

Feminism and Cultural Issues in India

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ABSTRACT

The concept of feminism became familiar to people in the 2nd half of the twentieth century, aiming to meet the demands of feminists who advocate for the elimination of the patriarchal structure in society and the creation of a new society where both men and women have equal rights, freedom, and opportunities. Granting equal rights, freedom, and opportunities to both men and women is the main objective of the Indian constitution and the legal system, as women make up nearly half of the population. However, cultural practices often result in the unequal distribution of rights and opportunities between males and females. Due to patriarchal structures, men tend to enjoy more privileges, leading to women being denied basic opportunities and support from society. This paper aims to answer why culture plays a crucial role in India when it comes to the equal distribution of rights and opportunities between men and women. It addresses why cultural practices are given more importance than the constitution, despite lacking legal validity. Moreover, it explores how societal rules and cultural practices restrict people's ability to raise their voice against inequality, injustice, exploitation, and discrimination prevalent in our society. The paper concludes with suggestions on how to strike a balance between culture and the constitution or legal system, ensuring that no one is denied basic facilities by society.

Keywords: Culture, Equality, Feminist, Opportunities, Right.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of feminism and cultural issues in India is a matter of great significance and relevance. The discourse surrounding this subject is of utmost importance, as it pertains to the fundamental rights and freedoms of women in Indian society. The intersection of feminism and cultural issues in India is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that requires careful analysis and consideration.

The concept of feminism became more widely known during the 2nd half of the twentieth century, when women's movements advocating for the rights, freedom, and opportunities of women gained momentum across the world. In modern usage, feminism is closely associated with the women's movement and has played a significant role in efforts to elevate the social positions

of women worldwide. Feminism, as a socio-economic and political movement, is based on two main premises: those women are underprivileged because of their gender, and that this underprivileged can and must be overcome. To some extent, feminism and feminists highlight the supremacy of men and the inferiority of women in most societies. However, feminism

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encompasses a range of perspectives and positions: feminists have concerned both radical and progressive methods to achieve their goals, feminist theories have drawn on various political traditions and values, and the women's movement has sought to achieve objectives ranging from women's suffrage and equal opportunities in education and employment, to the corroboration of pregnancy termination, the eradication of womanly genital mutilation, and the elimination of objectionable clothing codes.

Feminism is generally considered to be a relatively recent phenomenon, although feminist ideas can be traced back to ancient civilizations such as Greece and China. However, it was not until the 19th century that an organized movement addressing women's issues emerged. The roots of feminism were first emphasized in a book "The Book of the City of Ladies," by Christine De Pisan, which was published in 1405 in Italy. "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" was written by Mary Wollstonecraft's in 1792, is considered the first significant text in the field of modern feminism. This work was written against the backdrop of the French Revolution (1789). Wollstonecraft strongly advocated for women's rights to vote, education, employment, and property, which were denied to women at the time. She argued that women, like men, are rational individuals and should have equal rights. By the mid-19th century, the fight for women's suffrage and the right to vote became the central focus of the women's movement, with the belief that granting women the right to vote would lead to the elimination of all other forms of gender-based discrimination and prejudice. This period is referred to as the first wave of feminism. The underlying idea behind these movements was that women should enjoy the similar legal and political rights like men. In countries where democracy was strongest, the women's movement gained significant momentum (Sen, 2012, p. 25-26).

FEMINISM IN INDIA:

India is the largest democratic country in the world. In the democratic system, both men and women are given equal rights, freedom, and opportunities in social, political, and economic fields. However, in practice, men often take the forefront and enjoy these privileges without any discrimination, while women are denied the same due to cultural practices. Feminism in India encompasses a range of movements which main intention to accomplishing equal political, economic and social rights and facilities for women. Its objective

is also to protect women's rights within Indian society. Like, feminists around the world, Indian feminists also supporter of gender equality, supporting the right to education, same political rights, and the right to work. Indian feminists also raise their voices against cultural issues prevalent in the patriarchal society, such as dowry, caste discrimination, and inheritance laws. Feminism in India has gone through various phases and remains strong (Ray, 2014, p.13).

