

The Dialogue between Indian Feminism and Indo-Caribbean Feminism

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Abstract

The research paper seeks to explore the ways in which there can be opening of proper dialogue between Indian feminism and its diasporic counterpart, Indo-Caribbean feminism, in particular. The feminist concern of India is as diverse as its variegated topography, myriad languages and multifarious practices. The very nature of diverse country we live in could not allow for a single remedy for all the ills caused by the power structure of patriarchy and gendered nature of the society. The pluralistic, multi-cultural nature of India and Caribbean call for a nuanced analysis and theorizing of feminism that can address the multiple problems women in both the places face on a daily basis. Gender equality per se seems a distant goal when our countries are still grappling with basic women concerns such as domestic violence, women safety, women education and so on. Indian women who went across 'kalapani' showed great resilience, courage and fortitude during the period of indentureship and are worthy role models for emulation. Indian women too have come a long way since the times of Sati and early marriages that was dominant in the previous century. One striking similarity between both feminisms is that both are issue-based activism feminism. Besides, Indo-Caribbean feminism is struggling to find its place in Caribbean feminism which is afro-dominant. Likewise, in India, feminism is increasingly becoming the buzz word in the circle of urban educated Indian women. Rural Indian women who strive for basic amenities such as food, education and employment hardly see feminism as answer to their problems. Through this paper I would like to explore the common ground in both the feminisms and how both can enrich and embolden the feminist movements across geopolitical boundaries as a whole. The paper will also look into the roles of Feminists-activists from India and Caribbean such as Kamla Bhasin, Urvashi Butalia, Roshan Kanhai, Patricia Mohammed and many others and how they have been shaping the feminist movements in their respective places.

Keywords: Indian Feminism, Indo-Caribbean feminism, Dialogue, Multicultural, Kalapani, Patriarchy, Gender Equality, Indentureship, Diversity

In this paper, I have tried to understand the nature of Indian feminism and Indo-Caribbean feminism; how they originated and developed and what their common goals are. My idea is to generate an understanding so that it could engender a dialogue between the two. The category of 'woman' is not a homogeneous one and hence women issues pertain to the culture

and society one lives in. However, my contention is there are many common grounds that can be established for the extension of sisterhood. This sisterhood and solidarity will help in strengthening feminist movements in their respective countries.

Feminism is deeply rooted in the belief of universal equality of all- men and

women alike. The first wave of feminism of the 19th century and early 20th century focused exclusively on women legal rights. The Seneca Falls convention (1848) boldly proclaimed its resolution of extension of right of franchise to women as well. Feminist theorizing developed alongside women movements that raised various demands, one of the first were right to vote and right to property. Feminist analysis explores how the social system of patriarchy coupled with the State - machinery ensures gender/sex oppression. The liberalism of the 17th century preached the virtues of liberty for all in its notion of 'Inalienable universal human rights for all' but it somehow failed to address the concerns of women. Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the first women who believed in gender equality and wanted women to achieve this through the vehicle of education. She considered "women in the grand light of human creatures, who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties" (Wollstonecraft, 1796: 5). Although her approach has been assimilationist as she believed women should go beyond their feminine nature and embark on cultivating "masculine" virtues through education. Nonetheless, her book, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792, first published) became the foundation on which feminist movement stood.

The rubric of feminist theorizing was laid under the aegis of women movements. Broadly speaking, the movement of feminism aims at political, social and economic justice for women. Starting with suffragette movement of the late 19th c, feminism has come a long way with its myriad issues of political

representation to the redressal of the minutiae of gender/ sexual discrimination as may be the case. Feminism is multidimensional in its issues, aims and strategies given the fact that it constitutes the political expression and concerns of women from different regions, ethnicities, nationalities and other backgrounds. Moreover, because of the diverse range of issues and concerns of women, feminism cannot be restricted to a single formula applicable to all women experiences.

Feminism in India has come a long way and there have been achievements we can be proud of. However, the positive changes are widely skewed and haven't touched as many women as envisaged by the feminist movement. Two decades into the twenty-first century, women's issues are still at best about the safety of women outdoors and unfortunately at home as well. Gender justices, the social-political equality, despite feminism, seem far-fetched and quite utopic in its conception. The heterogeneous nature of Indian society makes it all the more challenging for feminism to combat the power dynamics of patriarchy and ensure a gender-equal society. This is, however, not to downplay what women movements guided by feminist ideology have achieved so far. Now whether a girl should be educated or not is no more a point of contention. The question is whether she should get the kind of education that her male siblings/counterparts would or she has to make do with mediocre average education. Women safety is one of the most pressing concerns we are faced with. Crimes against women or rather misogyny informed crimes are newspaper headlines almost every day.

