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## The History of Feminism and Doing Gender in India

**Abstract:** *The present paper looks at the historical background of the rise of feminism and women's movement and doing gender in India. Not only in India but all over the world there has been a close link between feminism and the women's movement, each inspiring and enriching the other. In the Indian context, while the women's movement is a much earlier phenomenon, the term Feminism is a modern one. Feminism comprises a number of social, cultural and political movements, theories and moral philosophies concerned with gender inequalities and equal rights for women. In the pre-independence era, the women's movement began as a social reform movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At this time, the western idea of liberty, equality and fraternity was being imbibed by our educated elite through the study of English and the contact with west. This western liberalism was extended to the women's question and was translated into a social reform movement. In the post-Independence period during the first few decades, the major concern was for overall economic growth. This was immediately followed by another decade, which witnessed an increased concern for equity and poverty alleviation. Gender issues were subsumed in poverty related concerns and there were no such specific programs, which aimed at women. In the post-independence period, the women's movement has concerned itself with a large number of issues such as dowry, women's work, price rise, land rights, political participation of women, Dalit women and marginalized women's right, growing fundamentalism, women's representation in the media etc. and a large number of Non-Government organizations have taken up this issue. Women's studies and now Gender studies is also an off shoot of the long history of women's movement in India. Various women's studies Centres have been set up and today again these are at the brink of disappearing from the radar and there is a struggle which is now going on. Though a lot 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.*

**Keywords:** Women's Movement; Feminism; Subordination; Freedom Struggle; Non-Government Organization



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The present paper looks at the historical background of the rise of feminism and women's movement and what doing gender has entailed in the Indian context. Not only in India but all over the world there has been a close link between these three, each inspiring and enriching the other. In the Indian context, while the women's movement is a much earlier phenomenon, the term Feminism is a modern one. Feminism comprises a number of social, cultural and political movements, theories and moral philosophies concerned with gender inequalities and equal rights for women. Any basic definition of Feminism or Feminisms can start with the assertion that at the center of feminism is the concerns for women's subordinate status in society and with the discrimination encountered by women because of their sex. Furthermore, feminists call for changes in the social, economic, political or cultural order to reduce and eventually overcome this discrimination against women and creation of an equitable society in which gender justice is achieved. This has been achieved throughout the world through movements and the establishment of Institutions. India has had both.

While the women's movement is a much earlier phenomenon, the term Feminism is a modern one. This term seems to have been first used in 1871 in a French medical text to describe a cessation in development of the sexual organs and characteristics in male patients who are perceived as suffering from "feminization" of their bodies (Geneviève FRAISSE, 2002 [1995]). The term was then picked up by Alexander Dumas, a French writer, republican and anti-Feminist to describe women who behaved in a supposedly masculine way. The term became widely used in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Women's right movement emerged in the United States of America with the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. This was followed by the writings of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Mary Wollstonecraft, who questioned many injustices met out to women. Hence the term Feminism emerged long after the women started questioning their inferior status and demanding an amelioration of their social position. Many groups were not comfortable with the use of the term feminist and did not identify their struggle for women's right with this term. Many believed that Feminism betrayed its anti-capitalist roots in favor of identity politics: it failed when the focus shifted "from society to the individual." It was argued that what was once collective action and a shared vision for how women might work and live in the world gave way to a focus on individual history and achievement, and an unwillingness to share space with people with different opinions, worldviews, and histories (Jessa CRISPIN, 2017). The same kind of arguments against the use of the term feminism was made in India too (Madhu KISHWAR, 1999). Today feminist as a term is understood to denote the political stance of someone committed to changing the social position of women.

Feminism comprises a number of social, cultural and political movements, theories and moral philosophies concerned with gender inequalities and equal rights for women. One can clearly see the history of feminism as consisting of three waves. The apparent pattern of rise and fall of feminism over time has led to the wave analogy, the peaks and troughs of the feminist movement are characterized as following the motion of tidal waters, with its ongoing cycle of gradual swelling, eventual cresting and final subsiding (Jane PILCHER; Imelda WHELEHAN, 2004, p. 52). The first wave was in the mid nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, primarily concerned with gaining equal rights for women, particularly the rights to suffrage. In Britain the Suffragettes campaigned for the women's vote. In 1918 the Representation of the People Act 1918 was passed granting the vote to women over the age of 30 who owned houses. In 1928 this was extended to all women over eighteen (Melanie PHILLIPS, 2004). The second wave was in the 1960s and 1970s when protests were centered around women's inequality not only in the context of women's political rights but in the areas of family, sexuality and work. Second-wave Feminism has existed continuously since then, and continues to coexist with what is termed third-wave Feminism.

The second-wave feminism saw cultural and political inequalities as inextricably linked. The movement encouraged women to understand aspects of their own personal lives as deeply politicized, and reflective of a sexist structure of power. If first-wave feminism focused upon absolute rights such as suffrage, second-wave feminism was largely concerned with other issues of equality, such as the end to discrimination (PHILLIPS, 2004). Carol Hanish (1971), with her essay *The Personal is Political*, coined a slogan that became synonymous with the second-wave and was related to the women's liberation movement (Ellen Carol DU BOIS, 1997).

