

# IS SEXUALITY A PRIVATE AFFAIR? REFLECTIONS ON PATRIARCHAL INDIA CHALLENGED BY INDIA'S FEMINIST MOVEMENT

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## Abstract

*“Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism...” Catherine MacKinnon famous observation pertaining to sexuality and its seminal role in shaping/constructing society and its norms opened up a new vista in Women’s Studies. Society, which is basically a patriarchal set up, has deliberately tried to maintain silence on the matters concerning sex and sexuality. Globally, the faint voices that rose occasionally to address these issues have been ruthlessly crushed however, the situations grows stern especially in a country like, India where patriarchal statutes are deep rooted. It is only with the sustained and vested interest of women activists that these dimensions of women’s existence have found a new way with a fresh perspective. Mary E John and Janaki Nair identify the works of Sigmund Freud, the radical ‘sexual politics’ of the women’s movements of the 1960s and 70s, Jacques Lacan and French Feminist Theory, Michel Foucault’s three volumes of the History of Sexuality, and the more recent designation of sexuality as sexual preference as the five most important moments in the thematisation of sexuality. Without the obvious influence of these major signposts, perhaps, Indian feminism may not have found its way. The proposed paper, therefore tries to analyse major works done in the area of Indian feminism (works of Partha Chatterjee, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, Malashri Lal, Mary E John, Janaki Nair, Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar, Geetanjali Gangoli and many others) on the lines of power play that takes place in Indian society. This power play is the undercurrent of major battles that have been fought by women on the grounds of inequality and their quest for identity and justice. Put together, these movements and activities led to the making of the history of Indian feminism. Based on various major events that took place in the Indian society to empower, elevate and embellish women’s position, this paper attempts to streamline the journey of Indian feminism.*

**Keywords:** Feminism, Patriarchy, Sexuality, Gender, Independent India, Subjectivity

## Is Sexuality a Private Affair? Reflections on Patriarchal India Challenged by India’s Feminist Movement

### Introduction

*Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one’s own, yet most taken away...as the organised expropriation of the work of some for the benefit of the others defines a class – workers – the organised expropriation of the sexuality of some for the use of others defines the sex, woman. Heterosexuality is its structure, gender and family its congealed forms, sex roles its qualities generalized to social persona, reproduction a consequence, and control its issue.*

– Catharine MacKinnon, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State”

Sexuality is an important terrain to be explored while charting the Indian Feminist Movement. Conventionally, sexuality limited itself to the meanings of human eroticism only; however Michel Foucault’s writings clearly outlined the various ways in which sexuality was a historical construction and there were other aspects such as gender, sexual identity etc that could be attributed to its meaning. In the context of this particular research paper, the term implies primarily the ‘gender roles’ and ‘gender identity’. To retain and protect its selfish interests’ patriarchy had silenced sexuality and pushed it to margins. Without the interventions of feminism, patriarchy would have silenced sexuality eternally. Politics and Publication were two important tools through which women activists, theorists, writers, philosophers tried to challenge and question the deep rooted patriarchal system in the social discourse of India. Hence, least one can do is to analyze some of the major theorists on the basis of these two tools and streamline the course of Indian feminism of which this article is just a token.

## Text and the Context

### Politics:

Because of the significant colonial past and its formative influences on the feminist movement of India, the discourse of feminism had been analysed in the light of pre and post independence era. In the Indian historical context, three important and successful events can be identified around which the First phase of Indian Feminism revolved: the Abolition of Sati by the British in 1829; the Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1929; and the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961. Thanks to the sustained efforts of Liberal social reformers and women activists during the nineteenth century, despite some political resistance, Laws could be enacted to address 'women's questions' that included issues such as women's education, widow remarriage and campaigns against Sati. Radha Kumar in the introduction of her book *The History of Doing* writes, "While early nineteenth century reformers argued that women's difference from men was no reason for their subjection, later reformers argued that it was precisely this difference which made women socially useful, and hence proper care for their conditions of being was socially necessary. (Radha Kumar, 2). The constitution of India was designed in a way that it maintains no difference on the grounds of sex. If Article 14 of the Constitution of India states that the State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India, Article 15 states that the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, sex, place of birth or any of them. Article 15(3) states that nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children and Article 16 states that there shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State (Online). However, the practiced version was far different than what was designed. If one decodes the historical events one comes across movement that started because there were several loopholes already in the socio-political dimension of our country. Samita Sen, in her brilliant policy and research report on gender and development she submitted to the World Bank, identifies 1920s as a remarkable decade because during this period Indian women's movements entered into a new era, leading to the creation of several local women's associations that began working on issues of women's education, livelihood strategies for peasant class women, as well as national level women's associations such as the All India Women's Conference. The latter was closely associated with the Indian National Congress, and worked within the nationalist and anti-colonial movements; under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, mass mobilisation and empowerment of women became an integral part of Indian nationalism. It is evident from the message that Gandhi sends to the All India Women's Conference held in 1936: "when woman, whom we call *abala* (powerless) becomes *sabala* (self-powered), all those who are helpless will become powerful". (Gandhi M, 165). Empowering women was not just a part of Gandhi's nationalist struggle, it was also at the core of his belief that women, whom he considered the subaltern of the subalterns should gear up, gather courage and become powerful and only then would Independence mean something for them. Hence he asserted the congressmen to work on liberation right from their homes: "(If) freedom is the birthright of every nation and individual, (then) first liberate their women from the evil customs and conventions that restrict their all round healthy growth". (Gandhi M, 416-17). Thus, women's issues remained central in Gandhi's nationalist and anti colonial struggles during India's Independence. Commemorating on Gandhi's significant contribution in recognizing the place, position and power of women Kumar writes,