Nevertheless, women have been making their qualitative and quantitative contributions in every field; however small their number may be, their achievements are noteworthy. They have even made their foray in what previously was deemed to be male bastions, be it military services, policing services, rigorous physical sports like boxing or the erudite academic jobs to the rigors and dedication of scientific areas of space exploration. Yet, the overarching patriarchy sits at the high altar influencing and hindering the feminist agenda of gender and social justice for women. Women face more obstacles (because of their gender) than men don't. Needless to say, feminist perspective is important in the understanding of these obstacles and exploring ways to counter them. That is why feminism continues to remain relevant and needs to be strengthened for the foreseeable future.

It is important to make clear at the outset that feminism doesn't stand for devaluing of male or masculinity. However, it is also important for feminist inquiry to analyze the gendered nature of relationship between men and women and how it affects women with regards to their status in the society and access to resources and their rights in general. The challenge before feminism is to show how gender inequality (despite the right to equality before law) in the social structure (owing to patriarchy, of course,) costs even men and the society at a much deeper level. And the reorganizing of society in sync with gender equality can be more fruitful than what is achieved by sexual division of labor and gender roles.

Indian Feminism

It is a common perception that

feminism in India is a western import. Jasbir Jain's book *Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency* (2011) is an attempt to show that this perception is wrong. She shows that the Indian cultural/religious texts have a long tradition of strong and scholarly women of Vedas and Upanishads to Draupadi and Sita from Mahabharata and Ramayana respectively. Jain goes on to show the rebellious streak of women in the *Bhakti* movement of the 15th to 17th century to resistance narratives of women in the 19th century. She asserts that Indian subcontinent is pluralistic and hence there are various feminist standpoints in the country. Nevertheless 'The women question' in India per se was first articulated in the 19th c by social reformers of the then British India. These intellectuals imbibed the idea of liberty, equality and fraternity and chose to work for the emancipation of Indian women. Another reason partly was the criticism of Indian society and its condition of women by the British colonial overlords that helped to spur the movement in the right direction. However, in their attempt to seek positive changes in women's condition, they wanted to resist the hegemony of colonial masters, what they called 'cultural defense'. So these reformers tried to create a society, modern in some ways yet rooted in tradition. Undoubtedly they wanted to bring about overall improvement in the position of women for which they worked with the then colonial government and passed remarkable legislations such as banning of *Sati*, 1829 (widow burning), widow's Remarriage Act (1856), and propagated women education which is all commendable. The reform movements in pre independence India were

limited in its scope as it catered mainly to the needs of upper caste/ class women and failed to address various other women communities from lower caste and class. Anupama Rao has called this feminism, "Brahminical Feminism" (Rao, 2003). Undoubtedly, the social reform movements led to the ending of the evil practices of widow burning and child marriage. However, women education helped only a handful of women of the upper class who were getting education in the 'new patriarchy' which allowed women to be educated alongside domestic responsibilities which she must bear as before. The social evils of widow burning and child marriage etc. of Indian culture sanctioned by scriptures put Indian thinkers on the back foot. They accepted European modernity but with a caveat what Partha Chatterjee has called the dichotomy of 'home' and 'world', 'spiritual' and 'material' which was also in accordance with patriarchal assigning of gender roles (Chatterjee 1989:623). With this dichotomy in place, the woman's question was answered as Partha Chatterjee writes:

The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of national culture and women must take the main responsibility for protecting and nurturing this quality. No matter what the changes for the external conditions in life for women, they must not lose their essentially spiritual (that is, feminine) virtues; they must not, in other words, be essentially westernized (1989:626- 627).

These reform movements didn't actually address the question of gender dynamics of power structure which is slanted unfairly

towards male prerogatives and privileges. The education of girls was not meant to equip them with knowledge and skills that could make them self-dependent. Rather, they were trained to be good housewives, mistresses of the home and the hearth. Gandhi is often credited with mobilizing women for the freedom movement. However, women's roles in the freedom movement were mostly merely an extension of their domestic works. Gandhi attempted to expand women's power as wife, daughter and sister at home but never intended for women to have 'political power in their own right'. Madhu Kishwar writes,

Even as women's participation grew numerically in the national movement, women didn't come to play a greater role at decision-making levels. Women were more prominent in running the ashram on a day to day basis by their unremitting services. They were involved in decision making only at rare and exceptional moments (1985:1757).

