



Indian Women's Movement after Independence

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Abstract

The Indian women's movement building on the nineteenth century social reform movement progressed through the period of nationalism and freedom struggle towards the milieu of democracy which was established in India with the achievement of independence. The achievement of the constitutional guarantee of equal rights for women could not fully realize the feminist aims in India providing a new momentum to the Indian women's movement. The new women's movement is expressing itself in the form of new organizations and groups which are emerging, new agitations and campaigns which are taking place to fulfill the dream of women being emancipated. It is in this background that the present paper attempts to understand the various aspects of the women's movement and track the shifts witnessed by it in the post-independent era. New debates and issues are emerging in the course of evolution of the feminist movement. The paper makes an attempt to present a picture of how these debates and issues are shaping women's question in India.

Keywords: Independent India, feminist movement in India, status of women, women's participation.

Introduction

The influence of the experiment of democracy on contemporary feminist movement in the post-independence period is as important as was the experience of colonial rule which proved to be one of the most important formative influences on the feminist movement of the early twentieth century. Asserting that gender based structures oppressed and subordinated women; the contemporary feminist movement in the post-independence period began by founding itself firmly on the principles of equality. The years after independence proved to be the site of a severe setback for feminists. Despite the acceptance of the principle of equality between men and women, its implications were not fully worked out. Women continued to be the victims of several forms of discrimination in and out of the home in independent India. Disillusionment was setting in but gradually. In the nineteen seventies constitutional guarantee of equality was denounced as sham and the movement which started in the seventies and eighties was a very different one, growing out of a number of radical movements of the time. A large number of women's organizations were born and old ones revitalized by the nineteen eighties. A special category of women's activism was born characterized by new dimensions. It is in this context that the present paper makes an attempt to understand these various aspects of the women's movement and to track the changes witnessed by it in the post independent era. New debates and issues are emerging with the evolution in the women's movement which need to be tackled by it besides the old ones there. The present paper attempts to identify some of the major debates characterizing the contemporary feminist movement.

Feminist Movement after Independence

The Reawakening: To ratify the promises made to women, the constitution of Independent India guaranteed "Equality between the sexes" and various administrative bodies were set up for the creation of opportunities for women. A lull in feminist movement was witnessed during the fifties and sixties¹. With the national movement coming to an end, the obvious reasons for mobilizing women disappeared. Many social women's organizations such as the AIWC reoriented themselves as primarily social organizations providing services such as running schools, hostels and were not involved in any struggle oriented activity. This period of relative calm lasted only fifteen years, followed by a deep restlessness when the country was gripped in multifarious problems which the democratic government had failed to tackle. To tackle this situation of nationwide unrest, a new ferment of political action began in the country in which once again women were among its important protagonists. The struggles were launched from party fronts or from joint fronts of coalitions of parties. There was also the case of parties splitting ranks and new parties coming into existence as witnessed in the case of CPI. Women entered the political arena through all of these channels. Besides mobilizing them, the need was also felt to interconnect analysis of women's oppression into their political involvements.

The resumption of the women's movement saw the involvement of women in various campaigns and agitations. The state was confronted with many questions that the women's movements were raising regarding land rights; the gender-blinded nature of development; laws pertaining to dowry, rape, divorce, etc². From the early seventies onwards, a host of new ideas and movements developed on the radical left and also within the