The third wave of feminism extends from the early 1990s to the present. The movement arose as a response to perceived failures of the second-wave. It was also a response to the backlash against initiatives and movements created by the second-wave. Third-wave feminism seeks to challenge or avoid what it deems the second-wave's "essentialist" definitions of femininity, which (according to them) over-emphasized the experiences of upper middle class white women. A post structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality is central to much of the third-wave's ideology.

Third-wave feminists often focus on "micro-politics" and challenge the second-wave's paradigm as to what is, or is not, good for females. Post-feminism is a term used to describe a range of viewpoints reacting to feminism. The term was first used in the 1980s to signify a backlash against second-wave feminism. It now denotes a wide range of theories, some of which argue that postmodernism has destabilized the notion of a universal femininity, and take critical approach to previous feminist discourses, including challenges to second-wave ideas (Stacy GILLIS *et al.*, 2007). One of the earliest uses of the term was in Susan Bolotin's 1982 article "Voices of the Post-Feminist Generation", published in *New York Times Magazine*. This article was based on a number of interviews with women who largely agreed with the goals of feminism, but did not identify as feminists (Ruth ROSEN, 2000). Some contemporary feminists, like Katha Pollitt, consider feminism to hold simply that "women are people". Views that separate the sexes rather than unite them are considered by these writers to be *sexist* rather than *feminist* (Katha POLLITT, 1995).

Though one talks about the different phases of the feminism, one cannot divide them into watertight compartments and there has been a continuum of thought and activities throughout this period. Feminist theory developed from the feminist movement. It takes a number of forms in researches in a variety of disciplines such as feminist geography, feminist history, feminist literary criticism etc. and the Centre for Women's studies became the nodal centers. In India we can clearly see the link between research, the rise of certain ideologies and social movements.

In the Indian context we can see the rise of feminism and the women's movement in two distinct phases, the pre-independence era and the post-independence era.

We can divide the women's movement into three phases:

1. First Phase (1850-1915)
2. Second Phase (1915-1947)
3. Third Phase (1947-Present).

The third phase can be further classified into three sub-phases:

- The Period of Accommodation (1947-1960s)
- The Period of Crisis (1960s-1975)
- 1975 – to date

## 1. First Phase (1850-1915)

In the pre-independence era, the Women's Movement began as a social reform movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At this time, the western idea of liberty, equality and fraternity was being imbibed by our educated elite through the study of English and the contact with the West. This western liberalism was extended to the Women's question and was translated into a social reform movement. The reform movements were not homogeneous and varied a lot in terms of the ideas and changes that were to be fostered. They did however share a common concern for rooting out the social evils, partly in response to charges of barbarity from the colonial rulers. This was a period of the hegemonic control and influence of colonial ideology. This was a time of transition, one of the emerging bourgeois society and values of new modes of thought.

The colonial intervention in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was no longer confined only to the market or polity but was intruding into the areas of our culture and society, and this could affect transformation in the social fabric of Indian society. This potential threat was sensed by the Indian intellectual reformer, exposed to western ideas and values. At this juncture, the Indian intellectual reformer, sensitive to the power of colonial domination and responding to the western ideas of rationalism, liberalism and civilized society on one hand, also sought ways and means of resisting this colonial hegemony by resorting to what K. N. Panikkar refers to as Cultural defense (K. N. PANIKKAR, 1975).

This cultural defense resulted in a paradoxical situation. Spurred by new European ideas of rationalism and progress, the reformers tried to create a new society, modern yet rooted in Indian tradition. They began a critical appraisal of Indian society in an attempt to create a new ethos devoid of all overt social aberrations like polytheism, polygamy, casteism, sati, child marriage, illiteracy – all of which they believed were impediments to the progress of women (Rekha PANDE, 2009, p. 27). All the social reformers shared the belief common to many parts of the world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that no society could progress if its women were backward. To the reformers, the position of Indian women, as it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was abysmally low and hence their efforts were directed at an overall improvement in the status of women through legislation, political action and propagation of education (PANDE, 2015). This was mainly spurred by the first wave feminism of the west and concentrated on basic rights for women.

The social reform movement did not radically challenge the existing patriarchal structure of society or question gender relation. They picked up for reform only those issues which the Britishers were pointing out as evidence of degeneration in the Indian society. Even the women's institutions and organizations that sprang up during this period did not have an independent ideology but only took off from what the men were stating. This is understandable because it was primarily the wives and sisters of the reformers who had initiated the establishment of these organizations. The direction and content of reform as laid down by the reformers was 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.