The new rather modern ideas of women that were brought to the country during British regime in India had to face serious backlash. The line was whenever the conservatives felt that the culture was being threatened, they enforced on women to remain more traditional. However, the contribution of social reform movements in improving the overall condition of women in a time when it was ridden with inhuman crimes against women is inarguably huge. Also, the propagation of women education helped in creating a more secular space for women in the public realm.

In post-Independent India, the first few decades were gone with the concerns of

economic growth. Gender issue relegated to the margins or subsumed under the larger issue of poverty alleviation and public welfare. After a few decades of lull and dullness, women's movement again started emerging in the 1970s alongside left movements. Women issues expanded from dowry, sexual harassment, divorce and property issues to alcoholism and rape. Sadly, a lot of these issues continue to date and call upon us to retrospect and reflect as to what went wrong. The recent 'me too' movement in a way bolstered up feminist movement in India. Despite backlash, professional women, to some degree, openly spoke up against harassment they have faced in their career indicting academics, movie makers, journalists to the elected ministers in the present-day government. If not much, this technology laden voice caused a ripple in the general nonchalance of patriarchal Indian society.

The major feminist issue in India is still about getting justice for women, girls and children who had suffered physical and mental abuses at the hands of men such as rapes, dowry deaths and numerous other misogynistic crimes against women. 'Me too' voice resulted in many big honchos not only losing their faces but their jobs too. It is heartening to see women speaking up against injustice and wrongs but to achieve a lasting change in the mindset of people that causes discrimination and gender crimes is yet to be seen. As a heterogeneous society, India has polyphonic feminist voices. Some are content with legal redressal and due process, some demand extra judicial intervention in the face of repeated failures in ensuring justice. However, there is a huge fissure in public

opinion on feminism. The rural women and lower middle income groups believe feminism is for fashionable elite women. Dalit/ Scheduled caste women felt their marginalization in the Indian feminist movement which gave rise to a separate feminist standpoint, called Dalit feminism. Dalit women claimed that their marginalization is the result of the dynamic of caste and gender; they emphasized on analyzing the intersectionality of it.

Indo Caribbean Feminism

The waves of 20th century feminist movements that originated in Europe swept across continents and the archipelago of Caribbean was no exception to it. Looking at the past, the first type of women organizing in the Caribbean came about in the form of women self-help groups in the late 19th c. These groups catered to the needs of white and highly colored women from upper echelons of the society. By the 1920s, black and colored middle class women started organizing themselves. These organizations mainly premised upon social work as an avenue for women's participation in social life. The concerns of these organizations were primarily basic such as working women's hostels, training schools for women, mother's vacation home etc. However, the sexual/ gendered roles of men and women were never challenged. Women's domestic responsibilities were organized in a manner that it allowed some scope for social work (Reddock, 1989). The first conference of Caribbean women social workers was held in Trinidad and Tobago in 1936. Another regional grouping called Caribbean Women's Association was formed in 1950, revitalized in 1970 as CARIWA. From

early on, English speaking Caribbean women knew that their strength lay in organizing at regional level and so they continued their efforts in that direction. Some notable feminist activist of pre 1950s are Amy Bailey, Una Martson (Jamaica), Elma Francois and Audrey Jeffers (Trinidad).

Caribbean feminism by the 1970s and 80s became a strong force to reckon with though not without its flaws. Caribbean feminism was mainly afro-centric and the issues and concerns of Indo-Caribbean women didn't feature in their feminist agenda. Indo-Caribbean women faced literary and cultural eclipsing at the hands of dominant Afro-Caribbean as well as Indo-Caribbean men. Their literary representations remained restricted to stereotypes of submissive, docile to sexually 'loose' women owing to the slanderous colonial documentation of them. The epithet of 'coolie' for Indians as Brinda Mehta writes, 'remains, even today a highly loaded and pejorative term that denigrates all things Indian' (2004:2). However, the scholarship of male authors with their engagement on the issue of migration, displacement and post-colonialism somewhat resurrected them. Indo-Caribbean women still have a long way to go to alleviate their invisibility in the social, cultural literary Caribbean space.

