*Ars Artium:* **An International Peer Reviewed-cum-Refereed Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences**
**ISSN (Online) : 2395-2423 • ISSN (Print) : 2319-7889**
**Vol. 3, January 2015**
**Pp. 132-138**

# The Role of Women Activism in Social Change: An Indian Perspective

*–Arvind Kumar**

## Abstract

The women's movement in India has a long and rich history. The presence of women in the public sphere has been significant, as their mobilization has been part of major event in the history of India. Ancient Indian text gives women a very respectful place in society. Furthermore, there are millions of ordinary women in the country who struggle to survive in order to remake their family and social lives; they are fighting for water, electricity, safety, literacy; safe contraception or resisting sexual harassment. There have been more changes in our contemporary society. They are fighting for oppressed classes and uplifting them in the mainstream of the society. The women movement in India has been heterogeneous in its different forms in diverse parts of the subcontinent. In present time, there are many women activists in the streets to demand right to dignity and respect for women. A woman activism in India has come in a full circle, where women are leading their own struggle against patriarchal structure of the society. The issues today are sexual harassment at the work place, the violence of development, caste and communal violence, lobbying for increased political participation of women in the highest levels of decision-making, etc. The list will go on as long as there is a women's movement. India has a rich and vibrant women's movement but it has still a long way to go to achieve gender equality and gender justice.

**Keywords**: Activism, Empowerment, Education, Feminism, Movement, Patriarchal, Reservation.

## Introduction

The women's movement in India has a long and rich history. As such, much theorization from feminists across the world has emphasized the importance of the politics of such relationships, in order to understand motivations and the development of the "self" and "others" as part and parcel of the development of policy. The broadening of

* *PhD Scholar, Centre for European Studies, School of International Studies, JNU, New Delhi.*

concerns in policy development has often, however, lacked a parallel effort to deepen feminist theory on the terms of the diverse relationships we create. Little attention is paid to the fundamental ability to empathize, cooperate, listen and reach out from the heart. All activist and feminist work is greatly strengthened – and in most cases requires – the transformation of the self as an essential step in breaking through the barriers of injustices. So, this paper will try to analyze the Indian women activism and social change in different times of the history.

## Definition of Feminism in Indian Perspective

There are many points of view to define feminism in India. Indian feminism is very much related with women activism in India, which has brought social change in Indian society. Women's role in Pre-colonial social structures reveals that feminism was theorized 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 recognized 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 favour 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.

The heterogeneity of the Indian experience reveals that there are multiple patriarchies, contributing to the existence of multiple feminisms. Hence, feminism in India is not a singular theoretical orientation; it has changed over time in relation to historical and cultural realities, levels of consciousness, perceptions and actions of individual women, 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. 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 open the way towards an equitable society for both men and women.

The male and female dichotomy of polar opposites with the former oppressing the latter at all times is refuted in the Indian context because it was men who

initiated social reform movements against various social evils. Patriarchy is just one of the hierarchies. Relational hierarchies between women within the same family are more adverse. Here women are pitted against one another. Not all women are powerless at all times. There have been intense debates within the Indian women's movements about the relationship between Western and Indian feminism. Many Indian feminists simultaneously claim a specific "Indian" sensitivity as well as an international feminist solidarity with groups and individuals worldwide. The rise of liberal feminism in the West in the 1970s focused deeply on demands for equal opportunities in education and employment, as well as ending violence against women. To a large extent, the emerging feminist movement in India was influenced by Western ideals called for education and equal rights, but also adapted their appeals to local issues and concerns, such as dowry-related violence against women, Sati, sex selective abortion and custodial rape. Some Indian feminists have suggested that these issues are not specifically "Indian" in nature but rather a reflection of a wider trend of patriarchal oppression of women.

## Indian Women's Movement and Social Change

The roots of the Indian women's movement go back to the nineteenth century male social reformers who took up issues concerning women and started women's organizations. Women started forming their own organization from the end of the nineteenth century, first at the local and then at the national level. In the years before independence, the two main issues they took up were political rights and reform of personal laws. Women's participation in the freedom struggle broadened the base of the women's movement. In post independence India, large number of women's autonomous groups have sprung up challenging patriarchy and taking up a variety of issues such as violence against women, greater share for women in political decision making, etc. both at the activist and academic level. India has a rich and vibrant women's movement but it has still a long way to go to achieve gender equality and gender justice.

