Indian Feminism: Historical Progress, Impact and Unresolved Issues

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Abstract

Gender refers to the societal norms, behaviours, roles, and interactions associated with women, men, girls, and boys. Gender, being a social construct, varies among cultures and evolves over time. Patriarchy, an extensively embedded concept, is inherently tied to gender, resulting in a power structure that reinforces male domination. Feminist discourse challenges patriarchal structures. It promotes equality and justice for people who face gender inequity. Despite the continued strength of Indian patriarchy, male domination has been significantly challenged by three waves of feminism. This comprehensive inquiry focuses at the key characteristics of three distinct phases of Indian feminism, as well as their significant impact on women's lives. Many laws supporting gender equality have been enacted, yet their enforcement remains insufficient. Women continue to experience various forms of violence—mental, physical, and sexual—both within the domestic sphere and in public spaces. This paper, therefore, critically explores the underlying causes of these persisting issues and evaluates how reforms in socialization processes could serve as a means to address them effectively.

Keywords: *gender socialization, legislative provisions, patriarchy, post-modernism.*

Introduction

Women are accorded honour and respect as goddesses. Their icons are revered religiously at temples, and they are paid homage on their stunning white marble graves.[1] However, the ground realities paint a different picture. An ever-fading status in Indian society and the minimal visibility of the "second sex"[2] in the economic, social, and political arenas uncover that the profusion of civil and inherent rights has only marginally extended to Indian women.[3]

Feminism, similar to democracy, freedom, fraternity, and modernity, was also overwhelmingly a Western ideological incursion brought into India.[4] Feminism centred around the subordinate position and discrimination encountered by women as a consequence of their sex, was a key concept of 19th-century feminism in the West. Feminism is generally categorized into three consecutive waves. The first wave (1920s) was preoccupied with women's equal rights, particularly the voting right. The second wave (1960s and 1970s) dealt with the oppression of women in family, sex, and work. The third wave (early 1990s), based on

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post-modernism and post-structuralism, turned its attention to micro-politics and a "post" understanding of gender and sex.[5]

The emergence and decline of Indian feminism, similar to Western feminism, can be seen in terms of three discrete waves. Nonetheless, the fact remains that, despite the discreteness of these waves, they are not watertight compartments. One wave flowed into another. The first wave of Indian feminism emerged in two phases between the pre-independence era. During the early 19th century, feminism was interested in movements for reform that sought to liberate women through education and the abolition of discriminatory socio-cultural and religious traditions. The nationalist movement of the early 20th century registered the active involvement of women fighting the oppressive colonial state. For women of the time, the struggle against colonialism was indirectly a struggle against patriarchy, which had hitherto restricted them to domesticity.

In the mid-20th century, immediately after India gained independence, women withdrew back into the private domain. This episode, however, did not last long. The 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of the second wave of feminism. This era focused on addressing inequalities that women experienced in different aspects of life and on academic, legal, and policy changes intended to raise the status of women and end the cycle of injustice, discrimination, and deprivation.

The third wave of feminism, which started sometime during the 1990s and is ongoing today, aims to correct the failure of the second wave in providing justice to women and granting them their rightful place in society. This wave is shaped to a great extent by neo-liberal and post-modernist schools of thought. The third wave's defining characteristics include the emergence of state feminism, the widened reach of feminism made possible through communication and social media outlets, and the emergence of intersectionality.

This paper seeks to evaluate the place of women in India in both pre- independence and post- independence period. It also examines how the three feminist waves have changed the lives of the Indian women throughout the years. While the final part of this paper brings out what can be done to raise the status of women and liberate them from the centuries-old biases and prejudices of patriarchy.

