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### **Fashioning Feminisms in India**

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## Fashioning Feminisms in India

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### Abstract

This paper will see Feminism in India as a set of movements, legal reforms, social and cultural changes that have taken place over a period of time. It will explore the debate around conceptualizing Indian feminism, the position of women in colonial and postcolonial India, and the challenges posed by globalization and the right wing ideology, the writings of prominent Indian academics and activists as they discuss feminism in the context of Indian culture, society and politics, and explore its theoretical foundations in India.

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**Keywords:** Women question, Patriarchy, Discursive construction, Essentialism, Difference

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## I

**D**ebates take the form of theory. When we talk of feminist theories, we understand it to be an extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical discourse. The label 'Indian' when used for feminist theories implies a political and cultural specificity. Indian feminism is clearly a response to issues concerning Indian women. To explore how this debate has taken shape over the years this paper will explore the inevitable association with western feminism, the position of women in colonial and post –colonial India, and the challenges posed by globalization and the right wing ideology, the writings of prominent Indian academics and activists as they discuss feminism in the context of Indian culture, society and politics, and explore its theoretical foundations in India. Feminism in India can be seen as a set of movements, legal reforms, social and cultural changes that have taken place over a period of time aimed at establishing and defending equal political, economic, social rights and equal opportunities for women in India.

### What Does Feminism Mean for us?

Woman question in India traditionally responded to anti – imperialist struggle for nationhood and is marked by a desire for sculpting an indigenous Indian identity. There is a recurrent sense of evasion and ambivalence towards the term feminism itself. Moreover, whenever it is used there are clarification, qualifications and disavowals and it is presented with a sense of differential understanding with western feminism. Indian feminist scholars and activists have wrestled to fashion a separate identity for feminism in India. In pre-independent India Sarojini Naidu a spokesperson for the cause of women denied that Indian women were

suppressed and quoted texts to highlight the glorious traditions and sacred texts to bring out the supremacy of Indian cultural traditions:

We are not weak timid women. We hold the courageous Savitri as our ideal; we know how Sita defied those who entertained those suspicions of her ability to keep her chastity I think this conference is writing the history of women of the world. I will, however confess to you one thing. I will whisper it into this loud speaker, '*I am not a feminist*'. To be a feminist is to acknowledge that one's life has been repressed. The demand for granting preferential treatment to women is an admission on her part of her inferiority and there has been no need for such a thing in India as the women have always been on the side of men in council and in the fields of battle. We must have no mutual conflict in our homes .We must transcend differences. We must rise above nationalism, above religion, above sex (All India Women's Conference 1930).

In this she effectively maintains a difference with the west and also brushes internal difference. This can be seen as a response in what Fanon called the second phase of a nation resisting the colonial masters and this phase is marked by anxiety to define and differentiate the Indian women vis-à-vis western counterpart. The discursive construction of Indian women often mediated with the idea of the Indian nation. Sita and Savitri from the epics were flaunted as icons to be emulated by women in India.

Fifty years later Indira Gandhi in her speech from the same platform acknowledged the travails of Indian women and equated them to India and defined suffering as a badge of her tribe but with an assertion of her strength to overcome any hurdles and to emerge victorious. For her western women imitate men, which is erroneous thereby asserting that the ethics of men and women are different:

I have often said that I am not a feminist. Yet, in my concern for the underprivileged how can I ignore women who, since the beginning of history have been dominated over and discriminated against in social customs and laws...in the west, women's so called freedom is often equated with imitation of man. Indian women are traditionally conservative but they also have the genius of synthesis to adopt and absorb. That is what gives them resilience to face suffering and to meet upheavals with a degree of calm, to change constantly and yet remain changeless, which is the quality of India herself. "True Liberation of Women" (All India Women's Conference 1980).

Neera Desai a pioneer of women's studies (at SNDT University, Mumbai) asserts that in India there is an allergy to the term 'feminism'. She was one of the very few people who openly called themselves feminist (way back in 1952). She used qualitative research method for her book *Feminism as Experience* (published by SPARROW in 1972). She took Women's studies to new heights in the form of epistemological growth and construction of new body of knowledge. We see this repugnance to the term feminism in MadhuKishwar's "A Horror of ism's: Why I Do Not call Myself a Feminist" for her to be a feminist is to be a mindless prototype, to be in a tight box. For her feminism is intellectual, elitist, metropolitan and it designs a kind of regimentation, which according to her does not address grassroots issues. And such intellectual ossification encourages biased opinions and it a western offshoot of individualism.

