

MISCONCEPTION OF FEMINISM AS A WESTERN CONCEPT IN INDIA

Dr. Chitwan Varma,

Associate Professor,
Sh. JNPG College, Lucknow.

This article endeavours to take an overview of the conceptual history of the idea of feminism in India especially as , the misconception of Feminism being a western concept is omnipresent. Such is the negative response to being called a feminist, that even while being a feminist in action and deed no one , including renowned personalities, want to associate with the term 'Feminism' with their name. This is largely due to the erroneous belief regarding the connotations attached to the western Feminism of the radical protests by feminist groups especially in America in 1960's.

Feminism can be defined as the belief in social, economic and political equality of the sexes. Although largely originating in the west feminism is manifested worldwide and is represented by various institutions committed to activity on behalf of women's rights and interests. In the west it started as a movement for women's emancipation that advocates for gender equal rights alongside equal access to public life.

In response to the persons who still insist on having the fallacious belief that feminism is a western concept here is an extract from the 'Some Questions on Feminism and its Relevance in South Asia'- a dialogue between Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan.on this same query Kamla Bhasin responds as follows;

What is interesting is that this allegation is made most forcefully by those men (and some women) who are themselves very western, who have been to English medium schools and colleges, and who themselves speak English, wear western clothes and so on. Such allegations are however never made about modern science or "modernization all result of /westemization" The same people do not question

the foreign origin of the parliamentary or presidential systems for instance, the development of capitalism of private ownership of land and absentee land-lordism, or of the ideology of the Left. Granted that the term "feminism was not born in South Asia but then neither were the industrial revolution, Marxism, socialism or for that matter some of our religions. Einstein was not born in Lahore, Marx in Calcutta or Lenin in Dhaka, yet their western origins have not made their ideas irrelevant for us. Nor should they be considered irrelevant, because an idea cannot be confined within national or geographic boundaries. In any case the term feminism may be foreign, the concept stands for a transformational process, a process which started in South Asia in the 19th Century as an organized and articulated stand against women's subordination. Thus feminism was not artificially imposed here, nor was it a foreign ideology. Feminism and feminist struggles arose in Asia when a consciousness development about democratic rights and the injustice of depriving half the population of its basic rights In fact feminist consciousness arose in Asia during certain historic periods of heightened political consciousness, especially in the 19 and early 20 centuries, during struggles against foreign rule and against the local despotism of feudal monarchs. The voices against women subordination during this period took the form of a demand for the possibility of widow remarriage, for a ban on polygamy, the practices of sati and of purdah, and demands for the education and emancipation of women.

Another misconception is about the term 'feminist' which has extremely negative and ambivalent connotations to its use and association. Again Kamla Bhasin gives an example of a speech by SrojiniNaidu. "In our country we have suffered for

centuries; women have been the harijans of our society" the speaker goes on in this vein on the theme of women's oppression, takes a pause-and then a strong statement: "But...I am not a feminist!" the speaker could be a women prime minister professional or artist- all strong women who very possibly, have fought all their lives to succeed in a man's world. We are amazed to hear. "I am not a feminist coming from them, and wait for them to explain what they mean by feminist Invariably, no such explanation is given. The categorical way in which they say "I am not a feminist" does not simply mean that they are not feminist; the implication is that it is not good to be one that those who are, are somehow misled and irrelevant.

Hearing such statements we cannot help wondering why people feel the need to condemn something that many people take seriously. We can only conclude that they haven't given feminism any thought at all. All we can understand is that they have imbibed the considerable false propaganda against feminists and feminism. The media for example, which is controlled to a large extent by men, has been responsible for a widespread misrepresentation of feminist as "bra-burning", "man-hating". "family destroying" women.

This propaganda reinforced by other forces and groups that see the emancipation and liberation of women as a threat with the result that feminist in our countries are attacked and dismissed as "middle class., westernized" and "rootless women". The facts, however, are that feminist in South Asia have never burnt their bras, even symbolically. Large numbers are married, have children and run their homes as well as or as badly as any other women. The question then is why feminist are subject to so much attack and why feminist is so often misunderstood. We believe that this is because few people have bothered to try and understand what it actually is and what feminist are try to do.

A broad definition of feminist for us today (which was accepted by women from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Srilanka in a recent South Asian workshop) is, "An awareness of women's

oppression and exploitation in society at work and within family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation."