First Wave of Feminism:

The escalation and diminution of feminism in India are closely linked to the transformation of the identity of the 'Indian woman.' The first phase of the first wave of feminism was witnessed in India in the 19th century, overlapping with the social reformation movements of that time. Interestingly, feminism in its nascent state was nurtured by the wives and sisters of the (male) social reformers. The stalwarts who advocated for the emancipation of women included reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Keshav Chandra Sen, and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Among the long list of male reformers, prominent women leaders who critiqued patriarchal society included Pandita Ramabai, Rassundari Devi, and Tarabai Shinde. Thus, it would not be wrong to say that feminism existed in India long before the world coined and became acquainted with this term.

These social movements, according to many scholars, on one hand, established a secular space for women in the public sphere by eliminating biases against women's education and providing them with opportunities to study. On the other hand, these movements were quite limited, as they perceived education as a tool for upper-class women to become better housewives and mistresses of home and health. Legal provisions like the abolition of *sati* and the ratification of widow remarriage were also directed toward uplifting the status of

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upper-caste Hindu women. However, the provision for widow remarriage failed to recognize the existing customary right of remarriage enjoyed by lower-caste widows. The women's organizations that emerged during this time were devoid of any ideology or independent voice. They relied heavily on the intellectual leadership of male reformists. Unfortunately, the social reform movements of the 19th century did not dare to alter the power dynamics between men and women.

Conservative customs like *purdah* began to fade away, but women were still not at the forefront as producers and owners of agencies. Their role remained limited to that of custodians of home and hearth. Patriarchy persisted; men dominated the public sphere and agency, while women were confined within the four walls of their homes. Unfortunately, women were merely beneficiaries of the humanistic treatment extended by a certain section of 'liberal' men.[6] Thus, the social reform movements, along with the first wave of feminism, established the image of an 'Indian woman' who was educated, non-violent, and could be controlled (or manipulated) easily.[7] This image found its replication in the Indian allegory of *Bharat Mata*, who was portrayed as a Mother Goddess by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and as an ascetic by Abanindranath Tagore. For Bankim Chandra, *Bharat Mata* had the feminine characteristics of beauty and a sweet voice, bestowing bliss and boons upon her children. In contrast, Tagore envisioned her as a mother figure who provided her children with learning, food, and clothing.[8]

The first wave of feminism resurged in the post-First World War era and continued until Indian independence in 1947. The non-violent nature of women was well utilized by Mahatma Gandhi during the independence struggle. He believed that women were best suited to carry out his non-violent strategies of *satyagraha*, boycott, picketing, and pacific civil disobedience. During this period, women participated in large numbers in *hartals*, *satyagraha*, the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement, and the Quit India Movement.

However, it is interesting to note that, in most cases, they played a supporting role, as whether in the 1920s or the 2020s, it is male figures who predominantly lead. It is always easy for patriarchal society to convince itself that men are 'born leaders,' while women can take charge only in the absence of male leadership. The first Prime Minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, notes in his book *Discovery of India* that women organized themselves in hundreds and thousands and took charge of the freedom struggle only when male freedom fighters and leaders were imprisoned. According to many feminist thinkers, this was inevitable because, under normal circumstances, the male leaders of the nationalist struggle did not encourage a second line of leadership.[9] They merely sought active participation and passive acceptance of male leadership from women.

Women's participation in the independence struggle had a twofold agenda: uprooting colonial rule and countering the stronghold of patriarchy. For them, showcasing the strength to defy the British administration and refusing to be intimidated by suppressive measures was a way to fight patriarchy at home. They aimed to create an image of themselves that was not timid, soft, or easily manipulated. Instead, they sought to be recognized as strong individuals capable of fighting oppression, demonstrating organizational capabilities, and assuming leadership roles.[10]However, these efforts could hardly bring about significant changes in the structural boundaries of family and society. The roots of patriarchy in India were so deep that true emancipation of women remained a distant goal. The communal riots during the partition period further exposed this reality. Women either became victims of violence (mostly physical) inflicted by rioters, or their own families took their lives in the name of upholding the dignity of the clan. It was easier for families to

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believe that killing the women themselves was a better option than risking their bodily integrity being violated by outsiders.