Women were seen as passive recipients of a more humanitarian treatment to be given by western educated elite males. There was thus an attempt to reform the women rather than reform the social conditions which opposed them. There were no attempts to alter the power structure and the man-woman relation in society. This was but natural since the change in the status of woman was being sought only within questioning patriarchy itself. The attempt was to create a new Indian woman, truly Indian and yet sufficiently educated and tutored in the 19<sup>th</sup> century values to suit the new emerging society. Thus education for girls was not

meant to equip them to be self-sufficient, independent and emancipated and train them to follow some profession but to be good housewives, the mistress of the home and the hearth (PANDE; J. KAMESHWARI, 1987).

The social reform movement had its own paradox: on the one hand there was a preoccupation with western ideas to emulate, assimilate or reject; on the other hand there was also the element of revivalism or a need to reassert and reinforce a cultural identity distinct from the British colonizers. Besides seeking reforms through legislation, education was seen as an important means of changing women's situation (Geraldine FORBES, 1981). Women's education, which saw its beginnings, now was visualized for creating appropriate wives for the men of the newly emerging westernized elite (Vina MAZUMDAR, 1972). Women also joined in struggle against colonialism, but while they were encouraged to participate by leaders like Gandhi, their work in the struggles was just an extension of their domestic work. Very few women were allowed to join the front ranks with men, and the ones that did spoke of the isolation they felt at times (Radha KUMAR, 1993, p. 4). As a form of backlash to these new ideas that colonialism brought to India, women's roles were being pushed to a more traditional way of life. Women traditionally became emblematic of tradition, and the reworking of tradition is largely conducted through debating the rights and status of women in society (Kumkum SANGARI; Vaid SURESH, 1989, p. 90). On account of this common view on women, whenever culture is being threatened an immediate response is an enforcement of women to remain in roles that are more traditional.

One is certainly not belittling the contributions of the social reform movement. 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. The only space available to a woman earlier was in the religious sphere and in the ancient period, Buddhism and Jainism provided this space, but women had to choose between this and the family and if they chose religion they had to move out of the families by becoming a part of the *Sangha*. In medieval period the bhakti movement declaring that God dwells in each individual and one could attain God through faith and many of the bhakti saints brought religion to the downtrodden and henceforth marginalized sections of society and women. Bhakti provides women a space and to move out of the daily life of patriarchal control and in the process they get their independence. For all these women bhaktas the rejection of the power of the male figure whom they were tied to in subordinate relationship became the terrain for struggle, self assertion and alternative seeking. Yet the women saints had to choose between marriage and a life of domesticity and their love of the supreme God (PANDE, 2005a, p. 281-282).

The social reform movement provided a secular space for women in other areas by looking at various issues which were culturally imposed on women by society and making them crippled. Raja Ram Mohan Roy argued that sati was not supported by shastras and was nothing less than female murder. He argued against polygamy and for property rights for 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 recognized faith. Ishwar Chandra VidyaSagar also was very critical of the system of early marriage and supported literacy for women; many women's organizations also took up these reforms.

Pandita Rama Bai's Sharda Sadan (1892) in Poona, Shri Mahipatramrupamanathashram in Ahmedabad (1892), Shri Zoroastrian Mandal in Bombay

(1903), maternity and child welfare league in Baroda (1914), BhaginiSamaj in Poona (1916) all were established and worked with the particular objective of improving the lot of women and removing the various ills in society. These regional organizations were followed by national organizations like Women's Indian Association (1917), the National Council of Women in India (1920), All India Women's Conference (1926) which went on to organize 12 women's conferences till 1937 and Federation of University Women in India (1920), with the sole objective of stimulating the interests of women in civic and public life and the removal of disabilities of women whether legal, economic or social and the promotion of social; civil, moral and educational welfare of women and children (FORBES, 2000).

## 2. Second Phase (1915-1947)

The second 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). All these organizations were formed by women in between 1917 and 1927 after World War I. During this period struggle against colonial rule intensified. Nationalism became the pre-eminent cause. Gandhi legitimized and expanded Indian women's public activities by initiating them into the non-violent civil disobedience movement against the Raj. In the decades that followed, women showed active participation in freedom movement paving the way for some women only organizations. There were organizations by women like Saraladevi, who set up the Bharat Stree Mahamandal. It met for the first time in Allahabad in 1910. Soon many branches in Delhi, Lahore, Karachi, Amritsar, and Hyderabad were set up and it addressed many problems including Purdah, which to them was a stumbling block to accept female education.

When Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi came on the political scene, he could draw in a large number of women to the political arena by giving a very broad meaning of *swaraj*, and helping them find dignity in public life and a new place in the national mainstream. His views on many issues installed a new confidence among women and a consciousness that they could fight against oppression. As a result, a large number of women joined the civil disobedience movement during the thirties. Besides Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, there were thousands of other who were now readily participating in the freedom struggle. In 1931 the picketing Board in collaboration with Bengal Provincial Congress Committee was started to popularize the home industries, especially the spinning and weaving of khadi. Punjab saw the inauguration of the Civil Disobedience movement by taking a procession of five thousand women at Lahore in 1930 under the leadership of Lado Rani Zutshi and Parvati, the daughter of Lala Lajpat Rai. Durga Bai Deshmukh organized the women in Madras to carry forward the policies of the congress. The manufacture of salt, in defiance of the British laws prohibiting such manufacture, had a lot of symbolic value for the women. Here was a very private issue linked to the daily lives of the people in the kitchen, brought to the forefront of the public realm and a large number of women from villages also joined Gandhiji at Dandi. Gandhiji firmly believed that by nature women were non-violent and hence would be more successful in carrying out his programmes of picketing and non-cooperative movement.

