

UNFOLDING THE JOURNEY OF FEMINISM IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Feminism has been described by G.D. Anderson¹ as: "Feminism isn't about making women strong. Women are already strong. It's about changing the way the world perceives that strength." The concept of feminism has been prevalent since ancient times. The epics of Mahabharat and Ramayan depicted equality of rights amongst men and women. For instance, 'Swayamvar', a practice where the bride had the right to choose her 'Var' i.e., the groom. With the lapse of time, the concept of feminism was lost in the oppression by the patriarchal society. Through this paper, an attempt is made to analyse the concept of feminism as seen in the contemporary world. To have an insight of the research paper it is divided into a few segments. The research paper unfolds with the introduction of the topic. The next part of the research paper discusses the history of feminism in India. The paper illuminates various feministic Constitutional provisions and programmes introduced by the government to support the development of women. The research paper primarily discusses the issue- 'Why do women have to fight for their rights even though there are ample laws to protect them?'

Keywords: Feminism, Women, Equality.

INTRODUCTION

The word feminism was first used in 1851 which meant the state of being feminine. However, by 1895, as the feministic movements began to spread globally, 'feminism' had evolved to become a word to describe the activity of advocating women's rights. Thus, today one may say that feminism is the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. It talks about political, economic, and social equality for both men and women. It is about respecting every woman's experience, knowledge, identity and strength, and endeavouring to empower all women to realise their full rights. Today, fighting for women's rights has become synonymous with 'man-hating'. In today's chaotic period where women's rights have been repetitively questioned the responsibility of the judiciary as the custodian of

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¹ G.D Anderson is the pseudonym for Geena Dunne, an Australian feminist writer

rights has become even more important. In the next segment let us throw light on the historical perspective of the topic.

HISTORY OF FEMINISM IN INDIA

The concept of feminism existed since ancient times in India. In the ancient Indian culture women and men were treated equally. In the earlier Vedic period, men and women were referred to as the 'two wheels of a cart'. This lesson aptly depicted equality between men and women. According to the ancient Hindu scriptures, women were regarded as '*Janani*' i.e., mother and '*Devi*' which means manifestation of *shakti* or power. However, in the later Vedic period, there was a decline in the ideology of feminism, especially the position of a woman in society. This was mainly because of foreign conquests in India. The invaders included Persians, Greeks, Portuguese, the Muslim Dynasties and the Britishers. As the foreign conquests began, medieval India witnessed issues of child marriage among girls, prohibition of widow remarriage, lack of education for girls, etc.

During the colonial era, the Western ideas of liberty, fraternity and equality were embedded in the elite classes *via* the Western education system. Western liberalism was extended to the women's question of equality which emerged as a social reform movement. Thus, it can be said that the social reform movements in India were inspired by the West. Moving towards the feministic movements in India, many feministic leaders emerged during this period, namely, Savitri Phule, Tarabai Shinde, Pandita Ramabai, and Raja Ram Mohan Roy, among others. They took steps to educate girls, criticized the patriarchal system, abolished the practice of 'Sati' and child marriage, and fought for women's right to vote. During the post-independence era, the constitution makers re-introduced the concept of feminism in India. The provisions focused on equality for both men and women, prevention of discrimination against women and equal opportunities and treatment of women in the workplace. Now let us discuss the constitutional mandates and legislative framework pertaining to women.

FEMINISTIC PROVISIONS IN THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION

The Constitution makers have appropriately re-introduced the concept of feminism through relevant provisions in the Constitution. The Constitution of India provides equality to women and it also empowers the State to make appropriate provisions for the overall development of women. Our Constitution makers have strived for equality between men and women wherein

the fundamental rights provide for equality before the law and equal protection of the law.² It further provides for the prohibition of any discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth.³In consonance with this, Article 15(3) also empowers the state to make special provisions for women and children. Apart from this, the Directive Principles of State Policy also incorporate relevant provisions to empower women and improve their socio-economic conditions.⁴The State has adopted reservation policies and provisions for the upliftment of women in different spheres.⁵

There are many legislations enacted by the State for the protection and upliftment of women which includes The Maternity Benefit Act 1961, The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act 1986, [The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961\(Amended in 1986\)](#), [The Dowry Prohibition Rules](#), [The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women 2001](#), [The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace \(Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal\) Act, 2013](#), and other laws.

The Indian Penal Code also has provisions for the protection of women against violence, outraging the modesty of a woman⁶, rape and sexual assault⁷, obscenity⁸, dowry death⁹, acid attack¹⁰, cruelty¹¹ and domestic violence. The relevant sections provide remedies and punishments for the offences, thus safeguarding the interests of women.