1ST PHASES OF FEMINISM IN INDIA:

The first phase of feminism in India was started with the social reform movement in the 19th century. Indian elite women became familiar with the concepts of liberty, equality, and fraternity through English education and the translation of western liberalism into various texts. This helped them understand the different meanings of equality. Savitribai Phule is considered the pioneer of India's feminist movement. She promoted girl's rights and education in Maharashtra and started girl's school in India in 1848. She fought vigorously to eliminate discrimination and unjust treatment based on caste and gender. Tarabai Shinde, an Indian feminist activist, also opposed and protested against male-domination and the caste system in the nineteenth century. She was famous for her outstanding work i.e. "Stri Purush Tulana" (A Comparison between Women and Men) in 1882. This work analyzed caste and patriarchy and is considered India's first feminist text. Pandit Ramabai, another Indian feminist, criticized not only the caste system but also the patriarchal structure in Hinduism. She converted to Christianity and married outside of her caste in opposition to Hinduism (Desai, 1977, p.135).

During the colonial rule in India, the era of modernity brought new ideas and concepts such as democracy, equality, and individual rights. These ideas helped Indians understand the various issues connected to the relations of gender and caste. During this stage, many social evils were challenged to bring gender equality in Indian society. Campaigns against child marriage, widow remarriage, and the sati tradition were started, the age for marriage was increased, and property rights were ensured through legal intervention. These efforts helped women change their positions and social status of late 19th century, as the national movement become visible in India. The British intervention in Hindu social practices and their attempts to modify and bring equality between men and women were realized through movements for gender equality in different parts of India. The British implemented laws such as the elimination

of Sati, the Prohibition of Child Marriage, the Widow Remarriage Act, , and the Age of Consent for the upliftment of Indian women (Gangoli, 2007, p.16).

2ND PHASES OF FEMINISM IN INDIA:

The second phase of feminism in India began from 1915 to 1947, when women became involved in the national liberation movement. Before Mahatma Gandhi became the unrecognized leader of the national movement, there were two well-known women who inspired women to participate in national struggle movement. Annie Besant was one of them, the founder and leader of the Theosophical movement in India. She emphasized for the freedom of Indian women and treated child marriage one of the rigid social evil that required to be abolished from the society of India. Like Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu was another encourager of women's participation in the National liberation Movement. She met Gandhi in 1914 and thereafter dedicated her energy to the freedom movement. She was lead to a delegation team to meet Edwin Montagu, Secretary of State of India for demanding women's right to vote in 1917. For approving women's right to vote, she effectively passed a resolution in 1918 at a special session in Bombay. Being a member of Home Rule League, in 1919 she was moved to England to present some evidence before the Joint Parliamentary Committee for women's right to vote. In the same year, she had been moving to different parts of India and launched campaign for women's Satyagraha. She exclusively requested women to protest against the Rowlatt Act. She was joined in the Non-Cooperation movement, which launched by Gandhi in 1920. Sarojini was an exceptional orator and her ability to speak left a lasting impression on everyone she met. She holds an extraordinary personality and fascinated audiences with her pure sincerity and loyalty. As a feminist, Sarojini Naidu expressed herself through both her poetry and her public persona. It is through this dual feminist consciousness that she portrayed Indian women, highlighting their world-weary sensations, their stagnation. In 1925, Sarojini Naidu's political ideas are spread and appreciated by many Indians that why she became the first Indian woman to act as a president of the Indian National Congress.

During this phase, Mahatma Gandhi encouraged women to take part in various movements for freedom against the British. He also advised them to break all cultural and ritual boundaries that restricted their freedom. Gandhi's encouragement inspired a lot to women and they crossed the all cultural and ritual boundary lines

and participated in national movement through the formation of women's organization i.e. All India Women's Conference (AIWC), which focused on women's rights and empowerment. In 1930 a Civil Disobedience Movement was launched by Gandhi where Sarojini took the leading role along with many eminent congress leaders. (Kumar, 1998). However, the British were against of this movement, as a result they arrested many leaders and at that time movements campaign was further carried out by Sarojini Naidu. One of greatest contribution of Gandhi for women's liberation is that his continuous efforts towards women's involvement in politics made their paths was easy. By passes of time women's were actively participated in national liberation movement and their importance's are easily recognized and visible as many women popular activists came to front like Kalpana Datta, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, and Madame Bhikhaiji Cama.

3RD PHASES OF FEMINISM IN INDIA:

The third phase of feminism in India emerged during the post-independence period, with a focus on promoting equitable treatment of women both in the home and workplace. The primary objectives of feminists during this phase were to address the sexual division of labor, ensure equal pay for both men and women for the same work, and eliminate discrimination in the workplace. To better understand the feminist movement during this phase, it is useful to compare it to the second phase of feminism in India.

