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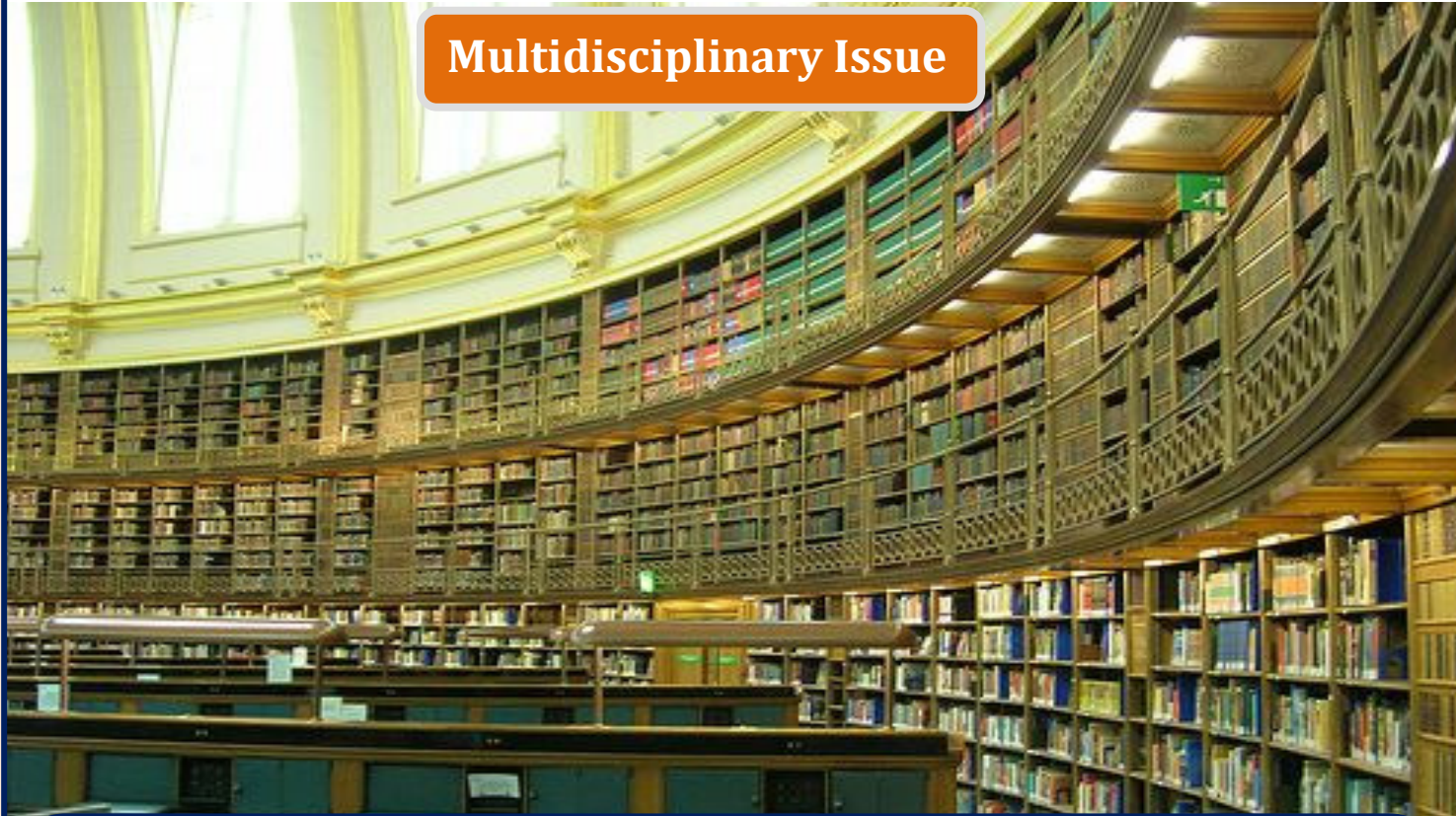
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- Chief & Executive Editor