There are several clear indicators of the fact that Indian women continue to be discriminated. The sex ratio is skewed against them; maternal mortality is the second-highest in the world; more than 40 per cent of women are illiterate; and crimes against women are on the rise. Yet, the women's movement which gathered strength after the 1970s, has led to progressive legislation and positive change, spurred on by the participation of women in local self-government.

It is a paradox of modern India that women wield power and hold positions at the topmost levels, yet large sections of women are among the most underprivileged. Some women from the upper classes head political parties and command large followers, yet women's representation in the Parliament and state legislatures has not been more than 10 per cent. The roots of discrimination against women lie in the religious and cultural practices of India. The beginning of changes started with the reform movements in the nineteenth century, which addressed practices like *sati*, child marriage, life of the widows, etc. Although India's widows today are not forced to die on the death of

their husband – in ritual of sati – by burning to death on their husband's funeral pyre, they are still forced to undergo daily ritual humiliations, to live completely apart from society, to live lives of extreme poverty for their children, alone, helpless and hopeless. Younger widows, with no chance of remarrying, face strong cultural disapproval within their own families. They often face dangerous hostile family situations or abuse. Rising problems with widows and their husbands' family after the death of their husbands sometimes include sexual abuse from a husband's brother or father, starvation or abandonment. Once young beautiful widows have arrived at Vrindavan, in some of the bhajanashrams, today they sometimes face the terrible fate of sexual trafficking and sexual exploitation as the ashrams try to produce more money. The only other alternative, to life in Vrindavan, for many of these widows is a life lived on the streets as a beggar in their own home region living under the humility of those she knows. Some of the ashrams today are also scattered with diseases like tuberculosis, dysentery and STDs. Most often, in the poorest ashrams medical help is virtually non-existent. Most of the widows of Vrindavan are categorized today in India as war widows, political widows or religious widows. The status of women in the contemporary context is reflected in the state of their health, education, employment and life in society. The Indian women's movement started with addressing the problems that women faced, like violence, property rights, legal status, political participation, and the rights of minority women. Today, Indian women have achieved several victories against an oppressive way of life and are poised to raise pertinent questions that will make their lives more emancipating.

There has one important question emerged that from where all these kinds of societal deprivations of the women come in Indian society? They can be traced back to ancient Hindu civilization. Although some studies point to the equal status and rights those women enjoyed in the Vedic period (2500 B.C. to 1500 B.C.); patriarchy seems to have been the norm throughout history. In the later Aryan period after 300 B.C., domination by the Brahmins (the priestly class), the growth of the caste system and other factors led to social decline. Child marriage became the norm, wives were expected to worship their husbands, barren women were thrown out of their homes and widows were not permitted to remarry. The practice of "Sati Pratha" in traditional Indian society made women condition more worse. Many of these vicious customs are still observed in some parts of the country. Other religions, like Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism or Islam, have questioned some of the practices in Hinduism, but, by and large, all religions have kept their women in varying stages of confinement and restrictions. The Bhakti cults tried to restore women's status and questioned some of the forms of oppression.

One of the fallouts of English education for the middle class during the colonial period was a change in attitude towards women. Through the Arya Samaj and the Brahmo Samaj, the Bengali middle class questioned the rigidity of brahminical Hinduism. Social reformers like Raja Rammohun Roy opposed sati or the practice of burning the widow on the husband's funeral pyre. The government abolished it in 1829. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's crusade for widows led to the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856.

Several decades of agitation led to the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 that stipulated 14 as the minimum age of marriage for a girl. Education of girls through formal schooling was another major concern. The All India Women's Education Conference held in Pune in 1927 became a leading organisation in the movement for social change. Women played a major role in the struggle for freedom from colonial rule. In 1917, the first women's delegation met the Secretary of State to demand women's political rights. The Indian National Congress supported the demand. In 1949 independent India gave them their due by enshrining in the Constitution the right of equality for women. Indian women have participated in large numbers in people's movements including those for land rights, environment, anti-price rise and anti-liquor agitations.

Several groups of feminist thought and activism emerged to create the contemporary women's movement in India. The spark was provided by the Declaration of the UN Year of Women in 1975 and the release at the end of that year of the Status of Women Committee Report, a voluminous compilation of data that blew apart the myth that post-Independence Indian women were gradually 'progressing'. Faced with stark facts on the abysmal status of the mass of Indian women, who suffered from poverty, illiteracy and ill health as well as discrimination in both the domestic and the public spheres, middle class women in the metros began to campaign against the worst manifestations of sexism and patriarchy. They represented different sections of the society — left leaning political groupings in academia, students' unions, trade unions, peasant groups and ordinary middle class women.

