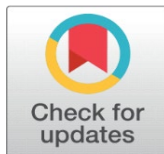


SOCIAL AND CULTURAL OPPRESSION OF WOMEN IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Women liberation movement in India began as a social reform movement in the nineteenth century. The western ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity were being imbibed by the educated elites in India through the study of English. In India the women liberation movement against patriarchal institutions of gender injustice has been weak as compared to the women's movements in the Western and European societies. In fact, women's fight against the oppression of patriarchy has been rather slow in emerging in India. The nineteenth century women found themselves totally suppressed and subjugated by the male patriarchal ideologies and attitudes of those times, though there was feminist identity, consciousness and also awareness of their miserable plight.

Keywords: Women Liberation, Women literacy, Gender equality

1. INTRODUCTION

The women's movement in India can be seen as forming these waves. The first wave can be seen during the nation movement, when there was mass mobilization of women for participation in the nationalist movement. Thereafter, for over a decade, there was a lull in political activity and can be called the second wave. In the late 1970s, the third wave of the women's movement emerged, which focused on women's empowerment.

There is a distinction between pre-independence women's movement in India. The pre-independence movements were essentially about social reforms and initiated by men. In comparison, the post-independence movement demanded gender equality, questioned gender-based division of labour and highlighted the oppressive nature of the existing patriarchal structure. There was an upsurge of various movements which raised a number of issues around diverse subjects such as land rights, wages, security of employment, equality etc. Some of the issues on which women got together were work, population policies, atrocities on women, including rape and murder.

Mrs. Annie Besant, the leader of the Theosophical movement in India, advocated emancipation of Indian women. In fact, many Indian women joined her Home Rule Movement. According to her, the Home Rule Movement was rendered tenfold more effective by the involvement of a large number of women, who brought to it the uncalculated heroism, the endurance, and the self-sacrifice of the feminine nature. She considered child marriage to be a social evil and wanted its removal from the Indian society.

Mrs. Sarojini Naidu was one of the forerunners of women's participation in the National movement. She worked as an active politician and freedom fighters. In 1918 she had a resolution passed at the special congress session in Bombay, supporting women's franchise. In 1931, representatives of various women's organization in India met in Bombay with Ms. Sarojini Naidu as their president and drafted a memorandum demanding the immediate acceptance of adult franchise 'without any sex distinction'. The memorandum went on to be accepted and women were granted equal rights with men. This was a time, when many other western countries were still fighting for equality between the sexes. She was the first Indian woman to become President of Indian National congress and the first woman to become the governor of a State in India.

There are numerous stories of how women questioned and fought against the establishment, personified in the deeds of Razia Sultana, Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, Ahilya Bai Holkar, Muktabai and so on, women throughout history made efforts to break free from the bonds of oppression they had to face by virtue of their birth.

Many women belonging to various castes joined the Bhakti movement. The Saints stood up for equal rights of men & women. It resulted in some amount of social freedom for women. Indian culture became accessible to women also, saints also encouraged the worship of the feminine counterparts of male gods, which indirectly helped to elevate the status of women.

Until 1951, Indian women were excluded from political activity by law. They were not allowed to vote or to hold office. In 1951, The Indian Act was amended so that an Indian did not necessarily have to have status to be a member. With this amendment the wording was changed so that the Indian Act no longer specified the sex of the voter. Because of this essentially by default women were finally allowed to vote in general elections. Women in India now participate fully in areas such as education, sports, politics, media, art & culture, service, sectors, science and technology etc. Ms. Indira Gandhi, who served as Prime Minister of India for an aggregate period of fifteen years, is the world's longest serving woman Prime Minister.

The constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14), no discrimination by State (Article 16) and equal pay for equal work (Article 39 (d)). In addition, it allows special provisions to be made by the state in favor of women and children (Article 15 (3)), renounces practice derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51 (A) (e)), and also allows for provisions to be made by the state for securing just and human conditions of work and for maternity relief (Article 42).

Feminist activism in India gained momentum in the late 1970s. One of the first national-level issues that brought women groups together was the Mathura rape case. Female activists also united over issues such as female infanticide, gender bias, women's health, women's safety and women's literacy.

According to a recent UNO report on deprivation, vulnerability and exclusion, "Dalit Women" in India are at the bottom of India's caste, class and gender social structure and their situation constitutes an extreme case of active exclusion. Muslim women come a close second, even worse off in certain parts of the country. They suffer from endemic gender and caste discrimination, violence and exploitation.

In virtually every corner of the globe women are denied basic human rights beaten raped and killed by men. This happened yesterday. This happening right now, and it will happen tomorrow. Patriarchal oppression is seen all over the world, where a women's sole purpose in life is to serve her father brothers and husband for the entirety of her existence. This extreme gender inequality and the continuation of a 'culture of silence' are the foremost reasons that violence in India has persisted. One of India's most extreme evidence of abhor is seen through dowry practices, commonly found throughout India. Dowry transactions go way back in Indian culture. The effect of the dowry culture can be traced back to the womb and is considered one of the primary causes for female foeticide.

In 1961, India's govt created the Dowry Prohibition Act, which was amended in 1984 and 1986 making the dowry practice a criminal offence. But despite being illegal for decades, dowry transactions are becoming more uncontrolled and practiced.

India's constitution guarantees free primary school education for both girls & boys up to age 14. The girl parents might consider chores more important than education as they will need to perform these chores for their future husband and in laws. Social sector programmers e.g. 'Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan' (Education for Everyone) are promoting girls education to equalize educational opportunities and eliminate gender disparities, but these initiatives will take time to unfold their whole effect.

2. CONCLUSION

Structures are the common theme that bind women across culture and geography. Ideology and custom make invisible victims out of women and divide them by class and culture. This makes difficult to recognize the connections between oppression based on gender and oppression based on class and culture. Having looked at the status of women in India, we come back to the statement of Jawahar Lal Nehru "You can tell the condition of a Nation by looking at the status of its women".

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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