Feminism in Indian Context

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"Feminism" generally means "the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities". In the Indian context, the term feminism comprises a number of social, cultural and political movements, theories and moral philosophies concerned with gender inequalities and equal rights for women. A feminist pleads for or supports the rights and equality of women. The present paper examines the rise of feminism in India aims at defining, establishing and defending equal political and social rights as well as equal opportunities for Indian women. In the West, the evolution of the feminist struggle is often referred to as 'waves' of change, reflecting peaks and troughs of the movement. The first wave of feminism began in the late 19th and early 20th century in the West, with the primary goal of securing voting rights. The second wave emerged in the 1960s amid a rising self-consciousness for minority groups, and against the backdrop of civil rights and anti-war sentiments. The movement largely focused on empowering minority groups over issues like reproductive rights and sexuality. The third wave of feminism began in the early 1990s, surging from the new postcolonial and neoliberal world order. The third wave deconstructed the idea of "universal womanhood," with the focus moving from communal objectives to individual rights (Rampton 1-10).

To a large extent, the emerging feminist movement in India was influenced by Western ideals. Feminism in India is a set of movements aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights and opportunities for women in India. It is the pursuit of women's rights within the society of India. Like their feminist counterparts all over the world, feminists in India seek gender equality: the right to work for equal wages, the right to equal access to health and education, and equal political rights (Ray 13). Indian feminists also have fought against culture-specific issues within India's patriarchal society, such as inheritance laws.

The history of feminism in India can be divided into three phases: the first phase, beginning in the mid-19th century, initiated when reformists began to speak in favor of women rights by making reforms in education, customs involving wome, the second phase, from 1915 to Indian independence, when Gandhi incorporated women's movements into the Quit India movement and independent women's organisations began to emerge; and finally, the third phase, post-independence, which has focused on fair treatment of women at home after marriage, in the work force, and right to political parity.

First Phase (1850-1915): In the pre-independence era, the Women's Movement began as a social reform and anti-colonial movement in the 19th century. It laid the foundation of Indian feminism. The aims of the movement centered around including women in public life with better political rights, access to education and employment in the context of the colonial state (Misra 25-43). The movement was influenced by western liberalism and western ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity through the contact with the West and the study of English. The first phase did not radically challenge the existing patriarchal structure of society or gender relation. Even the women's institutions and organizations that sprang up during this period did not have an independent ideology. The direction and content of reform as laid down by the reformers was

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accepted by the women's organizations without any question. As a result, even when women were speaking for themselves they were speaking only the language of the men, defined by male parameters.

In spite of its limitations, it cannot be denied that the social reform movement did help in removing prejudices against women's education and provided a secular space for women in the public realm. Various social reformers took up specific issues to improve the status of women:

Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, for instance, argued against the ideas of sati, polygamy, early marriage and permanent widowhood. Further, the Brahmo Samaj gave impetus to mass education of girls and women. The movement for education and social reform was largely led by upper-caste Bengali Women. The reformist movement, as a result, led to various social gains such as the legalisation of widow remarriage in 1856 and the abolition of sati The later part of the struggle remained preoccupied with the issues on property and inheritance, limiting the composition of the movement to upper-caste and elite class women. Ravindra Nath Tagore submitted a memorandum to the Legislative council for the removal of legal disabilities of remarried Hindu widows and the establishment of girl's schools in every suburb of Calcutta. Keshav Chandra Sen was instrumental in getting the Native Marriage Act passed in 1872, which forbade early marriage between boys under 18 and girls under 14; it also forbade polygamy and encouraged widow marriage. It allowed inter- caste marriages for those who declared that they did not belong to any recongnized faith. (Southhard 397-439)

Second Phase (1915-1947): During this period the struggle against colonial rule intensified. Nationalism became the pre-eminent cause. Mahatma Gandhi legitimized and expanded Indian women's public activities by initiating them into the non-violent civil disobedience movement against the Raj. Gandhiji's views on many issues installed a new confidence among women and a consciousness that they could fight against oppression. The 1920s was a new era for Indian women and is defined as 'feminism' that was responsible for the creation of localized women's associations. These associations emphasized women's education issues, developed livelihood strategies for working-class women. This phase saw the birth of three major organizations: Women's India Association (WIA), National Council of Women in India (NCWI) and All India Women's Conference (AIWC). Women therefore were a very important part of various nationalist and anti-colonial efforts, including the civil disobedience movements in the 1930s. However, feminist agendas and movements became less active right after India's 1947 independence, as the nationalist agendas on nation building took precedence over feminist issues (Gangoli 17-18)

