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History of Feminist Geography in India

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Introduction - Feminism involves political, cultural and sociological theories, as well as philosophies concerned with issues of gender difference. It is also a movement that advocates gender equality for women and campaigns for women's rights and interests According to Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker, the history of feminism can be divided into three waves. The first feminist wave was in the nineteenth and early twentieth century's, the second was in the 1960s and 1970s, and the third extends from the 1990s to the present. Feminist theory emerged from these feminist movements. It is manifest in a variety of disciplines such as feminist geography, feminist history and feminist literary criticism. Pre-colonial social structures and women's role in them reveal that feminism was theorized differently in India than in the west. Colonial idea of "Indian culture" and reconstruction of Indian womanhood as the epitome of that culture through social reform movements resulted in political theorization in the form of nationalism rather than as feminism alone.

Types of Feminism: Feminism is not a simple or unified philosophy. Many different women (and men) call themselves feminists, and the beliefs of these groups of people vary quite a bit. Here's a quick primer on some of the different kinds of feminism.

Liberal Feminism: Liberal feminism is characterized by an individualistic emphasis on equality. According to this philosophy, society itself does not need a major service, but rather laws need to be changed and opportunities have to be opened up to allow women to become equals in society. To a liberal feminist, evidence of progress is seen largely by the numbers of women in positions previous occupied by men, especially powerful positions. In the United States and much of the Western world, liberal feminism is the most mainstream form of feminism.

Socialist Feminism: Socialist feminism or Marxist feminism connects the oppression of women to Marxist ideas about exploitation, oppression and labor. Socialist feminists think unequal standing in both the workplace and the domestic sphere holds women down. Socialist feminists see prostitution, domestic work, childcare and marriage as ways in which women are exploited by a patriarchal system that devalues women and the substantial work they do. Socialist feminists focus their energies on broad change that affects society as a whole, rather than on an individual basis. They see the need to work alongside not just men, but all other groups, as they see the oppression of women as a part of a larger pattern that affects everyone involved in the capitalist system.

Marx felt when class oppression was overcome; gender oppression would vanish as well. According to some socialist feminists, this view of gender oppression as a sub-class of class oppression is naive and much of the work of socialist feminists has gone towards separating gender phenomena from class phenomena. Some contributors to socialist feminism have criticized these traditional Marxist ideas for being largely silent on gender oppression except to subsume it underneath broader class oppression. Other socialist feminists, many of whom, belong to Radical Women and the Freedom Socialist Party.

Radical Feminism: Radical feminism is similar to socialist feminism in that it emphasizes the need for dramatic social change in order to achieve genuine equality for women (and sometimes these two philosophies are grouped together). Radical feminists believe that society is extremely patriarchal, and until patriarchy is transformed on all levels, the system will remain unjust. A minority of radical feminists are *separatist feminists*, who believe that men and women need to maintain separate institutions and relationships.

Third Wave Feminism: Third Wave feminism is popular among younger women, many of whom are children of feminists from the 1970s (who are referred to as Second Wave Feminists). Similar to liberal feminism, Third Wave feminism is very individualistic. Although it does not reject political activism, Third Wave feminism is focused more on personal empowerment as a starting place for social change. Third Wave feminism celebrates the construction of individual identities in a complex, postmodern world, and invites women to define themselves as they wish from the smorgasbord of possibilities.

Feminist Geography (Gender Geography) in India: The history of feminism in India is regarded as mainly a practical effort and mostly non-existent. Compared to some other

countries there has been only sparse theoretical writing in feminism. Feminist geography in India examines how space, place, and environment are constructed through gender inequalities and patriarchal norms. It focuses on the spatial restrictions placed on women in public/private spheres, the intersection of caste and gender in accessing resources, and the localized nature of resistance, such as rural activism or urban protests. The term feminism can be used to describe a political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. The growth trajectory of the subfield within the Indian context however has been markedly different. Unlike western contexts, an intellectual debate challenging the inherent androcentricity of the discipline, and arguments for the inclusion of a gender did not occur.

Defining Feminism in the Indian context: Pre-colonial social structures and women's role in them reveal that feminism was theorized differently in India than in the west. Colonial idea of "Indian culture" and reconstruction of Indian womanhood as the epitome of that culture through social reform movements resulted in political theorization in the form of nationalism rather than as feminism alone.

Key aspects of the gender geography of Indian feminism include:

1. **Spatial Control & Public/Private Divide:** Indian feminism confronts deeply gendered realities where public spaces are often dominated by men, while women's mobility is restricted. Girls face stricter controls on movement compared to boys, limiting their access to education and economic opportunities.
2. **Intersectionality of Caste and Class:** Feminist geography in India emphasizes that gender inequality cannot be separated from caste and class. Rural dalit women often face intense marginalization, experiencing the worst of both gender and caste-based discrimination in access to public infrastructure.
3. **Localized Resistance and Activism:** Resistance takes forms that suit local spaces, such as the *Meira Paibi* (women activists) protests in Manipur, the anti-CAA protests led by women in Shaheen Bagh, or rural women leading environmental movements like Chipko.
4. **The Geography of Empowerment:** Research since the 1980s has grown to map women's agency, tracing how women negotiate, redefine, and reclaim spaces—such as public transport, workplaces, and rural landscapes—to challenge patriarchal hierarchies.
5. **Academic and Structural Focus:** In Indian academia, the study of the "Geography of Gender" has emerged,, particularly in the 21st century, focusing on the uneven development and the lack of women's participation in traditional geographical knowledge.