Therefore when Gandhiji brought India's freedom struggle to the masses, women were very active participants in it. Throughout the freedom struggle when a large number of women were coming and participating they were only there in support roles. The male leadership at this time did not encourage a second line of leadership and women could assume leadership only when the men were in prison. Nehru refers to this in his discovery of India: most of us men folk were in prison and then a remarkable thing happened. Our women



came to the front and took charge of the struggle. Women had always been there of course, but now there was an upsurge of them, which took not only the British government but their own men folk by surprise. Here were these women, of the upper or middle classes, leading sheltered lives in their homes, peasant women, working women pouring out in tens and thousands in defiance of government order and police lathi. It was not only their display of courage and daring but what was even more surprising was the organizational power they showed. This was also the first time in Indian history when a large mass of women were mobilized for political purposes in a mass organization. Many of the women felt that their struggle was two pronged. They were fighting not only the British overlords but they had to fight against patriarchy in their homes too.

### **Third phase: 1947 to Present**

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 in India. Article 15(3) (INDIA, 1949) empowers the State to make special provisions for women. There were also a large number of policy documents which followed, but what really happened was that a great gap arose between the theoretical status of women and their rights as defined in these and what existed in reality.

Immediately after independence, India had to deal with a variety of problems. The joy of Independence was tempered by the sadness of partition and the migration of a large majority of people and the break up of communal violence in Punjab and Bengal. This was followed by war in Kashmir, the danger of territorial fragmentation, the dispersion of power among 600 princely states and, last but not the least, economic dislocation which was to affect women the most. Years of colonial domination had destroyed our indigenous crafts and depleted our natural resources. Industrialization, changing technologies, illiteracy, lack of mobility – all resulted in the inability of women to cope with the new order. Once their labour was regarded as unimportant in the productive market, their role in the family also became marginal, giving them a raw status, which became abysmal with the passage of time.

#### **1. The Period of Accommodation (1947-1960s)**

Women's participation in the freedom struggle developed their critical consciousness about their role and rights in independent India. This resulted in the introduction of the franchise and civic rights of women in the Indian constitution. The state adopted a patronizing role towards women. Women in India did not have to struggle for basic rights as did women in the West. This was a period primarily of accommodation. Some of the organisations took up constitutional measures such as The Marriage Act of 1954 and The Hindu Code Bill of 1955-56. These bills took up the issue of marriage, divorce, succession, guardianship and adoption. The Hindu Marriage Act made monogamy legal, outlawed polygamy among all Hindus, and conferred equal rights of divorce on both men and women. It also made inter-caste and interreligious marriages legal. It fixed the marriage age for boys and girls. It also made child marriage punishable. The Hindu Succession Act, 1956, The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956, The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, The Maternity Benefits Act, 1961 were some other acts during this period. The NFIW (National Federation of Indian Women), wing of Communist Party of India, established in 1954 by several leaders including ArunaAsafAli, worked for the empowerment of women and women's rights. The National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) is affiliated to the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), composed primarily of women from socialist countries.



## 2. The Period of Crisis (late 1960s-1975)

This period from the late sixties has been marked by economic crisis and stagnation, rising prices, increasing landlessness and generalised discontent both in rural and urban areas. This period is also associated with the Green revolution, which dramatically improved scientific agricultural techniques aimed at improving agricultural yield. It was very successful in India. Although food was more plentiful, farmers not wealthy enough to keep up with the technology got left in the dust. In 1971, the CPI(M) set up the Shramik Mahila Sangathan (Working Women's Organization), to mobilise women of the lower middle and working classes affected by the growing economic crisis and economic hardship. The anti-price rise movement (1973) was a united front composed of women from the CPI(M), Socialist, Congress and non-party middle-class housewives from urban areas in Western India, founded in 1974. The population base of this movement was the rural and the toiling.

In 1973-74 Maoist women formed the Progressive Organization of Women, initiating a self-consciously feminist critique of radical leftist politics along with an overarching analysis of gender oppression. This led to other Maoist women's organizations in Pune and Bombay, culminating in the first major celebration of March 8 as International Women's Day in 1975 (KUMAR, 1993). They took up issues like anti-dowry campaign, protests against eve teasing (the harassment of women in the street), obscenity, price rise, and against the hardships suffered by women living in slums. With the repression of the Emergency period, the organization disintegrated within only two years of its formation. However, this period saw the rise of many autonomous groups with different agendas and issues. Some of the common issues included the division of housework, party politics, rape, and dowry deaths. The issues of violence, popularly called atrocities against women, became the centrepiece of the movement in the early eighties and the cause for the movement's expansion. In the 1970s the New Women's movement attempted to revive the Uniform Civil Code within the framework of gender politics. But women's rights became articulated within a state-led reform agenda, reinscribing the concerns of national integrity, modernity, and progress.

