic of India. When we talk about Feminism, which initiated as a socio-political movement addressing the cause of gender equality at different fronts like political, economic or social, trying to get a unified definition of feminism in the Indian context becomes difficult. What exactly is feminism in India? Does the mainstream feminism existing in India do justice to the graded inequality existing in the social fabric? Do we at all have any all encompassed feminism which can be accepted by all? Also, if it is at all possible or justified to try and define feminism in India are some of the glaring questions one meets with when one delves

into the venture of trying to trace the roots and the growth of this movement in India. Rooted in the principle of establishing equality amongst all genders where the gender positions are always variable and slippery given the kind of socio-political disposition occupied by them, feminism in India has its roots in the works of some of the indigenous social thinkers who worked for the emancipation of women although they were in no way involved in the methodical feminist movement or propagated the principles of feminism. Yet the so-called mainstream feminism in India has hardly referred to their indelible contribution in bringing about a drastic change in the social positions occupied by them. Given the kind of graded inequality existing in India, the mainstream feminist movement has also been silent about the needs of the women belonging to the weaker sections of the society who are constantly subjugated by the inherent power structure in the family and society at large. Due to the lack of agency the cause and needs of the subalterns amongst the subalterns have never found listeners. They have been ignored and their existence has never been recognized. When we talk about the noble principles of liberty, equality and fraternity which are again derived from the Buddhist principles, we are talking about all the members of the society. Yet when we talk about the implementation of the principles at the grassroot level we find that the ones relegated to the periphery of the dominant discourse are always silent or made silent.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak talks about the need of learning to learn from below in order to do justice to these ignored subject positions. Gopal Guru has also highlighted the fact that the Dalit women or the women occupying an area marked by the triple subjugation of caste, class and gender actually talk differently and these differences need to be addressed to. Eminent historian Uma Chakravarti has tried to re-read history through the feminist lens in order to unmask the instances of coercion and dominance which marks the area of the intersection of caste and gender. Sharmila Rege has also highlighted the lack in the mainstream feminism in India which has been Brahmanical in nature since its inception. However, trying to get to the roots of feminism in India is something which is still lacking.

Gender, unlike sex, which is biological, is a social construct and hence the roots of gender discrimination also lies in the society. In order to eradicate this discrimination, it must be rooted in the change in the perception of society and the mindset of the people who form the base of the society. Hence, the social thinkers who created a revolution during their times can in many ways be relevant in today's age. Being the proponents of humanism, their values need to be revived which are based on the principles of universal brotherhood: liberty, equality and fraternity.

Foucault propagated the theory of discourse according to which discourse is generated and given recognition by the people in power in order to advance their hegemony and ideologies. And hence anything which is important for the people in the superior position in the power structure is given prominence. Why some discourses are relegated to the periphery is never investigated. The lack of consciousness of some of these subject positions in order to even locate the graded discriminations meted out to them is missing in some cases. Here in lies the importance of some of the eminent social thinkers who pertinently focussed on the nexus of caste, class and gender and validated the need to raise the consciousness of these ignored entities. They emphasised on the need for education in order to bring about this change, but the literary canons have remained silent about their immense contribution. Thus, this research would focus on the need to trace the origin of feminism and highlight the need to decanonize the study of Feminism in India. Instead of just focusing on the western influence it would highlight the need to emphasize on the indigenous roots.

## 2. Feminism

Feminism originated as a socio-political movement in the West. The first wave initiated with the women's suffrage movement and the second wave mainly focussed on the social and legal rights of women to bring about their liberation. It originated as a movement to ensure empowerment of women socially, politically and economically but on a broader way it is a movement to establish equality amongst all genders. The third wave of feminism or the age of feminisms recognised the intersectionality with reference to race, ethnicity, nationality, religion and class. It was a continuation and also a reaction to the second wave feminism which mainly concentrated on the issues of the upper middle-class white women. The fourth wave feminism emerged recently focussing on the empowerment of women through internet and it emerged when the idea of post-feminism was slowly taking a grip on the minds of the people.

Beauvoir states "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"[2]. And it is our cultural disposition which plays an important role in shaping the kind of woman we become. Beauvoir tries to differentiate between the concept of sex and gender and establish the association of identity with the concept of gender. So, gender is constructed, and it is what leads to the creation of our identity. Betty Freidan highlighted

the need to focus on the individual identity of a woman which many a times gets shrouded under the garb of the roles played by her as a wife and mother. Now when we try to ponder over the subject positions occupied by women in different parts of world or specifically in India then we find that it is not homogenous. This lack of homogeneity gives birth to the layered concept of feminism or feminisms.

