

**Book Review...****13. The Narrative of the Indian Feminist Tradition****Mr. Charanjeet**

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This book aims to undertake a critical analysis and expand upon the existing body of scholarship on Indian Feminism. In particular, it endeavours to provide a foundational framework for tracing the evolution of Indian Feminism and identifying its roots within the tradition of Indian feminist thought. The Hindi belt in India has long been regarded as a stronghold of cultural-ideological values characterised by the persistence of the varna-caste social system and patriarchal norms. From the colonial era to the present day, the intellectual-cultural and literary movements in this region, whether knowingly or unknowingly, have often been trapped by the same patriarchal feudal biases they have ostensibly opposed. Notably, there has been a conspicuous dearth of a nuanced and empathetic approach toward issues pertaining to women within this society. With rare exceptions like Rahul Sankrityayan, the renowned author of '*Volga to Ganga*,' who elevated the productive and reproductive roles of women in society by highlighting the robust foundation of matrilineal underpinnings of the society, few others have shed light on the socio-economic status of women in Hindi-speaking states. There has been a noticeable absence of substantial exploration of the socio-economic status and conditions of women in Hindi-speaking states. There is scant evidence to suggest that comprehensive theoretical propositions have been put forth addressing the issue of gender devaluation.

To comprehend the status of women and the evolving feminist discourse within the Hindi belt, it is crucial to delve into the complexities of its folk culture. Historically, women have played an essential role in this society, serving as the linchpin of all socio-cultural activities. It is widely acknowledged that mothers serve as a child's primary educator, instilling the values of social life in the child's mind. In its ideal manifestation, the society of the Hindi belt is one that respects women, having worshipped them in the form of goddesses since time immemorial. Here, the birth of girls is often associated with the arrival of deities such as *Bhavani* or *Lakshmi*, and the narrative of the sanctity of the *Punch Kanya* is extolled. However, in reality, the extent of sensitivity exhibited by Hindi society towards its women and the degree to which it respects their talents while affording them equal status is a fundamental yet complicated question when evaluating the social status of women. The pursuit of democratic ideals within the social framework encounters complexity in everyday life, as the concept of democracy intersects with various social structures such as caste, class, religion, and gender, giving rise to numerous inequalities, including disparities in men-women equality rights. Against this backdrop, this



book, titled 'Dimensions of Indian Feminism,' authored by Dr. Supriya Pathak, presents vital propositions within the context of the discourse on Indian women.

In the opening chapter of this book, the author highlights the concept of Indian women's discourse, emphasising that feminist thought in India has been consistently influenced by the Western feminist tradition from its inception. However, it is notable that the intellectual dimensions of the Indian feminist traditions have often been overlooked, either knowingly or unknowingly. This lacuna is occurring without a well-defined set of evaluation criteria in place. Notably, endeavours to systematically trace the historical trajectory of Indian feminism as rigorous academic scholarship has not unfolded as anticipated. The history of the discussions and movements advocating for women's rights at the global level has been marked by numerous changes and achievements, a narrative with which we are generally acquainted. It is a common belief that identity-based discussions of this nature are unnecessary in India due to the perception that women hold an esteemed position within our culture. Women are not merely regarded as equals to men but are considered superior, often occupying respectable positions of high respect akin to forms of idol worship. In the Indian context, terms like 'rights,' 'equality,' 'parity,' 'struggle,' and 'exploitation' in relation to women are considered irrelevant. Moreover, a negative perspective occasionally emerges, contending that feminism represents a deconstructionist endeavour to establish a unilateral discourse that runs contrary to the concept of a holistic and inclusive society.

In the given context, when discussing the feminist movement and feminist interventions in India, the author underscores a longstanding tradition of women's knowledge within India, which is both captivating and enriching. Both before and after India gained independence, numerous women devoted their intellectual energy to contemplating women's issues and making significant societal contributions. During the nineteenth century, feminist scholars from European countries, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor Mill, Betty Friedan, Jean Elizabeth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony, were contemporaries of women in India who played pivotal roles in laying the groundwork for the modern women's movement. Notable figures among these Indian pioneers include Pandita Ramabai, Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, Kashibai Kanitkar, Ramabai Ranade, Fatima Sheikh, and Dr. Anandibai Joshi.