This field argues that understanding Indian women's struggles requires looking at their physical and social location, which shapes their experience of feminism. Historical circumstances and values in India make women's issues different from the western feminist rhetoric. The idea of women as "powerful" is accommodated into patriarchal culture through religion. This has retained visibility in all sections of society; by providing women with traditional "cultural spaces". Another consideration is that whereas in the West the notion of "self" rests in competitive individualism where people are described as "born free yet everywhere in chains", by contrast in India the individual is usually considered to be just one part of the larger social collective, dependent for its survival upon cooperation and self-denial for the greater good.

Indian feminist scholars and activists have to struggle to carve a separate identity for feminism in India. They define feminism in time and space in order to avoid the uncritically following Western ideas. Indian women negotiate survival through an array of oppressive patriarchal family structures: age, ordinal status, and relationship to men through family of origin, marriage and procreation as well as patriarchal attributes - dowry, siring sons etc. - kinship, caste, community, village, market and the state. It should however be noted that several communities in India, such as the Nair's of Kerala, certain Maratha clans, and Bengali families exhibit **matriarchal tendencies**, with the head of the family being the oldest women rather than the oldest man. Sikh culture is also regarded as relatively gender-neutral.

The heterogeneity of Indian experience reveals that there are multiple patriarchies and so also are there multiple feminisms. Hence feminism in India is not a singular theoretical orientation; it has changed over time in relation to historical and cultural realities, levels of consciousness, perceptions and actions of individual women and women as a group. The widely used definition is **"An awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation".** Acknowledging sexism in daily life and attempting to challenge and eliminate it through deconstructing mutually exclusive notions of femininity and masculinity as biologically determined categories opens the way towards an equitable society for both men and women.

The male and female dichotomy of polar opposites with the former oppressing the latter at all times is refuted in the Indian context because it was mostly men who initiated social reform movements against various social evils. Patriarchy is just one of the hierarchies. Relational hierarchies between women within the same family are more adverse. Here women are pitted against one another. **Not all women are powerless at all times**. Caste-community identities intensify all other hierarchies. The polytheistic Hindu pantheon provides revered images of women as unique and yet complementary to those of male deities.

History of Feminism in India:

First phase: 1850–1915: The colonial venture into modernity brought concepts of democracy, equality and

individual rights. The rise of the concept of nationalism and introspection of discriminatory practices brought about social reform movements related to caste and gender relations. This first phase of feminism in India was initiated by men to uproot the social evils of sati (widow immolation), to allow widow remarriage, to forbid child marriage, and to reduce illiteracy, as well as to regulate the age of consent and to ensure property rights through legal intervention. Women in this phase were categorized along with lower castes as subjects of social reforms and welfare instead of being recognized as autonomous agents of change. The emphasis was on recreating new space in pre-existing feminine roles of caring. The women involved were those related to male activists, elite, western educated, upper caste Hindus.

Second Phase: 1915–1947: During this period the struggle against colonial rule intensified. Nationalism became the pre-eminent cause. Claiming Indian superiority became the tool of cultural revivalism resulting in an essentializing model of Indian womanhood similar to that of Victorian womanhood, special yet separated from public space. Gandhi legitimized and expanded Indian women's public activities by initiating them into the non-violent civil disobedience movement against the British Raj. He exalted their feminine roles of caring, self-abnegation, sacrifice and tolerance; and carved a niche for those in public space. Women-only organizations like All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) emerged. Women were grappling with the issues relating to the scope of women's political participation, women's franchise, communal awards, and leadership roles in political parties.

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. There was provision for women's upliftment through affirmative action, maternal health and child care provision, equal pay for equal work etc. 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. The utopia ended soon when the social and cultural ideologies and structures failed to honor the newly acquired concepts of fundamental rights and democracy.

Conclusion: Yes, some people say feminism is outdated and unnecessary. They say women needed it a hundred years ago when they couldn't vote or own property. But now women are Supreme Court Justices and space-shuttle pilots. Nowadays, girls can be anything, and feminism sounds like a relic to some people. Sure the women's rights movement opened doors, their thinking goes, but is feminism still relevant. The answer is **yes** for a number of reasons. When I talk with young women, like the high school and college students, I see women who are not afraid to go after their dreams, and their dreams are indeed big. I am proud that they and my daughters are growing up in a world where their opportunities appear limitless. But I also hear a lot of concerns about how the world isn't as fair as we'd like. In schools and on college campuses, some girls are being harassed, even assaulted, by boys. Many girls remain reluctant to raise their hands in class, and they still feel unsafe walking home by themselves late at night.

Pop culture and advertisers bombard girls with harmful messages about how they should look—telling them they have to be thin, pretty, and sexy, no matter what career they aspire to. Many young women see reproductive freedom as their birthright, yet that fight remains under constant attack. Women are still paid less than men for the same jobs, and few women are running major corporations. And the United States still hasn't elected a woman President or Vice President. You can have all the opportunity in the world, but it doesn't count if you don't feel safe, your body is not your own, and you're not respected and appreciated for who you are. The bottom line is that opportunity for women must translate into real social progress.

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