socialist movement (but on a smaller scale within the socialist one). According to Radha Kumar, the most interesting ones among these new movements and ideas for the feminists were the Shahada and anti-price rise agitations in Maharashtra, and SEWA and Nav Nirman in Gujarat³. Shahada agitation, a tribal Bill landless labourers' movement in Maharashtra, was against the extortionate practices of local landlords who treated the tribals as sub-human. Women played the most militant role in the movement and with the development of a 'women's consciousness'⁴, gender-based issues like the problem of wife-beating began to be raised by them. The raising of this issue led to the development of a woman's anti-alcohol agitation in 1972 and continuing into 1973 because of the problem of many men coming home drunk and beating their wives. Although Utrakhand had also witnessed such anti-alcohol agitation several years earlier but according to Radha Kumar anti-patriarchal sentiments were expressed in the Shahada movement and remained dormant in Utrakhand³. Likewise SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association), initially a wing of the TLA (Textile Labour Association) and later parted its way from the association, was an organization of women who worked in different trades in the informal sector, but shared some common experiences of extremely low earnings, poor working conditions and so on. Although it was an effort towards improving the conditions of work for women, but some sections of the feminist movement which arose in the late seventies did not claim SEWA but the Shahada agitation, anti-price rise agitation in Bombay and the Nav Nirman movement in Gujarat as precursors. The anti-price rise agitation, launched by a coalition of the communist parties and the two socialist parties in 1973, mobilized women of the city against agitation. The movement grew rapidly becoming a mass movement for consumer protection. Along the same lines developed a student movement against soaring prices in Gujarat was soon joined by thousands of middle class women becoming known as the Nav Nirman movement of 1974. Despite being women-centric, Radha Kumar raises a question regarding the anti-patriarchal nature of the anti-price rise and Nav Nirman movements (whether these should be considered anti-patriarchal or not). She opines that neither of the agitations seems to have asked, for example, why an increase in domestic expenditure should be the concern primarily of women rather than men, and thus, through such agitations women seem to have accepted that family was women's sphere and their role as consumers has been reinforced rather than challenged. But collective public action was involved on the part of thousands of women in these movements and such collective action by women is generally regarded as posing an implicit threat to patriarchy. Moreover these protests allowed anti-patriarchal sentiments to germinate indirectly because several of the actions of the women in these protests emerged as feminist movements in the late seventies³. A powerful critique of patriarchy was witnessed in Jayaprakash Narayan's call for a 'Total Revolution'¹ during the early 70s in which questions were raised about power structures, which included many about women (Questions about family, unequal access to resources). This new assertion of women's rights was

also witnessed in Bodhgaya Math Struggle, one of the major areas of involvement of Chhatra Yuva Sangharash Vahini (CYSV), the vanguard of the 'Total Revolution', in which women's land rights formed an important part of the demand of the poor peasants land rights. Thus, seventies constituted a watershed in the history of the women's movement in India when the analysis of women's oppression gave rise to new forms of demand and/or action as noticeable in the Bodhgaya and many other movements. This in-depth analysis of women's oppression and the fighting for their possible liberation crystallized eventually into what came to be known as the 'autonomous women's movement'. The decade of the 70s brought women into mass movements in large numbers, although the specific issues and analysis of women's oppression differed from case to case. An important characteristic of the mass movements of the time was that alternatives to governmental policy were coming from the women cadres as can be seen in the case of the Chipko movement and the Shramik Sangathana of Dhulia. In the Chipko movement, which began in 1973 and was joined by women in 1974, the issue of environmental degradation was linked to women's increasing toil for fuel and fodder and from this was generated the idea of women having a nurturing attitude towards nature because of their own nature-related activities. Kumud Sharma is of the view that the women's participation in the Chipko movement has not helped them in their own struggle against oppression although claims have been made that it is a feminist movement⁵. But this movement, which challenged commercial forestry and forest based industrialization on environmental grounds, did take a women's perspective into account. In the course of the work of the Chattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh, a militant trade union formed in 1977 in the Adivasi belt of Madhya Pradesh, a concern for women's rights was also witnessed. This trade union basically fighting for the rights of marginalized manual miners also upheld women's equal rights to wage labour. Such analysis was also going on in cities and campuses by many educated women and students. During the mid-70s, many educated women took to radical, active politics and simultaneously promoted an analysis of women's oppression. The ferment of the 70s and 80s did not leave the political parties untouched who responded by coming up with their own women's fronts. The Congress party formalized its own women's front (Mahila Congress). During the later 70s, the Socialists, through the various permutations and combinations that led to the formation of the the Janata party, launched the Mahila Dakshata Samiti. The MDS led and participated in many agitations against dowry, rape, price rise, and provided legal support to many women in distress. Also special attention was being paid to women in most general movements of the eighties that was more noticeable in peasant than in workers' movements. In peasant movements in Maharashtra (led by an independent, Sharad Joshi) and in Bihar (various Marxist-Leninist fragments came together to form Indian Peoples Front to lead the strongest peasant movement in Bihar) in the eighties, special attention was paid to organizing women. Although such movements (peasant movement, tribal movement, student