The marginalization in terms of representation of Indo-Caribbean women has been three-fold. First, the historical documentation of Caribbean women has largely been obfuscated or misrepresented or have simply been ignored until the recent scholarship by the likes of feminists Rhoda Reddock, Bridget Brereton, Ramabai

Espinet, Patricia Mohammed, Rawwida Baksha Sooden and others. Bridget Brereton writes, 'The exclusion of women from conventional history thus reflected systems of gender oppression and in turn reinforced them by encouraging the definition of women as 'Other', the passive, there but not there, never the makers and movers of history (qtd in Mehta 2004: 63).' Caribbean women were either discredited or rendered invisible in the colonial narrative of planters and historians. Women experiences of African slavery and plantation indentureship were deemed domestic affairs and hence not fit to be discussed in the public realm. It goes to the credit of Caribbean feminists who successfully resurrected women narratives from oblivion at the hands of their male counterparts.

The racial dynamics between Indo-Caribbean and Afro Caribbean is as fraught as ever since they see each other as rivals and competitors and not as allies despite the common history of exploitation under the systems of slavery and indentureship. Brinda Mehta writes, "Imposed alienation in the form of gendered rivalry, mutual disregard, suspicion and cultural and religious high mindedness on both sides, fragmented the lives of women and constituted an initial stumbling block to reciprocal engagement" (Mehta, 64). She argues that Caribbean feminine agency constitutes women from various ethnicities, most notably Indian women who are second in population to Africans. Yet their visibility on the cultural- social space remains marginal. However, scholars like Rhoda Reddock through her scholarly work have tried to bridge the gap and promote a

more holistic understanding of Caribbean feminism.

Indo-Caribbean women have been marginalized for their cultural practices, cuisines and religion. On top of this marginalization, patriarchal family structure puts another layer to their subordination. In demography, they are second in countries like Trinidad, Fiji and Guyana to Afro-Caribbeans. Yet, their presence in Caribbean feminism has been pretty scanty until a few years ago. One reason could be class stratification, as Rosanne Kanhai writes, 'For the first time in our short but fast paced history, there is discernible Indo-Caribbean class stratification. Some of us have pulled ourselves from proverbial bootstraps and some of us are left behind- too traumatized by physical and mental challenges to free ourselves from poverty and its ill effects (2012:2).' Kanhai also talks of the shame associated with the cultural and religious practices of East Indians. All these contributed to the significant marginalization of Indian women in the Caribbean. Critiquing the feminist project and how its agenda has been diluted, Peer Mohammed writes, 'The general feeling is that with the globalization of women's movement; the co-optation of governments and international organizations in the struggle for gender equity; the introduction of women and gender studies in education and the career opportunities available in flourishing non-governmental projects, the status and condition of 'woman' has become less important to the idea of feminism(2000:117).' She expresses her exasperation at the sorry state of affairs for feminism as it is gradually losing its sheen

to the petty politics of today.

The kalapani narratives of Caribbean can be understood as the collective as well as individual stories of indentured women who braved the waters of kalapani and the perils of indenture life and chose to settle in the Caribbean in the aftermath. The life-trajectory of Indo-Caribbean women is one of ebb and flow: the miserable life in their home country forced them across Atlantic in the Caribbean, their new found economic independence, and confinement to domesticity in post indenture period. Hanif poignantly remarks,

What is fascinating about this demographic transition is that it motivated the transition of the Indian woman's identity from individual to family, from measurement of her work in her own right on the plantation... to her work not being measured at all. Now, in the domestic sphere, her work had essentially not changed but it was her husband being seen as the head of the family, and even if she worked equally with him her work had now become invisible. In part it was what real accomplished women were: housewives... It was a mark of success for a wife not to work... The perception that Indian women, particularly in Guyana, were "only housewives" still prevails. (qtd in Mehta, 2004:6).

