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Feminist Movements through the Ages in India: An Empowering Voyage from Prehistoric Age to the Period of Nationalism

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Abstract

The paper makes an effort to trace the status of women from the prehistoric period to the contemporary period to explore how the status of women changed in Indian society over the ages and patriarchy evolved to assume a complex structure. Indian women experienced a severe form of subordination as religious tradition and caste hierarchy shaped social practices. It not only unearths the history but also makes textual analysis of the prominent feminist texts and theories to show how women writers penned down their experiences and resisted the ideology and structure of patriarchal society. The period of the colonial period has been dealt with extra emphasis as in that phase history witnessed the rise of women's movement and nationalism, and these two movements somehow expressed contradictory core values. In order to comprehend the struggle of women to liberate themselves from the bondage of patriarchy, the pieces of literary works written by female writers are indispensable. It is often blamed that in the Indian feminist movement there is a theoretical paucity. The attempt has been initiated to present the principal ideas of Indian feminist scholars and connect the missing links.

Keywords- Women, Patriarchy, Caste, Religion, Society

Introduction

Indian feminism is not a new phenomenon instead as old the western women's campaign for their emancipation from hegemonic forces. The social structure of India is very much patriarchal. Here women play the role of the 'other'; patriarchal institutions not only force them to assume the secondary position but also justify male domination over women. She is assigned a relative position through the process of continuous social and cultural conditioning. In India the female oppression has started from the pre-historic period. From the Vedic period to the period of the Nationalist movement

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in Indian starting in the second half of the nineteenth century women faced different forms of oppression and in each age, they retaliated from the narrow space they attained and strived to accomplish their potentiality. Indian feminist movement witnessed a different height during females' participation in the Indian nationalist campaign for liberation. Women refused containment after realising their potential and acknowledging their victimization in the hand of the male-centric social and cultural establishment. The first wave of movement for female emancipation that swept across the country was inspired by the vision of some liberal, enlightened and dynamic reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. They worked in collaboration with feminist thinkers to eradicate all forms of social evils in which the female lot was trapped. They laid the foundation of modern India by organizing public opinion in favour of female rights and space at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Besides movements, literary ventures also helped in carving the destiny of new women of India.

The earlier writings by women were in the form of letters and autobiographies that projected the inner world of women and paved the way for Indian feminism. The conventional Indian society was not receptive to the idea of feminism which was inspired by the Western ideology and criticised it for misguiding women and dismantling the structure of indigenous tradition, and culture. Later many Indian women scholars critically challenged the established ideas of motherhood, marriage, sexuality, gender, class, and culture and brought the concept of 'new woman' who was the result of cross-fertilisation of west ideology and Indian tradition.

The Status of women at the Pre-Historic Period

Dr. V.S Wakankar, a distinguished archaeologist discovered Bhimbetka (Circa 500 B.C) in M.P in 1958. Later ASI discovered more such paintings at Kathotia and Kharwai. These pre-historic paintings are important sources to study the status of women in ancient India, gender relations and women's role in production and reproduction. These paintings include a woman carries an animal on her head with two children in a basket across her shoulder, a woman catching fish, another woman dragging a deer, women in a group hunting scene with males, and a mother-goddess.

From the cave paintings, ancient scriptures, and mythologies it is presumed that at the dawn of civilization when people used to live in the caves, the society was matriarchal. Men regarded women with huge respect. Childbirth was considered to be a miracle, which is the reason men used to worship mothers. At that time, women enjoyed privileges. Matriarchy continued in the agricultural age too as there was no concept of private property. At that time land was not counted as property. The corn which they used to produce was shared out equally among the members of the clan. In the field of agriculture, women played a major role, an eminent historian of ancient India Kosambi (1975)

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commented, “women were the first potters, basket weavers, agriculturalists” (p. 22). That age was totally in favour of women. They had complete freedom, could participate in every sphere of life. There was no seclusion, so women had the full opportunity to flourish their talent. In this ‘Free State’ women were the producers, gatherers, and controllers of wealth. Women were at the centre and, “inheritance was in the mother’s line, the father being of no importance, often not even recognized as having any pro-creative function” (Kosambi, 1975, p.22). The stone images, a bronze statue of a dancing woman are indicative of the existence of female sexuality. Women were worshipped both as destroyers and defenders.

