



## Indian Feminism: Indigenous roots and global influence

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### Abstract

Indian feminism is an intellectual and social tradition, rooted in history, culture, and socio-political struggles, rather than merely an extension of Western feminist ideas. It has its roots in pre-colonial spiritual movements, socio-religious reforms, anti-caste movements, and the involvement of women in the national movement. The interactions of Indian feminism with the problems of caste, class, religion, community, and colonialism have created different strands of Indian feminism, including Dalit, Adivasi, and postcolonial feminisms. At the same time, it has also had a marked impact on world feminist discourse by frustrating universalist paradigms and prefiguring intersectionality and the lived experience of the Global South. Indian feminism, hence, represents the dynamic presence of both native origins and transnational impact.

**Keywords:** Indigenous feminism, intersectionality, Dalit and Adivasi movements, postcolonial influence, transnational impact

### Introduction

Feminism in India is not an export of either Western feminist movements or a culturally homogenous and ongoing discourse, and is instead based on history, situated within a cultural fabric, and is in a state of continual development, drawing on the social realities and political histories of India. Indian feminism has been shaped by a complicated combination of religion, philosophy, social reform, anti-colonial nationalism, and postcolonial struggle for democracy, and can therefore be said to be unique in both nature and content (Equbal *et al.*, 2019) <sup>[1]</sup>. The Indian feminists of indigenous origin can be traced to the pre-colonial social practices, philosophical traditions, or the culturally inclined cultural movements like the Bhakti and Sufi traditions, which challenged the hierarchical organization of caste and gender and stressed spiritual equality. An earlier feminist resistance was manifested through the tools of women saints, reformers, and community leaders who were able to speak against the patriarchal leadership long before the advent of the modern language of feminism (Gori, 2021) <sup>[2]</sup>. These native forms provided the ethical and intellectual basis for further feminist mobilization in the colonial and nationalist era. Under colonialism, feminist issues began to include the politics of social reform and nationalism, especially in matters like education, remarriage of widows, and legal rights. During the post-independence era, Indian feminism broadened its range to include structural inequalities such as caste, class, religion, and region, resulting in several feminist voices such as Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim feminism (Grover & Sharma, 2025) <sup>[3]</sup>. This intersectional and plural nature is what makes Indian feminism different than the universalist feminist models. Globally, feminist critics and activists in India have been very instrumental in undermining Eurocentric feminist histories through the lenses of future projections, postcolonial experiences, development, and intersectionality. Indian feminism is therefore not only an aspect of the indigenous social reality but also plays a major role in reforming the entire world feminist thought as well as practice. This study approaches the concept of Indian feminism as a historically established and culturally localized trend that lived and worked on the

basis of indigenous culture and, at the same time, informed the discourse of feminism in the rest of the world. It attempts to examine how the pre-colonial social practices, reform movement, and post-independence struggles have facilitated a plural and intersectional feminist paradigm in India. The paper also examines intellectual and activist texts and the work of Indian feminism on world discourses of gender, caste, development, and postcolonial identity. Putting Indian feminism in the context of national and transnational, the investigation will bring into the limelight the unique theoretical grounding of Indian feminism as well as its new-day relevance.

### Conceptualizing Feminism in the Indian Context

Theorising feminism in the Indian context necessitates transcending any universal approach to feminism and the Western perspective on feminist emancipation, and the need to appreciate the historical and social specification of gender in struggles in India. Much of Indian feminism is not a unitary, homogenous ideology, but a cluster of movements, ideas, and practices that are created by not one, but through the diversity of caste, classes, religion, region, language, and communal formations of the country. Indian feminism is fundamentally aimed at opposing the relations of patriarchal power, yet it is done within the framework that is highly informed by the indigenous social realities and the past experiences. In contrast to the early Western feminism that was mainly concerned with personal rights and legal equality, Indian feminism has been strongly related to the collective battle against social stratifications in the form of caste oppression and economic exploitation, as well as colonial oppression (Hossain & Nikolov, 2021) <sup>[4]</sup>. The Indian feminist issues have generally been infused with greater social justice movements, such as anti-caste movements, peasant movements, labour mobilization movements, and anti-imperialist movements. This intersectional orientation has rendered Indian feminism quite keen on structural disparities and group-based identities. Although Indian feminism has a history grounded in the indigenous traditions like the Bhakti movement that focused on spiritual equality and challenged the gender and caste systems, and also, in the involvement of women in