It was in the year 1974 that the official Status of Women Commission published their report, *Towards Equality*, on women's low and ever decreasing status in Indian society. It focused attention on the fact that, despite many progressive social legislations and constitutional guarantees, women's status had indeed not improved much. It pointed out that women continued to have an inferior status in many areas like political, economic and social. It also stated some alarming facts with regards to employment, political participation and health status. The report pointed out to the sad fact that society had not yet succeeded in framing the required norms and institutions to enable women to fulfill their multiple roles. The increasing incidence of practices like dowry indicate a further lowering of the status of women. They also indicate a process of regression from some of the norms developed during the freedom movement. The report also pointed out that the concern for women and their problems which received an impetus during the freedom movement had suffered a decline in the last two decades (GOVERNMENT OF INDIA, 1975). To operationalize the recommendations of the *Towards Equality Report of 1974*, "A Blue Print of Action Points and National plan of Action for Women 1976" suggested measures in the area of education, health, family planning and nutrition, employment, social welfare and legal status and provisions. A separate chapter on Women and Development 1980-85 in the sixth five year plan resulted in women being perceived as productive contributors to the national economy. The seventh five year plan had a chapter on "socio-economic programmes for women" (1985-1989), which moved further away from a welfare approach to a more positive developmental one. The Indian parliament adopted a national policy on education (1986) which included a chapter on

education for women's equality. A national perspective plan for women was released in October 1988. The SAARC decade plan of action focused on the girl child (2000).

The Report pointed that the deep foundation of inequality is built in the minds through a socialization process, which continues to be extremely powerful. If education was to promote equality it must make a deliberate, planned and sustained effort. The educational system had not even attempted to undertake this responsibility. UGC (University Grants Commission), which was the nodal authority of higher education then, sent letters suggesting the starting of a program of Women's Studies and incorporating them in the curricula of Social Sciences for teaching and research. Many conferences, workshops and discussion groups took place to formulate clear guidelines, in order to help Universities, faculties, colleges and other institutions of higher learning to start such units.

The Towards Equality Report also raised the question of the Uniform Civil Code, appealing to earlier arguments but also squarely in the context of gender equity and justice. "The absence of the Uniform Civil Code, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, twenty-seven years after independence, is an incongruity that cannot be justified with all the emphasis that is placed on secularism, science and modernism. The continuance of various personal laws which accept discrimination between men and women violates the fundamental rights" (GOVERNMENT OF INDIA, 1975, p. 142). In India, we have a criminal code that is equally applicable to all, irrespective of religion, caste, gender and domicile. However, a similar code does not exist especially with respect to divorce and succession and we are still governed by the personal laws. These personal laws are varied in their sources, philosophy and application. Thus, a major constraint arises while bringing people governed by different religions under one roof.

In the post Independence period during the first few decades, the major concern was for overall economic growth. This was immediately followed by another decade, which witnessed an increased concern for equity and poverty alleviation. Gender issues were subsumed in poverty related concerns and there were no specific programs which aimed at women (GOVERNMENT OF INDIA, 1985). Women during this period were involved in such movements as the anti price, law and famine relief movement but did not start to pick up issues involving their oppression as women until the 1970's. Now increasingly there has been an emphasis on the promotion of Non-Governmental, grassroots level organizations (NGO's) for women's development. Some of these organizations have varied in their scope, objectives and vision but they have nevertheless provided women avenues of collectively voicing their concerns. These grass root organizations have questioned the welfare approach to women whereas they are primarily seen as beneficiary or recipients of programs and instead incorporated an empowerment participatory approach. While questions about the success of these organizations are often raised, it is often seen that women exposed to some amount of mobilization show great potentialities, receptiveness and defining capacities (Narayan BANERJEE, 1992).

### 3. 1975 to Present

Since 1975, there has been a steady increase in the number of women's welfare organizations in India. There were various issues that the Women's movement took up during this period against Liquor (PANDE, 2005c; PANDE, 2002), missing girl children (PANDE, 2004b), violence against women (PANDE *et al.*, 2008), 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 (Flavia AGNES, 1992). 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.

Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) was founded by the Civil Rights leader Ela Bhatt. Its aim is to provide full employment and self-reliance to women. Its aim for its workers is to be able to hold against tyranny from employers or the state and provide social security. Social security includes basic services that provide protection to workers and promote their wellbeing. It is the means through which workers can make their lives secure, safe and productive. It is an economic support to them. In fact, it is an economic security, as with these services and protection their economic situation is safeguarded. Once they have some social security, they do not slip deeper and deeper into poverty. A National Commission for Women was also set up on 31 January 1992. It hears complaints from women on refusal of rights, cruelties and other atrocities and redresses their grievances. In the post-independence period, the women's movement has concerned itself with a large number of issues such as dowry, violence against women, women's work, price rise, land rights, political participation of women, etc.

