

FEMINIST MOVEMENT IN INDIA

ANAMIKA¹ & GARIMA TYAGI²

¹Assistant Professor, N. K. B. M. G. (P.G.) College, Chandausi, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of H. Sc., N.K.B.M.G. (P.G.) College, Chandausi, India

ABSTRACT

In India, feminist movement was started as a reform movement for women and its credit goes to some great social reformers who were mainly men e.g. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatama Gandhi, Justice Ranade & Ishwar Chand Vidhyasagar etc. Later on it was joined by some great women icon of India as Sarojini Naidu, Indira Gandhi & many more. In the end of the nineteenth century, when women in India were suffering a lot from disabilities like Child Marriage, practice of Polygyny, sale of Girls for marriage purposes, severe restrictions on widows, non-access to education & restricting oneself to domestic & child rearing functions, these social reformers raised their voice against those social taboos, fought for women right of inheritance, pleaded for educating women & to treat daughter & sons equally. Prime Minister **Indira Gandhi** addressed the All India Women's Conference in 1980 & said, "I have often said that, I am not a Feminist, yet, in my concern for the unprivileged, how I can ignore women who, since the beginning of History, have been dominated over & discriminated against in social custom & in-laws. We need women to be more interested, more alive & more active, not because they are women, but because they do comprise half the human race." Though the social status of Indian women has witnessed a great deal of change in the past few decades, still there are various issues mainly concerned with the equal status of women in society and need more severe dialogue. Time is the most volatile element in the human life and this 'volatile' time is marching ahead changing the itinerary and flow of the living beings on this planet and has sown the seeds for a new culture in Indian society & years of lengthy speeches by feminists on women empowerment & equality have finally started to reap a few fruits. Surely it is a welcome change for Nation to be cheered about.

KEYWORDS: Women Empowerment, Feminism in India

INTRODUCTION

One of the most enduring truths about India is that it is a country of contradictions and at the heart of these contradictions stands Indian women who are among the most oppressed in the world and at the same time they are among the most liberated, most articulate and perhaps even the most free. Can these two realities be simultaneously true? Presently India has several women, young and old, working in all kinds of professions, on powerful and dignifying positions and yet Indian newspapers are full of stories of rape, sexual harassment, exploitations, violent incidents even murder of a woman for dowry & physical relations etc.

Have a woman on the highest position of nation and to simultaneously have extreme violence against women are merely the two ends of the scale. As always, a more complex reality lies in between. It is widely acknowledged that the battle for freedom had been fought as much by women as by men then why she is behind a successful man? Why she is not equally successful as a man? Why social traditions are made only for her not for her father, brother, husband and son? A

man does mistake and a woman gets punishment of his mistake? Is it justice and equality? Is it love of a man towards a woman which comes out in the form of her psycho-physical exploitations? This disparity is a social leprosy and one day this leprosy will demolish love & peace in the structure of a human society and ultimately the human race.

Perhaps women have a secure place in ancient India but now it is a matter of dispute. Though the social status of Indian women has witnessed a great deal of change in the past few decades, still there are various issues mainly concerned with the equal status of women in society and need more severe dialogue. Time is the most volatile element in the human life and this 'volatile' time is marching ahead changing the itinerary and flow of the living beings on this planet and has sown the seeds for a new culture in Indian society & years of lengthy speeches by feminists on women empowerment & equality have finally started to reap a few fruits. Surely it is a welcome change for Nation to be cheered about but many fingers are generally raised regarding this modernisation and its impact on our society.

The Feminist Movement was started as a reform movement for women and her status in society. Before 1832, according to the English Common Law, when a marriage held, the husband & wife became one & rights of women merge within her husband's right & so the women have no personal right. The *Marry Wollston Craft* was the first Feminist who demanded her right from her husband. She fought for the existence of women. That was the first expression of feminism in India. In the end of the nineteenth century, women in India suffered a lot from disabilities like Child Marriage, practice of Polygyny, sale of Girls for marriage purposes, severe restrictions on widows, non-access to education & restricting oneself to domestic & child rearing functions. Some Great Reformers as Justice Ranade, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Mahatma Gandhi & Sarojini Naidu etc. raised their voice against these social taboos, fought for women right of inheritance, pleaded for educating women & to treat daughter & sons equally.

Prime Minister **Indira Gandhi** addressed the All India Women's Conference in 1980 & said, "I have often said that, I am not a Feminist, yet, in my concern for the unprivileged, how I can ignore women who, since the beginning of History, have been dominated over & discriminated against in social custom & in-laws. We need women to be more interested, more alive & more active, not because they are women, but because they do comprise half the human race." Overall the main purpose of feminist movement was & is to provide women some rights as Right to fair Wage, Right to marriage or Divorce at will, Property right & mainly the Right of Equality with Equity.

But striking question is whether Feminist Movement was a milestone or a step towards milestone to be achieved? Yes surely it was a step which leaves footprints on the dust of time with a message to move ahead without any stop. Now it is the time of celebration of togetherness with the respect of each other's individuality. Men and women are complimentary to each other not contradictory ends of a scale. There is a biological difference of sex between them not any other difference exists. It is the thinking which creates differences. It is the mind from which pollution and prevention of pollution comes out simultaneously. So brain wash of society is important for equality and it can be done only through value education for both sexes without any gender discrimination issues. But in lacking of great teachers, the feminist movement or any other movement can't achieve the proposed success. So there is a huge need to prepare teachers with values of equality, justice and likewise.