movement, etc) in which women participate do not raise issues affecting women per se but they do raise societal or class issues but Gail Omvedt calls such movements *pre-movements* as far as women are concerned. He is of the view that such movements reveal the power of women in society often leading to the development of women's movements as such and allowing them to bring forth their own needs⁵. A sense of alienation experienced by some women in the leftist movements in Bombay in the 1970s and 1980s became an impetus for separatist feminist activism resulting in emergence of numerous autonomous feminist groups⁶. But these groups did accept the validity of social movements regarding poverty, corruption, class and caste. A number of magazines and journals devoted to promoting women's equality also came into being many were in regional languages. These included Feminist Network (English: Bombay); Ahalya, Sabala Sachetana, and Pratibadi Chetna (Bengali: Calcutta); Baiza (Marathi: Pune); Women's Voice (English: Bangalore) and Stree Sangharsh (Hindi: Patna). In 1977 a group of women in Delhi started a journal, Manushi, about women and society which Ilina Sen considers has become a living documentary of various aspects of the women's movement in India⁷. The state did not remain blind to these developments. With the publication of *Towards Equality*, the report of the Committee on The Status of Women in 1974, and With the declaration of the decade 1975-85 as the international decade for women, barriers against feminism were increasingly eroded within the political sphere. The findings of the Committee revealed that the constitutional guarantee of equality between men and women had not been translated into reality. In the early 80s, 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 1988 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 YWCA of India issued a document in 1988 criticizing the NPP.

From the early eighties, feminism had branched into a series of activities, from the production of literature to slum-improvement work, employment-generation schemes, health education and trade unions. The latter part of seventies and the eighties saw a spurt in feminist writing because the feminist literary critics came to believe that women need to create a literature of their own in which the peculiarly feminine issues and experiences could be considered and confronted by the female sensibility⁸. Such works presented women as oppressed,

exploited, cheated, tortured, angry, alienated and rebellious. There were new attempts to organize women workers' unions in the south. In the unorganized sector, these grew out of campaigns for an improvement in the conditions of living rather than in the conditions of work. Such attempts were also made in Bihar by A.K. Roy (the far left trade union leader) and in Bombay by feminists against the retrenchment of women mine-workers and women textile workers respectively. Such attempts failed because the threat of joblessness made women unite with men around the minimum demand of one wage per family, even if that was a male wage, although feminists could recognize the patriarchy implicit in such a work. Attempts to unionize women within the skilled working class (in Bombay) too failed. Because of these experiences, feminists came to the conclusion that poor women were more militant when it came to issues concerning their conditions of living as families than around issues concerning either work, or the specific problems they faced as women. The Chhatisgarh Mine Workers Shramik Sangh provided an example of how successfully women were organized when equal attention was paid by the union to things such as creating better housing, schools for children, and health care for the family. In the early eighties, when the wives of textile workers in Bombay organized support demonstrations for the general strike of 1981-82, it was this time that feminists also noted that once women had got involved in general movements for social transformation, they used to raise problems concerning them as women within the family. The recognition of such pattern has been voiced only by contemporary feminist movement, although such pattern was there in most movements from the early twentieth century onwards³. City bred and based feminists were now moving into unfamiliar areas and attempting to coordinate activities with other groups, this process being most noticeable in Maharashtra. This process was more complex in areas which had either no such tradition of activity, or in which feminist ideas were only just developing for the first time.

Feminists were more fragmented than ever before in post-independence period because they couldn't see a common enemy nor even attempted to identify the enemy in general terms. This inability to identify the common enemy was partly because of exigencies of colonialism and partly due to the complexities of Indian culture where gender relations were not as clearly distinguishable as in the west. Political divisions were now more important for feminists than they had been earlier. Majority of the pre-independence feminists formed membership of the congress government rather than any other political bloc because the congress stood for women empowerment. Moreover, there were diverse women's groups coming into existence many of which asserted their autonomy while some members of these groups retained their party-affiliations. The field of women's activities in India witnessed somewhat unusual growth with the inflow of funds and international cognizance being given to women's issues by the UN fora⁷. With the declaration of the decade 1975-85 as the international decade for women, the Indian state responded by commissioning a