In the post-independence period there has not been any dearth of documents as far as women are concerned. We can see various shifts in position with regards to policy approach to women. There has been a shift from welfare to development to integrating women in development, of the earlier decades to empowerment in the present. The 73rd and 74th amendments of 1993 to Indian constitution, providing for reservation of seats for women in *panchayats* and municipalities, are a giant stride in the empowerment of women. With 33% reservation for women in rural and urban local bodies, fifteen years down the line today we have 1.2 million elected women representatives in the institutions of local governance in rural India (GOVERNMENT OF INDIA, 2008). Yet we are also witness to the hurdles and obstacles placed in passing the Bill providing for reservation in the Parliament. It is a well-known fact that the Parliament is a policy making body and the *panchayati* only an implementing one and hence the delay. The setting up of the National commission has also helped in creating an environment for the realization of women's equality.

There has been a progressive increase in the plan outlays over the last six decades of planned development to meet the needs of women and children. The outlay of Rs.4 crores in the First Plan (1951-56) has increased to Rs.7, 810.42 crores in the Ninth Five Year Plan, and Rs.13, 780 crores in the Tenth Five Year Plan. There has been a shift from "welfare" oriented approach in the First Five Year Plan to "development" and "empowerment" of women in the consecutive Five Year Plan. The Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) undertook a number of welfare measures through the voluntary sector. The programs of women were implemented through the National Extension Service Programs through Community Development Blocks. Since the Second Five Year Plan (1956-61), efforts were geared to organize *Mahila Mandals* (women's groups) at grass roots levels to ensure better implementation of welfare schemes. Third, Fourth, Fifth and other interim Plans (1961-74) accorded high priority to women's education. Measures to improve maternal and child health services, and supplementary feeding for children, nursing and expectant mothers were also introduced. But it is the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85) which adopted a multidisciplinary approach with a three-pronged thrust on health, education and employment of women. In the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90), the developmental programs for women were continued, with the objective of raising their economic and social status and to bring them in to the mainstream of national development. A very significant step therein was to identify and promote "beneficiary-oriented Programs", which extended direct benefits to women.

It was the Eighth Five Year Plan (1992-97) which brought about a shift from 'development' to 'empowerment' by introducing special programs. The flow of benefits to women in the three core sectors of education, health and employment were monitored vigorously. Women were enabled to function as equal partners and participants in the developmental process with reservation in the membership of local bodies. Some major initiatives undertaken during the Eighth Plan for women included the setting up of the National Commission for Women to work towards safeguarding the rights and interest of women, and of *Rashtriya Mahila Kosh* to meet the micro credit needs of poor and assetless women. Other initiatives included the adoption of a National Nutrition Policy in conformity with the Constitutional commitment to ensure an adequate nutritional standard for the people, the launching of the *Mahila Samridhi Yojana* to promote thrift activities amongst women and of *Indira Mahila Yojana* basically for awareness generation and the economic empowerment through self-help groups. The Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002) envisaged: the empowerment of women and socially disadvantaged groups such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes and Minorities as agents of socio-economic change and development. Promoting and developing people's participatory institutions like *Panchayathi Raj* institutions, cooperatives and self-help groups was also taken up. The Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-2007) was formulated to ensure requisite access of women to information, resources and services, and advance gender equality goals. It spoke of the need for gender Budgeting. The Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-2012) proposed to undertake special measures for gender empowerment and equity. The Ministry of Women and Child Development would make synergistic use of gender budget and gender mainstreaming process. The Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012-2017) focused on four key aspects, viz., health, education, urbanization and governance. It also focused on single women, particularly those who are single by choice, and provided assistance under various government schemes. It also emphasized that special provisions be made with regard to education, for there are multiple factor that hinder women and girls from developing their full potentials such as lack of income, unsafe environment in the schools, curriculum not attuned to women's needs etc. It also emphasized that Gender Studies should be incorporated into the academic curriculum.

## Doing Gender in India

The setting of Women's Studies was part of the women's movement. It aimed to provide information and analysis about the lives of women, which would end gender inequalities and women's subordination. It would critique existing knowledge forms to show how and why women's lives, views and perspectives remained largely hidden in the existing academic disciplines. It emerged more as an offshoot of the concern of the society towards women's position and problems. Its birth can be traced to the recognition of a failure on the part of social scientists to enquire into women's issues, their lack of questioning of the assumptions, theories and tools of analysis borrowed from the West and to bridge the glaring gaps in data that might help orient policy changes. This was because many of the Social Scientists and educational planners had not found it necessary to re-examine the concepts and methodological approaches in terms of the social reality obtained in India. Women's Studies thus started as part of a larger social movement and the growing social concern among few academicians with the widening issues of poverty, unemployment, inequality and underdevelopment. Its aim gradually evolved into bringing about greater knowledge on the social basis of women's inequality, their marginalization in development and their exclusions from centers of powers and power structures. In sum, the evasion of the women's question or the unsatisfactory treatment of this issue was a major cause that simulated a yearning for the subject.

