Theoretical Perspectives and Social Practices in the context of Indian Feminism

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Abstract: Many ways Reformist and Nationalist structures and agendas were running in India, since ancient time till to date, but unfortunately it was not taken honest step towards the causes of Indian women. That's why at present scenario also the overall condition of Indian women is not very satisfactorily. Many efforts have been taken by social reformers and the government for the emancipation of Indian women through legislations and women's education but it is not completely successful because of existing social beliefs and practices and whatever progress is visible that is determined to only few upper class women.

The true empowerment of Indian women will only be happen when our women overcome these ideological barriers imposed by the patriarchal social system. Women in 21st century are subjected to domestic violence, dowry deaths, growing incidences of rapes, molestations, acid attack etc. Improving the status of women is taken over by society and government. But still ancestry and male chauvinism exist in society which makes their status no better than in the 19th century and the question of their status can be said to have been taken from the 19th century. Many efforts are still being required to improve the level of education, social, economical and every aspects of the life of women. There is an urgent need to be provided safety, security and equality in all walks of life, proper position in society, and thereby the nation, to benefit in multitude ways.

Keywords: **Indian Feminism, Equality, Indian women movements, patriarchy, Social practices, Theoretical perspectives etc.**

This research paper is a humble attempt to explore the objective study of theoretical perspectives and social practices in the context of Indian feminism especially the status of Indian women, caste system, culture, education, patriarchy and social practices of the contemporary times etc.

Introduction:

Feminism is a movement for social and political changes based on a critical analysis of male dominated society and the women's subordination within any given society. Feminism is a positivistic, holistic approach, a step to recognize the world realities, improve human relationships and aims at the preservation of human existence on the planet. Since woman's place is integrally embedded in a social life, any change or disruption would mean changing personal identity, sexual mores, family arrangements, child bearing customs, educational patterns, religious ideology, political and economic structures. Juliet Mitchell writes: "the feminist consciousness is the process of transforming the hidden, individual fears of women, into a shared awareness of the meaning of them as social problems, the release of anger, anxiety, the struggle for proclaiming the painful and transforming it into the political" (*Psychoanalysis and Feminism,* 111-118).

Feminism relates to women's position in society and culture and to the conditions of their roles in history. Mary Wollstonecraft in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) called for women's right for education, failing which all progress of knowledge and virtue would come to a halt.

The oppression of women is a society dominated by men under the centuries of both a fundamental reality and a psychological phenomenon. Patriarchy has tried to stifle women's creative urges and their very fountains of life-force in different conscious and unconscious ways. Sherry Ortner writes, "The secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact" (*Making Gender: the Politics and Erotic of Culture*, 4). Women suffer under inequalities, under estimations, revalorizations and even persecution.

Simon de Beauvoir said that I hesitated a long time before starting to write a book on woman. The subject is Woman? The term 'female' is pejorative not because it roots woman in nature, but because it confines her in her sex, and if this sex, even in an innocent animal, seems disgusting and hostile to man, it is obviously because of the annoyance the hateful woman looks at. And the most beautiful wildcats, the tigress, the lioness and the panther, lie under slavishly under the tyranny of the male empire, intrusion, impatience, wisdom, stupidity, intolerance, cruelty, depravity and humiliation. The male projects all the females simultaneously on the female. And the fact that she is a woman.

> "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychological or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminism" (*The Second Sex*, 293).

Feminism is a critical political concept that helps us to identify and name the wrongs based on gender-based oppression but also in relation to sexuality, class, age, location, race, and ability. The development of feminism is not consistent or continuous. "The (waves) metaphor is used to reflect story wherein the first wave culminates in suffrage, the second wave results in the rights to abortion, and heightened consciousness about wage inequities, racial discriminations, and sexual freedom, and the third (or even forth) wave is ongoing, and mostly focused on autobiography, choice, empowerment and diversity. The waves metaphor not only reduces the complexity of the issues raised, contested, and still left unsettled within each waves; it also tends to layer a familial story within the movement of the waves. Daughters outdo their mothers" (Lori J. Marso. *Fifty-One Key Feminist Thinkers*, 22).