The society started becoming patriarchal when one clan started attacking other clans. From that time women were viewed as private property, the property of man, and the property of the clan. The male members of the society became more concerned about their female members. At the same time, while attacking other clans they captivated female members of the defeated clan to make them slaves. Thus women became the object of war as commodity. Men fought against men but paradoxically it was the woman who suffered most.

Women in Vedic Period:

Scholars possess contradictory notions regarding the status of women in the Vedic period. Scholars like A. S. Altekar, R. C Dutta, and Ellison glorify the Vedic age and consider it as promising age for women in which they achieved full potentiality. R. C Dutta claimed, “No nation held their women in higher honour than the Hindus” (1972, p.168–69). A. S Altekar (1958)) is of the opinion that the position of women in the Vedic period was much better than the women of other ancient civilizations. Women had a considerable role and had honour in the institution of marriage. No trace of child marriage could be found in the Vedic age. The average age of girls for marriage was 15 or 16. Re-marriage was a socially accepted practice, “re-marriage was allowed by the society and was fairly common” (p. 5). Women took participation in the public spheres. Women in the Vedic Period enjoyed utter economic freedom. They produced things, utilized, and exchanged independently. From scriptures like *Kamasutra* by Vatsayan it is obvious that Vedic society acknowledged female sexuality with grace. Even from the religious texts, we get the references of polyandry, the practice society cannot afford to accept even in this contemporary time. There was no restriction in the movement of women. Women partook in public debates, horse riding. There were several references in Mahabharata and Ramayan where Kshatriya women took engaged in war activities, sometimes led from the front. Women excelled in the field of education because of the favourable socio-cultural environment. But feminist scholars like Uma Chakravarti (1996) counter those claims and argue that:

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This trajectory of scholarship was part of the Indian nationalist project that attempted to assign a high place for women in the ancient Hindu past: The analysis of the position of women in ancient India has also been coloured by the fact that almost all the works have been written by scholars who would fall within the nationalist school of history. Writing at a time when Hindu social institutions were being subjected to fierce criticism by a generation that was imbibing Western education and Western values, these scholars worked hard to show that the position of women had been high in the ancient past. (p. 74)

The Aryan society too was totally patriarchal. It was headed by a patriarchal father who had total control over all the members of the clan. The inheritances were in the patriarchal line. Patriarchal attitude was present in the marriage system. Evidence of polygamy could be traced in Rig-Veda while infidelity on the part of women was a serious matter. In the field of education, women had limited scope, “learning like property, descended from father to son” (Kosambi, p.30). Despite these restrictions, women excelled in this field. From ancient scriptures we get the references of Gargi, Maitreyi who had achieved the highest knowledge. From Rig-Veda, we came to know the names of some women like Gosha, Apala, Vishvara who were the composers of hymns. There are references of Upadhyaya or Upadhyayi (women teachers), who remained unmarried in order to devote themselves to studies. But education was a far-fetched dream for the common women. It was available only to the daughters or the wives of the Munis or Rishis and they too had to make great sacrifices in order to achieve it.

Women in the Buddhist and Jain Period in India:

The historians have observed comparatively better gender relations in the Buddhist and Jain period than the previous age. Women were not suppressed on the basis of gender. Scholars like Burrow perceived the coexistence of different cultures in the society. Buddhist religious scriptures and philosophy encouraged women to attain their full potentiality. Initially Gautam Buddha was reluctant to include women into the Sangha (Hastings, 799), but later at the request of revered Ananda Thera, a favourite disciple of him he opened the religious order for women. Buddha believed women capable of accomplishing complete potentiality, “Itthi pi hi ekacceyyaseyyaposajanadhipa Medhavinisilavatisassudeva Patibbata, Tassayojayatipososurohotidisampatievamsubhagiya putto rajjam pi anusasati” (Feer and Davids 86).