According to this definition anyone who recognizes the existence of sexism (discrimination on the basis of gender), male domination and patriarchy and who takes some action against it, is a feminist. From this definition it is clear that a mere recognition of sexism is not enough, it has to be accompanied by action, by a challenge to male domination. But this action can take any form. For instance woman's decision not to be humiliated, or to educate herself and pursue a career, or her refusal to be restricted by purdah, or her decision not to have children are, as feminist actions, as relevant as the most organized struggles. In other words you don't have to belong to a group to be a feminist, although in order to do anything effectively it is much better to be part of one.

The main difference between earlier feminist and present day ones is that earlier, the struggle was for the democratic rights of women. It includes the right to education and employment; the right to own property; the right to vote, the right to enter parliament, the right to birth control the right to divorce etc in other words earlier feminists fought for legal reform, for a legally equal position in society, the struggle were, essentially, outside the home and the family, Today, feminist have gone beyond mere legal reform to end discrimination. they are working towards the emancipation of women.

Feminism therefore now includes the struggle against the women's subordination to the male with in the home, their exploitation by the male with in the home: against their exploitation by the family, against their continuing low status at work, in society and in the culture and religion of the country against their double burden in production and reproduction. In addition, feminism challenges the very notions of femininity and masculinity as mutually exclusive, biologically determined categories. Thus feminist see the women do not only fight against discrimination but also for emancipation and liberation from all forms of

oppression by the state, by society, and by men. Since women are victims of exploitation (eg Unequal pay, low wages), subordination (eg Under male domination), oppression (eg Violence against women), they are in a position to understand the problem facing other women, and know that and we have to initiate the struggle to change our situation and society itself in its essence then, present day feminism is a struggle for the achievement of women's equality, dignity and freedom of choice to control our lives and bodies within and outside home.

Feminists seek the removal of all forms of inequality, domination and oppression through the creation of a just, social and economic order at home both nationally and all over the world. Feminism liberates both men and women from the roles that society expects and associates them with. Society demands stereotype roles and behaviour from men and women and conditions them to the same. On one hand it oppresses women and on the other hand it dehumanises men under false machoism by asking them "not to cry", "to be angry and assertive" while it enforces women to be "feminine" and not to "climb trees" or be tomboyish. These autocratic norms or constructions of masculinity or femininity lead to stigmatisation of people who move away from the norm. It is also in the purview of Feminist ideology to protect and fight for them.

Our society is profoundly entrapped by patriarchy and most men behave in a very misogynistic manner as they are conditioned to do so while observing their fathers and their behaviour towards their mothers and women in general. Patriarchy as a structure rests on inequality where women are dominated by men. This domination mostly though not always, oppresses women. Without this inequality, domination and oppression and acknowledgement of patriarchy this system will collapse. Again it is the purview of Feminist study to recognise acknowledge patriarchy and its members to show courage to put an end to injustice, biases resulting from patriarchy.

Feminist movement, though known to have emerged as an influence in India from America in 1990's but initially it was spearheaded by men and women who were anti-caste feminists like B.R.Ambedkar, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Savitribhai Phule, Ramaswamy Periyar, Tarabhai Shinde etc. 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. Other reformers like 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 Vidya Sagar 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 Mahipatramruprath in Ahmedabad (1892), Shri Zorastrian 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.

Feminism comprises a number of social, cultural and political movements, theories and moral viewpoints concerned with gender inequalities and equal rights for women. In the pre-independence era, the women's crusade began as a social reform movement in the 19th 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 broadmindedness was extended to the women's welfare and was resulted 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 incorporated 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.. 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 resulting from this idea and influence of western Feminist movement.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- *Bhasin, Kamla; Khan, Nighat Said (1986). Some questions on feminism and its relevance in South Asia. New Delhi: [Kali for Women](#).*
- Delhi, 1986 Flavia Agnes Women's Education, *Political Participation and Constitutional Claims Of Equality*. Paper presented at the seminar on Transforming Gender
- Kumar, Radha. 'The History of Doing' 10 January 2016 at the Wayback Machine, *Kali for Women*, New Delhi, 1998.

Copyright © 2014, Dr. Chitwan Varma. This is an open access refereed article distributed under the creative common attribution license which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.