Indo Caribbean women remained at the receiving end of Hindu and Islamic fundamentalism as well as stereotypical racist assumptions. Another challenge for Indo-Caribbean women is its marginal place in Caribbean feminism which is largely afro-dominated. The heterogeneity in culture of India and Caribbean enables

multiple differences to be functional and effective in the poetics of feminism. The interplay of caste, class, and ethnicity is crucial to the understanding of feminism and where it is headed. The differences are many between Indian women and Indo-Caribbean women yet there are several common grounds as well. The hybrid, creole Indo-Caribbean identity has a part Indian in its cuisine of 'roti', 'double', in its music of *Indian-soca*, and *Chutney*, and in some of its religious observances. The lack of engagement from Indian state has resulted in a rather valid alienation of Indo-Caribbean people from its homeland. While analyzing 'Indianness' in the culture of Indo-Caribbean, Peter Manuel senses a sense of estrangement of Indo-Caribbeans from the present day India, yet, they are committed to preserve the sense of India which they have inherited from their ancestors/ first generation Indo-Caribbeans to be precise. Peter Manuel writes,

What is important in the Indo-Caribbean diaspora is less a relationship with India itself than the relationship with and maintenance of some sort of Indianness. India thus has become more a state of mind than a specific locale; just as the Hindi language has become the exclusively religious and poetic rather than utilitarian medium, so has "India" gone from being a quotidian, enveloping reality to an emotionally resonant if finite and heterogeneous configuration of images, whether derived from worm eaten song books or Bombay films (31-32).

Indo Caribbean feminist theorizing under the lexicon of kalapani discourse, dougla

poetics, *Bindi*, *Matikor* is not only the reclamation of cultural identity but also the creation of interstitial space for the negotiations to happen. India has also been witnessing subversive politics such as the 'Pink chaddi' campaign, 'Kiss of Love' etc. Also, women at the forefronts of recent protest movements, getting beaten up and harassed by state machinery are engendering new feminist poetics. Protesting women in universities like JNU and Jamia or for that matter Shaheen Bagh is crucial to our understanding of present day Indian feminism.

The call for sisterhood was embedded in the second wave feminism calling upon women for the collective sense of women unity thereby extending solidarity for the women movement as a whole. The third wave feminists have critiqued the notion of sisterhood as, they believed, it promoted monolithic and singular kind of womanhood as it fails to take differences among women into account. They called for intersectional analysis of power, gender and class for furthering the agenda of gender justice and gender equality. Regardless, bell hooks explains sisterhood in these terms:

We understood that political solidarity between females expressed in sisterhood goes beyond positive recognition of the experiences of women and even shared sympathy for common suffering. Feminist sisterhood is rooted in shared commitment to struggle against patriarchal injustice, no matter the form the injustice takes. Political solidarity between women always undermines sexism and sets the stage for the overthrow of patriarchy.

(2000:15)

The life and journey of Indian foremothers of Caribbean have been exemplary and worthy of emulation. Rhoda Reddock writes about one such woman, Phoolbasie who turned leader for her community during her indenture life. She was a strong advocate for women workers' rights. She was admirably called 'Naidoo' after Indian activist and freedom fighter Sarojini Naidoo by her people (Mehta, 2004:71). These ancestors of Indo-Caribbean women are a matter of pride and source of strength for Indian women also. Already there is an undeniable connection between homeland and Indian diaspora. Old ties have to be revived and strengthened. Another challenge is to curb violence against women for both the feminisms. Despite women's visibility in all outdoor jobs and enterprises, violence against them is not diminishing. Both, India and Caribbean are plagued by crimes against women in the form of domestic abuse, rape, sexual harassment and so on. Kanhai poignantly says that she measures the progress of Indo-Caribbean community against the 'measuring rod of domestic violence (2012:7). And it would not be an exaggeration to say that the same 'measuring rod' applies to India as well.

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Besides, it is always good to foster solidarity and cooperation between two nations and it takes almost an inherent quality when the two places are the homeland and its diaspora. I am well aware of the increasing irrelevance of the dichotomy of 'homeland' and 'diaspora' in the pluralistic, fluid, global world, yet diaspora revels in its celebration of whatever vestiges of ancestralism remain in them. The visit of Kamla Persad Bissessar to her ancestral place in a small village in Bihar in 2012 shows diaspora's keenness to engage with the homeland and their latent desire to find their roots of origins. In this connection, Rosanne Kanhai's remark becomes pertinent, 'I saw Afro Caribbean women bringing black affirmation from the global stage into a context of afro victories in national politics... Afro-Caribbean women could draw on burgeoning African American feminist discourse; there was no parallel for Indo-Caribbean feminists (2012:3).'

In conclusion, it can be said that Indian feminism and Indo-Caribbean feminism can become support systems for each other. The *jahajibehn* sisterhood can be extended to homeland sisters and vice versa.

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