

Reframing Equality: Feminism in Contemporary India

Dr.Tanuja Kumari

Assistant Professor, University Department of History,BBMKU,Dhanbad

Abstract

Feminism in contemporary India represents a diverse, evolving, and deeply intersectional social movement that seeks to challenge gender-based inequalities across cultural, economic, political, and digital spaces. Rooted in the reformist ideologies of the nineteenth century and shaped by the socio-political dynamics of post-Independence India, the feminist movement today is a complex network of struggles against patriarchy, caste discrimination, religious marginalization, labour exploitation, and digital exclusion.

Introduction

Feminism in India is neither monolithic nor linear; instead, it is the result of multiple historical trajectories, social negotiations, and ideological shifts (Sharma, 2019, p. 12). As a movement, it challenges patriarchal power structures that manifest across institutions such as the family, state, market, and religious communities. The contemporary feminist landscape is shaped by its dialogue with the past—especially the reformist movements of the nineteenth century—and its ongoing engagement with issues of identity, citizenship, representation, and bodily autonomy. Unlike Western feminist traditions that often foreground individual rights, Indian feminism frequently intertwines personal freedom with community obligations, collective struggles, and structural inequality (Kumar, 2020, p. 18). This duality is what makes the contemporary Indian feminist movement particularly rich in analytical depth.

Observations

Historical Background and Foundations

The roots of Indian feminism trace back to early social reformers such as Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai, and Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who challenged oppressive practices including child marriage, sati, caste-based exclusion, and the denial of women's education (Kumar, 2020, p. 18). Their work laid the foundation for feminist thought that interrogated

both gender and caste simultaneously. During the nationalist movement, women participated in large numbers, yet their political mobilization was often framed within the discourse of sacrificial motherhood and nationalist duty (Sen, 2018, p. 27). After Independence, feminist activism saw major transformations in the 1970s following the publication of the Committee on the Status of Women in India Report (1974–75), which exposed systemic discrimination in employment, education, and political representation (Sen, 2018, p. 29).

From the 1980s onwards, women's movements focused on issues such as dowry deaths, custodial rape, domestic violence, labour rights, and reproductive health (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 86). These struggles expanded feminist discourse and brought structural violence onto the mainstream political agenda.

In recent decades, Indian feminism has diversified tremendously, with new voices emerging from Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, queer, and disabled communities (Patel, 2021, p. 34). Each community articulates its own specific experiences and struggles, contributing to a broader multivocal feminist movement. Dalit feminism, for example, challenges the caste-blindness of upper-caste feminist narratives and foregrounds the lived experiences of caste-gender violence (Rege, 2003, p. 55). Muslim women's movements have interrogated both patriarchal interpretations of religious law and Islamophobic state policies (Fatima, 2020, p. 69). Queer and transgender feminists have expanded the boundaries of feminist theory by highlighting gender as a spectrum shaped by social norms and legal frameworks.

National events such as the 2012 Nirbhaya movement, the 2015 Pinjra Tod campaign, and the 2018 #MeToo wave catalysed mass mobilization and reshaped feminist activism across campuses, workplaces, and public spaces (Menon, 2020, p. 41). These movements connected personal experiences of violence with public calls for accountability, reform, and justice.

Intersectionality in Indian Feminism
The concept of intersectionality—first articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw—has become

central to contemporary Indian feminist theory. Indian intersectional feminism acknowledges that gender cannot be understood in isolation from caste, class, religion, region, sexuality, language, and disability (Rege, 2003, p. 57). Dalit feminist scholars argue that Brahmanical patriarchy functions through caste hierarchy and endogamy, shaping the everyday experiences of Dalit and Adivasi women. Muslim women activists highlight how communal violence, stereotyping, and legal debates intersect with their gendered struggles (Fatima, 2020, p. 71). Rural women emphasize land rights, forest rights, displacement, and ecological struggles as central feminist issues (Xaxa, 2016, p. 62). Thus, intersectionality is not merely a theoretical lens but a lived reality shaping feminist movements in India.

Digital Feminism and Online Activism

Digital technology has transformed feminist activism in India, democratizing political participation while also introducing new vulnerabilities. Hashtag campaigns such as #MeTooIndia, #WhyLoiter, and #GirlsAtDhabas amplified feminist voices and created networks of solidarity across class and geographic boundaries (Sarkar, 2021, p. 75). Social media platforms have enabled survivors of sexual harassment to narrate their experiences without institutional mediation, challenging long-standing cultures of silence. Digital feminism has also reclaimed public spaces, challenged restrictive hostel rules, and questioned the policing of women's bodies (Joshi, 2022, p. 80).

However, digital spaces are deeply unequal. Women, especially from rural and marginalized communities, face limited access to smartphones, internet connectivity, and digital literacy. Moreover, online harassment, cyberstalking, doxxing, and misogynistic trolling pose serious risks to feminist activists. Digital surveillance by both state and private actors further complicates the landscape of online feminism, raising questions about security, privacy, and censorship.

Challenges to Contemporary Feminism

Despite significant progress, feminism in India faces persistent challenges across multiple domains. Patriarchy remains deeply rooted in cultural norms, influencing decision-making within families, communities, and institutions (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 86). Caste

discrimination continues to fragment feminist solidarity, as Dalit and Adivasi voices remain underrepresented in mainstream discourse. Communal polarization has created further divisions, with minority women often caught between religious conservatism and state-led majoritarian politics.

Economic inequalities also disproportionately affect women. Wage gaps, informal labour exploitation, lack of maternity benefits, and limited representation in leadership roles hinder women's socio-economic mobility (Patel, 2021, p. 37). Violence against women—including domestic violence, sexual harassment, trafficking, and honour killings—remains a pervasive issue despite legal reforms. Feminist activism also faces backlash, with movements being labelled “anti-family,” “anti-nation,” or “Western,” which delegitimizes their efforts and endangers activists.

Conclusion

Feminism in contemporary India is an evolving, intersectional movement that continues to adapt to changing socio-political landscapes. While the country has witnessed major feminist achievements—from legal reforms to grassroots mobilization—many challenges remain unresolved. Advancing gender justice requires sustained institutional reforms, inclusive policy-making, intersectional solidarity, and continuous public engagement (Roy, 2022, p. 103). As feminism expands into digital and transnational spaces, it holds the potential to reshape societal norms and build a more egalitarian future.

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