Because of his self-feminization and his feminization of politics, Gandhi was hailed as the parent of the 'Indian women's movement', and his depiction of women's innate qualities was eagerly received by many feminists as expanding and detailing many of their self-definitions. (Radha Kumar, 2)

Later Sen points out in her report, 1930s also witnessed several Left parties creating their own women's organisations such as the *Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti* (Women's Self-defence League) in Bengal; however, rather than focusing solely on issues-related to women, these organisations worked more towards party related policy issues. If 1920s was a decade that saw the genesis of First Wave of feminism in India, then 1930s was a decade that witnessed a vigorous upsurge of various women's organisations. However, by 1940s as the nation was caught in the high fever of nationalism, whose sole objective was to ensure freedom to the nation, women's issues gave way to nation-building issues. The urgency of the nationalist struggle overrode the priorities of the feminist agenda, and the variety and the range of activities in which women began to participate, shattered their unity. After India's Independence in 1947, women's movements quietly died down due to many reasons: women's education was expanding, franchise rights were extended to women, and there was scope for women to enter into public and private sector services and professions; hence many women's organisations returned to the house, and some found berths in the welfare arms of the new government (Sen, 22-23).

After a lull of about twenty years there was this sudden subjectivity that triggered into Indian Feminism. One of the most prominent movements to have laid the foundation stone for the contemporary feminist movement was The Shahada Movement.

This movement was a Bhil tribal landless labourer's movement against the exploitation and subjugation of the tribal landless labourers by non-tribal landowners. Initially it was a folk protest; however, very soon it became militant with the involvement of the New Left party. Women were active in the movement and they demanded direct action on issues specific to them as women, such as physical violence and abuse as a result of alcoholism. Groups of women would go from village to village, enter liquor dens and destroy liquor pots and containers. If any woman reported physical abuse by her husband, all other women would surround him, beat him up and force him to apologize to his wife in public.

Another milestone that can be counted is the formation of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA). Founded in 1972 as an initiative by Ela Bhatt, it was probably the first attempt made to form a Trade Union attached to the Textile Labor Union in Ahmedabad. It was an organization for women who were involved in different trades, but shared a number of common features and work experiences—low earnings, extremely poor working conditions, harassment from those in authority and lack of recognition of their efforts as socially useful work. SEWA aimed at improving the working conditions of women through a process of training, technical aid, legal literacy, collective bargaining, and to teach values of honesty, dignity and simplicity.

This movement spread to Gujarat, where it was called the Nav Nirman movement. The movement started as a student's movement against spiraling costs, corruption and black marketing. Soon, it became a massive middle-class movement and thousands of women joined it. The methods comprised mock courts where judgments were passed on corrupt state officials and politicians, mock funeral processions, and processions to greet the dawn of a new era. Women started participating in increasing numbers in the Naxalbari movement in West Bengal and the Naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh, the Nav Nirman youth movement in Gujarat, and the Chipko Movement. The Shramik Mahila Sangathan (Working Women's Organization), the Progressive Organization of Women, and the Mahila Samata Sainik Dal (League of Women Soldiers for Equality) were some of the organizations that also emerged during this period.

It is important to note here that though most of the feminist initiatives were by women, it did touch the chords of men's sensibilities too. A fiery critique of rooted patriarchy can be seen in Jayprakash Narayan's call for "Total Revolution" (Gull and Shafi, 47) in the early 1970s in which he raised pertinent questions regarding power structures and the place of women in that larger gamut called Indian society. Peasants' movement in Maharashtra led by Sharad Joshi paid important attention in organizing women where they were not only questions issues related to them but also issues in general that were of national importance.