## Contemporary Women Movement in India

Both research and activism has focussed on the negative fallout of the process of globalisation and liberalisation on women. They have demanded that the investment in the social sector be increased. But a government bent on opening up the economy to foreign investment and free trade has paid no heed to these voices, although India has experienced industrial recession and a period of jobless growth in the past decade. Given the high levels of the population and a large population below age 20, the demand for employment is growing and joblessness and accompanying frustrations have contributed to violence, frequently expressed as ethnic, caste, class or communal conflicts. Women are the worst sufferers in such conflicts. Besides raising these economic issues, sections of the women's movement are questioning the oppression of Dalit women. Muslim and Christian women are strongly demanding equal rights. The war in Kargil has spurred activism for peace. Women were the first to lead a peace delegation to Pakistan in the post-war period, breaking the ice and initiating people-to-people dialogues. Issues of conflict and peace are important, given the tremendous suffering of women in Jammu and Kashmir and in the North East region. Cross-border trafficking of women and girls is a major problem that remains untackled. Lobbying by women's groups of the South Asian region forced the SAARC countries to include in their Male Declaration of 1997 a paragraph on trafficking and a commitment to sign a regional convention on trafficking. This commitment has yet to be fulfilled.

The National Commission for Women has made a series of recommendations for legal reform and other measures that deserve consideration but have so far been ignored by the government. Last year the Indian government reported to a UN Committee on the status of implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination of Women and was congratulated for bringing women into *panchayats*, but critiqued on other counts including denial of rights to minority women. Activists have drafted a Bill on Domestic Violence after national consultations with women's organisations and lobbied for its passage. An official version is likely to be introduced in Parliament shortly. The government has declared 2001 as the Year of Women's Empowerment or Swashakti.

The gang rape of a 23-year-old woman on a Delhi bus has sparked mass protests in India, with thousands demanding drastic action be taken. She had been travelling home from watching a film at a shopping mall in the south of Delhi when she and a male friend were attacked by a group of drunken men on a largely empty bus. Thousands of protesters took to the streets to demonstrate outside the Indian parliament, the Delhi chief minister's office and at the police headquarters to demand urgent action to protect women in the "rape capital of India." Campaigners claim there is an ambivalent attitude to sexual violence against women in India and that assaults are often trivialised. Many were afraid to report assaults because lacks of sympathy among police officers who instinctively believe the woman "deserved" the assault and the fact that few offenders are convicted. Despite having two million people less than Mumbai, Delhi records considerably more rapes. Last year of 2012, during this incident there have been many protest demonstration happened throughout of the country. Indian government has also taken steps to stop the violence and sexual offence against the women. Government brought up and ordinance after following the recommendation of Justice Verma committee.

## Conclusion

Today Indian women movement has reached it extreme point. Many women organisations are taking up their responsibility to fight against the exploitation of women. Today every political party have women wing in the party. Women as a whole emerging as basic vote bank of any national party. Recent trends have been showing that women voting behaviour is changing and voting against the family wishes. Reservations in local level election for the 50% seat have been giving women a powerful tool to fight against the patriarchal structure. All the women started to realize that as a voting constituency can reclaim a respectful position society. If we took up the recent movement against the police and patriarchal structure of functioning of the government, then we can notice that women movement is reaching at its true potential. This is the dream of women activism to change in the social structure. We can see the change in thinking of the society towards women. There are many old practices like sati rituals have been put at the end. There is long way to achieve an egalitarian society in India, where women will considered as the equal partner. So, women activism has achieved many rights in their struggle, but still they have many destinies to be achieved. One

thing is totally clear that woman activism and participation in politics has change various aspect of the society. True social change can be achieved only when women will start to think equal to male and men will also treat them as equal partner. Women activism is the most important aspect to bring social change in society.

## Works Cited


- Agnihotri, Indu and Mazumdar, Vina. "Changing Terms of Political Discourse: Women's Movement in India, 1970s-1990s." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30(1995): 1869-1878. Print.
- Arya, S. *Women, Gender, Equality and the State*. New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, 2000. Print.
- Dietrich, G. "Women's Movement and Religion." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 4(1986): 157-60. Print.
- Forbes, Geraldine. *Women in Modern India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Print.
- Giri, V. Mohini. *Living Death: Trauma of Widowhood in India.* Delhi: Gyan Publishing House (Originally from University of Michigan), 2002. Print.
- Hasan, Z. "Communalism, State Policy, and the Question of Women's Rights in Contemporary India." *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 4(1993): 5-15. Print.
- Kumar, R. *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800-1990*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 1993. Print.


❑❑❑