There are notable differences between women's movements in India before independence and after independence. Before independence those women's were inspired by western philosophical/liberal ideas they were initiated and started women's movement in India with primary focused on social reform. During the time of social reform movement, women's were against off lot of social evils which they found the root cause of women's suffered like Purdah, Child marriage, sati, widow remarriage etc. this movement changed the life of upper castes and classes of women because they got opportunities became literate. Overall, patriarchy and gender-based division of labor were not questioned during this phase.

Post-independence women's movements was something different from pre-independence where gender equality, gender based division of labour and patriarchal structure were the major issues brought by women's. During the post-independence period, it was found that both women and other disadvantaged community were decided their

destiny to elevate their status and positions. This was due to the continuous efforts of Indian feminists, from the pre-independence era, the makers of the Indian constitution, who incorporated several articles in the constitution to improve the status of women and promote gender equality.

Despite these efforts, however, women have not fully benefited from these constitutional provisions due to a lack of awareness among the general population. As a result, there is a need for legal measures to be implemented to elevate the conditions and status of Indian women.

The feminist movements that emerged in India after gaining independence led to the creation of several laws aimed at preserving and protecting the rights and freedoms of women, as well as empowering them to live a dignified life. Some of the important laws are like for the protection of women from domestic violence by the name of dowry, the Dowry Prohibition Act was introduced in 1961, for the protection of women from burning, the Prevention of Sati Act was introduced in 1987, for the protection of women from physical and mental torture, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act was introduced in 2005, and for protection of women from any kinds of sexual assault at workplace, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act was introduced in 2013 (Deshpande, 2019, 246-249).

In a verdict judgment of the Supreme Court of India in May 2013, regarding two-finger test that is known as virginity test on a rape victim, stated that which violated her the right to privacy and directed to Government of Delhi for better medical facilities to detect sexual assault (The Hindu, 2013). Mumbai family court in 2014 stated that a wife is entitled to divorce her husband if he forces her to wear a sari instead of a kurta and jeans, as this constitutes an act of cruelty (The Hindu, 2014). The Supreme Court of India in 2018 declared that having married affairs with a woman without the prior consent of her partner is a crime (Biswas, 2018, BBC News).

Kerala High Court's judgment regarding the restricted entry of women to the Sabarimala temple at menstruation age has been modified by Supreme Court of India in 2018 and stating that any discrimination against women is unconstitutional (The Hindu, 2018). Finally, on July 14, 2023, the Law Commission of India decided to solicit the opinions of the public at large, recognized religious organizations, and intellectuals on the matter of a Uniform Civil Code. This code would establish a single system of rules and regulations that treat all individuals

as equal, prohibit all forms of discrimination, and promote gender equality (Mishra, 2023, The Hindu).

FEMINISM AND CULTURAL ISSUES IN INDIA:

Lord Ram once remarked, "To truly understand someone's talent, creativity, and ability, it is essential to witness their struggles rather than solely focusing on their successes." When I apply this quote to the Hindu practice of venerating women, it sheds light on the matter and clears any doubts I may have had. It leads me to conclude why this tradition is gradually fading and reinforces my belief that it is an integral pillar of Indian society and culture, which unfortunately seems to have been disregarded in recent times due to gender inequality and various forms of women's exploitations. Regarding these, Indian feminists have actively opposed cultural challenges within India's male dominated society, including inheritance laws (The Times of India, 2021).

In India, culture plays a significant role in all aspects of life, making it a diverse and multicultural society. Throughout its ancient history, women have been an integral part of Indian culture and society. However, the conditions of women in India have been a subject of debate and discussion for many years. Despite the government's efforts to promote gender equality through various policies, the lack of proper implementation or slow progress has hindered significant improvements in women's lives. While legislation grants equal rights, opportunities, and pay to both genders, these provisions often remain on paper and fail to translate into reality, highlighting the existence of gender discrimination. The deep-rooted cultural norms in India are the main cause of this gender inequality. Despite significant investments in women's empowerment, there has been limited progress in changing the roles and positions of women due to the conflicting nature of Indian culture. This lack of progress is not only detrimental to women but also to the nation as a whole. India's complex and rigid history has made it difficult to overcome the obstacles posed by unscientific cultural practices in the 21st century, preventing the country from achieving significant advancements in women's empowerment.