#### **Publication:**

Recognizing the value to words, women started penning their issues in various articles, pamphlets, books, journals, memoirs etc. There was this sudden spurt of women's writing post 1960s' new feminism in the west which resulted in the declaration of 1971 as the international year of the women and subsequently, declaration of 1976–1985 as the United Nations decade for women. In 1971 the Government of India instituted a Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI). The aim of the committee was to look into the problems faced by women in the country and provide recommendations which when implemented would enable women to play their full and proper role in the building up of the nation. The report, *Towards Equality*, which was supposed to represent India in the 1975 United Nations convention in Mexico, came out with shocking observations: just barring middle-class women's entry into education, the condition of the vast majority of women had been alarmingly deteriorating since India's Independence. India's four Five-year plans, had done absolutely very little to uplift the abject conditions of women with a drastic consequence of a shocking declining of sex ratio, high infant and maternal mortality ratio, wide gender gaps in literacy and wage rates and escalating violence against women. All these disturbing findings acted as initial impetus for setting up women's studies courses in India. In 1974, the first women's studies course was introduced in SNDT women's university. As Mary John notes, with the introduction of this course, "a fundamental shift was thus inaugurated – from women as subjects to be educated to women as new subjects of investigation and study". (John Mary E, 4). According to what is quoted in Gull and Shafi's article, early 80s saw a shift of the focus from men to women and the state adopted much of the rhetoric of the women's movement e.g. 'Women must fight for their own rights'; 'Women will never get their due share unless they organize', etc. The National Perspective Plan was formulated for women under state patronage and systematic plans were made for promoting women's education, health status, and political participation. The National Perspective Plan was attacked by most groups outside the ruling party in 1998 on the ground that it offered superficial remedies only, without touching the fundamental causes of women's oppression.

A group of organizations that included the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), All India Coordination Committee of Working Women (AICCWW), National Federation of Working Women (NFWW), Joint Women's Programme (JWP), and the YMCA of India issued a document in 1988 criticizing the NPP (Gull and Shafi, 48)

Resurrection of feminism in the 1970s went beyond tokenistic measures of identity politics and witnessed common people from different strata of society involving directly with wider issues concerning women. These people were not activists by profession but still they had the passion in their heart and vision in their mind to work towards women's emancipation. Their aim was to create awareness among women about their rights for justice, equality and freedom. Thus, these people took up issues such as family violence, marital rape, healthcare, education, economic independence of women etc., at every level of the society so that power equations of the structure moved from the centre to the periphery. Not surprisingly, this activism slowly percolated down to literary and cultural spheres. A very significant contribution in the evolution of such a women-centric movement was made by *Manushi*, a Journal about Women and Society, which began getting published in 1979 from New Delhi, in English and Hindi by a group of women spearheaded by Madhu Kishwar as the founder editor. In fact, it was the first journal that was totally committed to address women's issues including but not limited to social, legal, literary, cultural and political. Though for various political and ideological reasons, Kishwar chose to distance herself from being branded and branded as 'feminist' (for she claims to have hardly used the word); the journal was popularly marked as the first feminist journal in the media as well as academia.

However, there were other magazines and journals with a one point agenda of promoting women's equality issues in the Indian social set up. Some of them were, *Feminist Network* in English published from Bombay; *Ahalya, Sabala Sachetana* and *Pratibadi Chetna* in Bengali from Kolkata, then Calcutta; *Baiza* in Marathi from Pune; *Women's Voice* in English from Bengaluru then Bangalore; and *Stree Sangarsh* in Hindi from Patna. (Gull and Shafi, 48)

In fact, women's literary studies gained a major fillip when Susie Tharu and K Lalita, eminent and committed scholars India has ever seen, attempted to rewrite literary history of women. They traced an entire, solid and vibrant 2600 year Indian tradition of women's writing in their two-volume edited book, *Women Writing in India* first published by the Oxford University Press in the year 1993. These volumes are not merely documents of women's literary writing in India, but they also document the hardships and discouragement people face when they choose to work in the area of women's studies. The editors write in their preface:

When we began work, we were repeatedly warned, often by reputed scholars, that we would find few significant women writers in Marathi or Kannada or Urdu literature. One of the editors had been teaching courses in Indian writing in English for several years little suspecting that the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries would hold such gems as Cornelia Sorabji's autobiography, Pandita Ramabai's letters or memoirs, Krupa Sattianadhan's novels, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's utopian fiction, the many pieces that first appeared in the influential Indian Ladies Magazine over the first two decades of the twentieth century, or the memoirs of such independent political thinkers as Muthulakshmi Reddi. (Tharu Susie and Lalita K., xvii-xviii)

This should be sufficient to prove the Indian patriarchal indifference and systematic suppression of an entire tradition of women's writing in India. However, this did not discourage them from producing what we can today call an iconoclastic contribution to the women writing in India.

## Conclusion

In the context of Indian Feminist Movement one can rightly point out that it was not one of those movements where women were competing to be 'men' or for that matter being superior to them. They only insisted upon having a recognized identity which truly was based on their natural characteristics, strengths, and abilities. Politics and literature were two important areas where they wanted to make their presence felt for it was in these areas their recognitions were almost not counted. Therefore, women from diverse regions and religions participated in the movement and waged wars against the discrimination either through their writings or through their actions. They became writers, politicians, activists, leaders etc. and took seminal ideological and literal positions to reflect the state of affairs in the Indian society and challenge the profoundly entrenched patriarchy so that women finally find their voice to reconstruct the establish norms and reconstruct the same where they have an equal space and say like men.

**Brief Biography**

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