



## FEMINISM IN 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY

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**ABSTRACT**-The moment we hear the word 'Feminism,' a variety of images come to our mind, wherein women coming on the streets to fight for their rights emerges. One could imagine a staunch feminist woman arguing for their rights without listening to anyone around. A bit scary and a bit funny image arises. But to my surprise, I don't understand why women have to fight for their rights? Do men have to fight for their rights, then why do women have to fight for their rights?

Although there is no specific definition of the term 'Feminism,' Dictionary calls it - the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of sexes. The movement started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are still fighting.

In this paper, we will be discussing the three Waves of Feminism and the need for the Fourth Wave of Feminism. Also, the paper would specifically focus on women of India as we have enough variety in terms of different societies, cultural backgrounds & even economic backgrounds. We are thus covering all the aspects of Feminism, along with a bit of black Feminism. We all tend to imagine an image of a multitasking mother who has 8-10 hands who takes care of her children, husband, family, work, household chores, and whatnot. But society has somewhere deep down in our minds cultivated this idea where a woman is always taking care of everyone, and a man will always go out and work for someone who goes out and earns. The question arises, Is it a reality, don't women fail? Don't they get tired? Is the image of women as 'Devi' as we call it in India a reality? I feel a woman should be accepted as a human being; she is not a Devi – she is a woman, a human who can make mistakes and learns from her mistakes just as any other man does. These stereotypes tend to put women on a pedestal from where it is not easy to be a human.

**Key Words:** Feminism, Fourth Wave of Feminism, Stereotypes, Black Feminism.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Wikipedia states - Feminism is a range of social movements, political movements and ideologies that aim to define, establish and achieve the political, economic, personal, and social equality of sexes. The above definition states a brief view of what is Feminism all about, but there are various layers to it. Feminism as a movement – First wave of Feminism started during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the First wave mainly focused on promoting women's right to vote. The second wave of Feminism began in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century for legal and social rights of women. In contrast, the third wave of feminism started in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century

in around 1992 that focused on individuality and diversity of women. An urge for Fourth Wave of Feminism arose in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that adopted social media to fight against the various injustice against women.

### First Wave of Feminism

Till now every individual knows what Feminism is? We don't have to explain it around. During the 1850s First Wave of Feminism started, and we have discussed the same in brief at the introduction. But India had a different scenario altogether; in India, we were not fighting for Right to Vote, our priority was to abolish Sati culture. In Sati custom, a widow will die with her husband at his funeral pyre. We also had another problem of Child Marriage; Dowry related violence against women, custodial rape and sex-selective abortion. It was during the period, we were under the colonial rule of Britishers. According to Maitrayee Chaudhari, unlike the western movements of feminism, Indian Feminism was initiated by men and later on carried over by women. As an individual movement, Feminism started quite later in Maharashtra by Savitri Phule who started a school for girls in 1848, While first feminist literature— Stri Purush Tulna ( A Comparison between Men and Women) by Tarabai Shinde was published in 1882. The work protested against the upper caste patriarchy and the caste system in India. To stay in a dominant male society and write a text (pamphlet initially published in Marathi) against men and the customs set by the patriarchal system needs a real spark. The work was a response to a newspaper article in Pune Vaibhav that criticised women in general.

The text started by Tarabai Shinde with a question to gods and I quote; it says.

“ Let me ask you, something Gods! You are omnipotent and freely accessible to all. You said to be completely impartial. What does that mean? That you have never been known to be partial. But wasn't it you who created both men and women? Then why did you grant happiness only to men and brand women with nothing but agony? Your will was done! But poor women have had to suffer for it down the ages,”

The text says it all. No reference is required to understand the same. The text was criticised a lot initially and only got recognition when it was republished in 1975.

Pandita Ramabai also criticised Patriarchy and caste system in Hinduism during the first phase and married outside her caste and turned to Christianity.

The first phase for any movement is considered as a crucial phase and India had to fight a lot.

When we talk about the **Second or Third Wave of Feminism** the same may not be applicable for India as **First Wave of Feminism** started really late. Hence whether we call it Fourth Wave of Feminism or Second Wave they are one and the same for India.