report on the status of women to a group of feminist researchers and activists, which acknowledged that Indian women suffered from a range of structural inequalities and injustices. A large amount of money was channeled into women's activities through various groups and voluntary agencies resulting in a competition between different women's agencies and groups for these funds often causing schisms and conflicts between them. Because of ideological differences and differences of opinion on various issues between different feminists themselves which they have acknowledged and between women's groups and organizations, the need was felt to look for common ground where a common programme for women can be launched. Such attempts at looking for a common ground were made over time that met with some success but the differences always remained there. Despite these ideological differences, the issues that had arisen in the women's movement since 1975 were taken up by women's groups representing all ideologies and tendencies⁹. But because of schisms, splits and feuds, there was a feeling that the quest for unity was not only futile but also counterproductive, for it allowed all sorts of evils to be glossed over: especially the way in which the movement was used to further either individual or organizational ambitions. Initially dismissing such things largely as 'personal problems', by the mid-eighties there was much greater awareness of these problems as problems and it was felt that could not be subsumed in the way they had earlier been. The women's organizations openly declared their differences from each other. The party-political women's organizations took to print to express their differences from each other, the left attacked autonomous feminist groups through their papers, pamphlets and other publications; the socialists concentrated on attacking the left and the autonomous feminist groups, although did not attack other women's organizations in public. All these bodies devoted considerable energies to establish separate identities from each other. All this was happening because of the privileging of the organizational needs over those of the movement. There was also the problem of aid being poured into social movements meant for developmental activities resulting in competition and schisms and, thus, there was least attempt on their part to achieve or even discuss commonality of interests. As a result of this, autonomous feminist groups lost much of the space which had earlier occupied on the premise that they were different from party-political women's organizations. Their shift away from agitational activities in the early eighties not only left an empty space for party-political women's organizations to move into, but also affected their presence through the media.

The experience of the feminists from the campaigns and agitations of the seventies and eighties made them to reconsider their tactics and methods used earlier by them³. The feminists through such agitations (rape, dowry deaths, sati etc) were able to won some concessions in the form of laws for women which in some ways proved to be beneficial but in other ways brought serious disappointments for feminists. The discovery that the laws passed have been in the main ineffective⁶ and that there was no connection at all between the enactment of new laws and

their implementation had left many feeling rather bitterly that the government had, with the greatest of ease, sidetracked their demands. This raised questions about the efficacy of basing campaigns around demands for changes in the law. On the other hand, decisions came up on the part of feminists to take up individual cases and follow them through the intricacies of the courts without being concerned for the time being consumed in following court procedures. The feminists' tactics and methods of agitation also witnessed a change whereby according to them earlier methods such as public campaigns, demonstrations, street theatre, etc. had limited meaning unless they were accompanied by attempts to develop their own structures to aid and support individual women. The feminists also turned towards history to re-appropriate traditionally accepted women's spaces. The attempt to re-appropriate such spaces grew in the eighties through attempts to re-interpret myths, epics and folktales. There was critique of mainstream religious and cultural texts or practices and search for alternative practices or texts and to discover particular historical or particular methods of women's resistance in India. Such interest in tradition had been present in the Indian feminist movement from its inception like the street plays *Om Swaha* (against dowry deaths in 1979) and *Mulgi Zali Ho* had both used traditional songs. At this stage, however, the main effort was to describe traditional forms of women's subordination in India through various stages from birth to death; as well as to look for traditional comments on women's suffering, placing both in an orthodox socialist-feminist framework. As against this, in the eighties the emphasis changed to looking for traditional sources of women's strength, rather than suffering. This consisted of using Hindu goddesses such as Kali and Shakti as metaphors for the strengths of Indian women. There was also an interest in defining the ways in which ordinary women used the spaces that were traditionally granted to them to negotiate with their husbands, families communities and so on. These traditional female devices (like women simulating possession by devi (goddess) to reform alcoholic husbands) were being examined as potentially feminist tactics as they began to be recommended as a means of gaining some degree of power. This search on the part of Indian feminists for historical examples of women's resistance led them to scrutinize the distant and immediate past, to look at the role women played in general movements for social transformation, and to reclaim some of the movements predating contemporary feminism like the Telangana movement (the landless labourers' movement) and the Chipko movement (the forest protection movement). Though the Chipko movement had begun in the mid-seventies and the main role was played by women, there was little or no discussion of it as a women's movement at that time. In the early eighties, this movement began to be celebrated by feminists as a mass women's movement, and theories of women's special relation to their environment began to be propounded. A new awareness of women's role in the movement developed and in the Kumaon region where Chipko had not been especially strong, a women's anti-alcohol agitation began, following the pattern of Shahada,

where too the development of a women's consciousness had led to an anti-alcohol agitation.