economic and social practices of communities. The feminist thinking in the colonial world was expressed through social reform movements, which focused on such practices as sati, child marriage, and women's education, and helped resolve contradictions between tradition and modernity (Jayanthi, 2022) <sup>[5]</sup>. During the post-independence period, the equality stipulated in the constitution offered a legal approach to the feminist forces, yet the social movements pointed out the discrepancy between the legal rights and their actual realities. However, modern Indian feminism is marked by its focus on intersectionality, the realization of the interaction of gender with caste, religion, sexuality, and regional identity. Marginal feminisms such as Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, and queer feminisms have defied the mainstream discourse of the feminist movement itself, making it more inclusive and self-conscious. Therefore, feminism in India can rather be considered as not an imported set of ideas but a fluid, context-responsive movement that tries to attain social justice, dignity, and substantive equal treatment to all women.

### **Indigenous Roots of Feminism in India Pre-Colonial Traditions and Women's Agency**

Feminism has had indigenous origins in India, such as pre-colonial social, religious, and philosophical ideologies and traditions that have given women different levels of agency, authority, and visibility. During the Vedic era, women like Gargi and Maitreyi were acknowledged as scholars who were involved in philosophic arguments and intellectual life. Writings such as the Upanishads show that women also participated in metaphysical questions, implying that women were not completely locked out of the production of knowledge. Though there were patriarchal standards, early Vedic society gave women the right to acquire education, worship, and discussion. Buddhist traditions also empowered women spiritually by creating the Bhikkhuni Sangha, which gave women the opportunity to live monastic life and reach spiritual liberation. Buddhism focused on the value of moral actions and spiritual equality that undermined Brahmanical patriarchy and provided women with other ways of development other than domestic chores (Kataria, 2012) <sup>[6]</sup>. Likewise, in Jainism, women were also permitted to be ascetic, which supported the notion that spiritual power was not male-exclusive. The approaches of the Bhakti and Sufi traditions that originated in the medieval times were a major departure from inflexible social stratifications. These cultural movements were focused on individual piety rather than on ritual, caste, and gender differences. The female saints and poets expressed their spiritual experiences in vernacular languages, thus being more inclusive as concerns religious discourse (Kumari *et al.*, 2016) <sup>[7]</sup>. Women rulers like Razia Sultana, Rani Durgavati, and Ahilyabai Holkar were women who had administrative power and military power, proving the fallacy of the privacy of women with administrative power. These pre-colonial traditions combined are an indication of a complex and non-linear history of women's agency, which is a significant basis for indigenous feminist thought in India.

### **Bhakti Movement and Gender Egalitarianism**

The Bhakti movement is among the most important indigenous forces of feminist awareness in India, as it was a radical opposition to patriarchal, caste-based, and ritually-

based religious systems. Focussed on the worship of a deity of a person, the Bhakti tradition did not face the mediation of Brahman, but gave importance to emotional, spiritual, and ethical equality. This ideology helped women to express dissent and identity in a very patriarchal world. Women saints like Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi, and Andal helped to change the gender norms by acting in a transformative way. Mirabai had been given identities of spiritual autonomy in her devotional poetry, which were against the requirements of the marital and the royal duties, claiming her to have the right to choose devotion instead of household conformity. One of the most popular Virashaiva saints (Kurian, 2012) <sup>[8]</sup>, Akka Mahadevi, was unwilling to accept traditional femininity and bodily attachments, and her poetry was aimed at denying male hegemony and bodily containment. As one of the earliest female Bhakti poets, Andal did not hide desire and devotion, and she sharply challenged the conventions of female sexuality and manifestations. In addition to the personalities, the Bhakti movement also served as a social criticism challenging the caste system and promoting inclusiveness. Numerous Bhakti saints did stress the moral equality of all worshippers, and caste and gender discrimination were undermined. By sanctifying women's experiences in the open places of worship, Bhakti traditions broke the significant patriarchal discourse and provided alternative forms of agency and opposition. What was not directly feminist in the modern sense, the movement was based on feminist spiritual equality, personal autonomy, and social critique, which forms the basis of indigenous feminist thought in India.

