

Relevance of French Feminism in Women's Movement in India

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Abstract

The crusade to end women's subordination to men that we call feminism is an ongoing, recurring, enduring political mission, with deep roots in a country's past. Thus *Feminisms* can be documented in many societies both European and Indian though the accepted norm is that feminist thought and action are integral to Western tradition. In fact, feminist efforts to emancipate women and the organised resistance to their efforts as well as the importance of historical understanding are important in understanding societies which are different from the European models. An attempt has been made to establish several parallels between the two countries in the form of women's representation, political and labour force participation and equality.

Key Words: feminism, France, India, challenges, patriarchy, rights

Feminism to our understanding is rooted in politics (Offen, 2000, preface xi) and human thought. However, there are certain questions which are being raised every day in women's movements across the world, such as: What is feminism? Who is a feminist? Is feminism the same across national borders/across cultures/and over the centuries? These appear to have diverse answers, and each answer is opinionated and poignantly charged. The Webster's dictionary definition reads as: **a theory and/or movement concerned with advancing the position of women through such means as achievement of political, legal, or economic rights equal to those granted men**¹ (my emphasis).

We have looked at *Feminism* from the European perspective – especially France and from the Indian perspective; we have also tried to see how it has impacted the women's movement in India. As we know: "Europe has spawned many feminisms [...] but are interrelated in many ways...". In fact, most societies and cultures have been patriarchal or "prone to subordinate women...throughout the world" (ibid. xii, xiii). When we look at the criticisms of the subordination of women in Europe we find that they have a common root – that of Roman Catholic Christianity. Moreover, European cultures "shared a secular intellectual tradition of Humanism" (ibid). Of the *mélange* of various other processes of the Reformation, and the secularist reforms both political and sociocultural in nature known as the period of Enlightenment. Thus, societies became progressively more receptive to critical thinking and questioning especially to politics of the family, to

¹ Webster's Dictionary, p.277, Oxford & IBH Publishing Co., 1976 (Indian Reprint); For detailed discussion see Karen Offen, *Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach*, *Signs*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 119-157

feminist challenges, to patriarchy, of the adjustments and interaction of relationships between men and women etc. In this regard, the most important channel of expression available to feminists was the press, or in other words the "print culture" under its manifold forms which were easily available and had a great impact in the "public space". (ibid.: xiii)

Offen's inquiry reveals that this word and its derivatives originated in France.² The invention of the word "feminisme" has time and again incorrectly been ascribed to Charles Fourier in the 1830s; its origins are still vague. It began to be used widely in France in the early 1890s and then primarily as a synonym for women's emancipation.³ The earliest self-proclaimed "feminist" in France was the women's suffrage advocate Hubertine Auclert, used the word in her journal, *La Citoyenne*, from 1882 to describe herself and her associates.⁴ The words gained currency following discussion in the French press of the first self-proclaimed "feminist" Congress in Paris, in May 1892.⁵

² Karen Offen, "Sur les origines des mots 'féminisme' et 'féministe,'" *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* (Paris) 34, no. 3 (Juillet-Septembre 1987): 492-96.

³ Marya Cheliga-Loey stated in 1896 that Charles Fourier had coined the expression in his *Théorie des Quatre Mouvements et des destinées générales* (1808) "Les hommes féministes," *Revue Encyclopédique Larousse*, no. 169 [November 28, 1896]: 826 But Offen's examination of 1808 and 1841 editions of the *Théorie* revealed no trace of the actual words.

⁴ Signs, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Autumn, 1988), p. 126; and Steven C. Hause, *Hubertine Auclert: The French Suffragette* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987)

⁵ The Congrès Général des Institutions Féministes convened at the sixth district municipal building in Paris on May 14, 1892. See Maria Deraismes, "A

By 1894-95 the terms had crossed the Channel to Great Britain, and before the turn of the century, they were appearing in Belgian French, Spanish, Italian, German, Greek, and Russian published sources.⁶ By 1900 a veritable taxonomy of self-described or imputed feminisms had sprung into being: "familial feminists," "integral feminists," "Christian feminists," "socialist feminists," "radical feminists, and "male feminists," among others.⁷

Then why France? What impact did it have on emerging feminism? Historically in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries France was a major political and economic power with its thinkers, writers, scientists, artists influencing vision and thought everywhere and even countries beyond the frontiers of France. The period of "Enlightenment" had a very strong French component, where the "woman question" was central to its concerns. The impact of the French Revolution and the imposition of the Napoleonic Civil Code inspired and stirred further feminist initiatives even beyond the frontiers of France. In numerous ways throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries French socio-political critics made important contributions towards elaborating the feminist challenge. Karen

Propos du Congrès de la Fédération des sociétés féministes," *Revue des revues* (August 1892): pp.1-3.