### Fourth Wave of Feminism

Fourth Wave of Feminism focuses on the injustice prevailing in terms of sexual assault, rape, harassment at workplace, acid attacks & violence against women. Till date, women had many achievements in terms of the right to vote, equal rights in property, child custody, equal rights in marriage and parenting. All these laws are available in the book of the law and violating these laws result in punishment, but a question arises why do we have to make law for these things? Do men have to fight for their place in a family? Did they struggle to get their rights in their parental property? The answer is NO, then why do women have to fight? Feminism accordingly should not be a struggle for the right of women the fight has to be for equality not in the eyes of the law but in the eyes of every individual, society; everyone be it a man or a woman.

Today we see women working in the male-dominant areas and few of the women achievers of our century are Gita Gopinath (1<sup>st</sup> Indian Woman) – Chief Economist at International Monetary Fund (IMF). Hima Das/Dhing Express (1<sup>st</sup> Indian athlete) won gold at IAAF World under 20 Athletics Championship. Mary Com created world history by winning 6<sup>th</sup> gold at the World Boxing Championship. Avani Chaturvedi, Aruna Reddy, Dhivya Suryadevara, Padmasree Warrior, Komal Mangtani, Indu Malhotra, Sudha Balakrishnan, Debjhani Ghosh and many more... Just name a field, and you will find Indian women at the top. These prove that our society has potential. What we need to do is just a little push.

First of all, every child must get an education, after that, the said norms, or we may say stereotypical thoughts say, a man must do these things while a woman must do the other. Eg. A boy must have a hair cut and have small hair while a girl must have long hair, who decides these roles, I feel the decision should be personal. A boy may feel like keeping his hair long and even a ponytail or braided one, while a girl may decide to have short hair. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have crossed these barriers in terms like no one may question you for having the hairstyle you want, but our society is yet to be upgraded in this version of our lifestyle.

The question is why a child is every time poked that you must do this, you must not do that based on their gender. Why is blue explicitly the colour of a boy and pink the colour of girl, Cant they have different choices? An example could be whenever we go to malls and toy shops we find segregation of items/toys that interest boys (and they may even colour the section blue) while a portion of items/toys that interest girls (with pink colour). Who makes these differences? These are nothing but a clear example of discrimination. The interest of a child must be decided by a child itself and not some pattern of choices that create a stereotypical image in the minds of sellers.

The example quoted above is a small one, just a primary thought. However, there are 'n' number of discriminations taking place in our society, and we find them reasonable because even we have learnt it the same way. Also, I learnt the same style and did not find any issues with that. However, the way things are presented, I think even deciding on a small toy should not be a gender base perception as this is a base of a child's future decisions.

Women face many issues on an everyday basis where people (here people include men and women both) judge women. They have this stereotypical notion that women are good for a few things while men are good at others. It discourages the thought of trying; women don't even try to step in that masculine sphere of work. But women have attempted and proved the notion to be wrong. But it is also essential to remove this notion from the minds of society. It is not an impossible mission, but yes we have to prove ourselves time and again as these stereotypical thoughts are drilled to our subconscious mind in a way that they seem reasonable to us. We don't find any gender discrimination when we tell a girl child to behave, to talk and even dress in a particular way, making her realise that it is different to be a woman.

Our so-called experts of society have the view that Mother Nature has made us different physically. True, but Mother Nature has never been biased to us. Sun never rises only for men or suspends extra light for men; neither do winds go a little slow for women as they are so-called delicate dolls which might not be so strong as men. Mother Nature has never differentiated between any of her children then why do humans behave differently?

Our media/film industry is also not untouched by the stereotypes. Cinema / Movies / Daily Soaps / Dramas everything we visualize on the big screen has a predetermined image/notion of men, women, their image, their body language etc. In Indian Cinema our society readily accepts an old man having an affair with a 19 year old girl where we have a superstar male hero and a talented young actress, but if anything opposite is displayed the same will not be accepted by the society. In short if a movie displays another way round, the same might not even work for a week in theatres. Female Leads in Indian Cinemas are the so-called 'Pretty Dolls' at the display poster who have no specific role except to dance with the hero and support him to entertain, while the whole story will move around the male protagonist – his fight/ his love/ his achievements/his anger etc. Although Indian Cinema has few strong female protagonist roles as well where the story will move around women, but they are very few. The scenario is the same whether it is Bollywood, Tollywood or Kollywood.