## II

### “The white man saving brown women from brown men” GayatriC.Spivak

Both the colonial state and the independent state after it had a dual and paradoxical attitude towards the ‘woman’s’ question.’ James Mill in his *History of British India* (1917) wrote that the condition of women in society is an indication of that society’s place in civilization. He wrote women into the project of modernity. In one fell swoop, women, modernity and nation become essential and inseparable elements in the discourse of civilization (Sen 2000:10) for the colonialist rulers the atrocities practiced against women became a confirmation of the rulers modernity and moral ground of their civilizing mission could be carried out, it was a ‘mask of conquest’ (Vishwanathan 1990) they paraded as protectors of Indian women against the prevalent practices of sati, child marriage, ascetic widowhood, *kulin*polygamy, female infanticide and women’s education . It was the colonialist discourse that by assuming hegemony of brahmanical texts, believed in the total submission of all Hindus to the dictates of the text and that the texts were the necessary basis of all such practices as sati which received the sanction of texts.

#### **The Nationalist Answer**

The nationalists concern to defend their culture against western invasion led them to endorse the subordination of women with some of the most regressive customs. This is well documented in recent scholarship; some of the most important works are by Uma Chakravorty (“ConceptualisingBrahmanical Patriarchy in-Early India-Gender, Caste, Class and State”), Himani Banerjee (*Inventing Subjects: Studies in Hegemony, Patriarchy and Colonialism*), Kum KumSangari (*Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*), V.Geetha (*Periyar, Women and an Ethic of Citizenship*), MeeraKosambhi (*Crossing Thresholds: Feminist Essays in Social History*), Devakijain and Nirmala Banerjee (*Tyranny of the Household*) among others. The early nineteenthcentury social reforms were not so much about specific conditions of women within a determinate set of social relations as it was about the political encounter between a colonial state and the suppressed tradition of colonized people a tradition that Lata Mani has analyzed in her book the *Contentious Tradition* where she says that the abolition of sati was itself produced by colonialist discourse by debates of sati in colonial India. Indian nationalism opposed to the colonial ideology and took up the women’s question in its struggle against the domination of the colonial rulers.

Cultural chauvinism resulted in an essentialized model of Indian womanhood special yet alienated from public space. Gandhi legitimized and extended Indian women’s public activities by activating them into the civil disobedience movement against the British Rule. He glorified their feminine compassionate roles of sacrifice and forbearance. We call aptly this the first phase of the women’s question in India. The writing of prominent Indian academics and activists framed the bedrock of debates on feminism in the context of Indian culture, society and politics, and their deliberations explore its theoretical foundations in India. Some of the prominent men and their works were:

Raja Ram Mohan Roy	Spoke against Sati, favored women's education. started <i>Brahmo Sabha</i> in 1828
IshwarChadraVidyaSagar	Protested against polygamy, child-marriage and favored widow remarriage and women's education (1849)
M.K.Gandhi	Participation of women in the national movement (1914-1948)
B.R.Ambedkar	Drafted the Constitution of India, Hindu Code Bill (1948)
JyotiraoPhule&SavitribaiPhule	Pioneers of women's education. Formed the Satya shodhak <i>Samaj</i> (society for the Seekers of Truth) 1873
GovindRanade&RamabaiRanade	Organized the Sarvajanic Sabha and the Prarthana <i>Samaj</i> ,(1890) the Widow Marriage Association in 1861

The Indian Constitution then granted equality and freedom from discrimination based on gender, class, caste or religion. Some Women's rights enshrined in the constitution of India as early as 1950 were:

- Article 14-Equal rights and opportunities in political, economic and social spheres.
- Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the ground of sex.
- Article 15(3) enables affirmative discrimination in favor of women.
- Article 39-Equal means of livelihood and equal pay for equal work.
- Article 42- Just and human conditions of work and maternity relief.
- Article 51(A) (c) Fundamental duties to renounce practices, derogatory to the dignity of women.
- Article 46-The state to promote with special care, the educational and economic interests of the weaker section of the people and to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.
- Article 243D (3), 243T (3) and 243R (4) provides for allocation of seats in the Panchayati Raj System.

First phase of women's question was to uproot social evils initiated by men; women in the first phase were cast as subjects of social reform and welfare instead of being autonomous agents of change. Cultural chauvinism resulted in franchise and upliftment through affirmative action; state adopted a patronizing role towards women. Women were educated to be conveyers of national culture. Imagining women became the bedrock of an ethnicized and oppositional being. Much of theorizing of Indian feminism has articulated the national question with the sanitized image of Hindu upper caste women. The domestic sphere was redefined and it now became a repository of India's spirituality, the good woman, the chaste wife and mother empowered by spiritual strength was seen as an iconic symbol of the nation. Partha Chatterjee and Tanika Sarkar aptly summed it up as women were spoken for and that the new woman was a construct. New woman was subjected to new patriarchies; she was to be a *bhadramahila* (a respectable woman) without becoming a *memsahib* (Englishwomen), without jeopardizing her home (John

1996:9). Her education was meant to inculcate the values of discipline or orderliness, thrift, cleanliness and personal responsibility. Resolution of the women's question was considered to be complete; it disappeared for a period of over twenty years.