Culture encompasses norms, rules, values, symbols, customs, behavior, dress code, way of life, art, craft, and more. It serves as a framework that the members of a society have developed over generations to shape their social interactions and distinguish themselves from other groups. Culture evolves over time, adapting to changing circumstances and needs. It is influenced by historical facts and evidence. Indian culture, for example, is rich

in customs and traditions that have been an integral part of society for centuries. India is home to diverse religious communities, each free to practice their cultural norms in accordance with their respective religious laws. However, there are instances where these religious laws conflict with the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Indian Constitution, particularly women's rights. Despite these inequalities, the Indian government maintains a hands-off approach to religion and personal laws, upholding the principles of secularism.

Indian society is predominantly structured by hierarchical systems within the communities and family. These hierarchies are categorized based on factors such as age, gender, position in the family, caste, wealth, kinship relationships, lineage, occupation, & relationship to exercising power. Unfortunately, these social conventions and economic needs often result in girls from poorer families experiencing double the vulnerability and instability compared to their male counterparts. From the moment they are born, girls are compared to brothers and entitled to less in terms of education, food, and playtime. Even also they have less scope in matter of family's income and asset, which is even more pronounced in impoverished rural Indian households. It is ingrained from the beginning of human history that women has been assigned more laborious work and exhausting responsibilities throughout their life's, without any recognition or compensation (Bhatt, 2005).

In India, we found patriarchal structure where male members of the family either fathers or husbands act as a heads of households. In this structure, descent and inheritance are traced through the male line which called Patrilineal and men usually look after all the activities and responsibility of the utilization and distribution of family resources (Singh & Singh, 2011). These traditions have been deeply ingrained in Indian life for so long that women have come to accept and expect this way of life. Unfortunately, this lack of awareness and information about their constitutional rights often prevents women from fully utilizing them. Lack of political awareness and efficiency among the women's are causing of not properly enjoying their voting rights. In addition, there is an understanding that investments of money in field of politics against female candidates are as wasted of money" resulting in political parties investing less time in them (Chaudhuri, 2005).

After carefully analysis of various census data from 1951 to 2011, it has been found that the female sex ration has

declined due to an infanticide, more particularly female infants and neglect to the girl child. Despite being forbidden, infanticides are still prevalent in grassroots level of India, primarily driven by the economic burden of dowries that families must pay when their daughters get married. Dowry payments are also illegal but continue to occur frequently in rural areas. Girls are often treated as valueless by our society if they are unable to birth a male child, and this can lead to violence against her.

In India, between 1991 and 2001, the female male ratio has declined from 94.5 girls per 100 boys to 92.7 girls per 100 boys. However, certain regions like Kerala did not experience this decline, while states like Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat, and Maharashtra saw a significant decrease in the female-male ratio, ranging from 79.3 to 87.8. This decline is indication of fatality inequality and suggests a rise in sex-selective abortion. Although the Indian parliament has forbidden the use of sex determination techniques for fetuses, the enforcement of this law has been largely disregarded (Sen, 2001, p-40).

Marriage plays a significant role in the lives of most Indian women, who often get married prior to the attainment of legal age of 18. Unmarried is uncommon in India, and early adulthood is focused on childbearing and raising children for women. Consequently, if women go into the labor force, it is typically much delay than men. While city Indian men peak in labor force participation between 25 and 29, city Indian women reach their peak between 40 and 44. This delay leaves women with less time to acquire skills and limited opportunities for career advancement (Ray, 1999, p-25-28).

Women are underrepresented in the Indian workforce, with a higher dropout rate from primary and middle schools compared to men, as well as lower literacy levels. Given the high unemployment rates in India, employers can easily exploit the law, particularly when it comes to women, as it is culturally expected for them not to challenge men. Furthermore, labor unions often overlook women's needs, and women are forced to accept jobs that align with their roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers. The Gulabi Gang is more famous Banda district of Uttar Pradesh in India because of a unique way to protect themselves from domestic violence, sexual violence and oppression from their abusive husband by their pink saris and bamboo staves. They openly shame and sometimes confront these individuals. The group also exposes incidents such as

rape, dowry death, dowry beating, child marriage, child molestation, refutation of education to girls, and sexual harassment. They have even stormed police stations to demand investigations into these matters and fight against corruption. The exact number of members is unknown, with estimates ranging from 270,000 to 400,000. In 2018, the Supreme Court of India overturned a law that criminalized a man having sex with a married woman without her husband's permission (Biswas, 2018).