Nevertheless, women like Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Hansa Mehta, Durgabai Deshmukh, Lado Rani Zutshi, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Sarojini Naidu, Durgawati Devi, Aruna Asaf Ali, and Captain Lakshmi Sehgal survived amidst such precarious conditions and exhibited the courage to express an alternative vision that challenged the strong patriarchal control of that era.[11] Their efforts secured Indian women numerous fundamental and constitutional rights. Unlike in Western countries, the Indian Constitution, since its inception, recognized women's right to vote, enabling them to choose their representatives. Article 15(3) of the Indian Constitution empowered the state to make special provisions for women. Fifteen women members of the Constituent Assembly represented the needs and demands of Indian women, securing rights and legislation that would empower them and help them break free from the age-old barriers of patriarchy.[12]

Period of Accommodation (1947 to late 1960s) :

The dawn of independence brought with it endless opportunities for development, modernization, and secularization. The Constitution established the rule of law, and from a gender perspective, everyone had an equal chance to establish a position for themselves in society. However, there was a noticeable gap between the constitutional and legal provisions for women and their actual status in society.

In the post-partition period, women retreated to their homes. The spark they had displayed during the nationalist struggle was beginning to fade. Along with it, their own identities also began to disappear. The first General Elections in the country revealed that a large number of women did not even have a name of their own. They had no individual identity and were recognized only in relation to the male members of their family. Numerous women in independent India could not even exercise their right to vote, which had been so generously granted to them.[13] Unfortunately, a state that had enacted numerous laws and regulations in favour of women had failed to recognize their names in the first place. For many women, the only identity they had was as a wife, daughter, or sister of a man who, fortunately, had a name of his own. Almost 50% of the Indian population woke up every day in an India that was free from colonial rule but not from the grip of patriarchs within their own families.

Not all Indian women had an equal opportunity to elect their legislators. However, legislators continued to formulate numerous laws to benefit and uplift the status of women. Some of these legislations included the Hindu Marriage Act (1954), the Hindu Succession Act (1956), the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act (1956), the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), and the Maternity Benefit Act (1961).[14]

It is important to note that, due to the absence of a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and the existence of different religious personal laws, most of these legislations were directed toward Hindu women. This scenario was quite similar to that of the 19th-century social reform movements.

Second Wave of Feminism :

The period of accommodation did not last long. After independence, Indian women had become merely docile beneficiaries of welfare, and their presence in legislative and bureaucratic institutions was negligible. Their status, identity, and position in society hardly underwent any positive change. The financial crisis of the early 1970s and the *Towards Equality* report published by the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) in 1974 paved the way for the second wave of feminism in India.

The media also played a crucial role in shaping the second wave of feminism. Constant reporting on violence against women provided women across the country with numerous instances to examine the effectiveness of existing laws.[15] The new social movements of the 1970s merged with feminist movements, drawing public attention to a relatively new strand of thought known as eco-feminism. The Chipko Movement of 1973 and the works of renowned eco-feminist Vandana Shiva are among the finest examples of this merger.[16] In addition to eco- feminism, India saw the establishment of Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in 1972 which is a major trade union that advocates for the rights and empowerment of self-employed women, particularly those in the informal economy.[17]

The price rise in the early 1970s, coupled with high inflation rates and increased unemployment, directly affected women's traditional role in the household. For the first time since independence, women were back on the streets, protesting against economic stagnation and unchecked corruption. A parallel can be drawn between women's participation in the independence struggle—particularly the Civil Disobedience Movement against the oppressive Salt Tax—and the second wave of feminism. In both cases, women took to the streets when their private domain was imperilled by the state.

