

Challenges facing the Indian Feminist Movement

Monday 3 February 2020, by [OMVEDT Gail](#) (Date first published: 30 January 2020).

Movements pioneered by early feminists should be studied with new theoretical inputs to deal with the challenges to the abolition of gender exploitation.

This is the text of Gail Omvedt's inaugural lecture on Feminist Discourse, organised by the Department of Sociology, Savitribai Phule Pune University.

Thanks to the organisers of this seminar for inviting me to give the inaugural lecture.

My late mother-in-law [Indumati Patankar], a freedom fighter and feminist activist till her physical capacities allowed her to be so, experienced and faced all the periods through which concepts and practices of feminism have gone through; from the freedom movement against colonialism to the contemporary period of imperialist globalisation.

Her memoirs inform me about surprisingly advanced understanding and practices of feminist consciousness during the period of the freedom movement. It is shown by concepts of staying and sleeping in one room by young men and women without any apprehension, intercaste and interreligious marriages, young women leaving their homes alone to join the freedom movement.

Today, one can not even think of many of these practices and bold concepts involved in those practices. In the early 80s, my mother-in-law used to encourage us for being bold in this relation. Though I was from the background of the feminist movement in the US, in India I needed such kind of encouragement in the given situation. Feminist activists in our rural movement like Nagmani Rao, Gauri Day also still remember the pleasant shock they had about Indutai's old experiences and bold concepts.

The second aspect was of conducting marriages in the Gandhian or *Satya shodhak* way. Gandhian marriages were based on simplicity, Swadeshi ideology and without dowry of any kind. The satya shodhak marriage ceremony based itself on anticaste ideology, women's liberation and commitment for social justice. Even in this era of imperialist globalisation, these kind of marriages are less in number than that period. The dominant trend is of the marriages based on ritualistic Brahmanic procedures. As against the component of social justice, these marriages are extremely individualistic and with the show of pomp.

Of course, it is true that autonomous women's organisations based on feminist ideology were not getting formed in those days, but concepts and practices based on feminism were very much there. It was the beginning of the development of feminist ideology all over the world.

Also Read: Discovering the First Generation of Feminists in Kerala [1]

Mass organisations of women based on feminist ideology started getting formed in India around the mid-1970s. They were autonomous from their sister organisations in which men and women were

together. This phenomenon was more in existence in rural areas than in the urban ones. Their agenda was basically composed of feminist issues or issues related to women's liberation. There were many debates about this new phenomenon, but these organisations were not opposed by sister organisations. Mass of women getting organised like this was giving new energy to the overall toiling people's movements in those days. It gave rise to the creative contribution by uneducated or less educated women in these movements.

Most of the creative, poetic, emotionally appealing and content-rich songs in simple language belong to this period between the mid-1970s and 80s. Mass national women's conferences at Kolkata and Patana were organised during this period only. It is a great lacking in today's period.

Different shades of feminism

In the process of this development, different shades of feminism started emerging within the broad spectrum of the overall feminist movement: Ambedkarite feminists, Marxist feminists, Marx-Phule-Ambedkarite feminists, socialist feminists. These shades are there also in today's period. These shades are not only related to the various theories but also realities of women's exploitation related to the caste, class, race, gender, community and religion-based exploitation. Though the central question is related to gender, it exists in real life intertwined with these other forms of exploitations. Without considering this reality, one cannot emerge with theoretical and practical answers for marching towards women's liberation. There is not sufficient theoretical churning about this with the aim of a united movement. It could be said that there is no in-depth attempt to understand the contemporary character of caste, gender as well as class relations of producing newer and newer life.

Also Read: Building a Feminism That Centres the Voices of the Oppressed [2]

With the beginning of the process of imperialist globalisation, somehow, the process of decline of mass women's liberation movements started taking place. One has to seriously study this process because it will come up with the relationship between the decline and emergence of the imperialist globalisation. At the same time, it would reveal the weaknesses of these mass movements in coping with and successfully going ahead in the face of imperialist globalisation.

This period of imperialist globalisation comes with big 'revolution' in the information technology and new kind of automation in the industrial field. With this, the character of the industries having a big workforce under one roof has radically changed. Now more than 90% of the workforce is in the category of the unorganised labourers. The percentage of unemployed and semi-employed people has risen to new heights. This has given rise to a new kind of unrest which cannot easily develop in the positive movement, giving alternatives to the various aspects of the established socio-economic formation

A new approach

A new approach could only emerge with the alternatives in the fields of industry, agriculture, natural resources, ecological approaches. In this situation, the system is going ahead with false promises to the people and dictatorial ways of dealing with suffocated unrest without an alternative vision. Women's liberation is facing a situation in which there are rampant atrocities and women are forced to return to the gender slavery of most regressive nature. There is a special boost given to male domination of the worst kind.

There are many spaces and opportunities which could be used by the feminist movement in the present era. Women's movements could be organised around the rights of women on natural

resources like water, wind, sun, forests and sound waves to have ecologically sustainable, renewable-based and decentralised production processes. There is enough scientific base available for doing this. A movement for equitable water rights for organic agriculture could be the best beginning for this. Experimenting for a new kind of commune homes initiated by women could be one of the socio-cultural contributions of the feminist movement.

The question of deserted women is one which has the potential to find theoretical and practical alternatives to the traditional family. It was taken up by the movement in Sangli-Satara district led by late Krantivirangana Indutai Patankar and the movement led by Nisha Shivurkar in Nagar district. These movements should be thoroughly studied and freshly taken ahead with new theoretical inputs dealing with the question of single women-headed families.

Also Read: The Indian Women Who Fought Their Way Into the Legal Profession [3]

The feminist movement is for the abolition of gender exploitation of all kinds and abolition of gender as a socio-economic, cultural reality which is the basis of the exploitation. A lot of theoretical contribution is necessary for understanding this and finding out the programme which becomes the basis of the movement. I hope that the young generation engages itself in this and will come forward to organise a mass feminist movement of advanced nature.

Gail Omvedt is a scholar, sociologist and human rights activist who has written on the anti-caste movement, Dalit politics and women's struggles in India.

Gail Omvedt

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

The Wire

<https://thewire.in/women/gail-omvedt-feminist-movement-india>

Footnotes

[1] <https://thewire.in/women/discovering-the-first-generation-of-feminists-in-kerala>

[2] <https://thewire.in/caste/building-a-feminism-that-centres-the-voices-of-the-oppressed>

[3] <https://thewire.in/law/women-lawyers-history-india>