### **Community-Based and Tribal Feminist Practices**

The societies in India of community-based and tribal practices provide valuable information on the indigenous femininity that is very different from mainstream patriarchal norms. The Khasi and Garo peoples of Meghalaya and the Nair of Kerala were matrilineal societies, which in the past arranged kinship, inheritance, and social identity using the female line. Women in the Indian caste system were relatively more independent about property ownership, residence, and family decision-making, a challenge to the tradition of patrilineal systems found in most parts of India. Women are the traditional successors of the family property, and they are the main representatives of family and clan activities in the Khasi and Garo tribes. Although political power still might be dominated by males, the economic and social power that women have in family formation gives them a high level of agency. Equally, due to the Nair system of marumakkathayam, women were free to own property, exercise sexual and marital independence, thus redefining family and gender relationships (Singh, 2025) <sup>[9]</sup>. Women have another important role in governance, resource control, and economic activities in tribal and indigenous communities. The women are usually involved in village councils, agricultural work, forest management, and artisan work, and they are the ones who directly contribute to the community's livelihood. They have been taught the significance of ecology, health, and social organization, which constitute a vital component of indigenous government structures. Such community-based practices emphasize new models of gender relations that are based on cooperation and not on dominance. Although these are not devoid of inequality in the country, they show that feminist ideologies of agency, inclusion, and humanity existed long

ago within the indigenous Indian social set-ups and provide useful insights into modern feminist discussions.

### **Feminism During the Colonial Period**

#### **Social Reform Movements and Women's Emancipation**

The colonial era was a turnaround in terms of the development of feminist consciousness in India, as the issues of women gained primacy in the social reform movements. Indian reformers increasingly challenged some of the respected practices, which included sati, child marriage, female infanticide, and denial of education to women, often in their colonial modernity. The abolition of sati in the year 1829 under Governor-General Lord William Bentinck and heavily championed by Raja Ram Mohan Roy became a historical milestone reform and a memory of the initial fight for women's rights. On the same note, the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, advocated by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, attempted to deal with the social marginalisation of widows and defied the orthodox Hindu traditions. Another important field of reform became women's education (Ossome, 2024) <sup>[10]</sup>. Bethune School, Calcutta, and the campaigns of reformers like Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule in western India put education as empowering and socially changing in perspective. Notably, women became the subjects of change themselves more and more. Patriarchy, religious orthodoxy, and gendering were attacked by activists and reformers writing, establishing educational programs, and activism, including Pandita Ramabai, Begum Rokeya, and Tarabai Shinde. Such reform movements formed the basis of the emancipation of women as they focused on the legal inequalities and gave more access to education and public life to women.

#### **Nationalist Movement and Women's Political Mobilization**

The Indian nationalist movement was one event that dramatically changed the character of women's involvement in the common and political life itself. The freedom movement gave women a chance to escape the bonds of domesticity and participate in the mass mobilization and civil disobedience, as well as take up political leadership. Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Kasturba Gandhi, Aruna Asaf Ali, and Usha Mehta are some of the women who have taken an active part in the Indian National Congress and other nationalist movements. The involvement of women was also promoted by Gandhian movements, especially using the idea of political activism as the natural extension of moral obligation, self-sacrifice, and service to the nation. Nevertheless, the movement of women during the nationalist time was very much bound with the existing gender concepts (Rathnam, 2024) <sup>[11]</sup>. The traditional concepts of femininity were very frequently supported through the image of the woman who was the spiritual and moral protector of the nation, despite facilitating political involvement, which was yet another concept that nationalism used to foster. Although women were fully engaged in protests, boycotts, and underground activities, they were not always involved in activities that would be transformative, but rather symbolic. This period was, however, a pivotal growth of women's political awareness and mobilization, which was due to the influence of the nationalists who politicised women's experiences and provided a platform on which feminist movements would act in the post-independence period.

### **Limitations of Colonial Feminist Discourse**

Although this has improved much, feminism during the colonial times had its own limitations, or rather required a great deal of ideology and structure. Colonialists made Indian women seem like a downtrodden people who were powerless victims of primitive society, with practices like sati and purdah being used to rationalize the need to intervene in India. Such orientalist-constructed forms of Indian womanhood maintained the stereotypes and established Western norms as being superior. In most instances, the colonial reforms were not driven by the real interests in the rights of women, but rather, they were also driven by the need to justify the colonialists' rule. Meanwhile, indigenous reform movements also provided greater attention to the importance of women both in the family and the nation, as compared to radical gender equality. Respectability, domesticity, and moral virtue in emphasis restricted the demands of feminism (Sharma, 2017) <sup>[12]</sup>. Other problems, like labour rights, sexual independence, and caste-related oppression, were scarcely addressed. Accordingly, the colonial feminist discourse continued to be influenced by the conflict between the reform and social control, modernity and tradition. Although it brought about important discussions of the position of women, it did not address the question of patriarchy fully, and one more argument is that broader and intersectional feminist strategies are necessary during the post-independence period.

