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Theoretical construct of feminism in India: Historical context and contemporary dynamics

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Abstract

This paper delves into the theoretical construct of feminism in India, tracing its historical emergence, evolution through the four waves of feminism, and examining its current manifestations. While Indian feminism shares similarities with global feminist movements, it also embodies unique characteristics rooted in the country's socio-cultural and economic landscape. This paper explores the contributions of significant feminist theorists, including Betty Friedan, whose work, although based in the West, has informed Indian feminist discourse. We also critically analyse the current state of feminism in India, shaped by increasing digital activism, intersectionality, and responses to contemporary socio-political challenges.

Keywords: Indian feminism, feminist theory, intersectionality, digital activism, socio-political challenges

Introduction

Feminism, at its core, is a movement for equality, aiming to dismantle systems of oppression that discriminate based on gender. Renowned feminist theorists have provided various definitions of feminism that emphasize this pursuit. According to bell hooks, "feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression," emphasizing that the goal of feminism is not merely to benefit women but to eradicate all forms of gender-based oppression across society. Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir famously stated that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," highlighting that societal roles and expectations are constructs that can and should be questioned. These perspectives underscore that feminism, while broadly applicable, takes on different forms and interpretations in various cultural contexts.

In India, the feminist movement embodies many of these universal goals but is uniquely interwoven with the country's complex socio-cultural landscape. As a society deeply affected by caste divisions, religious plurality, and significant economic disparities, feminism in India has a distinct trajectory influenced by these factors. The movement's evolution cannot be separated from India's colonial history, which both restricted and catalysed change, particularly in the areas of social reform and women's rights. Notable figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar campaigned against social practices such as sati and child marriage, laying an early foundation for the feminist movement, even if these efforts were largely patriarchal and upper-caste in perspective.

The interplay between Indian feminism and Western feminist theories has also been significant, although Indian feminism has carved a path that addresses the specific socio-political realities of its population. The feminist movement in India today operates across multiple fronts, confronting not only gender discrimination but also deeply ingrained caste hierarchies, religious conservatism, and regional disparities. Indian feminists, therefore, argue for an intersectional approach, one that recognizes how caste, religion, and class influence gender-based oppression uniquely within the Indian context.

This paper seeks to provide an in-depth analysis of the theoretical underpinnings of Indian feminism, examining its evolution across four waves, each shaped by its own goals, challenges, and achievements. By understanding the unique societal dynamics that have influenced Indian feminism, we can appreciate how it has adapted Western feminist concepts to address the complex issues Indian women face, from reproductive rights and economic participation to representation and safety.

Through this lens, we can see that Indian feminism is not merely an offshoot of a global movement but a robust, dynamic force in its own right, continuously evolving in response to the distinct challenges of Indian society.

The Historical Context

Colonial Influence and Social Reforms

The origins of Indian feminism can be traced back to the colonial period, a time of dramatic social, political, and cultural transformation. During British rule, Indian society was introduced to new ideologies and values, many of which began to challenge longstanding social structures, particularly those impacting women. Western liberal ideas regarding individual rights and freedoms found resonance among certain sections of Indian society, leading to the emergence of social reform movements that began questioning entrenched practices.

Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar became central figures in advocating for women's rights during this period. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, often hailed as the "Father of the Indian Renaissance," campaigned fervently against the practice of sati, where widows were burned alive on their husbands' funeral pyres. He saw this practice as a blatant violation of women's rights and a symbol of patriarchal oppression. His efforts led to the abolition of sati in 1829 under British law, marking one of the earliest legislative victories for women in India.

Similarly, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar played a crucial role in advocating for widow remarriage, a practice that was deeply stigmatized within traditional Indian society. He championed the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, which sought to legitimize the right of widows to remarry. Vidyasagar, like Roy, also pushed for women's education, believing that empowering women through education would lead to societal progress. These reform movements, while progressive, largely represented the upper-caste, urban sections of society and tended to exclude marginalized women, such as those from Dalit and tribal communities, who faced additional layers of discrimination.