⁶ In Belgium, an Office 'Féministe Universel' was established in 1896 and sponsored publication of *Cahiers féministes* (March 1896-1905) for further details see *Signs*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Autumn, 1988), p. 127

⁷ For the various sub-forms of late 19th century French feminism, see Karen Offen, "Deanachronist-population, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-siècle France," *American Historical Review*, 89, no. 3 (June 1984)

Offen (2000) rightly says that: "Feminist claims are primarily political claims, [...] they pose explicit political demands for change" and therefore an intricate part of political history demanding a sexual balance of power in every area of human life.

In every society all over the world "backlashes against feminist challenges" are not exceptional, have bravely defended their views despite the setbacks and have launched effective counteroffensives and these offensives recurred repeatedly throughout every period of history. It is but normal and accepted that relations between men and women lie at the heart of controversy. Though most believed that in France the French Revolution had a long-term impact on French women, however, post-Revolutionary feminism emerged in Paris as part of a demand for social and political reform.

Early twentieth-century French feminist groups invariably critiqued male/female relationships with reference to the family and explicitly proposed a radically restructured, non-patriarchal family; they insisted, nevertheless, on the necessary complementarity of, distinction between, and interdependence of the sexes.⁸ Social roles, based in "natural" biological differences and the then seemingly inevitable constraints on women of reproduction and parenting, were paramount but were not perceived by most advocates of radical change to conflict directly with a woman's self-realization or self-fulfilment as a moral and intellectual being. Sexual dimorphism remained central to the French

vision of the social order and, indeed, since the Enlightenment motherhood itself had long been invoked by many reformers as a rationale for granting women civil and civic rights and for insisting on women's participation in public affairs. By the early twentieth century, therefore, most French feminists had rejected competitive individualism as anti-French, in keeping with their love-hate relationship with the Anglo-American world. From 1900 until the fall of the Third Republic in 1940, French feminism was closely associated with republican nationalism, and its discourse became closely intertwined with the pro-family and pro-natalist concerns of the regime. As in the nineteenth century, its advocates continued to emphasize sexual difference, a sexual division of labour, motherhood and education for motherhood, and state subsidies for mothers; but they also demanded enhanced legal, educational, and economic rights and the vote for women. French feminists, both secular and Catholic, bourgeois and socialist, advocated putting France's welfare and a reconstituted family ahead of individual or personal needs, in the name of national solidarity.⁹ With this historical perspective in mind, it is particularly striking to observe that in France up to the time of publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1949, physiological difference and the sexual division of labour predicated on it was rarely identified by self-styled feminists as a primary instrument of women's

⁸ *Signs*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Autumn, 1988), p. 145

⁹ See Offen, "Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism"; and "Women and the Politics of Motherhood in France, 1920-1940," *Working Paper no. 87/293* (Florence: European University Institute, 1987)

oppression. On the contrary, from the early twentieth century onwards, French feminists have found it both strategically and tactically useful, given France's seemingly perilous demographic position, to emphasize and celebrate the uniqueness of womanhood, especially women's role and rights as mothers. They demanded radical socio-political reforms by the state that would transform the social institutions surrounding motherhood and thereby encourage natality and at the same time improve women's status.

Within the post-1968 French *mouvement pour la liberation des femmes*, the group known as *Psych et Po* (Psychanalyse et Politique) insisted on the centrality of biological differences between the sexes; their enthusiasts, whose thinking draws heavily on Lacanian psychoanalytic postulates, argue that just this women's difference, which they insist lies in a sexuality that has been repressed by patriarchal culture, is the source of women's potential liberation.¹⁰ The "feminine," in their view, has been totally repressed, and their objective is to challenge existing language and culture through exploration of "women's language." This group, which treats physiological, sexual difference and its social consequences with deadly seriousness-and fosters a concept of a repressed "woman's nature" as fundamental-is in this essential respect, at least, far closer than its adversaries to the tradition of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French feminism, even though the focus has shifted