The primary objective of feminist discourse in India was to emancipate women from the confines of Indian patriarchal traditions, religious practices, and rituals. These feminists ardently championed women's human rights and their right to education, often adopting revolutionary positions that contradicted the prevailing socio-cultural norms of India. For instance, in her book '*Hindu Stree Ka Jeevan*,' Pandita Ramabai highlighted the discriminatory status of Hindu women, and she embraced Christianity as a response to the gender discrimination and caste prejudices that persisted within Hinduism. Conversely, Savitribai Phule, as an educator, promoted the cause of educating girls from deprived castes. She exhibited a pioneering spirit, positioning herself ahead of her era and keeping stride with her husband. Throughout the nineteenth century, she emphasised the significance of education and physical labour in fostering



knowledge and prosperity. She firmly believed that women were not inferior to men and thus advocated for their education as an essential avenue toward gender equality. This narrative reflects the historical significance and multifaceted nature of the feminist movement in India, with its proponents striving to challenge and transcend deeply entrenched societal norms and prejudices.

The feminist movement in Western countries held significance from an Indian perspective; however, within the Indian knowledge tradition, a non-violent approach towards addressing women's issues emerged, in which figures like Gandhiji and Vinobaji played pivotal roles. Indeed, it was through Gandhiji's efforts that women in India first began to actively participate in public life, marking the nascent stages of the women's movement and heightened awareness among women. The feminist discourse attributes the political activation of women to Gandhiji, who envisioned a nation with a universal, rather than narrow, outlook. At a theoretical level, Gandhiji advocated for inclusivity, and he held clear views on who should lead the movement for the country's liberation. He adopted two core values for this movement: 'truth' and 'non-violence.' According to Gandhiji, women were better suited than men to uphold these values. In addressing Indian women, he emphasised that they need not emulate Victorian women; instead, Indian women had much to impart to women globally.

Other scholars, such as Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, Periyar, and Lohia, also examined this discourse on women's issues from the lenses of caste and class. Dr. Supriya, the author of this book, draws our attention to the profound insights into women's issues offered by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. She notes that Dr. Ambedkar not only undertook the groundbreaking task of integrating the untouchable, marginalised and oppressed Dalit class, which had suffered social exploitation for centuries, into the mainstream of the nation, but he also dedicated his entire life to eradicating the narrow-mindedness and distortions rooted in societal stereotypes and superstitions. Dr. Ambedkar envisioned a classless society in India, devoid of casteism, classism, communalism, and hierarchical distinctions, where every individual could lead a life of dignity and respect while fulfilling social responsibilities in accordance with their abilities. Women occupied a central place in his vision because of the severe challenges they faced in Indian society.

According to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the women's question in India exhibited a level of complexity surpassing that found in any other developed or developing country. This intricate web of complexities permeated various spheres of Indian life, including the family structure, societal norms, cultural practices, legal frameworks, and employment opportunities. Ambedkar recognised that overlooking this multifaceted complexity led to new forms of oppression and subjugation for half of the country's population. He contended that the struggles faced by women across this vast and intricate country ran deep, and their cultural underpinnings needed to be critically examined as a fundamental prerequisite for achieving women's freedom. It was imperative for women to assert their claim to equality with utmost dignity. Dr. Ambedkar was a committed advocate for women's progress, firmly believing that the status of women within a



society served as a critical benchmark for evaluating that society. Recognising that nearly half the global population consisted of women, he asserted that comprehensive development could not be attained unless women were empowered and advanced. Dr. Ambedkar held immense faith in women's organisations, asserting that their collective strength had the potential to bring about significant societal improvements. At the core of Dr. Ambedkar's ideology regarding women's issues lay the critique of the Brahmanical patriarchal system and the traditional religious and cultural beliefs that perpetuated the subordination of women to men. Within his comprehensive study and vision, Dr. Ambedkar attributed the enduring nature of women's struggles - marked by exploitation, oppression, ignorance, humiliation, and social inequality - to the presence of an inherently unequal social system and deep-seated illiteracy, which had persisted for centuries.

Similarly, Periyar deemed women's liberation to be as imperative as the abolition of the caste system. Historically, he viewed caste and gender-based subjugation as interconnected forms of oppression, interpreting them as structural impediments to modernity. Periyar identified the Brahmanical structure as the primary source of these issues. He consistently observed that during the colonial era, Brahminical hegemony was being upheld under the guise of nationalism, detrimentally affecting both *Shudras* and women. Periyar also scrutinised Mahatma Gandhi's concept of *Swaraj*, contending that it worked against the interests of Dravidians and women. He strongly opposed the idealised notions of Indian/Tamil womanhood propagated by prominent nationalists and social reformers of his time, offering critical commentary on these traditions. Thus, the trajectory of discourse surrounding women's rights and gender equality in India has been marked by a fascinating journey, replete with numerous challenges and triumphs.

