



Change of Role of Women in India through Ages

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ABSTRACT

It is an established fact that the role of woman changed with the passage of time. Woman cannot be considered as a weak creature as she is occupying prominent positions in the society. Right from the beginning women have been suppressed as the set up of Indian society was largely patriarchal. But, with the passage of time there is a marked change as for as the position of women is concerned. Active participation of women can be witnessed in all spheres of life.

Feminism in India is a set of movements aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights and equal opportunities for Indian women. It is the pursuit of women's rights within the society of India. Like their feminist counterparts all over the world, feminists in India seek gender equality: the right to work for equal wages, the right to equal access to health and education, and equal political rights. Indian feminists also have fought against culture-specific issues within India's patriarchal society, such as inheritance laws and the



practice of widow immolation known as Sati.

The history of feminism in India can be divided into three phases: the first phase, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, initiated when male European colonists began to speak out against the social evils of Sati. The second phase, from 1915 to Indian independence, when Gandhi incorporated women's movements into the Quit India movement and independent women's organisations began to emerge; and finally, the third phase, post-independence, which has focused on fair treatment of women at home after marriage, in the work force and right to political parity.

Despite the progress made by Indian feminist movements, women living in modern India still face many issues of discrimination. India's patriarchal culture has made the process of gaining land-ownership rights

and access to education challenging. In the past two decades, there has also emerged a disturbing trend of sex-selective abortion. To Indian feminists, these are seen as injustices worth struggling against.

As in the West, there has been some criticism of feminist movements in India. They have especially been criticised for focusing too much on women already privileged, and neglecting the needs and representation of poorer or lower caste women. This has led to the creation of caste-specific feminist organisations and movements

Women's role in Pre-colonial social structures reveals that feminism was theorised differently in India than in the West. In India, women's issues first began to be addressed when the state commissioned a report on the status of women to a group of feminist researchers and



activists. The report recognised the fact that in India, women were oppressed under a system of structural hierarchies and injustices. During this period, Indian feminists were influenced by the Western debates being conducted about violence against women. However, due to the difference in the historical and social culture of India, the debate in favor of Indian women had to be conducted creatively and certain Western ideas had to be rejected. Women's issues began to gain an international prominence when the decade of 1975–1985 was declared the United Nations Decade for Women.

Indian women negotiate survival through an array of oppressive patriarchal family structures: age, ordinal status, relationship to men through family of origin, marriage and procreation as well as patriarchal attributes. Examples of patriarchal

attributes include: dowry, siring sons etc., kinship, caste, community, village, market and the state. It should however be noted that several communities in India, such as the Nairs of Kerala, Shettys of Mangalore, certain Maratha clans, and Bengali families exhibit matriarchal tendencies. In these communities, the head of the family is the oldest woman rather than the oldest man. Sikh culture is also regarded as relatively gender-neutral.

In Muslim families, women and men are considered equal, but not in the westernized sense. The Quran teaches that the minds of males and females work differently and are generally different biologically. Therefore, Islam grants different rights to the husband and wife. One such right which the wife owes to her husband is being head of the household.



Unlike the Western feminist movement, India's movement was initiated by men, and later joined by women. The efforts of these men included abolishing sati, which was a widow's death by burning on her husband's funeral pyre, abolishing the custom of child marriage, abolishing the disfiguring of widows, introducing the marriage of upper caste Hindu widows, promoting women's education, obtaining legal rights for women to own property, and requiring the law to acknowledge women's status by granting them basic rights in matters such as adoption.

Maharani Jind Kaur, the youngest wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, was renowned for her beauty, energy and strength of purpose. But her fame is derived chiefly from the fear she engendered in the British, who described her as "the Messalina

of the Punjab", a seductress too rebellious to be controlled¹

The colonial venture into modernity brought concepts of democracy, equality and individual rights. The rise of the concept of nationalism and introspection of discriminatory practices brought about social reform movements related to caste and gender relations. This first phase of feminism in India was initiated by men to uproot the social evils of sati (widow immolation), to allow widow remarriage, to forbid child marriage, and to reduce illiteracy, as well as to regulate the age of consent and to ensure property rights through legal intervention. In addition to this, some upper caste Hindu women rejected constraints they faced under Brahminical traditions. However, efforts for improving the status of women in Indian society were somewhat thwarted by the late nineteenth century, as nationalist



movements emerged in India. These movements resisted 'colonial interventions in gender relations' particularly in the areas of family relations. In the mid to late nineteenth century, there was a national form of resistance to any colonial efforts made to 'modernise' the Hindu family. This included the Age of Consent controversy that erupted after the government tried to raise the age of marriage for women. Several Indian states were ruled by women during British colonial advance including Jhansi (Rani Laxmibai), Kittur (Rani Chennama), Bhopal (Quidisa Begum) and Punjab (Jind Kaur).