The introduction of Women's Studies into the university system has been a path breaking event for social scientists and other scholars who want to see a comprehensive and balanced presentation of our social reality. Women's Studies is viewed as an instrument for social and academic development that will help the university community and the society at large acquire a better understanding of the multi-dimensional roles played by women and look into the causes for gender disparity (PANDE, 2004a, p. 54). For the past few decades, the world community is focusing on the issues concerning gender disparity leading to serious social imbalances. The education system all over has responded by establishing Women's Studies to develop new scholarship and a body of studies from the perspective of women.

Across the world today Women Studies have continued to critically engage with the notion of power and to radically transform the intellectual landscape. There has been recognition that knowledge is also a form of capital, to which some individuals and groups have better access than others. This then becomes a source of power for exerting control. As a result, social structural inequalities of race, nation, class, caste or gender correlate with asymmetries in the production, reproduction and deployment of social scientific knowledge (Patricia UBEROI, 1993, p. 244). Fundamental to feminism is the premise that women have been left out of codified knowledge, where men have formulated explanations in relation to themselves and have generally rendered women invisible or classified them as deviant. The description and analysis of women as autonomous human being has been one of the most significant contribution made by feminism (Cheris KRAMARAE; Dale SPENDER, 1993). The emphasis on a feminist perspective meant a realization of power relations inherent in current knowledge frameworks and practice in terms of who has access to that knowledge, how it was distilled and eventually how meaning was encoded (SPENDER, 1981). Though feminism has made critical use of past male theories despite their gender blindness, it was recognized that it was necessary to develop feminist theories and concepts which saw women as primary to theorizing. But it meant not being content with this but opening a new world.

## **The First National Conference of women's studies**

The first National Conference on Women's Studies held in SNDT University in 1981 aptly defined Women's Studies for the Indian context. It stated,

by Women's Studies we do not mean merely focusing on women's experiences, problems, needs, perceptions etc. in the context of development and social change with a view to integrating this neglected area within the scope of higher education but viewing it as a critical instrument to improve our knowledge about society which at present remains partial, biased, projecting only a view of social reality derived from a male perspective (SNDT, 1981).

Women's Studies in the Indian context is a study of women. Does this mean that women have not existed or been studied before? What is different here is that it is demarcated as a scientific enquiry and this enquiry has an approach that has been much different from all preceding ones because its purpose is different. This purpose has emerged from a particular conjunction of events that pushed women's concerns into public attention (Maithreyi KRISHNARAJ, 1988).

## **UNESCO Workshop and Women's Studies**

The publication of the Status of Women in India Report saw the beginning of a whole lot of activities, both by public minded organizations as well as government agencies to understand and analyze the suppressed status of women, to trace its origins and manifestations

and to grapple with measures for remedying it. One major field of activity that was identified was education, both towards increasing women's literacy and knowledge as well as education on women's concerns and social positions. The First National Conference of Women's Studies was held in Bombay and highlighted some of these concerns and tried to define women's studies. This meeting also led to the birth of the Indian Association of Women's Studies – a national organization that seeks to bring together academics, activists, policy makers and administrators in the cause of women's development. It has ever since sought to focus the attention of the nation, particularly its educational agencies, on the need to promote better understanding of women's issues. The UNESCO Meeting of experts on women's studies and social sciences in Asia, held in New Delhi in 1982, defined Women's Studies in terms of the objectives that such studies sought to achieve. These included promoting a better and balanced understanding of our societies and how they are responding to the process of change. It aimed to contribute to the pursuit of human rights and to assist men and women in understanding, recognizing and giving due importance to the roles actually played by women and men. Such studies should also help in investigating the causes of disparity, analyzing structural factors in addition to attitudinal and cultural factors. It also meant to empower women in their struggle for equality and for an effective presence in all areas of society and development. Finally these studies should attempt to make the invisible women visible and in particular the women from the most unprivileged strata (UNESCO Report, Samya Shakti, 1983).

### **Establishment of Women's Studies Centers and Cells**

Following the recommendations of the First National Conference on Women's Studies, held in Bombay in 1981 and the UNESCO workshop in 1982, the Secretary of the University Grants Commission had sent a circular letter to the Vice Chancellors of the various Universities to suggest the starting of a program of Women's Studies and incorporating them in the curricula of Social Sciences for teaching and research. Many conferences, workshops and discussion groups took place to formulate clear guidelines, in order to help universities, faculties, colleges and other institutions of higher learning to start such units as well as reinvigorate the existing units and centers on Women's Studies.