¹⁰ Dorothy Kaufmann-McCall, "Politics of Difference: The Women's Movement in France from May 1968 to Mitterrand," *Signs* 9, no. 2 (Winter 1983) p-285

from procreation and mothering to sexuality and separatism.¹¹

A further paradox is apparent when we consider that the French feminists who rallied round Simone de Beauvoir consider the *Psych et Po* position "antifeminist."¹² In the light of what we now know about the overall history of feminism in France, however, it seems ironic that, up to the time of her death, Beauvoir's arguments were received with greater enthusiasm in English-speaking countries than in her own.¹³ Beauvoir's existentialist, environmentalist position, which rejected "the feminine" as a purely cultural construct and rejected the societal role implications of woman's physiological difference, even as she endorsed heterosexual existence, seems in retrospect more in harmony with the tradition of individualist feminism, more characteristic of Anglo-American feminism, than with the dominant historic tradition of relational feminism in her own nation.¹⁴

As we understand, French feminists essentially focus on: elaborations of womanliness; celebration of sexual difference rather than similarity within a framework of male/female complementarity; and, instead of seeking unqualified admission to male-dominated society, they mounted a wide-ranging critique of the society and its institutions. How can the contemporary feminist movement learn from

¹¹ *Signs*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Autumn, 1988), p. 147-48

¹² See "Variations sur des thèmes communs," *Questions féministes*, no. 1 (November 1977), as translated in Marks and de Courtivron, pp- 212-30.

¹³ Principal French critic of Beauvoir's position is Menie Gregoire, *Le metier de femme*, Paris: Plon, 1965

¹⁴ *Signs*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Autumn, 1988), p. 149

French feminism and vice versa have been attempted in the following section.

The second part of the study tries to determine whether Indian feminists can learn from French feminist struggles and simultaneously feminist movements in the western world can learn useful lessons from the continuous negotiation between identities that is carried out by women in the developing world.¹⁵ France and India are vastly different in terms of topography, economic development, the social order and ways of life. Yet, there are striking similarities in two such different countries between the discourse of those demanding increased women's representation and those opposed to it. Both countries are secular, liberal democracies, although their political cultures have evolved according to their different histories; the most obvious example of difference is the fact that one was a colonial power, the other an ex-colony. In India, gender and the question of women's position in society became, in the words of Samita Sen, the "*touchstone of the colonial-nationalist encounter*"¹⁶ First; it examines the way in which women's representation was brought onto the political agenda. Second, it explores arguments used to justify the demand for better representation and counter-arguments used to oppose it.¹⁷ British rulers accused Indian

society of backwardness in the way it treated women and presented the protection of Indian women as part of their civilizing and modernizing¹⁸ mission, Indian nationalists counter-posed their own vision of modernity by encouraging women to engage in political activity against the colonizers and by calling for universal suffrage. Thus gender became the site of competing ideologies and visions of modernity. In France, by the end of the Second World War, voting rights for women became inevitable following the innumerable parliamentary debates of the inter-war period¹⁹ and formed a part of France's post-war modernization project.

There are nevertheless several parallels to be found in how the issue of women's representation developed in the two countries. Women in both India and France won the vote after the Second World War,²⁰ following their important contribution to the Nationalist and Resistance movements respectively; their labour force participation and voting increased, although their presence within political elites did not.

Both countries introduced measures to increase women's presence in elected assemblies, and constitutional amendment bills were debated in their respective parliaments in the 1980s and 1990s, when the issue of women's equality was introduced within the frame work of good governance rather than of social and

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p-378

¹⁶ Sen Samita. 2000. "Towards a Feminist Politics? The Indian Women's Movement in Historical Perspective" *Working Paper Series 9*, www.worldbank.org/gender/prr/wp

¹⁷ Gill Allwood and Khurshheed Wadia, "Increasing Women's Representation in France and India", *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Jun., 2004), pp. 376-77

¹⁸ *Revue Canadienne de Science Politique*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Jun., 2004), p-379

¹⁹ Reynolds, *France between the Wars: Gender and Politics*, London, Routledge, 1996

²⁰ French and Indian women gained full voting rights in 1944 and 1950 respectively.

economic disadvantage. Women currently comprise 34.45% per cent of the combined membership of both houses of parliament in France.²¹ In India women's representation in the Parliament stands at 11.6% and this dismal representation is subject to discussions on caste, class, religion and regionalism.²²

Demands from women for representation in elected bodies, moves by politicians to achieve this, and pressure from international and regional quarters have provoked intense debate in both countries. The main themes of these debates can be organized under three main headings: democracy, equality and representation.²³

In India, gender quotas have been opposed on the grounds that it is undemocratic. Across party political and ideological lines the most vociferous opponents are men. It has been argued that the Reservations Bill was undemocratic/unconstitutional as it violated article 325 of the Constitution: "No person is to be ineligible for inclusion in...[the] electoral roll on the grounds of religion, race, caste or sex." Proponents of reservation counter this by also referring to the Constitution (Article 15[3]), that allows for special provisions on the grounds of sex if this furthers equality goals, and simply follows positive discrimination measures already established for certain Scheduled Castes /Scheduled Tribes.