### **Second Phase of the Women's Question:**

1970's was a fertile period for the burgeoning of the second phase of women's question in India, first phase was articulated during the freedom movement and had substantially led to rights and privileges accorded to women in the constitution of India and the women question was declared to have been resolved. "Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India" in 1974 by the ministry of Education and Social Welfare revealed total invisibility and neglect of women's economic roles. It raised alarm as to the status of women in India leading to large scale research and the institutionalization of women's studies and all this stimulated a new spate of legal reforms and programs and policies for women and hence this encouraged the visibility of women in public space. A number of protective laws were enforced to prevent exploitation of women. To quote few:

- Sati Prevention Act, 1987,
- The Family courts Act, 1984,
- Protection of Human Right Act, 1993,
- The Maternity Benefit Act 1961,
- Immoral traffic (Prevention) Act 1956,
- The Child Marriage Restraint Act,
- 1929, The Pre- Natal Diagnostic Technique (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994, the legal Practitioners (women) Act, 1923
- Protection of women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005
- Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, Amendment Act, 1984
- Protection of women from Domestic Violence Act (2005/2006)
- The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013
- Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 amended in 2002 and 2003
- Anti-Rape laws (1860, 1983) now called the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013
- Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 and the Special Marriage Act, 1954. Marriage Laws (Amendment) Bill 2010.
- Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code Decriminalizing same-sex relationships

### **Third Phase of the Women's Question:**

One of the most significant contributions of feminist theorizing in the last two decades in India has been an unrelenting critique of essentialist notions of both the Indian nation and woman. One could call this phase as broadening the parameters of feminism and moving beyond gender and adding in its purview issues of class, caste, sexuality, location, ability among other points of difference. Arundhati Roy, Vandana Shiva, Medha Patekar avowing concern for global issues like the anxiety about nuclear wars, environmental issues, HIV and other health hazards expressing a post feminist stance of moving beyond male female debates.

Ruth Vanita and Suniti Namjoshi among others have observed that heteronormativity is linked to heterosexism and homophobia. Evaluating heteronormativity that involves alignment of biological sex, sexuality, gender identity, and gender roles through their writings they assert that



sexuality is a matter of choice. Ruth Vanita through her writings has unearthed a rich reference to same sex relationship in ancient texts. Dalit feminism has responded to the complex salience of class and the differences created by the caste-ridden society and Dalit feminist theory is aimed towards social justice and against all sorts of exploitation and oppression towards Dalit women. Bama Gunasekhran, Urmila Pawar and many more Dalit women writers through their writings articulate and record their experiences of humiliation and hurt and thereby subverting centuries of old historical neglect they exhibit a stubborn refusal to be considered as an object. Bama Faustina is the most distinguished Dalit feminist writer in Tamil. Her autobiographical novel *Karukku* was the first Dalit Tamil text. As an exponent of Dalit Feminism, Bama has found in *Karukku* the right space to articulate the travails and suffering of Dalit women, Bama gives a clear picture of the caste oppression meted out to the Dalit Christians not only by the upper caste society but more so within the catholic church itself. (Ahmad 144) For Bama, Dalit literature is not simply a literature on Dalits but a critique of the Hindu social order revealing the powers of dominate repressive ideologies including patriarchy, casteism and globalization. SharmilaRege in her work *Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios* debates the question of class, caste, religion and sexuality. Her approach added to new method of historiography revealing blind spots of a Hindu nation towards Dalit voices. In her work *Against the Madness of Manu* she emphasizes Ambedkar's role in the women's movement by discussing his ideological dissension against brahminical patriarchy, to show how caste system engenders violence against women. Her specific emphasis on alternative history has given a new life to the local and oral traditions of knowledge and cultural practices by bringing them into public attention through translation process that build archives of national memory.

### III

India is a heterogeneous land and also there are multiple patriarchies and hence this call for multiple feminisms. Thus feminism in India is not a singular theoretical orientation; it has changed over time in relation to historical and cultural realities, levels of perception, understandings and actions of individual men and women and men and women as a group. The widely used definition is "An awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation". (Bhasin and Khan 1986) Acknowledging sexism in daily life and attempting to challenge and eliminate it through deconstructing mutually exclusive notions of femininity and masculinity as biologically determined categories opens the way towards an equitable society for both men and women.

Indian Feminism must also be at once attentive to the micro politics of context, subjectivity and struggle as well as to the macro politics of global economic and political systems and processes (Mohanty 2002, 501). Mohanty (1991) discusses Maria Mies study of the lace makers of Narsapur as a demonstration of how to do this kind of multilayered, contextual analysis to reveal how the particular is often universally significant – without using the universal to erase the particular or positing an unbridgeable gulf between the two terms. We need to deconstruct the objectification of 'third world' feminisms and reconstruct a plural, contradictory, complex notion of what feminist paradigms mean in India. And further show that the heterogeneity of Indian experience and the ever-changing gender relations has necessitated the

articulation of multiple feminism and multiple theoretical frameworks striated with common concerns. Audre Lorde writes, "The future of our earth may depend on the ability of all women to identity and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference. The old definitions have not served us..." (Lorde 123). So discussions on Indian feminism can contribute to this positive recognition of difference in the struggle to redefine its meaning.

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