Just as feminism can be associated with an inherent angst to attain identity, similarly it can also be associated with a desire to raise consciousness regarding the way we look at things around us. It enhances our capacity to see things differently as Nivedita Menon talks about in her book *Seeing like a Feminist*[7]. Menon states that, "To be a feminist is to understand that different identities-located hierarchically as dominant or subordinate-are produced at different times and in different spaces, but also to be aware particularly of the processes of gendering." [7] By 'gendering' she refers to the process through which we become the proper men or women as per the acceptable gender roles assigned to us. The rules and regulations which we have internalised or have been forcefully imposed upon us determine who we are and not our original selves.

Feminism at its core is against patriarchy and not men. It preaches humanism and equality among all. It doesn't have a linear trajectory like other 'ism's like Marxism, Structuralism etc. but over the years it has evolved and is still evolving. The wave metaphor used in describing the evolution of feminism makes it evade the concept of linearity. Hence, we often use the waves metaphor or trope in order to chart the development of feminism. It is from the previous wave that a new wave arises, and the process goes on. However, what ties them together is the concept and resistance towards patriarchy.

## 3. Indian Feminism

India is marked by the divisions based on caste, sub-caste, religion, region, gender etc. Unlike race in America which is still homogenous in nature the graded hierarchy of caste discrimination in India is marked by its heterogeneity even in the people belonging to the same caste due to the different sub-castes and gotras. Even the regional differences have an influence on their hierarchy in some cases. For example, the Brahmins of certain regions are considered superior to that of the other areas.

It is with the advent of the third wave of feminism or the age of Feminisms that the different discourses of feminism from different parts of the world started getting more agency and recognition. Indian feminism originated as an off shoot of the Subaltern Studies group initiated by the likes of Ranajit Guha and Dipesh Chatterjee. Subaltern feminists like Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty made their presence felt with their powerful writings and views. Since the 1970s the term Subaltern denoted the colonized subjects who came under the rule of the British. The term subaltern has originated from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Latin term *subalternus*

including the Latin *Sub* meaning from below and *alternus* meaning every other. The concept of the subaltern as somebody belonging to the inferior rank or subordinate is majorly derived from Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci's work on cultural hegemony where subaltern position is such a position which has been subject to the hegemony of a class occupying a powerful position. It was later on taken up by the Subaltern studies group in India to specifically refer to the peasants who were out of the economic power structure of capitalism and is now used to refer to any one occupying an inferior status or the marginalised position in the power structure of society due to reasons like race, class, gender and ethnicity. However, the term subaltern is no less than a conundrum. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak defines it as an area without identity and agency. Now, the Dalit women who are the subalterns among subalterns occupy such a position from where any kind of agency is difficult. And when we talk of feminism in India, space needs to be made to incorporate their voice who have never been heard.

Women in India have not always been in such a sad state. We can see from the reference of the *Atharva Veda* [13] that the women were entitled the right of Upanayana and had the right to education as we get the reference of many women reading and teaching. However, it is after the teachings of Manu in the form of Manusmriti that the downfall of women happened and also that of the lowest caste like the Shudras. As a result of the injunctions of Manusmriti the women were deprived of the basic right of equality. Although this position has continued for some time, yet with the Renaissance Age in India there has been a kind of social revolution which took into its ambit the basic upliftment of the women.

Feminist discourse in Indian Democracy should thus include the proponents of Renaissance in India who dared to question the blindly followed rituals and customs in the ignorant societies of India. Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in West Bengal raised concerns regarding the illogical superstitions and practises prevalent in the society. Child marriage and Sati system were strongly opposed by them. There were many other thinkers in other parts of India like Gopal Ganesh Agarkar and Mahatma Gandhi who spoke about the empowerment of women. However, almost all these social thinkers came from more elite background and their thoughts and reforms were mainly confined to the customs ingrained in their own community. Various saints like Tukaram and Chokhamela did justice to the social awakening of their times too. Mahatma Phule, Narayan Guru, Shahu Maharaj, Periyar and Babasaheb Ambedkar were some of the social thinkers of the non-Brahmanic movements. However, it is Mahatma Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar who pertinently focussed on the intersection of caste, class and gender. They spoke about the empowerment of women and rooted their arguments and devised their solutions based on the needs of the people trapped under the triple subjugation of caste, class and gender. They justified the need to gain rationality and

breathed in the importance of education paving the path for women empowerment and laying the seeds of feminism.

It has always been stated that feminism in India has been Brahmanical in nature right from its inception. One of the prime reasons for it is that the women from the marginalised section were not even aware of their own weak positions, they accepted everything as a reality with no idea about a way to escape this subjugation. They were not aware of their own identity and the need to assert their identity. It is these thinkers who paved the way for the upliftment of women. Based on their principles various Dalit feminist groups were formed in the 1990s. Since these two thinkers had gone to the roots of the cause of these kinds of discriminations so it becomes important to know about their own disposition.