The *Towards Equality* report published by the CSWI highlighted that, women from all social groups and demographic backgrounds faced disparities and injustices.[18] The increasing occurrence of dowry-related violence, sexual harassment in the workplace, rape, and alcoholism signified a deterioration in women's status.[19] The report underscored the continued inferior position of women in political, economic, and social spheres, revealing alarming trends in employment, political participation, and healthcare. It also noted society's failure to establish necessary norms and institutions to support women in their multiple roles. Additionally, the report observed that the momentum for women's issues, which had gained traction during the freedom movement, had weakened over the past two decades. It identified patriarchy—reinforced through socialization from one generation to the next—as the primary cause of these inequalities.

In response to the CSWI report, the Indian government formulated *A Blueprint of Action Points and National Plan of Action for Women* in 1976 to implement its recommendations in policy formulation. In the following decade, women were given a place in the five-year plans. The Sixth Five-Year Plan included a dedicated chapter on *Women and Development*, acknowledging women as producers and contributors to the Indian economy. The Seventh Five-Year Plan further addressed women's concerns by incorporating a chapter on *socio-economic programs*. In addition, in 1986, the Indian Parliament's *National Policy on Education* included a chapter on promoting gender equality through education, emphasizing its role in empowering women and ensuring their equal participation in society. Women's Studies also became a focal point for the University Grants Commission (UGC), leading to the introduction of specialized courses in educational institutions across the country.[20]

The impact of the second wave of feminism was most profound in the realms of academia, policy formulation, and legal enactments. It was during this period that Women's Studies emerged in India, and the importance of "gender politics" was widely acknowledged.[21] For the first time, Indian feminist writings gained international recognition. Writers such as Kamla Bhasin, Ismat Chughtai, and Shashi Deshpande, among many others, earned respect and acclaim in literature and academia. Feminist literature at this juncture moved beyond the shared experiences of upper-class women, expanding its focus to include the struggles of women from marginalized communities (for example, Dalit women) and economically disadvantaged sections of society, as well as those in rural areas and the unorganized sector. Notably, these women often faced "double discrimination"—a concept explored in depth by scholars. Studies revealed that

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women from economically backward classes were not only subjected to inequality but also endured state-inflicted violence.[22]

The recommendations of the *Towards Equality* report had already emphasized the need for a Uniform Civil Code (UCC). Building upon this recommendation, debates on the necessity of a UCC sprang up across the nation. Though no legislation was enacted in this regard, the landmark *Shah Bano Case* (1985) led to the formulation and implementation of the *Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986*, which aimed to safeguard the rights of Muslim women upon divorce or separation. This act became the centrepiece of intense debates and scrutiny, with some arguing that it contributed to the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). However, setting aside the political discourse, this legislation was a crucial step in addressing intra-gender inequalities based on religion.[23]

Finally, towards the end of the second wave of feminism, civil society began playing an increasingly significant role. Several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) emerged with diverse goals and perspectives.[24] These organizations provided platforms for women to collectively voice their demands and played a crucial role in promoting women's empowerment at the grassroots level.

Third Wave of Feminism :

The confluence of the economic policies of liberalization, privatization, and globalization at the national level, along with the rise of postmodern thinking at the international level, coincided with the emergence of the third wave of feminism in India. Many thinkers believe that the rise of postmodernism, with its emphasis on "little truths," was instrumental in shaping this wave.[25] This intellectual shift highlighted the fact that even the second wave of feminism had failed to achieve true equity and justice for women. Marginalized women and those at the grassroots level were still being unheard by mainstream feminist discourse. Thus, the rise of the third wave was inevitable.[26] Neo-liberal economic reforms significantly transformed the nature of feminism in India. The initiation of state feminism, decentralization in governance, expanded channels of communication, and the advent and spread of social media have all had a profound impact on feminism and feminist movements in the 21st century.