While pre-independence feminists largely accepted sexual division of labour, however a change was witnessed in the nineteen-seventies when feminists began to point out the many injustices this sexual division of labour resulted in for women. Feminists were also aware of innumerable inequalities in India in the nineteen-seventies not only between men and women but also between women themselves, feeding into each other based on caste, class, language, religion, region, tribe etc. Because of this complexity of several inequalities working simultaneously in the Indian situation, feminists faced serious problems in coming out with holistic overreaching campaigns for change. Feminist movement in India is also characterized by a tension between the desire for equality which opposes sex-based differentiation and the sex or gender-based celebrations of feminine. Radha Kumar gives the examples of various movements which showed anti-patriarchal elements like communist-led food campaigns of the nineteen-forties, Chipko, the anti-alcohol and anti-price-rise movements of the nineteen-seventies (these were women's movements and focused on issues which are regarded mainly as women's concerns) and nationalist, Tebhaga and Telangana movements (these movements were dominated by men but women also were active in large numbers)³. The women's concerns in the former were ancillary to the role of a housewife like fuel for heating and cooking, food; while these issues did not always come up in the latter but problems of male domination were brought up during the course of both types of movements. While these movements challenged areas of male control or oppression, they did not display the tension between sameness and difference which is seen as the characteristic of Indian feminism. These movements did not demand equality with men nor did they oppose to the sex-based definitions of roles of men and women. They have been described anti-patriarchal in the sense that although these movements appear to affirm the principle of complementarity between the sexes but these opposed practices of privileging men over women.

Women's movement is not only restricted to campaigns and agitations, the feminists are actively involved in running shelters for battered wives and women who are victims of violence and also provide counseling and legal aid. They help in forming self-help groups to make women economically self-reliant. They conduct training workshops on various issues. The success of the women's movement has not been in terms of the laws passed or the number of women appointed to office but in the fact that it has brought a new consciousness on the entire question of women in the Indian society. The statement of such achievements should not influence one to exaggerate its positive impact. Still a large majority of Indian women live below the poverty line leading wretched miserable lives. Despite the long history of women's struggle, Indian women are one of the most backward today in terms of literacy, maternal mortality, longevity, employment and sex ratio. The women's movement

is grappling with new problems with old mindsets steeped in patriarchy still prevail.

Women's groups and organizations after independence

After independence there was a relative calm in feminist activities because of the opening of new opportunities for women. Because of this lull many pre-independent women's organizations like the AIWC reoriented themselves as primarily social organizations providing services like running schools, hostels, etc. Communist women broke away from the AIWC and formed the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) in 1954, which remained a platform for women within the party and in party-led trade unions. Many political parties maintained token women's fronts such as the Mahila Congress by Congress concerned primarily with mobilizing women for party rallies and vote-catching. However all these bodies were not involved in any struggle oriented activity.

The resumption of the women's movement in post-independence period saw the emergence of many new women's organizations and groups and old ones being revitalized actively engaged to promote women's interests. Although women's organizations (AIWC, WIA) have been a part of the anti-colonial nationalist movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was only in the seventies that women's groups that worked essentially for women's cause were formed⁶. During the late 70s and 80s many urban groups emerged in Calcutta, Bangalore, Pune, and elsewhere. The year, witnessing the development and crushing of the Nav Nirman movement, also witnessed the formation of the first women's group of the contemporary feminist movement in Hyderabad known as POW comprising women from the Maoist movement. This group recognized the sexual division of labour (the base) and the culture rationalizing it (the superstructure) as the two primary structures of women's oppression. Maharashtra witnessed the sudden development of many feminist activities in 1975 whereby, under the influence of the POW, Maoist women in Pune formed the Purogami Stree Sangathana (progressive women's organization) and Maoist women in Bombay formed the Stree Mukti Sangathana (women's liberation organization). A new group called the Mahila Samta Sainik Dal (League of Women Soldiers for Equality) was also formed by women from the dalit movement. The manifesto of this Dal recognized the sexual oppression of women considering religion as the major agent in the oppression of women as well as dalits, and the caste system as the source of inequality in India. Further parallels were drawn between caste oppression and women's oppression, existing in the latter a caste division between men and women, where notions of purity and pollution were used to suppress women. The manifestoes of both POW and MSSD stressed the sexual oppression of all women that earlier social reform or feminist groups had ignored³. During the nineties women from the Dalit community also formed organizations such as All India Dalit Women's Forum, and the National Federation of