Colonial reformers also campaigned against child marriage and advocated for raising the age of consent, leading to the enactment of the Age of Consent Act in 1891. These efforts highlighted early feminist consciousness but were often limited in scope, as they were guided by patriarchal views and were carried out largely by male reformers. The voices of women themselves were rarely centered, and marginalized communities were generally overlooked in these discussions. Furthermore, colonial authorities often used social reform as a means to assert moral authority, complicating the relationship between feminist goals and colonial intentions.

Despite these limitations, the colonial period set the stage for feminist thought in India. It encouraged Indian society to confront long-standing social practices and provided women with a few foundational rights, although these rights were largely restricted to the upper castes. This era laid the groundwork for a feminist consciousness that would evolve in the following decades, especially as India moved toward independence and self-governance.

Post-Independence Transformations

The post-independence period brought new opportunities and challenges for the feminist movement in India. With independence in 1947, India adopted a constitution that

guaranteed fundamental rights and freedoms for all citizens, regardless of gender. Article 15 of the Indian Constitution prohibited discrimination on the grounds of sex, and Article 14 established equality before the law. These constitutional guarantees were a significant step toward gender equality and provided a legal foundation for future feminist movements.

However, despite these constitutional promises, the reality on the ground was vastly different. Deeply ingrained patriarchal values continued to shape societal attitudes, and discriminatory practices persisted in many forms. Women were often confined to traditional roles within the family and faced restrictions on their freedom of movement, employment opportunities, and education. Moreover, the legal system was slow to enforce constitutional rights, leaving many women without adequate recourse to address gender-based discrimination.

The post-independence era saw the rise of a more organized feminist consciousness, especially in the 1970s, when women began to actively mobilize and demand their rights. The 1975 report *Towards Equality*, published by the Committee on the Status of Women in India, was a landmark document that exposed the extent of gender-based inequalities in Indian society. It highlighted issues such as the low participation of women in the workforce, high rates of maternal mortality, and widespread practices of dowry and child marriage. This report galvanized a new generation of feminists, who sought to address these issues through activism and policy change.

This period also witnessed the establishment of independent women's organizations, such as the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), which focused on the rights of women working in the informal sector. SEWA advocated for economic empowerment and labour rights, recognizing that many Indian women, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, faced significant economic marginalization. Other organizations, such as the All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), also emerged, focusing on a range of issues, including domestic violence, dowry harassment, and women's rights in marriage.

The post-independence feminist movement was marked by several landmark legal reforms aimed at addressing gender-based violence and protecting women's rights. The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 sought to curb the practice of dowry, although it was met with limited success due to persistent cultural attitudes. In response to the rising awareness of violence against women, the 1980s saw the enactment of laws addressing issues such as rape, domestic violence, and sexual harassment.

However, the feminist movement during this period was primarily led by middle-class, upper-caste women, which led to critiques from marginalized communities. Dalit and Adivasi feminists argued that mainstream feminism often ignored issues specific to their communities, such as caste-based violence, land rights, and access to basic resources. This exclusionary tendency led to the rise of intersectional feminism in the 1990s, which acknowledged the need to address caste, class, and other social hierarchies within the feminist movement.

Thus, it can be said that the post-independence period was characterized by both progress and limitations. While the Indian constitution provided a framework for gender equality, societal attitudes and institutional inertia meant that real change was slow. However, the feminist movement

in this era laid the foundation for future activism by highlighting the systemic nature of gender-based discrimination and mobilizing women to fight for their rights. The groundwork laid in the post-independence era paved the way for the later waves of feminism, which would broaden the movement's scope to include diverse voices and address intersectional issues unique to Indian society.

Four waves of Feminism

The four waves of feminism offer a broad framework to understand the evolution of feminist thought, each wave building on the previous to address new challenges and expand feminist goals.

The first wave (late 19th - early 20th century) focused primarily on legal rights, with activists like Susan B. Anthony and Emmeline Pankhurst campaigning for women's suffrage and equal legal status, culminating in achievements like the 19th Amendment in the U.S.

The second wave (1960s - 1980s) expanded its scope, emphasizing workplace equality, reproductive rights, and freedom from gender-based violence, with figures like Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem leading the charge; this period achieved milestones such as the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the legalization of abortion in *Roe v. Wade* (1973).