In addition to the Constitutional provisions and other laws, the Indian government has also introduced several programmes and schemes from time to time to support women's development and empowerment. These schemes include 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' which ensures and protects the education of girl child. Another programme introduced is 'Mahila Shakti Kendra' which aims to empower rural women and give them opportunities to enhance their skills so that they may be employed. Apart from this, the 'Scheme for Adolescent Girls' aims to improve the life and health of girls by providing them with proper education and nutritious food. Moreover, 'Mahila Police Volunteers' is a programme that

² The Constitution of India 1950, art 14

³ The Constitution of India 1950, art 15

⁴ The Constitution of India 1950, art 39(a), art 39(d), art 39A, art 42, art 51(A)(e)

⁵ The Constitution of India 1950, art 243D, art 243 T

⁶ The Indian Penal Code 1860, s354, s 354A, s 354B, s 354C, s 354D

⁷ The Indian Penal Code 1860, s375, s 376, s 376-A-D

⁸ The Indian Penal Code 1860, s292, s 293, s 294

⁹ The Indian Penal Code 1860, s304-B

¹⁰ The Indian Penal Code 1860, s 326-A, s 326-B

¹¹ The Indian Penal Code 1860, s 498

encourages the participation of women to act as connecting link between the female police officers and the women who are in distress. Furthermore, through 'Rashtriya Mahila Kosh' poor women receive loans at concessional terms for their livelihood and income-generating activities.¹²

FEMINISM IN INDIA: CURRENT PERSPECTIVE

India has modernised and developed significantly in every sphere since its independence. Regarding feminism, the government in consonance with the Constitution and other laws has supported women's struggle for feministic rights. However, they have not been successful in eliminating this struggle. Women today have been pursuing different roles, be it a teacher, a doctor, a politician, or an astronaut. The constitutional provisions and government programmes have contributed significantly to elevating the condition of women and encouraging their participation in the workforce. However, most people believe that even today, women are particularly discriminated against. Women themselves report that they have been facing discrimination. Society at large also witnesses violence against women, be it in their homes, their workplaces, or in public.

It is highly debated as to who is to take the blame for the discrimination and suffrage women have to face. Some argue that it is essential to educate and teach boys to respect women while some say that it is because of women's behaviour that they get into trouble. Today, there exists an egalitarian view regarding women's place in society as people acknowledge that women should have equal rights as that men. However, like a coin has two sides, there exists a different notion. People living in rural and remote areas have a traditional mindset. They prefer a 'man' to be the breadwinner of the family to a woman. Despite innumerable efforts of the government, this mindset could not be changed. This reflects the failure of the government to implement the laws and programmes efficiently. There is no doubt that since its independence, India has progressed considerably to make the country more feministic. However, it is evident that despite its efforts, India has a long way to go.

¹² Ministry of Women and Child Development, *Initiatives by Government for reducing Gender Gap in all aspects of Social, Economic and Political Life* (25 March 2021) (Release ID: 1707475) <<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1707475>>accessed 30 June 2023

WHY DO WOMEN STILL HAVE TO FIGHT FOR THEIR RIGHTS?

Now, the question that needs to be pondered is – ‘Why do women still have to fight for their rights?’ This further poses a question – ‘Are the laws, provisions and schemes made by the legislature and government sufficient and appropriate to eradicate the gender gap in India and are the laws being implemented properly?’ Women in rural and northeastern areas of the country are nonetheless unaware of their rights and are even today discriminated against.

The researchers believe that the sole reason for this is the laws and provisions not being executed and implemented properly due to corruption. Corruption is rampant in every sector and at every level of the government in the country. The funds provided by the government are misallocated and underutilised by those in power. Consequently, due to financial difficulties, many of the programmes are not implemented to the best of their capacity. Additionally, women are not aware of their rights or are misled to think that they are powerless and are bound to face discrimination and difficulties.

As citizens of the country, it is our responsibility to see that such laws are properly executed around us. The world looks upon India as an economic hub and an impending leader in the years to come. But how can we achieve this when nearly half of the women population still fights for their rights? Everyone wishes to change the world, but how much effort are we putting in, to make our neighborhood a better place? After all, change starts at home.

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Feminism is often considered as ‘man hating’. Questions arise like, why feminism cannot be the same as equalist? The point of feminism is to give back to women what they deserve. Some or the other way India still dwells on a patriarchal society. Feminism is not hating men or women in society. It’s a choice of women, whatever they want to do at any point in time with their willingness.

Although the Indian constitution has made several feministic laws and provisions for the upliftment of women and to prevent discrimination against women in different spheres, the implementation of the laws is not up to the mark. India, at the moment, is a patriarchal country. Hence hostile treatment of women is not a thing of the past. Indian women have been victims of domestic violence and discrimination in the workplace. They are still fighting for equal representation, opportunities, and pay as their male counterparts.

The point of feminism is to provide women with the basic characteristics of the word itself. Feminism itself means, as per ancient relics and proven facts, contrary to masculinism, tolerance, power, dignity, and glory; for which the women in the contemporary world are striving. Even though there are settled laws and precedents, women are devoid of the position they deserve. This can be accomplished only when there is a paradigm shift in the mindset of society at large. We must ask ourselves - "If not me, who? If not now, when?"¹³



¹³ Emma Watson(*HeForShe*)<<https://www.heforshe.org/en>>accessed 30 June 2023