A woman child, o lord of men, may prove Even a better offspring than a male. For she may grow up wise and virtuous:

Her husband’s mother reverencing, true wife. The boy that she may bear do great deeds,

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And rule great realms, yea, such a son of noble wife becomes his country's guide.
(Translation, Davids and Woodward 111)

The movement of women was not only confined to the domestic sphere. They freely participated in public domains. In both these ages, we get a considerable amount of references of female scholars which reflect society valued female education. Sanghamitra, the daughter of great empire Ashoka was a champion of female education and she herself preached Buddhist philosophy. From scriptures of Jainism, we come to know about Princess Koshambi who devoted her life to pursue philosophy and religion. One distinctive feature of that age was that women were not debarred from religious activities. They performed rituals, preached religion, and composed many hymns. The sacred text of Buddhism *Tripitaka* mentions many female scholars like Patacara, Kisagotami, Ambapali, Kundalakesi, Isidasi, Addakasi, and Bimala who left domestic bondage to lead the life of Sanyasinis. One such Bhikkhuni described her chosen life in the following words. "O woman, well set free, how free am I". (Psalms 25)

Women in the Period of Maurya and Gupta Dynasty:

Mauryan dynasty was the most powerful empire in ancient India. It began in 324 BC with Chandragupta Maurya as the first king. We get the status of women in the Maurya period through *Arthashastra* the only surviving text of that age written by Kautilya, the Prime Minister of Chandragupta. Besides dealing with matters like politics, administration, and economics, the text delivers considerable accounts of the conditions of women. From the narratives of *Arthashastra*, we come to know that that a woman didn't have an individual identity at that time. It was solely dependent on men she was associated with, and her value was completely dependent on her reproductive capacity, more specifically her ability to beget a male child. Kautilya describes women as dull, incapable of taking decisions. It is evident that upper caste women were the worst sufferers of gender hierarchy. They were the victims of more rigorous customs. The life of lower caste women and ganikas were comparatively better and they enjoyed more liberty. Upper caste women didn't have any say in their marriages and it was compulsory for women to remain virgins till marriage. Losing virginity in other means or pretending to be a virgin was a punishable offense. Men possessed the right to punish their wives physically. There was no concept of marital rape and a husband the privilege to abandon his wife and sleep with other women if his wife cannot satisfy his urges.

The situation of women did not improve much in the Gupta age (4th-6th Century). The same evil social practices were prevalent at that time. Women were the property of men, only the women of the higher class had the opportunities of education. They were trained in dancing and music, not for their own sake but to cater to the taste of men. At this age, women were kept confined at the home.

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They were the mistress of the house; still, they did not have the decision-making power. They could exercise their power only on minors. The position of women was above children and beneath men.

Women in the Middle Age:

Women's position in society again declined in the Medieval period. Women's movement in the public spheres got confined and they are secluded from the mainstream of life. The dowry system (dowry actually meant "stridhana") was very much prominent at that time. It was present in the Vedic age too, but it used to give women a certain kind of economic security, that changed during the medieval period. Women lost claim in the 'dhana' and it became the property of the in-laws. Female infanticide was another major social evil. Every parent wanted a male child as only the son could perform the 'samskaras'. Parents used to think that only a male child could lead them to salvation. Besides, the son was regarded as the maintainer of the race and bearer of the family tradition. So, the female child was not welcomed. She was killed by poisoning or burning alive.

In the name of religion and tradition, Devdasis or temple-women were sexually exploited. At that time polygamy was widely practiced. The most heinous social practice was *Sati* (meant self-immolation of the widow), in which the recently widowed woman sits on the pyre, places the head of her dead husband on her lap, and burns herself with her husband. The belief was that by burning herself the wife would lead the husband to heaven. In most of the cases, it was not a voluntarily act. She was made drunk, tied to the pyre so that she could not leave. Amidst the loud music, the death cry of the women got lost. Even the child widows were not spared.

Despair and Hope in Colonial Period:

During the British rule women became the victim of double colonization. They were the subject of both imperialist oppression and patriarchal oppression. This time some reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar fought for women's causes. Their efforts led to the prohibition of *Sati* and the legalization of widow re-marriage respectively. It was an exclusive characteristic of Indian feminism that the foundation stone of this campaign was laid down by male social reformers. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who is hailed as the 'Maker of Modern India' and the 'Renaissance Man', had fought a long crusade against the enactment of *Sati*. The practice of *Sati* refers to the immolation of widows on the pyre of their dead husbands. Roy succeeded in eliminating this inhuman practice with the help of Lord William Bentick, the then Governor General of British India in 1829 by passing the famous Regulation XVII.