²¹ <https://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> ; *Revue Canadienne de Science Politique*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Jun., 2004), pp-379-80

²² https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_political-participation_in_India

²³ see Sen (2000)

In both France and India, equality between the sexes is enshrined in the respective constitutions, but does it not exist in practice? The definition of equality is fundamental, since the equal right to stand for election has failed in both countries to produce anything approaching equality of outcome. The enduring question is whether it is justifiable to introduce unequal measures in order to produce an equal outcome. In India too, the idea of equality has driven the campaign for reservations. Women's equal presence in politics was seen as desirable because women brought with them unique nurturing skills.

Representation has been the key issue in debates over quotas. It can be argued that demands for gender quotas are based on the assumption that the equitable representation of women's interests can only be guaranteed by the presence of women, as men are unable or unwilling to represent them. The French Parity Campaign²⁴ assumed that only identity as women matters and can be represented without interference from race or class. Parity campaigners (page 389) argued that such a representation would be wrong, since it would threaten the nation's unity, breaking it down into identity-based communities. Universalism and its resistance to the representation of minorities survived the debates and ensuing legislation, by accommodating duality and abandoning claims to gender neutrality.

²⁴ Parity literature in French is vast. In English, see Allwood and Wadia (2000), chapters 8 and 9; See Joan Scott (1997, 6, 11) for details

In India, the debate over who can legitimately represent a sociologically diverse electorate has been heavily marked by the issue of caste. The Constitutional Amendment Bill on gender quotas attracted intense opposition from politicians representing Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes who rejected the bill as meaningless since women are not a homogeneous group. Caste and community are also divided by class and gender. The Reservations Bill has been left pending over the last four years because its supporters have lost the arguments on representation in a climate created by the protection of minority cultures versus women's representation.

Impressive multiculturalism in India contrasts with the rejection of multiple identities in France. In France, opposition to quotas has been based on a perceived threat to national unity by claims from other minorities. In India, however, arguments about protecting minority cultures and rights have been exploited by politicians and intellectuals in order to undo the Reservations Bill.

The struggle for women's representation in political institutions is important but it must form part of a wider strategy to improve the lives of all women. At the same time, questions of how to represent a heterogeneous population in conditions of social justice and of how to bring about meaningful citizenship for both sexes must be considered. Hence, the struggle for women's representation must not be isolated from other struggles.

French feminism with its vibrancy and complexities provides new avenues, to understand gender in South Asia. The focus on elaborations of womanliness; and celebration of sexual difference rather than similarity within a concept of male/female complementarity is reflected in the

contemporary Indian women's movement²⁵ which has made a concerted effort to put feminist concepts of sisterhood onto practice—for example new organizations came up—*Saheli*, *Sakhi Kendra* etc, based on creativity, arts, solidarity and intimacy—personal relationships between women cut across class and cultural barriers. There are attempts to *re-appropriate traditionally accepted women's spaces*—through re-interpretation of myths, epics and folktales—to critique mainstream religious, cultural texts and practices, to discover historical methods of women's resistance—*street plays* based on traditional songs and dances. An attempt was made to look for traditional sources of women's strength rather than suffering—identifying images of women warriors—appropriating and recasting: *Kali* as all-powerful ravaging mother goddess in a feminist mould (as represented by the dancer-cum-artist Chandralekha; and the naming of Indira Gandhi's burial ground as Shakti Sthal). Stree Shakti Sanghatana began to develop an understanding of the specificity of women's experiences in the Telangana Movement²⁶ and embarked on an *oral history* of them just as Catherine Montfort-Howard²⁷ embarked on discovering women's role in the French Revolution. French feminism also provides a point of immense comparative importance to the study of the politics of feminism, liberalism and secularism in India.

²⁵ Radha Kumar, *History of Doing: Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800-1990*, Zubaan An Asso. Of Kali, 2002

²⁶ Lalita K. et al., *We Were Making History: life stories of women in the Telegana people's struggle*, 1989, Kali for Women, New Delhi

²⁷ Catherine Montfort-Howard, *Literate Women and the French Revolution of 1789*, 1994, Summa Publications USA

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