Another concern for women is the expectation of a dress code imposed on them. In Islam, both boys and girls are required to dress humbly, which is known as hijab and encompasses various behaviors and clothing choices. However, feminists have differing opinions regarding the extreme control imposed by external forces. It is also important to note that women from different religions are also expected to stick on specific dress codes. For instance, in 2014, Mumbai's family court governed that a husband's opposition to his wife wearing a kurta and jeans, and his insistence on her wearing a sari, constituted cruelty on his part. This ruling allowed the wife to seek a divorce on the grounds of cruelty, as defined by section 27(1)(d) of the Special Marriage Act, 1954 (Gulfnews, 2014).

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, the topic of feminism and cultural issues in India is a crucial area of study that requires careful consideration and analysis. The intersection of these two phenomena has a significant impact on the lives of women in India, and it is essential to address these issues to ensure that women in India have access to the same rights and opportunities as men.

In our society, women play a crucial role in interpreting Indian culture. Many practices that are treated as cultural practices are linked to women's motility and control of their sexuality, such as sati, child marriage, isolation of widows and purdah system. In today's society the most unpleasant fact that women's power is derivative from attributes of virginity and motherhood, rather than sexuality or fertility. While male's participation in any rituals programme will not look about his virginity and purity. The existing social set up teaches to women to fulfill and obey all rules which are designed for women's life and to get some rewards of higher status in next life. Religion often links spiritual rewards with fulfilling gender based duties. This type of descriptions and imagery significantly influences how women feel about themselves. It is clear that by involving in such cultures,

rituals and traditions, women identify themselves as lower and filthy. People are socialized to think in a positive way about gender functions, which is why they feel guilty if they fail to meet these expectations.

To ensure human dignity and equal treatment, there is an urgent need to understand the accurate meaning of equality taught in our religious sacred text and give equal positions and status to one and all. We need to reevaluate the legitimization given by our sacred text regarding the lower position and status of women. Every individual is born equal, and their evaluation should be based on their selection of work, not their sex or gender. The sum of old culture and traditions which made by myth are lost its validity as well as utility in the era of science and technology, so it is wrong to think that women are to exploit in the patriarchal system.

HOW TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES?

The issue of feminism in India has been a subject of debate and discussion for many years. The feminist movement in India has been helpful in bringing about significant changes in the status and rights of women in the country. However, despite these advancements, there are still many cultural issues that continue to impede the progress of women in India. Cultural issues in India are deeply rooted in the country's history and traditions. These issues include gender discrimination, patriarchal attitudes, and social norms that perpetuate gender inequality. These cultural issues have a significant impact on the lives of women in India, affecting their access to education, employment, and healthcare, among other things.

The patriarchal norms have assigned women a lower status than men. In my opinion, more effective measures must be taken to bridge the gender gap and eliminate gender inequality. It is necessary to change people's mindset and make efforts to ensure that they understand women's equal rights and the benefits of education for them.

Culture, with its long-standing traditions and emotional connections, is deeply ingrained in society and difficult to eradicate. Some cultures are based on unscientific principles, while others are grounded in scientific knowledge. As rational beings, it is our responsibility to embrace the scientific cultures that promote equality and prevent discrimination among people in society. Despite the numerous provisions in the constitution and the efforts made by the legislature, proper implementation has been hindered by cultural norms

rooted in a patriarchal structure. As rational individuals, we must strike a balance between cultural norms and constitutional provisions by rejecting unscientific cultural practices and embracing those that are supported by scientific evidence. This will enable us to effectively uphold constitutional provisions for gender equality and national development. In addition to this endeavor, several other steps should be implemented to ensure fair treatment.

- However, the best way to eliminate discrimination against women is through education and it is also important to raise awareness among women about their rights and equality.
- We aim to eradicate gender inequality, and to achieve this, we need the involvement of everyone. We strive to mobilize as many men and boys as possible to become advocates for change, and we are not content with mere discussions. We want to make sure that our efforts result in tangible outcomes.
- To fight against the problems which are faced by women of India in their day today life, everyone must be committed to work together, including the government, to ensure their safety. Criminals who are engaged in misconduct activities against women shall punish in several ways, which must be well implemented to be taken seriously.
- Education should be strongly emphasized. For the betterment and future endeavour of women and girls they need to get compulsory education. We must work together to defend and safeguard women in India, which put more visible impact on Nation's growth.
- Women must be treated equally and get support in every stages of life from all people in the society. We have to extend our all supports to women where they can utilise their freedom for themselves. By doing so, we can resolve these problems and make sure that women will never face any discrimination in society based on their gender.

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