Partha Chatterjee observed that "Nationalism separated the culture into two spheres- the material and the spiritual" (p. 119). In the material sphere, even the staunch nationalists believed that they were far behind their Western counterparts. They admitted that they could not match the

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scientific and technological advancement of the West. But, they had a stern belief that “in the spiritual domain, the East was superior to the West” (p. 120). This material/ spiritual distinction created the dichotomy of the outer and the inner space. And in the inner space women were projected as the torchbearer of culture and the essence of ‘home’ was inherent in them.

First Feminist Writers:

Savitri Phule was the first female teacher in India. During the colonial period, while women’s identity was almost non-existent, she took the enormous task to educate women of the underprivileged section of the society and provided refuge to the socially outcast women. She herself was married at the tender age of nine as it was customary for girls to get married before they reach the age of puberty. The rampant inequality in the society, caste hierarchy, desolate condition of women, especially young widows moved her deeply. She thought only education could illuminate the lives of women, and for that noble purpose, she established the first female school in India in Vishrambaug Wada, Pune in 1848. At first batch, there were only 9 students, which rose to 25 in the next batch. As her journey was against the grain, she had to bear all the ordeals of the world. As female education was almost a crime to the rigid, orthodox society of India her father-in-law didn’t accept it and drove them out of the house. Amidst all the adversities, her husband had been her constant support. Between 1848 and 1852, in the span of just four years, the couple established almost 18 schools for women. The orthodox men who were against female emancipation and believed that education would spoil their girls harassed her in the entire possible manner. On her way to school a group of men used to hurl abuses and throw eggs, muds, and garbage, and cow dung at her. But these hardships couldn’t break her indomitable spirit.

Those who believe that there is a dearth in theoretical aspects in the Indian feminist movement, Pandita Rambai’s *The High Caste Hindu Women* is an answer to them. The work may be compared with Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The book minutely analyses the bearings of social customs and religion on Indian women. This unique feature of Indian social structure makes the Indian feminist movement distinct from the rest of the world. Pandita Ramabai begins with a prefatory remark that, “In order to understand the life of a Hindu woman, it is necessary for the foreign readers to know something of the religion and the social customs of the Hindu Nation.” (p. 19). Pandita Ramabai Sraswati was a feminist, scholar, and a pioneer of female education and social reformation. She was a tradition-breaker in every possible sense. She intrudes in all the spaces which were previously reserved for males only. Because of her wide knowledge in Sanskrit theology and literature, she is conferred with the title Pandita (Scholar) and Saraswati (goddess of knowledge).

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Tarabai Shinde was a feminist critic as well as a social reformer. She was an associate of Savitri Phule. She fights against the social evils and in her writing, she expresses gender-biased patriarchal traditions and the social myths, and the evils of the caste system. Her critical work *Stree Purush Tulna* (The Comparison between Woman and Man), a book-length essay Published in 1882 originally written in Marathi language depicts society's hostile attitude towards women and its very negative portrayal. At the very introductory part, she throws a question to the readers striking the biased mindset of people, "God brought this amazing universe into being, and he it was also who created men and women both. So, is it true that only women's bodies are home to all kinds of wicked vices? Or have men got just the same faults as we find in women" (Shinde, p. 1882).

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain fought against the patriarchal oppression at that time when nothing was in favour of women. She stood beside the downtrodden women. Upper-class conservative people often accused her as a woman of loose morals as her companions were prostitutes. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain rejects the norms of this patriarchal world and creates a parallel utopian world Ladyland, which is headed by a lady. In this Ladyland, "science, technology and virtue work together in perfect harmony" (Bagchi, 2005, p. xiii). Here citizens use ultra-modern technologies. This world is just the opposite of the man-made world. Men indulge in war exhausting themselves and human resources. On the other hand women in Ladyland devote themselves to the welfare of total humanity. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's main emphasis is on women's education and she condemns the militarism of men.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Padmarg* is also a utopian fiction but it is very much realistic. It deals with the problem of contemporary society. Here women form a utopian world amidst the humdrum of the world, free from social evils. Like *Sultana's Dream*, here also the main focus is on education. The inhabitants of Tarini Bhavan form a kind of sisterhood to help the less fortunate women. Barnita Bagchi observes, "Rokeya's vision in *Padmarag* reveals that women, be they Hindus, Brahmos, Muslims or Christians, black or white are victims of patriarchal oppression. They all need a refuge and the means to become self-reliant" (p. xii).