### **Post-Independence Feminist Movements in India**

India Post-independent feminist movements developed in the constitutional framework of formally embodied gender equality and faced underlying social and structural inequalities. The principles of equality, non-discrimination, and equal opportunity were incorporated in the Indian Constitution under Fundamental Rights, especially Articles 14, 15, and 16, and thus established women with a legal foundation in their rights. Changes in the family laws—through the Hindu Code Bills—attempted to advance the position of women in marriage, inheritance, and divorce; however, they stoked up a great deal of controversy and opposition, particularly on personal laws and religious freedom. Regardless of the progress in legislation, the disparity between the constitutional principles and the real life of women became more vivid, and the systematized feminist movements appeared in the 1970s (Singh & Yadav, 2021) <sup>[13]</sup>. The second-wave feminism in India was characterized by mass movements on matters of dowry deaths, custodial violations of bodily autonomy, domestic violence, and the discrimination of women at the workplace and the anti-dowry movement. The autonomous women's groups sprang up at this time in urban and rural areas, which focused on grassroots activism, consciousness, and opposition to both state neglect and patriarchal domination. Feminist discourse was not limited to equality before the law but covered structural inequality and stereotype oppression. Late twentieth-century Indian feminism had begun to take an intersectional view by which the experiences of women are determined by caste, class, religion, region, and sexuality (Dongre *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[14]</sup>. Dalit feminism also anticipated caste-based exploitation and marginalisation in society as well as in mainstream feminist activism, and Adivasi feminists focused on the displacement, land rights, and environmental justice.

Muslim feminists would critically explore the issues of personal law, citizenship, and minority rights, and queer feminisms would question heteronormative assumptions of feminism as well as legal systems. In totality, however, these varied strands have made Indian feminism a plural, inclusive, and critically self-reflective movement that is still subject to a variety of transforming social and political realities.

### **Indian Feminism and Global Feminist Thought**

Indian feminism has contributed a lot to the transformation within feminist ideas across the world by providing critical postcolonial insights that question the universalist way of thinking within Western feminism. The Indian school of postcolonial feminism has been challenging the mainstream feminist discourse in the Western Middle East to perceive women in a specific homogeneous way, as well as to make the Third World women appear as subjects of dominant forces and tradition. Focusing on historical background, cultural particularity, and structural injustices based on colonialism and capitalist processes, Indian feminists have been pointing out the weakness of universal feminist paradigms. These criticisms have given voice to Global South people and demonstrated the necessity of plural and context-specific feminist theories of global feminism that acknowledge differences in diversity and power disparities. Other than criticism, Indian women have made various contributions to the world in gender, development, and labour (Mert & Unsal, 2022) <sup>[15]</sup>. The effects of neoliberal economic policies, informalization of labour, and globalization have been discussed by scholars and activists in ways that would predominantly impact women, especially the marginalized ones. Associations like the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) have also contributed to the international debate on women's labour rights, microfinance, and social security. Indian feminist interventions have played a significant role in the discussion of systemic harm against women, as they have attracted the concern of the state, law enforcement, and militarization in supporting gendered violence. Feminist analytic concerns have been employed to analyse issues concerning custodial violence, conflict-related severe gender-based harm, and communal riots to associate gender oppression with state power and political conflict. Indian feminism has also taken the path of transnational feminist networks and solidarities (Hossain & Nikolov, 2021) <sup>[4]</sup>. The Indian women's organizations and NGOs have been working closely with the UN platforms, international human rights forums, and global conferences to influence the gender policies and agendas of advocacy. Transnational exchanges have also been facilitated by Diasporic feminist activism, which deals with matters of migration, identity, racism, and labor exploitation. These networks have seen Indian feminism appear as a place of resistance along national lines, as well as being essential to the changing world of global feminist thought and practice.

### **Contemporary Challenges and Digital Feminism**

In the modern world, Indian feminism is working in the context of a dynamic socio-political and technological environment defined by digital media, the processes of neoliberal economies, and the transforming balance of power. Social media has become an important platform of feminist expression, discussion, and formation of movement