Feminism in Indian Context:

Whenever we talk about feminism our gaze moves towards West and figures like J.S. Mill, Wollstonecraft, Showalter, Toril Moi, Simone de Beauvoir etc. come to our mind. But when we think about feminism in India there is vagueness before our sight. Only passing references have been made to some female reformers and thinkers who made their signature on the society by their thoughts and actions. But they never have been listened properly. Though the voice of women like those of Pandita Ramabai was revolutionary for the time and may be this is the reason why she was sidelined and her voice was suppressed by the mainstream history. That is what Uma Chakravarti has written in her book *Re-writing history; the life and time of Pandita Ramabai* (2013). But we cannot totally ignore the contribution given by many freedom fighters, independence, spread of education, ensure for economic, social and physical development, employment opportunities and above all the resultant new awareness of Indian women.

In many ways Reformist and Nationalist structures and agendas were running in India but unfortunately it was not honest enough towards the causes of women. That is what Pandita Ramabai, a great social reformer & pioneer for women education, demonstrated most effectively the failure of the agendas of social reformers and nationalists of the 19th century India. According to Ramabai, the task of emancipating women from their current situation was much more difficult than ending slavery because the effects of slavery are visible to all. However, the effects of slavery on women are largely unseen. She says:

> Most people think that women are living not in slavery but in a state natural to them. The belief that women are not oppressed and that their condition need not be different from the present one, is so deeply entrenched in everybody's mind that it is impossible from anybody to even marriage how wretched their condition really is. What is worse, even women themselves believe that their condition is as it should be. In the past African Negroes

were slaves in America, many of them held similar belief…..This state of mind is the ultimate in slavery…it destroys self respect and the desire for freedom: the two boons that God has given to humanity (Pandita Ramabai, *People's of the United States*, 168)

Social reformers across the country had expressed their deep concern about women's issues such as 'sati', child marriage, female infanticide, widowhood, 'Purdah', polygamy, 'devdasi' and denial of education. When the upper caste Hindu widows in India especially Bengal immolated themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, in order to stop the custom, he referred to various Sanskrit texts to prove that the practice was not determined by religious texts. While preparing the arguments in favour of regulation of 'sati', he also discussed the economic aspect of the question (*Women in India Society*, 1-2).

Indian Feminist Movement:

The Indian women's movement can be divided into three stages: (a) The Reformation (1850 to 1915); (b) the pre-independence phase (1915 to 1947) and (c) the post-independence phase 1947 to the present.

Reformation Phase (1850-1915):

It is called the first phase of the Indian feminism movement in India. It has brought about ideas of democracy, equality and individual rights. The rise of nationalism and the recognition of discriminatory practices brought about a dynamic social movement related to caste and sexuality. Initially, this phase was started by men to eradicate the social evils of *sati*, to allow widow's marriage, to forbid child marriage, and to reduce illiteracy and to control the age of consent and to secure property rights through legal intervention. (https://en.wikipedia.org> wiki> feminism_in_India).

Pre Independence Phase: 1915-1947

During this time the war against colonial rule intensified. Nationalism became the first cause. Claiming the rise of Indian superiority became a tool for cultural revival leading to the basic expression of Indian womanhood similar to Victorian womanhood: yet separate from the public sphere. Women have been arguing over issues related to women's broad political participation, women's structures, communal awards, and leadership roles in political parties. The 1920s were a new era for Indian women and were defined as 'feminism' which was aimed at creating local women's organizations. The organizations focused on women's education issues, developed strategies for the livelihoods of working women, and organized national-level women's organizations such as the All India Women's Conference. After independence, the All India women's conference continued to function and in 1954 the Indian Communist Party formed its own wing of women known as the National Federation of Indian Women. However, the agendas and movements of women became more difficult after independence in 1947, as nationalism policies in nation-building further strengthened women's issues. (https://en.wikipedia.org> wiki> feminism_in_India).