#### 4. Mahatma Phule

The reformist and radical social movements in the nineteenth century had touched upon the issue of woman's question but it is Mahatma Phule's Sarvajanic Satyadharma which highlighted the need for equality among all genders. It further justified the need to respect women and the need to educate them. His Satyashodhak Samaj was established to investigate the truth in the norms and rituals followed by people and strived to seek the truth. He had also organised various struggles to provide the women with their human rights. Upper caste reformists like Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, Ramabai Ranade and Pandita Ramabai were silent on the contribution of Mahatma Phule in fighting for the cause of women and the lower caste people. However, his contribution could be seen in the examples of Tarabai Shinde and Mukta Salve who took forward his ideas and principles.

Mahatma Phule's concept of education as the third eye is very important to understand the immense contribution of his in reflecting upon the need to bring about an actual change. He knew the power of education in enhancing one's rationality and power of thinking. Hence, even after facing many obstacles he opened the first girl's school in India in August 1848 when education for women was not something easily acceptable. He not only preached about equality but also practised it. He educated his wife Savitribai Phule and asked her to teach in his school for the untouchables. This is how he tried to go to the roots of the discrimination in society and tried to bring about equality by spreading the power of education and hence rationality. Both women and Shudras who were deemed unfit for education according to Manusmriti were provided education and in turn empowered by Mahatma Phule.

Dhananjay Kheer observes in his book, while explaining Mahatma Phule's philosophy: "There should be no discrimination between laws for men and women. One law should be applicable to both" [6]. According to Mahatma Phule actual happiness is found in truth and reason. Truth is the ultimate religion and all other religious books are written by men which are based on facts which are not true. And the

root cause of inequality among gender lies in these religious texts. His book *Slavery*[12] questions the arbitrariness of the Hindu religious books which are based on strange mythologies. He states that the Brahmins invented these mythologies for a specific purpose : “ In order however, to keep a better hold on the people they devised that weird system of mythology, the ordination of caste, and the code of cruel and inhuman laws, to which we can find no parallel amongst nations.” [12]

### 5. Babasaheb Ambedkar

Carrying forward the baton of empowerment of women, Babasaheb Ambedkar kindled the flame of identity amongst the hitherto ignorant class. He spread the slogan of educate, agitate and organise. True education for him was not the degrees or certificates but a realisation of one’s real situation. He believed that only true education can help one to agitate and to change the conditions in which one is existing, which will ultimately lead to organise oneself.

Dr. Ambedkar’s speech at the Mahad Satyagraha was revolutionary in nature. It changed the lives of the triply subjugated women who were living under the subjugation of caste, class and gender. They started realising their situation and started speaking to create a difference. His liberal views were an important force in bringing about this transformation in these women. In 1942 Mahila Parishad he spoke about the need to stop early marriages and the importance of equality in marriage. His progressive views found an outlet in the Hindu Code Bill presented by him, which was truly beyond its time and provided innumerable safeguards to the women to strengthen their footing through legal provisions. However, as expected it had to face a lot of opposition since it had questioned and tried to shake the base of the binaries existing in the society.

Babasaheb Ambedkar tried to go to the base of the root cause of the discriminations existing in society. He tried to decode who actually were the Shudras and how they became the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Social structure. His book *Annihilation of Caste*[1] explores the ways of annihilating caste. According to Ambedkar the root cause of any kind of discrimination be it gender or caste, lies in the social system dominated by caste hierarchy in India which in turn is a result of the religion which propagates it that is Hinduism. So, Ambedkar suggested that the only way to come out of this was to destroy the religion based on which caste was founded:

“I have, therefore, no hesitation in saying that such a religion must be destroyed, and I say, there is nothing irreligious in working for the destruction of such a religion” [1]

He also proved that Buddhism, founded on the principles of *Pradnya*, *Maitri*, *Sila* and *Karuna* can be the only solution to come out of all these forms of subjugation. He propagated the principle of *Dhamma* and also charted the way to establish *Saddhamma* which according to him had the capacity to bring about real empowerment.

### 6. Conclusion

Nivedita Menon writes in the Introduction of her book *Seeing Like a Feminist* : “To be a feminist is to recognize that, apart from gender-based injustice, there are multiple structural inequalities that underlie the social order, and to believe that change is possible, and to work for it at whichever level possible” [7]. Any kind of change is possible, and it is only possible if we are conscious of the need for such a change, see the realities under the veneer of normalisation and carry forward our continuous sense of responsibility to create that change. Indian constitution stands on the basic principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. In order to attain true feminism in India we need to have the true fulfilment of these ideas. Thus, tracing the history of feminism in the works of these notable social thinkers is all the more needed and equally important is the need to revive their ideals in the modern times to reconsider the base of feminism in India. This also justifies the need to decanonize the study of feminism in India. Irrespective of the space and time which Mahatma Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar occupied; their philosophies find reverberance even in the modern times in order to raise feminist sensibilities and pave the path for actual liberation of women.

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