in which women are able to narrate, forge solidarities, and criticize the dominant narratives outside of the conventional institutional structures. Digital sites have democratized feminist discourse by making the marginalized voices heard, such as the young women, queers, and those of a lower town and rural origin, as they had no access to the forums before. The emergence of digital feminism has caused new challenges and contradictions, however. Feminist activism online has frequently received strong criticism in the form of trolling, cyber harassment, doxxing, and gendered hate speech. The increase of right-wing politics and cultural nationalism has only deepened the opposition to feminist notions, often presenting feminism as a Western export that is threatening traditional values and social solidarity (Jayanthi, 2022) <sup>[5]</sup>. Feminist activists and scholars are becoming more and more subject to challenging patriarchal norms, religious orthodoxy, and state policies, indicating the declining zone of dissent in the digital and public sphere directly. In spite of these issues, digital activism has had a discursive change in the feminist agenda in India. gender-based harm, reproductive rights, body autonomy, and LGBTQ+ inclusion are all universal movements that occur online, mobilizing the opinion to pressure institutions in response. Protests, awareness campaigns, and legal advocacy have also been easily coordinated using digital tools (Kataria, 2012) <sup>[6]</sup>. On the one hand, digital feminism is not an alternative to grassroots organizing, but on the other hand, it has become an influential complementing force, changing the strategy of feminism and widening the scope of feminist politics in modern India.

### **Discussion**

Indian feminism is described as a continuity and change that are very dynamic and represent both the profound indigenous traditions and a flexible adaptation to emerging social, political, and global conditions. Among the essential continuities is the struggle against patriarchal power and social order that can be traced back to the pre-colonial spiritual movements and community practices up to the modern women's movement of feminism. Indian feminism has focused on collective justice, moral equality, and social reform, and has been characterized as such in contrast with less communal feminist traditions. Simultaneously, the modes and patterns of feminist activism have been dramatically changed, influenced by colonial experience, constitutionalism, economic liberalization, and online technology. Additional interests: Feminist agendas now extend beyond initial focus on social practices and legislative changes to include intersectional prerogatives like caste discrimination, wage legislation, sex attraction, environmental justice, and coercive state practices (Kumari *et al.*, 2016) <sup>[7]</sup>. The interaction between native culture and foreign trends has been a successful and controversial one. Bhakti egalitarianism, community-based governance, and anti-caste thought are sources of indigenous cultural resources, which have offered feminist resistance with an ethical and philosophical basis. At the same time, the involvement in the international feminist theories has brought new analytical resources, terms, and solidarities across national boundaries. Indian feminists have selectively modified concepts of the world, including gender equality and human rights, with a critical objection to the globalized universalist concepts about the universality of people. Such a dialogic process has enabled Indian feminism to be

grounded, though globally active in intergroup communication, so as to enhance plural and inclusive feminist discourse (Ossome, 2024) <sup>[10]</sup>. In modern India, feminism is very much applicable to all the gender inequalities, socio-economic disparities, and political polarization. severe gender-based harm against women, lack of equal access to education and jobs, cyber harassment, and the discrimination of women of colour still highlight the need to intervene with feminism. Feminism in India today is not merely a struggle of women but a generalized challenge of social injustice and has provided alternative alternatives of democracy, citizenship, and social change in a fast globalized, but also a more unequal environment.

### Conclusion

This paper has discussed the concept of Indian feminism as a historically based, diverse, and dynamic movement that has been influenced by the indigenous cultural practices as well as by the interactions with the outside world. Through the analysis, one can point out that feminist consciousness in India was not created entirely in colonial modernity, and it had very strong roots in pre-colonial spiritual and cultural practices and communities, which acknowledged women as being powerful actors and challenged hierarchical social societies. The bhakti and Sufi traditions and matrilineal and tribal systems, indigenous systems, offered ethical reasons for future feminist thinking. The colonial period was a period of great transition that saw the growth of social reform movements as well as nationalistic politics that empowered women to participate in many activities in society, but at the same time, limited feminist agendas in the context of patriarchal and nationalistic concepts. The post-independence feminist genre also expanded by guaranteeing its own constitutionally, mass-driven, and intersectional critiques that prefigured caste, class, religion, and sexuality. In theory, the paper highlights the need to consider Indian feminism in the postcolonial and intersectional light, threatening the universalist feminist discourses. Indian feminist ideology plays a key role in world feminism because it focuses on specificities of context, structural inequalities, and collective resistance. It underscores the intersectionality of the oppression in gender with colonial legacies, state power, economic marginalization, and cultural politics. As a matter of fact, Indian feminism has been used to shape policy discussions, legislative changes, grassroots movements, and global actionism; it has shown its ability to impact institutional structures and social interactions on the ground. Future studies have a wide range of potential. Further variations of feminist experiences can be revealed by comparative studies of various areas, communities, and traditions of feminism in India. More effort should be put into the new areas of concern, including digital surveillance, climate, migration, and the political economy of care work on the feminist side. Field and longitudinal studies of marginalized populations can further enhance the empirical research, especially in rural and conflict-prone regions. With Indian feminism still changing to respond to the international currents, subsequent studies should be responsive to continuity and change in the quest to achieve gender justice and social equality.

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