Third Phase (Post 1947): Post independence feminists began to redefine the extent to which women were allowed to engage in the workforce. Prior to independence, most feminists accepted the sexual divide within the labour force. However, feminists in the 1970s challenged the inequalities that had been established and fought to reverse them. These inequalities included unequal wages for women, relegation of women to 'unskilled' spheres of work, and restricting women as a reserve army for labour. In other words, the feminists' aim was to abolish the free service of women who were essentially being used as cheap capital.[4] Feminist class-consciousness also came into focus in the 1970s, with feminists recognizing the inequalities not just between men and women but also within power structures such as caste, tribe, language, religion, region, class etc. This also posed as a challenge for feminists while shaping their

overreaching campaigns as there had to be a focus within efforts to ensure that fulfilling the demands of one group would not create further inequalities for another.

In this phase women's movement entered the private sphere to claim equal rights pertaining to marriage, divorce, succession, justice for dowry and sexual violence, and economic opportunities (Misra 25-43). An exemplification of this can be found with the passing of Hindu code bills in 1950s, which provided equal rights to women through laws on divorce, marriage, adoption and inheritance (Halli and Mullal 7-10). With the improvement in literacy levels and free movement, Indian women were beginning to determine their place in society and develop identity-consciousness. The key difference between the first and second wave was that the former was espoused by men on behalf of women and did not seem to challenge the hegemony of the Indian patriarchal social structure, instead focusing on specific cultural issues that conflicted with the idea of Western liberalization. The latter was largely led by women and women's organizations. The lines between women's social, economic and political rights became blurred in this period. The Chipko movement in 1973, for instance, saw women protest for their rights against environmental and economical calamities (Kumar 20-29). This movement is key in Indian feminism because not only was it a demand for constitutional rights, it also stood against the patriarchal social structures at a grassroots level. It was primarily due to the efforts of women and their role in the freedom struggle that   women got the right to vote and complete equality in the constitution of India.

There were various issues that the Women's movement took up during this period against Liquor, missing girl children and violence against women, to name a few. Dalit women's and marginalized women's rights, growing fundamentalism, women's representation in the media have also been taken up by the Women's movement. From mid to late 1980s, women's groups concentrated on providing services to individual women to enable them to gain advantages already given in law. This is significantly different from the welfare dispensed by earlier women's groups. The earlier groups sought amelioration; the new groups sought recognition and realization of rights (AGNES 19-33). Some of the important women's organizations in this period included, SEWA, National Commission of Women (New Delhi), National Council of Women (Pune), Joint Women's Program (Delhi), Kali for Women (Delhi) and several others.

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. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005 is an Act of the Parliament of India enacted to protect women from domestic violence. It was brought into force by the Indian government from 26 October 2006. The Act provides for the first time in Indian law a definition of "domestic violence", with this definition being broad and including not only physical violence, but also other forms of violence such as emotional/verbal, sexual, and economic abuse. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 is a legislative act in India that seeks to protect women from sexual harassment at their place of work. The Act came into force from 9 December 2013.

To conclude, Indian feminism can be defined in terms of women's movement. It is the women's movement in India that has been the force behind the long struggle of women's advancement from subordination to gender equality and finally to women's empowerment. The cause for women's freedom was first espoused by enlightened males who had imbibed liberal

ideas. Up to the twenties of the last century the struggle was carried on by men and women followed. It was only after Gandhiji's entry into politics, when the nationalist movement under his leadership was transformed from a middleclass movement into a mass movement, that women themselves for the first time raised their voice against the disabilities from which they suffer and questioned and struggled against not only the British rule but patriarchy itself. In the process, women secured many rights and social freedom and realized many other rights as grants. Feminism did not gain meaning or become an operational principle in Indian life until the country gained independence in 1947 and adopted a democratic government. The Indian Constitution then granted equality, freedom from discrimination based on gender or religion, and guaranteed religious freedoms. Though a lot still needs to be achieved and there are various impediments in making this reality available to a large section of women, the women's movement has brought women's issues center stage and made them more visible, contributing immensely to women's struggle for equality.

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