Dalit women and Dalit Solidarity. The declaration of emergency in 1975 caused a break in the ongoing feminist movement and the lifting of the same in 1977 renewed the feminist movement, feminist groups coming up all over the country, but mainly in the major cities. The distinguishing feature of the new women's groups was that many of them opted for autonomy, consisting of separate, women-only groups, rejecting any political-party affiliation or conventional organizational structure, despite the fact that most of their members belonged to other political groups of left and far left. The only party-based women's organization to come up in the late seventies was the Mahila Dakshata Samiti (MSD), which was founded by socialist women in the coalition Janata party in 1977. Though the feminist campaigns in the late seventies and early eighties were dominated by the new city-based groups, similar developments of feminist consciousness had also taken place in certain rural movements. This can be seen in case of Karimnagar district when the Telangana movement in Andhra Pradesh was again renewed after the emergency was lifted. In this district where women had been especially active in the landless labourers' movement from the sixties on, the new wave of agitation began with a campaign against the kidnapping of a woman called Devamma, and the murder of her husband, by a local landlord. Subsequently, women demanded the formation of independent women's organizations called the Mahila Sanghams and raised the issues of wife-beating and landlord rape through these Sanghams.

There were continuous debates going on over various issues involving these feminist groups which held differing views regarding such issues. Despite ideological differences these groups rapidly built networks among each other. The initial time in the life of these groups was consumed in attempts at self-definition. The two factors of affiliation of most of the members of these groups to the far left and their belonging to the urban educated middle-class influenced the feminist movement of the late seventies and early eighties in fairly complex ways. On the one hand, considerable debate was going on the class basis of women's oppression, the road to women's liberation and the role feminists could play in this; on the other hand, the awareness of their basically middle-class background led many feminists to feel that their own needs were minor and different compared to the needs of vast majority of women in India from the working and laboring classes. The Marxist affiliations of most of the feminists resulted in a broad agreement that a materialistic framework was necessary for the analysis of women's oppression, although there were wide differences over what this meant. Debates were also going on regarding the things whether family should be considered as a homogenous structure of oppression for women, or differentiated according to class. Underlying these debates was the argument that how far and in which ways commonality of women's experience can be sought and if it could cut across class, and to a lesser extent caste and community boundaries. The experience of the Maoist insurgency of the late sixties and its repression and disintegration in the early seventies, had led many to believe

that a revolutionary transformation of society was possible if different oppressed groups (tribals, subordinate castes and women) were organized and represented separately, and then brought together to fight their common enemies. Therefore, in the late seventies the question before the women's groups was of how women could be organized and represented and different arguments were provided to conclude that this was not the task of feminist groups. The ideological heterogeneity of feminists (most of them belonged to diverse sections of the far left) led to constant argument and disagreement within and between feminist groups and the sectarianism of the far left further exacerbated the problem. But in the late seventies the feminists were overwhelmed with fear that to recognize sectarianism within their ranks would make anti-feminists to recognize and declare the incapability of women to work together. Thus, the need was felt for suppression of recognition of sectarianism and it was most often treated as a personal problem between individuals rather than as a source of conflict of ideas and attitudes. Some saw in this lack of ideological homogeneity examples of the potential pluralism of feminism which could provide a ground for women with different ideas to work together and thus, the idea of achieving homogeneity through expelling dissidents was rejected. While there was some sort of feminist critique of party politics, the terms of criticism varied widely. The liberal reformist school although being critical of the existing practice of political parties believed that reform was possible and could fulfill feminist aims; the left school, although being critical of the traditional and entrenched political parties, provided that genuine representative political parties could be created; libertarian school argued that political parties were so structured that they would never fulfill feminist, or indeed socialist aims. Regional variation was also witnessed in the terms of the argument. Delhi, where feminism and party-affiliation were mutually opposed, witnessed the development of two major feminist groups of the late seventies (Samta and Stri Sangharsh) out of university-based feminist discussion groups in Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University and were not having any members who were party-affiliated. On the other hand, the first feminist groups in Bombay were neither university-based nor composed mainly of students. Most of their members had some experience of organizing, campaigning and negotiating, both as members of political groups or organizations, and in joint party and non-party fronts. Most of the members were from the far left, from civil liberties' organizations, revolutionary groups, independent trade unions etc. The importance of this difference between Delhi and Bombay based groups became clear at the first national conference of socialist-feminists in India organized by women in Bombay in 1978. It was in this conference that need was felt that a distinction had to be made between activists and the general body of women. Moreover, a distinction was also made between conscious-raising and theory generation. It was out of such distinctions that a three-tiered hierarchy developed, consisting of theory generators (the most articulate ones), activists (conscious-raisers), and the subjects of their attention. The influence of feminist ideas was beginning to grow.

Interestingly, one of the central issues of debate during the 1980 conference was on the role of feminist groups and the relationship they should have with party and mass based organizations. There was the issue of how a women's movement would and should develop.