Rokeya explores the fact that all women irrespective of their class, colour, creed, and community are the victims of the male-dominated society. Through major and minor characters, Rokeya presents the dire situation of women at that time. At the same time, she establishes the idea if women can get out of the patriarchal clutches, they themselves can provide help to the underprivileged women. Simultaneously they can create a better place to live in, where equality, peace, and freedom would prevail.

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After Rokeya Sakhawat Hosain, the most radical feminist voice was Ismat Chughtai. M. Asaduddin comments, “When Ismat Chughtai, the prima donna of Urdu fiction, appeared on the scene in the 1940s, everyone had to sit up and take notice” (p. 89). M. Asaduddin further remarks, “Ismat Chughtai is intimately related to the corpus of Indian literature that represents female consciousness” (p. 89). She presented the plights of Indian women. At the same time, she exposed the hypocrisy of society. Chughtai questioned the establishment, interrogated the taboos regarding female sexuality.

In the Indian context, Ismat Chughtai is probably the first female writer who dares to raise the issue of lesbianism, as in India there is a long tradition- from myth to modern literature which propagates compulsory heterosexuality as it is linked with procreation. M. Asaduddin in his Introduction to “Ismat Chughtai: Lifting the Veil- Selected Writings” mentions, “She is the first significant writer in Urdu to acknowledge female sexuality and to portray it in a courageous and convincing way (Asaduddin, p. xviii-xix)”.

Besides these writers, in the realm of Indian poetry, the first woman poet Toru Dutt also presents in her poetry the subject of female victimization and conditioning. Kamala Das produces some energetic and striking confessional poetry. Her poetry mainly deals with the man-woman relationship. She has the courage to speak of her body. Later women poets such as Gauri Deshpande, Suniti Namjoshi, and Chitra Narendran follow her.

Women in Political Agendas and the Resistance:

The turmoil period of independence is very much crucial from the point of view of Indian women. Both the colonialists and the nationalists portrayed women according to their own destined goal. The nationalists associate ‘Bharatmata’ image to the nation and try to arouse nationalist sentiment. On the other hand, the colonialists justify their colonial rule by presenting the view that in India women are the victim of barbaric social practices and their salvation is possible only under British rule. Women leaders used this opportunity and under the shield of Swaraj, they raised the issues of women. At the time of movement, women got the opportunity to come into contact with each other. They grasp the platform to share their sufferings. Before that women were confined within four walls, so their sufferings went unheard. This movement brought them together on a platform. Earlier, the home was the whole universe for them, now the real larger world appears before them. Besides women became aware of their strength which was unknown before.

Conclusion

In the present scenario social, cultural, and literary paradigms are shifting, making way for previously unheard, underestimated, and sidelined ideologies to set their own parameters. The re-

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reading and re-writing of women texts and history are parts of this historical and cultural necessity. The history of human civilization was one dimensional. It was written with a male perspective and underestimated women's role and neglected their issues. The suffering of Indian women has remained unheard of for thousands of years. The condition of women has changed over the ages. The situation of women in India is different from the women of the rest of the world. India is a country of diverse cultures, and in each culture, women feel different kinds of oppression. Patriarchy works here on multiple dimensions. The caste system, religion, myths and cultural values have a tremendous bearing upon the lives of women. In each age, women have been marginalized, and in each age women tried to resist those values and make their mark in every field of life. The feminist movement in India began at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the true sense of the term which gets complicated at the end of the century, as the rise of nationalism subdued the movement which shares some contradictory core values. Both the colonizers and Nationalist males portrayed the image of Indian women for their own interest, but this time Indian women didn't accept their victimhood. They counter the misogyny in all forms and produce their own narrative. These women activists, political leaders, and writers paved the way for the new generation of feminist writers and activists.

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