In the third wave (1990s - 2000s), feminism grew more inclusive and intersectional, focusing on diverse identities and experiences shaped by race, class, and sexuality, as introduced by thinkers like Kimberlé Crenshaw and activists such as bell hooks. This wave embraced LGBTQ+ rights, body positivity, and representation of marginalized groups.

Finally, the fourth wave (2010s - present) is characterized by digital activism, with social media platforms empowering movements like #MeToo to confront sexual harassment and assault on a global scale, democratizing feminist discourse and amplifying previously marginalized voices. Each wave has expanded feminist goals, from legal rights to intersectional equality and online activism, creating a complex, inclusive framework that continues to evolve.

The four waves of feminism, originating in the West, have influenced Indian feminist movements, albeit with unique adaptations and impacts shaped by India's distinct socio-political and cultural context. Here's an overview of each wave and its specific impact in India:

Indian Context

First Wave: Social Reform and Education (19th Century)

The first wave of feminism in India was marked by social reform movements in the 19th century, largely focused on education and ending oppressive practices against women. Pioneering social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Jyoti Rao Phule advocated for women's education, abolition of sati, widow remarriage, and laws against child marriage.

This wave led to significant changes in Indian society, laying the foundation for later feminist movements by addressing the most immediate and visible forms of gender injustice.

The impact included

Legislative Reforms: Laws banning sati (1829) and legalizing widow remarriage (1856) were enacted.

Women's Education: The establishment of educational institutions for women marked a significant societal shift, empowering women to participate in public life.

Awareness of Women's Rights: Though led largely by men, these efforts sparked early awareness about women's issues and planted seeds for future movements.

However, this wave was largely limited to upper-caste, urban women, leaving marginalized groups like Dalit women largely out of the conversation. The movement was more about reform than challenging deep-seated patriarchal structures.

Second Wave: Equal Rights and Legal Reforms (1970s-1980s)

The second wave of Indian feminism began in the 1970s, paralleling the global feminist wave focused on equal rights, legal reforms, and economic empowerment. This period saw the rise of independent women's organizations that highlighted issues such as dowry violence, workplace discrimination, and reproductive rights. Influential organizations included the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and groups that advocated against custodial rape and dowry-related violence.

Impact in India

Legal Gains: Key legislation, such as the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961) and amendments to protect women from domestic violence and sexual harassment, emerged as a response to second-wave activism.

Rise of Women's Organizations: SEWA and other organizations worked toward economic independence for women, particularly in the informal sector, significantly improving their bargaining power and status.

Awareness of Patriarchy

This wave brought awareness to patriarchy as a structural issue, encouraging women to question traditional gender roles and challenge societal norms.

The second wave, however, was criticized for focusing more on issues relevant to urban, middle-class women, leaving out the needs of rural, Dalit, and tribal women. It also lacked an intersectional approach, which would become central in the third wave.

Third Wave: Intersectionality and Identity Politics (1990s-2000s)

The third wave of Indian feminism in the 1990s embraced an intersectional approach, acknowledging that caste, religion, and socioeconomic background profoundly affected women's experiences. Inspired by intersectionality in Western feminism, Indian feminists began exploring the distinct challenges faced by Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim women.

Impact in India

Inclusion of Marginalized Voices: Dalit feminists like Ruth Manorama and groups like the Dalit Women's Collective emerged to address the unique oppression faced by Dalit women, creating a more inclusive feminist movement.

LGBTQ+ Rights and Gender Fluidity: The third wave expanded feminism to include LGBTQ+ issues, particularly

through legal and social advocacy for decriminalizing homosexuality and supporting gender diversity.

Broadening of Feminist Issues: This wave's focus extended beyond gender-based oppression to include class, caste, and community-specific issues, making Indian feminism more representative of the country's diversity.

The third wave marked a shift towards collective, identity-based activism, which highlighted the ways in which various forms of oppression intersected and reinforced each other. This approach helped broaden the scope of Indian feminism and build solidarity across diverse communities.

Fourth Wave: Digital Activism and #MeToo Movement (2010s-Present)

The fourth wave, emerging in the 2010s, is characterized by digital activism and the use of social media to amplify feminist discourse. The #MeToo movement became a prominent feature of this wave, drawing attention to the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault across social classes and professions.

