

## Contours of Feminism: An Understanding of Contemporary Gender Issues in India

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### Abstract

*Feminists have challenged the understandings of social structures, processes and agencies by using gender as a critical lens to examine contemporary issues in feminism. For this, one had to foreground women's subject positions and their lived experiences as the basis of feminist epistemological claims, thus strengthening standpoint theories and the idea of situated knowledge. Feminism brought in the categories of gender and patriarchy to critique power framed in "modernity" as well as "tradition" into their classically framed binaries. In the Indian context, Feminism has demonstrated the idea of the traditional Indian society as a product of colonialism as well of the institutions of power anchored on patriarchy. The present paper attempts to examine various issues associated with feminism in the Indian context. These issues are particularly related to gender, patriarchy, sexuality & their impacts on the lives of not just women in India. The intersectional ties between gender, caste, class and other factors which create binaries in the Indian society would also be taken up in the course of discussion for this paper. Finally, the paper would attempt to offer viable solutions to bring about equality in the society as an endeavor to overcome binaries that divide the Indian society into inequalities.*

Key Words: equality, feminism, gender, masculinity, patriarchy.

### Introduction

Gender studies is not a singular concept but it is a field of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary study. The term 'Gender' is used to refer to the social and cultural constructions of masculinities and femininities and not to the state of biological differences of sex. Sharon Crasnow appeals to "Look at the role of biology and nature in the making of self and society more seriously" (Crasnow, 2006). Therefore, gender is implicated in the fundamental, ongoing processes of creating and conceptualizing social structures. Contemporary sociological reference to male and

female gender roles typically uses *masculinities* and *femininities* in the plural rather than singular, suggesting diversity both, within cultures as well as across them. The field of gender studies emerged from different areas in 1950, through the theories in sociology, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and the work of feminists such as Judith Butler. Indian feminists Uma Chakravarty, Kumkum Roy, Sudesh Vaid, Kumkum Sanghari, and Radha Kumar reinterpreted the traditional history of women to reconstruct gender studies that include various facades of the social, economic, cultural and political aspects.

Vishal Jadhav observes that, “Gender identities are closely associated with the ideas of space” (Jadhav, 2018). This is because the male and female identities differ across time and space. The history of the ideas of space in the ‘West’ has been different from those in the “Non-west.” In India the ideas of space are heterogeneous. Therefore, it is inappropriate to indulge in general deliberations and discussions around the concept of gender as they cannot be applied worldwide without taking into consideration the location of gender. In India, in the pursuit to trace the history of the society, it is important to identify the factors which create gender inequalities. Therefore, the understanding of the concept of gender necessitates the understanding of the ideas of masculinity, patriarchy and sexuality that are deeply entrenched in the Indian society. An understanding of these ideas is also essential in order to perceive the concept of feminism in the Indian context.

Gender Studies depict an interdisciplinary nature. Therefore, Gender Studies is not an independent area but it is related to studies of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and location and religions. Therefore, Gita Chadha says that there is a, “Need to challenge the gender, class, caste ideologies of one’s own habitus and field that construct one as man with well-defined masculinities” (Chadha, 2016). In this context, Sharmila Rege says that when she looks at the area of gender studies she feels that she is, “A gender-sensitive sociologist located in India, interrogating the complexities of caste, class, ethnicity and gender” (Rege, 2003). Thus, the processes of gender studies interact and are controlled by disciplinary bodies of labor, power,

family, society and the state which involve any form dominance and submission.

## **The concept of masculinity and gender**

The privileges of patriarchy come with the concept of masculinity. A male child learns to grow up as a “man.” Sooner than later, he realizes that growing up as a man offers him many more privileges which are not available to his female counterparts in the family. Within the family situation men exercise powers over their sisters, wives and eventually even the mother. The family property is the man’s privilege and so is the access to the outside world. As a result, the choices that men have are infinite as compared to the ones that are available for women. Therefore, men have more mobility than women. Shilpa Phadke argues that “As women, we too want to face risks, but we want to step out of our houses” (Phadke, 2011). However, such privileges are conventionally available to the women in the family.