FIRST PHASE OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENT: AN ASSESSMENT

Nineteenth century social reformers were primarily concerned with issues that affected urban, upper caste, middle class women such as purdah, sati, education, age of marriage and widow remarriage. They argued that uplift of women was

necessary because women are the mothers of future generations. While women were urged to come out and work for the nation, there was no questioning of the traditional role of mother and wife. In fact it was stressed that if they were educated they would become better wives and mothers.

Social reform, demand for political, economic and legal rights as well as participation in the freedom struggle were the main elements in the women's movement in pre-independence era. Their participation in the public arena and in politics legitimized their claim to a place in the governance of India. As early as 1918, moving the resolution at the Indian National Congress, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani told the delegates that women had as much rights as men for this was the age of human rights, justice, freedom and self determination. She asked, "How do we attain rights?" and answered, "By the strength of our agitation we must force men to concede our demands and at the same time carry on propaganda among ourselves." (Forbes, 1998, pg. 94). Efforts were also directed towards women's education and improving the condition of poorer women. These organizations cut across boundaries of religion, caste, language and region. The women in the movement were educated and mentored by men but they were not mere puppets of the anglophile elite or even of nationalists. Some had been educated in English medium convent schools others in *pathshalas*. Some were from princely families, others from ordinary middle class homes. Some of them were strong personalities with views of their own.

The women's movement in pre-independent India has been often called the first wave feminism. In this phase, women blamed tradition and religion for their suffering and sought redress in education and legal change. They were feminists in the sense that they recognized women as oppressed because of their sex. They looked upon women as biologically, psychologically and spiritually different from men and based their claim for representation in public life on the complementarity of this difference. They argued that women could bring a special knowledge of the household and family matters to forums where public policy was debated and formulated. This ideology fitted well with Gandhi's views on women and the nationalist desire to bring women into the freedom movement.

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT: 1970S TO THE PRESENT

Independence brought many promises and dreams for women in India – the dream of an egalitarian, just, democratic society in which both men and women would have a voice. The reality, when it began to sink in was, however, somewhat different. For all that had happened was that, despite some improvements in the status of women, patriarchy had simply taken on new and different forms. It was thus that the 1960s and 1970s saw a spate of movements in which women took part: campaigns against rising prices, movements for land rights, peasant movements. Everywhere, their participation resulted in transforming the movements from within. One of the first issues to receive countrywide attention from women's groups was violence against women, specifically in the form of rape, and what came to be known in India as 'dowry deaths' – the killing of young married women for the 'dowry' or money/goods they brought with them at the time of marriage. Because women were able to mobilise support, the State responded, seemingly positively, by changing the law on rape and dowry, making both more stringent. This seemed, at the time, like a great victory. It was only later that the knowledge began to sink in that mere changes in the law meant little, unless there was a will and a machinery to implement these. And that the root of the problem of discrimination against women lay not only in the law, or with the State, but was much more widespread.

So a further level of work i.e. creating awareness was needed so that violence against women could be prevented,

rather than only dealt with after it had happened. Legal aid and counselling centres were set up, and attempts were made to establish women's shelters. Knowledge was recognised as an important need. Everywhere there was women's activity, activity that could not necessarily be defined as 'feminist', but that was, nonetheless, geared towards improving the conditions of women's lives. The women's movement in India today is a rich and vibrant movement, which has spread to various parts of the country. It is often said that there is no one single cohesive movement in the country, but a number of fragmented campaigns. Activists see this as one of the strengths of the movement which takes different forms in different parts. While the movement may be scattered all over India, they feel it is nonetheless a strong and plural force.

CONCLUSIONS

In the mid-1800s the term 'feminism' was used to refer to "the qualities of females", and it was not until after the First International Women's Conference in Paris in 1892 that the term, following the French term *féministe*, was used regularly in English for a belief in and advocacy of equal rights for women based on the idea of the equality of the sexes. Apart from the theoretical perspective most of the feminist would be agree with the fact that women are oppressed and this oppression is wrong or unjust. Very broadly, then, one might characterize the goal of feminism to be ending the oppression of women. But if it is acknowledged that women are oppressed not just by sexism, but in many ways e.g. by classism, homophobia, racism, ageism, albinism, etc., then it might seem that the goal of feminism is to end all oppression that affects women. Here, comes the need to fight against the social taboos to revitalize the social system and to uplift the status of women in present Indian scenario. In fact, awareness can do those wonders that can't be accomplished by humiliating women. Although there is no end of discussion about influential women included both contemporary women who are changing today's world and those whose contributions have endured through the ages (though they lived centuries ago yet alive), still, the Indian women are struggling for their name and existence. Why? What are the reasons behind this bitter truth that most of the women in India are deprived? Who is accountable for this scarcity- male dominance or female faults or both or none? Is this disparity adoptable or should be changed? How can the position of Indian women be improved? What type of methodologies should be implemented to get better results? These and many more analogous questions always knock at the door of everyone's mind and every person knows what are the answers but a pin drop silence says to each and every woman that- "You and only you have the power to change your status as well as your sister's status; so wake up dear not to suppress others but to be on your feet which will be with other's feet with a concern of humanity not gender discrimination."

REFERENCES

1. Basu, Amrita. 1995. *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
2. Beauvoir, Simone de. 1974 (1952). *The Second Sex*. Trans. and Ed. H. M. Parshley. New York: Vintage Books.
3. Bergmann, Barbara. 2002. *The Economic Emergence of Women* (Second edition) New York: Palgrave, St. Martin's Press.
4. Delphy, Christine. 1984. *Close to Home: A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression*. Trans. Diane Leonard. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.