Legal measures such as the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, the establishment of the National Commission for Women, the shift in focus of the Ninth Five-Year Plan from *development* to *empowerment* of women, and the launch of programs specifically aimed at women's welfare—such as *Mahila Samakhya*—are among the earliest manifestations of the third wave of feminism. Additionally, the codification of the *Vishaka Guidelines* (1997), which later led to the enactment of the *Sexual Harassment at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013*, further solidified the feminist movement's engagement with legal frameworks.[27]

This extensive list of legal provisions makes it evident that feminists had, by this time, largely shifted their focus toward acquiring state power. Formulating laws and ensuring their effective implementation at every level of governance became the prime agenda of feminist leaders. In the post-2000 era, more legislations were introduced, including the *Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005*, the *Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013*, the *Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019*, and the *Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023*, among others. However, it is both interesting and unfortunate to note that, despite the existence of so many legislations, violence against women persists. Women continue to be subjected to mental, physical, and sexual abuse. According to National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, in 2021, an average of 86 rape cases were reported daily in India. However, this is certainly not the complete

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picture, as many cases go unreported for various reasons.[28] One such reason, tracing back to the time of partition, is the fear of losing societal respect. While India celebrates the diamond jubilee of its independence, it is crucial to reflect on how independent women truly are. Unfortunately, justice for one rape victim often goes unnoticed because, in the meantime, many more women become victims of sexual violence. The execution of the convicts in the *Nirbhaya* gang rape case in 2020[29] was seen as a landmark moment, yet within less than five years, the R.G. Kar incident occurred, reinforcing the persistent threat to women's safety.

Mangala Subramaniam has identified three key characteristics of the third wave of Indian feminism. Firstly, she highlights that globalization expanded channels of communication and funding, allowing NGOs working for women's emancipation to receive international support. The linkage between national and global civil society became stronger. Secondly, the feminist focus broadened to encompass the intersectionality of gender with caste and religion. The *Mandalisation* of Indian politics, the growing nexus between caste and politics (what Rajni Kothari termed as *casteism in politics* and *politicization of caste*), and the rise of right-wing politics—alongside the ascent of the BJP—played a major role in shaping these concerns. Lastly, the third wave placed greater emphasis on the creation and maintenance of social capital, particularly through the documentation of women's activism via women-oriented presses and journals.[30]

In the decade following 2010, feminist movements in India have effectively capitalized on social media platforms to mobilize support against gender-based inequalities and injustices. Social media has provided women with a powerful platform to share their personal experiences of violence—whether inflicted by family members, partners, workplace colleagues, or even strangers. It has also served as an outlet for countless women who had never spoken up before, either due to fear of shame, threats of further harm, or the patriarchal conditioning that dictates women must seek permission before asserting their voices.[31] The #*MeToo* movement of the late 2000s and the recent protest march, *The Night is Ours* (held in Kolkata in 2024 in response to the brutal rape and murder of a young doctor at the R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital, a call for justice for the victim), are prime examples of how social media has provided impetus to feminist struggles.

The Way Forward :

Standing in 2025, the unavoidable question that Indian feminism must address is: *What is the current status of women?* The gap between legislation and implementation, which was evident in the initial years after independence, has not narrowed. With every passing year, the number of legislations and the syllabus for law students have expanded, yet the security and dignity of women remain compromised.

Our textbooks still describe things as either *natural* or *man-made,* as if biological producers—women—have no role in the realm of artificial production.[32] Patriarchy not only manifests itself in its ugliest forms in our daily lives but also influences us in subtle ways that we often fail to notice and reflect upon. While our society has normalized men wearing pink, it is yet to normalize the idea that cooking is not a gender-specific role, rather a fundamental life skill.

One can also highlight the fact that laws such as the *Equal Remuneration Act*, the *Right Against Discrimination*, and the *POSH Act* provide sound solutions to address workplace inequality and harassment. Instead of proposing solutions like exempting women from night shifts, efforts should be made to ensure the effective implementation of these legal protections.[33]

Thus, it can be concluded that merely formulating laws and ensuring their implementation cannot, by themselves, bring about gender equity in society. The entire construct of gender-based identity needs to be challenged and dismantled. As the saying goes, *charity begins at home*—it is more important to educate male children on how to respect and treat women than to simply enrol girls in self-defence courses.

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