Post-Independence phase 1947 till date:

After independence, Indian women began to redefine that women were allowed to work. Before independence, most women accepted the gender equality within the working class. However, feminists in the 1970s challenged the inequalities and struggled to change it. These inequalities include the unequal pay of women, the displacement of women to 'unskilled' spheres of jobs, and the deterrence of women as a job. The recognition of the feminist movement also began to focus on the 1970s, when women saw inequality not only between men and women but also within power structures such as caste, nation, language, religion, region, class etc., 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. (https: / en. wikipedia.org> wiki> feminism_in_India).

Now in view of above, the real women empowerment will happen in India when our women overcome these mindsets imposed by a patriarchal social order. Entrepreneurship is all about enterprise, which is about believing in possibilities and not getting fixated by limitations. There are no easy solutions and the battle has to be fought on many fronts- at home, an educational institutions, religious bodies, and

ultimately, in the minds of men and women. We all have a responsibility in promoting and supporting the cause of women welfare as it is a colossal waste for the country not to harness the inherent potential and creativity of one half of its population (Anu Aga "Women in India" *Women and Society*...16-17).

Several social ills that plague Indian society target the girl child and women. These include female feticide, neglect of the girl child, sexual abuse of the girl child, trafficking of girls and women, dowry harassment and domestic violence. Such violence on girls and women is detrimental to their physical and mental health, which calls for empathy on the part of health professionals. Health professionals, including mental health professionals, need to be aware of the trauma in order to ensure adequate and appropriate interventions. The Indian government has passed laws to punish abuse and violence against girls and women by treating them as criminals. (Suman, LN. Domestic violence, psychological trauma…. *Women Health Open J.* 2015; 1)

Women have come to a long way from their dark age-especially in India, where girls were married off even before they attained puberty to much older men and treated as mere protecting tools to churn out heirs against their wishes; their hair was chopped and they were robbed of all the finery and freedom with the demise of her husband. It used to be a matter of convenience and culture where no one paid heed to a women's tears or pain. Today they are no longer the demure, helpless, coy creatures they used to be even a few years back. It is indeed intriguing to note how the male dominated society subjugated them literally into play things, dumping upon her the role of a virtual house maid and sex object while men were considered a superior race. Today they have empowered themselves to speak their minds and give voice to their inner thoughts; they found the courage to break free from the shackles of domination that diminished and insulted their voice. (Padmini Dutta Sharma, Central Chronicle, "Opinion & Stand", Wednesday, March 08, 2017, 4).

Today, women have an array of choices, yet each one of them have potential to arouse conflicts. Hence, with the widening of the women's world she needs to cope up with a broader range of issues-professional demands and expectations, responsibilities at home, children's needs, family relationships and many more. How can we handle these competitive demands through natural arguments and conflicts? What kind of solutions do we need to strive for? How much time should we take to learn? (Kiran Bedi, "*Women and Social*...48-52). These are the burning questions for which the Government and society have to search the appropriate answers and solutions.

Conclusion:

The patriarchal values and various social limitations of women established in ancient times persist but in a different ways till now. The reality of subordinate position of women is now indicated through adverse sex ratios of girls, the growing domestic violence, the increasing number of dowry death and rape cases. They still suffer social and economic oppression, confined only to homebound activities, where their responsibilities are limited to only kith and kin and are hardly consulted in any matter on importance. Many efforts are still being required to improve the level of education, social, economical and every aspects of the life of women. There is an urgent need to promote education for women especially deprived Indian women so that they can be reached to the mainstream of society and can be spent their life as respectful and full of dignity. The Government and public sector need to play an important role to enable the welfare, empowerment and emancipation of women. To ensure women's participation in all walks of life, to empower rural women with opportunities for skill development, employment, literacy, health and proper nutrition and to provide safety and security, equality, freedom from discrimination, rights and welfare to women and to promote for being entrepreneurship skills as well as decision making and leadership quality.

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