Despite the fact that man enjoys more privileges than a woman, masculinity in India has always been associated with great responsibility. These responsibilities often prove to be a burden on the male members of the family and in turn restrict men’s own life choices. Such pressures sequentially produce different kinds of masculinities which are dominant or subordinate. Therefore, the masculine powers experienced by a young man are different from an old man, or that experienced by an upper caste male is different from a Dalit man. However, Nivedita Menon calls this as a “Good news for feminism because by doing so, the gender “male” does not get assigned by birth” (Menon 2012). Menon rightly says so because in the Indian context, the manner in which the concept of masculinity is constructed has deep implications on feminism.

## **An understanding of Patriarchy in the Indian context**

Patriarchy is not a singular concept; it should therefore be examined as “patriarchies.” An understanding of its pluralities of meanings is essential to understand the concept of gender in the Indian milieu as it reinforces the concept of the privileged men and the male power over the female gender. These privileges are acquired culturally and structurally through social

institutions like marriage and legal entities like property ownerships. The Hindi word for patriarchy is “*Purushpradhan*.” Therefore, a brief capsulation of the term “patriarchy” asserts that men have power women.

Gender identity comes into practice in the society because society differentiates gender roles with cultural stereotype of assuming some norms or directives from a patriarchal society. Stereotype indicates an individual’s fixed mind set up with pre-determined mental impressions which may be constructed or arranged in society but which may be or may not in a real sense. Parents, relatives, teachers as well as the government communicate their stereotypes to children in numerous ways. Thus there is undue pressure on boys and girls to live up to the established norms of masculinity and femininity. While girls endure unwarranted social control, discrimination and domination, boys too suffer from the stereotyping that exists in a patriarchal culture. Discouraged from being emotional, gentle or fearful they are thrust into the role of breadwinners, protectors, and warriors in a patriarchal structure of society.

Power relations help to understand the nature and causes of women’s subordination and oppression within the patriarchal society. Frequently, women are simply the passive and powerless victims of the male power. The disciplinary bodies and complex analysis of the relations between gender and power articulated through them show that oppression of women is caused by men’s possession of power in terms of access to education, prominence in religious function based on the theory by Manu as well as through the power of decision in terms of proper food, marriage, domestic matters, self-healthcare and so on.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the paper makes an attempt to suggest some measures which can be consciously adopted in order to bring about a change in the Indian society and to move towards the equality

of genders. These changes can be divided into mainly into three categories, namely, social, legal and academic changes.

In order to unravel the contours of feminism in India, the notions of gender, masculinity, patriarchy and the family structures need to be critically examined. Even in modern times, these concepts dominate the mind-sets of people across different sections of the India society. As the issue is a complicated one, it requires a careful assessment, evaluation and disentanglement of the various social components which are closely associated with each other. Therefore, there is a need for major social transformations in order to change the existing binaries between mainstream men and the other weaker sections of the society.

Most men enjoy privileges which women are denied. In order to bring equality in the society, more men should be willing to give up their privileges. By doing so, an attempt can be made towards building equal relationships in the society. Since the first place to bring about a social change is one's own home, boys will have to be raised differently by their families. Men as well as women will have to be brought up in ways that are completely different from traditional stereotypical formats. This is a difficult task because society been built over years in a certain manner. Therefore, the issue requires great intervention and a radical challenging of the statuesque. The attainment of such a project can be attained through deeper societal transformations, government policies as well as implementing strict laws.

Secondly, there is a dire need to effectuate academic changes. Through the various disciplines of knowledge, it is essential to bring about issues related to gender consciousness in the academia. Gita Chadha rightly calls this "Bringing feminist consciousness to the academia, reconceptualizing and reclaiming disciplines" (Chadha, 2016). By doing so, young boys and girls can be sensitized towards gender problems that revolve around the profoundly immoral gender issues in India. Thus, the need of the hour is to do what Leena Pujari calls, "A feminist confronting patriarchies in sociology, both at the academic and institutional levels" (Pujari, 2018). Pujari further says that the Indian society needs, "A political project, one that seeks

transformations and interventions in the world outside the classroom rather than merely inculcating students with objective and value-neutral facts, figures, and theories” (Pujari, 2018).

Thirdly, strict laws will have to be imposed to bring about gender equality in the society. Particularly, laws which involve crime against women like domestic violence, sexual oppression, rape, exploitation and denial to equal opportunities to earn a decent economic standing with men should be effectively brought into force. These legal processes should be speed-up and justice should be pronounced at the earliest.

To conclude, it can be said that unequal gender relations stunt the freedom of all individuals to develop their human capacities to their fullest. Therefore, it is in the interest of both men and women to liberate human beings from existing relations of gender.

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