When we talk about the southern part of India where people usually have dark skin and only a few people with fair skin, we find most actresses of north India (fair skinned) that are really popular and rarely a dark skinned female lead. While we find a male lead who is dark skinned, who would be dreaming of a beautiful looking female lead and almost double the age of the female lead and still the movie is a blockbuster and people readily accept it. All these stereotypes impact the minds of the viewers and they find it normal that a woman must necessarily be beautiful doesn't matter even if she is stupid.



There might be a difference in opinion of people saying that although there are exceptions for cinema but our Daily Soaps have main female protagonists who would fight for their rights. I beg to differ as these female protagonists would be more or less fighting for either their spouse or her in – laws or the society. But they would rarely fight for themselves. Infact TV Serials usually depict a picture of a perfect ‘Sanskari’ ( Cultured) daughters/daughter-in-laws creating an image of how a woman should behave in the society, and how they prioritise their family by sacrificing her rights, dreams and desires.

The scenario is not different even if we talk about cinemas/ TV dramas of foreign countries, they would present a doll like female lead who has to look beautiful whether she is shown as smart or an innocent shy girl thereby creating an image of women who have to look beautiful whether she applies her mind or not has never been a question.

I have heard people saying feminism is no more required in the current scenario and that there is no need of all these government schemes of ‘Beti bachao Beti Padhao’ etc and now that women have been granted all the permissions to enter various temples and other places there is no need of feminism anymore, and they have received all their rights. My question to those people first of all is Why do women need permission? Did men also apply for permission? The answer is ‘no’ men don’t need permission then why do women always need permission, before they get married they need permission from their father and brothers and after marriage they seek permission from her husband and in- laws. These thoughts have been drilled in the minds of the society through various norms, rituals and our cinemas as well where women are just followers. We need to remember that culture is made by us and not the other way round. Customs, Rituals, fasts etc are always tied to women. Women must wear bangles, anklets and various other ornaments as they are made to believe that these ornaments will increase their husbands life. The same should be applied to men. They must also wear a few ornaments that increase life of their wives. This is just an example and there are many more which are instilled in minds of society that women must follow all these rules and rituals in name of happiness of her family many of them demean women but they follow.

People say nowadays women go out and work but their roles have not changed. They work at home and do household chores, they take care of family members and children and rear babies and also go out and work ultimately someone who has to work 24x7 at home and work as well. On the contrary men only earn bread and butter and their family even the women feel that men get tired since they work so hard. Why is it so? Why can't men stay at home, rear children take care of family and women go out and earn bread for their family. Questioning gender roles is threatening patriarchy!

Feminism is actually not a new story it has been here around us but the society did not accept. Right back from ‘Mahabharata’ where Draupadi questions her husband Yudishthir his right to gamble her away to ‘Malala’ in Pakistan fighting for rights of women for education we have ‘n’ number of events and incidents that present feminism has been around us. We all know ‘Meera Bai’ who gave away all , riches and wandered in search of her love ‘Krishna’ . We have ‘Mahadevi Of Karnataka and many other saint poets that questioned Patriarchy, Right to marry by choice, early widowhood rituals and many others. These saint poets are the early feminist and later we have many too. But since the whole patriarchy is questioned many were burnt alive stating they were evil spirits that have come to destroy humanity.

We are in a society where in video games a princess is rescued by a prince and they fall in love, but we need a society where a princess is smart enough to rescue herself and get a prince who is her partner and not her rescuer. We need to come out of the society that thinks that women get raped because of their sense of clothing. Instead we must teach our children to respect both genders equally and come out of the patriarchal stereotypes that demean one gender. Feminism is not the want to convert patriarchy to matriarchy but a need for dignity, respect and equality of both genders.