The discourse surrounding women's human rights as an ideological framework constitutes a significant and impactful intellectual intervention. In the global context, the origins of this discourse can be traced back to the year 1792 with the publication of the book 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' authored by the eminent liberal feminist thinker Mary Wollstonecraft. This book emerged during a period when liberal philosophers like John Locke, Hobbes, and Bentham were primarily engaged in the theoretical elucidation of natural rights inherent to man. Historical records indicate that as early as the fifteenth century, particularly in 1405 AD, Christine de Pizan delved into discussions regarding women's rights in her French work titled 'The Book of the City of Ladies.' In this seminal work, feminist women in France endeavoured to comprehend the exploitation and subjugation of women, placing them at the forefront of their inquiry. India stands as one of the few countries where the history of the human rights movement has experienced a fluctuating trajectory, marked by periods of advancement and regression. While the roots of the human rights movement in India can be traced back to ancient historical writings and social activities, its contemporary foundation was established during the struggle against colonial rule. In fact, during this era, in the critiques of British colonialism by Indian nationalists, a significant emphasis was placed on the British administration's infringement upon the fundamental freedoms and rights of the Indian populace to perpetuate its dominion in India.



Examining the evolutionary path of feminist intervention within the academic sphere, the author intricately investigates the interconnectedness of the women's movement and women's studies. In addition, the author offers a comprehensive assessment of the relevance, significance, and challenges inherent in the field of women's studies. The origins of women's studies as an academic discipline can be unequivocally attributed to the contributions of the women's movements in India. These movements played an indispensable role in raising fundamental questions concerning the invisibility of women in historical narratives and imbued feminist discourse with fresh insights. Feminist historiography did not solely aim to make women visible within historical narratives; rather, it had a defined agenda to emphasise and document the diverse roles and contributions of women to social and historical processes. In essence, the inclusion of women's experiences within the dialectics of history marked the inception of subjects like women's studies. Numerous women activists, feminists, and social scientists embarked on a quest to establish a novel tradition of knowledge, viewing the world through a fresh perspective and endeavouring to enhance society's attitude towards women. Their underlying premise was that women should not merely be included in history in a tokenistic manner, nor should their place be confined solely to the records of history. Instead, the focus should be on recognising women's contributions and intellectual interventions as pivotal elements in the overall process of knowledge creation. This recognition should be comprehensive and factually grounded, thereby necessitating the emergence of new fields, such as women's studies.

In Indian society, the position of a woman, often regarded as the linchpin of the family, finds themselves trapped in a relentless cycle akin to an ox trapped within a grinding mill, revolving ceaselessly around its central axis. Throughout our lives, we have witnessed women around us adeptly managing household responsibilities and fostering harmony in familial relationships. It is a rare exception when we notice women battling to assert their rights and aspirations.

Over centuries, women have donned various roles – as mothers, wives, girlfriends, sisters, grandmothers, and more. Despite this, narratives abound in folk songs, stories, and legends detailing their discord, conflicts, and tensions in roles such as sister-in-law, mother-in-law, stepmother, and neighbours. We have been raised on tales of astute women who exercised control over men, sometimes confining them within the enigmatic realm of '*Kop Bhavan*' to fulfil their unfounded demands. These women have haunted our dreams since childhood, appearing as witches and sorceresses wielding the dark arts. Ironically, the stories of men's conflicts are often rendered as humorous diversions for our amusement, failing to garner comparable attention. Wars, legal battles, and epic clashes among mighty men are etched in history, elevating them to the status of heroes. Such narratives, steeped in courage, invoke a warrior spirit within us, transcending mere human identity. To establish a healthy and ideal society, it becomes imperative to address existing prejudices, injustices, and gender-based discrimination against women globally. There exists an urgent need for fresh research that delves



into the role of women in upholding family, society, and culture, ultimately paving the way for improved gender relations.

‘The Dimensions of Indian Feminism’ constitutes a noteworthy contribution to comprehending diverse aspects of Feminism within the Indian context. It stands as an intellectually stimulating, well-crafted, and informative work that is poised to garner substantial interest within the academic community. The book possesses broad appeal, extending to a wide readership encompassing academics, feminists, scholars, researchers and activists dedicated to the field of women's issues, Women's and Gender Studies. It serves its intended purpose admirably and stands as a recommended read.

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