Impact in India

Amplified Awareness and Access: The internet and social media have enabled feminist discourse to reach wider audiences, transcending geographical and social boundaries.

Mobilization and Mass Action: Movements such as #MeToo in India and campaigns like #PinjraTod (challenging restrictions on female students in hostels) brought together women from various backgrounds, highlighting the need for systemic change in workplaces and educational institutions.

Addressing Taboos and Legal Reforms: Digital campaigns have helped spark discussions on issues like marital rape, menstruation, and the criminalization of marital abuse, prompting policymakers to take note.

This wave has empowered individuals from marginalized groups to share their experiences openly and find solidarity, leading to a more democratized feminist movement that reflects a wider range of voices. However, digital activism has also faced backlash, especially in conservative and rural communities where traditional norms remain strong.

Each wave of feminism has built on its predecessor to expand feminist goals and address the evolving needs of women. From the pursuit of legal rights in the first wave to the digital activism characterizing the fourth, feminist movements in the West and India have intersected and diverged based on cultural contexts. In India, while feminist thought has been influenced by global feminist movements, it has uniquely adapted to address local issues such as caste discrimination, economic inequities, and gender-based violence. Together, the four waves have created a rich, evolving framework for feminist activism, one that continues to inspire new generations of women to seek equality and justice in increasingly nuanced ways.

Overall Impact on Indian Society

The evolution of feminism in India through these four waves has brought both transformative and gradual changes:

Legislative Progress: Feminist activism has contributed to significant legal changes, addressing dowry violence, sexual harassment, and women's workplace rights.

Educational and Economic Empowerment: Each wave has encouraged greater access to education and economic

opportunities for women, enabling more women to participate in public life.

Social Awareness: Feminism has created awareness of issues like domestic violence, sexual harassment, and gender equality, challenging long-standing social norms and encouraging dialogue across generations.

While there has been progress, challenges remain due to India's complex social fabric, where caste, religion, and economic disparities still intersect with gender issues. As a result, the impact of feminism in India continues to evolve, addressing not only gender-based issues but also broader social inequalities. The ongoing fourth wave of digital activism signals that Indian feminism is adaptable, increasingly inclusive, and still critically relevant to addressing contemporary gender issues in a rapidly changing society.

Betty Friedan's Contribution to Feminist Thought and its Impact in India

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) was groundbreaking in its critique of the post-World War II societal expectations that confined women to domestic roles. In challenging the idea that women should find ultimate fulfilment solely as homemakers and mothers, Friedan sparked the second wave of feminism in the United States. Her work gave voice to what she famously called "the problem that has no name," describing the dissatisfaction felt by many American women who were forced to suppress personal ambitions and professional goals in favour of domestic responsibilities. Although Friedan's critique was primarily centred on middle-class, suburban American women, her work resonated internationally, prompting feminist movements around the world—including in India—to question deeply ingrained gender roles and social constructs.

Friedan's Influence on Indian Feminism

In India, the 1960s and 1970s were a period of social transformation, as the country had recently gained independence and was grappling with issues of national identity, social reform, and economic development. Friedan's ideas entered this complex cultural landscape, where they were adapted and reinterpreted to address the unique challenges faced by Indian women. Here are some key areas of her influence in the Indian context.

Questioning Traditional Gender Roles

Friedan's critique of the restrictive domestic role encouraged Indian feminists to examine how cultural norms dictated women's lives. In India, where the traditional joint family structure and the roles of wife, mother, and daughter-in-law are deeply valued, Friedan's ideas encouraged thinkers and activists to question the expectation that a woman's primary duty is to manage the home and family, often at the expense of her own aspirations. Indian feminists began to explore how social and familial expectations constrained women's choices in education, careers, and personal growth.

Encouraging the Pursuit of Independence and Professionalism

Inspired by Friedan's call for women's professional fulfilment, Indian feminists advocated for increased educational and career opportunities for women. At the

time, however, the push for professional opportunities was more accessible to middle- and upper-class urban women, as rural and lower-class women often faced economic and social barriers to education. Nevertheless, Friedan's ideas helped to open conversations on women's right to economic independence, eventually leading to increased efforts by Indian feminists to support working women's rights and education for girls.