Because of the spread and fragmentation which the feminist movement had undergone, various profession and issue-based groups also came into existence. The first professions to feel the influence of feminism were journalism, academics and medicine⁷. Soon after the feminist movement began, most of the major English language dailies had deputed one or more women journalists to write exclusively on feminist issues, and a network of women journalists evolved, which in Bombay was formalized into a women journalists' group in the mid-eighties with the purpose of lobbying for better reporting on 'women's issues' such as dowry, or rape, or sati. Most of the women involved in founding the first contemporary feminist groups were themselves academics that chose to study different aspects of women's lives with the idea that this would be useful to the development of the feminist movement. 'Women's studies', however, really took off in the eighties, initially under the support of independent research institutes such as the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) in Delhi; also an attempt was made by SNDT Women's University in Bombay to find research at the University level which set up a Women's Research Unit. With the proliferation of women's studies, it became a separate sphere resulting in a paradoxical situation in which the knowledge produced by it witnessed a disconnection from the activity itself and the initial vision of it as aiding in the generation of feminist theory to inform feminist practice was relegated to the background. While the influence of feminism in medicine has been less effective than in journalism or academics, the connection has been closer here than in the other two. Although in early eighties, women's centres came up in several cities which provided mix of services like health care, legal aid and counselling and a few of them also tried to provide employment but they lacked sufficient resources to sustain their schemes because of which they foundered. The existence of such centres was witnessed from the twentieth century on; these new centres were different in several important ways³. The earlier centres having a social-welfare ideology focussed on one or two issues and tended to approach women's problems in an already defined, blanket way. On the other hand, the new centres which were explicitly feminist attempted to provide help on a whole range of issues which they saw as interlinked, and had a more flexible, individualist approach. The effort of new centres seemed to put feminist concepts of sisterhood into practice as well as to redefine these concepts through basing them on traditionally accepted structures of friendship among women. Such efforts were represented by names of centres (Saheli in Delhi and Sakhi Kendra in Kanpur). Saheli was a centre for women's resource, documentation and legal aid.

The women's organizations and groups have been instrumental in raising the various women's issues and carrying out the

campaigns and agitations regarding them. Women's organizations fought around issues such as atrocities against women in the form of rape, alcoholism, and wife-beating, dowry harassment, violence in the family, common civil code, problems of working women, communalism, problems of maid servants and many more issues⁵. The city-based groups played an important role in mobilizing public opinion and press coverage during the movement against sati, following the Deorala incident (Roop Kanwar incident^b) in the mid-80s. Similarly, autonomous groups spearheaded the agitation for reform in rape law and were successful in paving the way for the passage of an amendment which placed the onus of proof of innocence on the accused rapist. They also led the campaign against Netan, or the proposal to introduce an injectable contraceptive for women which, it was feared would be used on women without their consent or knowledge in order to force policies of population control on them. They have also been in the forefront of the campaign for a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) for all Indians as different religious laws governing different sects of people, in different ways, are discriminatory to women. Women's autonomous groups continue to play a watchdog role in relation to other issues also, such as commercialized portrayal of women's bodies in the media and advertising. To link up with poor urban or women's issues and lives has also been on the agenda of some city based groups. Women's groups and women's fronts belonging to many parties also took a strong note against communal tendencies and communal violence as witnessed in case of 1984 Delhi riots where many women's groups came forward after the riots to provide support to the victims and to lobby against communal violence. Issue based cooperation and dialogue spread among many women's groups and women from a number of parties, the earliest example of which can be witnessed in the Bombay-based Anti Price Rise Movement between 1972 and 1975 in which women leaders of the two major communist parties and the Socialist party joined together to protest against soaring prices.

Indian feminist movement: Current issues and debates

Because of reasons like spread of feminism and the influence it was beginning to have on women's attitudes, especially within the family, counter-movements against feminist (or women's rights) ideas began to be initiated by sections of traditional society. The individual support work that women's centres did, involved them with people's lives in a more intimate way. This approach of feminists appeared more threatening than their earlier agitations that provoked considerable degree of hostility from the people. From the mid-eighties on there was an increasingly sophisticated critique of feminism. The arguments made against the feminist were remarkably similar to those advanced against social reformers in the nineteenth century: that they were westernized, upper class and urban, and therefore, ignorant of, and unsympathetic to traditional Indian society. Feminists have been forced to confront claims of being both westernized from the state and from sections of the civil society