In India we have not defined Women's Studies narrowly as studies about women or information about women, but viewed it as a critical instrument for social change and development in the context of Asian social reality. Women's Studies would help us in better understanding inequality and imbalance in the social system. Women's Studies should lead to the pursuit of a more comprehensive, critical and balanced understanding of social reality which should include aspects like women's contributions to the social process, women's perception of their own lives and the broader social reality. Women Studies here also focuses on the roots and structures of inequality that led to marginalization, invisibility and exclusion of women from major areas within the society and the country (PANDE, 2005a, p. 125). Between 1983 and 1986, the UGC initiated a few steps in this direction. Apart from co-sponsoring various seminars, the UGC established a standing committee on Women's Studies. In December 1985, this standing committee established specific organizational structures and an action plan to begin some organized activities for women's studies in the universities and colleges. It identified seven Universities from various parts of India to play a leadership role in curriculum, material and human development and to carry out research (Standing committee, UGC, 1985, p. 8). In all the UGC has funded 22 centers and 11 cells since 1986. Yet in a report the UGC did recognize that there is much that still needs to be done (UGC, 1997, p. 4). It felt that the Centers could play a significant role in facilitating the national goals of removal of



poverty and discrimination. The current configuration of the centers is such that there are differences among them in their age group, skills, location within the University in terms of the universities own priorities as well as in leadership. Today these Centers' primary role is knowledge assimilation and knowledge transmission through teaching, research, field action and documentation. They fulfill several related and complimentary roles for the academic community as well as for the activists, policy makers and policy implementers (PANDE, 2005b, p. 126).

Today there are 163 Centres of Women's Studies spread across the country. The UGC has recognized the interventionist role played by these Centers by initiating gender perspectives in many domains, in the generation of knowledge, in the field of policy design and practice. These Centers were designed to act as catalysts for promoting and strengthening women's studies through teaching, research, action, field work and extension. It recognized the role of these centers in contributing to the visibility of women's issues, tried to combine erudite knowledge with socially relevant theories and success in opening up a dialogue in multi-disciplinary collaborations (PANDE, 2013, p. 6).

However, again today, as we write this article there have been some new developments. There was a circular which stated that the Women's Studies Centers will not be receiving any funding after the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> Plan. Uncertainties regarding what would happen after the end of the 12th Plan in March (along with the end of such plans in general) were temporarily allayed when on the 29th of March the UGC issued a public notice stating that all existing Plan schemes would continue for the fiscal year 2017-18. However, on the 16th of June, UGC published a revised notice (dt 9th June) that ongoing schemes under the Plan Head would continue and expenditures therein would be admitted only up to September 2017. By September 2017 the UGC is planning to close these by withdrawing or suspending support. There has been a lot of activism around this issue. The Indian Association of Women's Studies (IAWS) is planning to take a mass delegation to the HRD Minister, lobbying with MPs from all parties during the monsoon session of Parliament and build a movement against this step. These centers need to be strengthened and supported in financial and intellectual terms, rather than this summary withdrawal of support.

Hence, to conclude, 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 middle class 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. 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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### **História do feminismo e fazendo gênero na Índia**

**Resumo:** O presente trabalho examina a base histórica do surgimento do feminismo, do movimento de mulheres e do fazendo gênero na Índia. Não só na Índia como em todo o mundo há uma grande proximidade entre o feminismo e o movimento das mulheres, com um inspirando e enriquecendo o outro. No contexto indiano, enquanto que o movimento das mulheres é um fenômeno mais antigo, o termo Feminismo é bem mais atual. O feminismo engloba vários movimentos sociais, culturais e políticos, teorias e filosofias morais preocupados com desigualdades de gênero e direitos iguais para as mulheres. Na era pré-independência, o movimento das mulheres começou como um movimento de reforma social no século XIX. Nessa época, a ideia ocidental de liberdade, igualdade e fraternidade vinha sendo absorvida pela elite intelectual por meio do estudo do inglês e do contato com o Ocidente. Esse liberalismo se estendeu para a questão da mulher e se transformou num movimento de reforma social. No

*período pós-independência, durante as primeiras décadas, a maior preocupação era o crescimento econômico, seguido por uma crescente preocupação com equidade e diminuição da pobreza. Questões de gênero eram vistas como parte da desigualdade econômica e não havia programas específicos, centrados nas mulheres. No período pós-independência, o movimento das mulheres se preocupava com um grande número de questões, como dote, trabalho feminino, aumento de preços, direito à terra, participação política das mulheres, direitos das mulheres Dalit e de mulheres marginalizadas, fundamentalismo crescente, representação da mulher na mídia - problemas adotados por um grande número de Organizações Não-Governamentais. Os Estudos sobre a Mulher e os Estudos de Gênero são uma consequência da longa história dos movimentos das mulheres na Índia. Vários centros de estudos sobre a mulher foram criados, hoje fadados a desaparecer apesar de muita luta. Embora muito ainda tenha que ser feito e existam vários impedimentos para que um grande número de mulheres seja incluído, o movimento de mulheres trouxe importantes questões para o centro das discussões, dando-lhes maior visibilidade.*

**Palavras-chave:** movimento de mulheres; feminismo, subordinação; luta pela liberdade; Organizações Não-Governamentais

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