A Critique of Class Bias in Feminist Discourse

While *The Feminine Mystique* challenged middle-class domestic norms, Indian feminists critiqued its focus on the experiences of relatively privileged women, a limitation Friedan herself faced in later criticism. In India, many lower-income women had long worked outside the home, driven by economic necessity rather than personal choice. For these women, employment was not a means of self-fulfilment but a survival strategy. Indian feminists pointed out that the challenges faced by working-class women required a different approach—one that addressed issues of labour exploitation, childcare, and the absence of support systems for balancing domestic and work responsibilities.

Impact on Activism for Legal and Economic Rights: Friedan's ideas fuelled a broader feminist discourse that eventually influenced Indian feminist activism for legal reforms. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminists in India organized around issues such as dowry deaths, domestic violence, and equal pay, drawing upon Friedan's critique of systemic inequality as inspiration. Activists pushed for policies like the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961) and the Equal Remuneration Act (1976), which sought to address gender discrimination. Although these policies targeted systemic inequalities specific to India, they shared Friedan's underlying principle that women deserve equal treatment and opportunities.

Expanding Feminist Thought to Include Intersectional Concerns

Indian feminists built upon Friedan's foundational ideas while expanding feminist discourse to include intersectional issues unique to the Indian social fabric. Unlike in the U.S., where Friedan's work was rooted in a relatively homogenous suburban demographic, Indian feminists had to address the intersecting challenges of caste, religion, and regional diversity. Feminists like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Flavia Agnes, and others incorporated issues of caste-based discrimination, religious patriarchy, and economic inequality into their advocacy, creating a feminist movement that was responsive to India's diverse realities.

Legacy and Continuing Relevance in India

Though Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was not a comprehensive solution to all women's struggles, her ideas provided an entry point for Indian feminists to confront restrictive gender norms and advocate for the right to self-determination. Her emphasis on personal fulfilment and professional growth helped inspire Indian women to demand greater autonomy over their life choices and assert their place in both private and public spheres.

Friedan's impact on Indian feminism, while indirect, remains significant in that it prompted critical examination of gender roles and spurred discourse around women's rights. Indian feminists were able to adapt her ideas to a culturally specific feminist framework, one that continues to

evolve and advocate for women across all segments of Indian society, addressing not only issues of gender but also those of caste, class, and community.

Contemporary Scenario of Feminism in India Digital and Grassroots Activism

Today, feminism in India manifests in both grassroots activism and digital movements. Platforms like social media have democratized feminist discourse, allowing marginalized voices to participate and share experiences. Campaigns addressing issues like marital rape, consent, gender bias in workplaces, and bodily autonomy have gained traction, bringing new visibility to long-standing issues.

Legal Reforms and Institutional Changes

India has witnessed several legislative reforms aimed at addressing gender-based violence and promoting gender equality. The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 2013, prompted by the Delhi gang rape case, strengthened laws against sexual violence. However, enforcement remains inconsistent, and cultural norms continue to hinder women's safety and freedom.

Challenges and Criticisms

Despite significant progress, Indian feminism faces challenges, including resistance from conservative factions, socio-economic inequalities, and the continued influence of caste-based patriarchy. Criticisms also arise from within the feminist movement, with debates over the commodification of feminism, the exclusion of marginalized voices, and the complexities of addressing intersectional issues within a diverse society.

Intersectionality and Inclusivity

Modern Indian feminism is increasingly intersectional, incorporating diverse experiences across caste, class, religion, and gender identity. This inclusivity marks a shift toward addressing the unique struggles of Dalit, Adivasi, queer, and trans women, whose experiences of oppression differ from those of privileged groups.

Conclusion

The theoretical construct of feminism in India reveals a movement that is adaptive, diverse, and constantly evolving. Rooted in both indigenous struggles for social justice and influences from global feminist thought, Indian feminism addresses a complex array of issues that include but are not limited to gender inequality, caste discrimination, and socio-economic barriers. As the movement continues to evolve, it remains a vital force for social change, challenging the status quo and advocating for an equitable society.

Indian feminism today is not only about gender equality but also about creating an inclusive society where all marginalized groups have a voice. This intersectional approach ensures that feminism in India is a comprehensive struggle for human rights, pushing toward a future where equality transcends mere rhetoric and becomes a lived reality for all.

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