including by right wing Hindu fundamentalist forces⁶. It was argued, both then and now, that the reformers or feminists could not claim to represent any large category of society, and therefore their demands should be ignored by the state. While the feminists had attempted to distinguish between women on the basis of caste and class, and later region and culture, counter movements against feminism now imposed communal distinctions where Indian were distinguished from each other as being Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and so on. Thus, the category 'Indian women' itself was broken down into several constituents of which the most important became communal identity. The attempts to better the conditions of women of any community were treated as attempts to impose alien norms and considered as interference with communal autonomy. Communal offensives were now launched against laws which had existed over a century, under the somewhat arbitrary banner of 'religion in danger'. Caste stratification is also of significant concern for feminist movement in India. There has been criticism projected against the Indian feminism from Dalit groups that it represents and is made of upper caste and class women and the interests of the Dalit women have been marginalized within Indian women's movement¹⁰. Aparna Basu cites an example in this context where the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in West Bengal subscribed to middle and upper class perceptions of gender ignoring the Dalit women's perceptions¹¹. In debates on caste and gender oppression, attempts have been on the part of Dalit women to link caste relations to gender exploitation and how gendered forms of violence lead to upper caste domination. As with Dalit feminism, minority women too have expressed their fears claiming that they have felt isolated and alienated within the movement because of the predominantly Hindu symbols being used within the movement, therefore, Hindu and Indian becoming synonymous. They suggest that mainstream feminism is upper caste, Hindu in its orientation, hence unable to address the issues of minority women. Indian feminism is continuously witnessing challenges from these quarters of caste, communalism, etc.

There have been many debates going on around important questions and issues characterizing the feminist movement. Debates on the role of law have been central to feminist activism and discourse in India. Although feminist interventions relating to law have resulted in passing of many laws (Domestic Violence Act in 2005, a law on sexual harassment in work place and so on) but feminists have recognized the inefficiency of the laws passed³. Feminist critique of Indian law has recognized that law and judicial practices legitimize women's subordination as is understood through the working of civil or criminal laws that work to discriminate against women. There are laws relating to inheritance, marriage, divorce, succession, guardianship that feminists consider preserve the family as it exists, that is, a system based on male dominance. Such skepticism has raised doubts about the transformative capacity of law. While these criticisms have been the focus of debate within Indian feminism, but there also has been the perspective that there may not be viable alternatives other than the formal

structure of law, thus remaining a significant area for feminist intervention⁶. There has been the question of internal structuring of women's organizations. Although the feminist trend seems to be in favour of anti-hierarchical theme but India has never been able to project a clear alternative to hierarchical structures. Some other debates also emerged around issues which although lacking a clear link with issues of practice have nevertheless been important and often controversial. The important ones among these have been the debates about the "productive" nature of the household and debate about the origins of women's oppression and patriarchy. Although the demand of "wages for housework" has been never raised in India but the questions raised in the debate regarding productive nature of the housework faced heated reactions in raising those points. A wide variety of feminist positions have resulted to pronounce on the question of the origins and development of women's oppression in India but it has been mainly dealt with by the Marxists (but having different approaches). Although there have been some debates on this issue, but so far the discussion lacked depth. Also many other issues are emerging in the Indian women's movement which need to be dealt with. The women's groups of various ideologies have taken cognizance of, and worked actively on issues of rape, dowry death, and personal law among others. But so far no sustained movement or campaign has taken place regarding issues such as equal wages and work for women agriculturists or rural and urban toiling women although such issues being a theoretical priority for many left organizations⁹. Also the movement has been lacking in overall "co-ordination" or 'direction' and the movement is not providing ongoing ways for suppressed classes to come forward and assert themselves. In the contemporary women's movement, many ideological and theoretical questions are yet to be sorted out. The questions of autonomous women's movement, of the relationship between the women's movement and a larger class-based or other movement continue to cause intense debate.

Conclusion

After independence a vigorous although uneven women's movement has taken shape in India. Women from diverse castes, classes and communities have participated in the movement along with activists drawn from a variety of political trends, parties and groups belonging to various ideologies making the movement highly heterogeneous. Looking at the women's movement in India one becomes aware of the enormous variety of positions, ideologies, strategies and mass bases. There are many debates going on around unresolved issues and questions, lending a sort of vibrancy to the women's movement. The positive achievement since independence is an important factor outweighing this debate and controversy. There is the need to celebrate diverse strengths of the Indian women's movement especially its ability to meet challenges from different quarters, that is, challenges from communalism, caste movements etc. From its present position, the Indian feminist

movement has a strong enough base on which to build for the future.

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