During this period the struggle against colonial rule intensified. Nationalism became the pre-eminent cause. Claiming Indian superiority became the tool of cultural revivalism resulting in an essentialising model of Indian womanhood similar to that of Victorian womanhood: special

yet separated from public space. Gandhi legitimised and expanded Indian women's public activities by initiating them into the non-violent civil disobedience movement against the British Raj. He exalted their feminine roles of caring, self-abnegation, sacrifice and tolerance; and carved a niche for those in the public arena. Peasant women played an important role in the rural satyagrahas of Borsad and Bardoli.

Women-only organisations like All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) emerged. Women were grappling with issues relating to the scope of women's political participation, women's franchise, communal awards, and leadership roles in political parties.

The 1920s was a new era for Indian women and is defined as 'feminism' that was responsible for the creation of localised



women's associations. These associations emphasised women's education issues, developed livelihood strategies for working-class women, and also organised national level women's associations such as the All India Women's Conference. AIWC was closely affiliated with the Indian National Congress. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, it worked within the nationalist and anti-colonialist freedom movements. This made the mass mobilisation of women an integral part of Indian nationalism. Women therefore were a very important part of various nationalist and anti-colonial efforts, including the civil disobedience movements in the 1930s.

After independence, the All India Women's Conference continued to operate and in 1954 the Indian Communist Party formed its own women's wing known as the National Federation of Indian

Women. However, feminist agendas and movements became less active right after India's 1947 independence, as the nationalist agendas on nation building took precedence over feminist issues.

Indira Gandhi (née Nehru) was the only child of the India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. She is the first and only woman Prime Minister of India and the second-longest-serving Prime Minister.

Post independence feminists began to redefine the extent to which women were allowed to engage in the workforce. Prior to independence, most feminists accepted the sexual divide within the labour force. However, feminists in the 1970s challenged the inequalities that had been established and fought to reverse them. These inequalities included unequal wages for women, relegation of women to 'unskilled' spheres of work, and restricting women as a reserve



army for labour. In other words, the feminists' aim was to abolish the free service of women who were essentially being used as cheap capital. Feminist class-consciousness also came into focus in the 1970s, with feminists recognising the inequalities not just between men and women but also within power structures such as caste, tribe, language, religion, region, class etc. This also posed as a challenge for feminists while shaping their overreaching campaigns as there had to be a focus within efforts to ensure that fulfilling the demands of one group would not create further inequalities for another. Now, in the early twenty-first century, the focus of the Indian feminist movement has gone beyond treating women as useful members of society and a right to parity, but also having the power to decide the course of their personal lives and the right of self-determination.

In 1966 Indira Gandhi became the first female Prime Minister of India. She served as prime minister of India for three consecutive terms (1966–77) and a fourth term from 1980 until she was assassinated in 1984.

The state of Kerala is often viewed as the ideal progressive leader in the women's rights movement in India among states. Kerala maintains very high relative levels of female literacy and women's health, as well as greater female inheritance and property rights. For example, a 1998 study conducted by Bina Agarwal found that while only 13% of all women in India with landowning fathers inherited that land as daughters, 24% of such women were able to do so in the state of Kerala. This is important because it has been shown that measures to improve such access to property and economic independence through channels such as education not only



directly improve women's wellbeing and capabilities, but also reduce their risk of exposure to marital or any sort of domestic violence.

In 2014, an Indian family court in Mumbai ruled that a husband objecting to his wife wearing a kurta and jeans and forcing her to wear a sari amounts to cruelty inflicted by the husband and can be a ground to seek divorce. The wife was thus granted a divorce on the ground of cruelty as defined under section 27(1)(d) of Special Marriage Act, 1954.

Issues

Despite "on-paper" advancements, many problems still remain which inhibit women from fully taking advantage of new rights and opportunities in India.

There are many traditions and customs that have been an important part of Indian culture

for hundreds of years. Religious laws and expectations, or "personal laws" enumerated by each specific religion, often conflict with the Indian Constitution, eliminating rights and powers women should legally have. Despite these crossovers in legality, the Indian government does not interfere with religion and the personal laws they hold. Religions, like Hinduism, call for women to be faithful servants to God and their husbands. They have a term called *pativrata* that describes a wife who has accepted service and devotion to her husband and his family as her ultimate religion and duty. Indian society is largely composed of hierarchical systems within families and communities. These hierarchies can be broken down into age, sex, ordinal position, kinship relationships (within families), and caste, lineage, wealth, occupations, and relationship to ruling power



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These traditions and ways of Indian life have been in effect for so long that this type of lifestyle is what women have become accustomed to and expect. Indian women often do not take full advantage of their constitutional rights because they are not properly aware or informed of them. Women also tend to have poor utilisation of voting rights because they possess low levels of political awareness and sense of political efficacy. Women are not often encouraged to become informed about issues. Due to this, political parties do not invest much time in female candidates because there is a perception that they are a "wasted investment."[[]

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