

Feminists of Modern India

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Every now and then, we hear the word “Feminism”, or someone being called a “Feminist”. But often people do not know the true essence of the word and may form bias or in many cases incorrect notions regarding the meaning of the word. In this paper, we will aim at understanding of the concept better through examples of the women as well as men from our historical past that were feminists and were strong promoters of the feminist movement in India. The term may have come into limelight now, but the concept has deep roots in the past. Various periods of history have witnessed feminists, who have not only raised their voices against the cruel and discriminatory practices of the past, but have also worked towards liberation of women, in an attempt to build a better place for the future generations.

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“Feminism” is a word we get to hear a lot these days. Most of us believe that feminism is about placing women above men in the society. However, this is completely incorrect. Feminism is about equality - equal rights for both men and women in the society. This includes a number of rights and demands like right to equality of pay, the right to a quality and decent life- free from discrimination, abuse and violence.

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Though feminism in India has gained much limelight lately, its seeds were sown years ago- in the middle of the 19th century. Our history has a lot of examples of women as well as men who advocated women rights and fought for the equality of men and women. So while some Indians were fighting against the British for an independent India, there were some others who were fighting for a 'better' India.

The struggle for the equality of men and women can be traced back to the pre-independence period of the mid-19th century. That was a time when most women were not allowed to go to schools and get educated. A girl child was considered a burden on the family. They were married off at an early age, and did not have rights to property or inheritance of their parents.

Most of them were confined to their houses and their main job was to take care of the entire family. Adding to this was the violent and inhuman system of *Sati* (widow immolation) that was in practice.

As shocking as it may sound, but as per Maitrayee Chaudhuri, renowned author and professor, India's feminist movement, unlike in the West, was initiated by men, and later joined by women, who were mainly their wives, sisters and daughters.

One of the first feminists of historic India was Raja Ram Mohan Roy, one of the founders of Brahmo Samaj. He worked to abolish the social evils that existed in the society at that time including- the heinous *Sati* system, the practice of polygamy (having multiple wives) and child marriage. He also fought for the rights of inheritance of property for the women. He was a strong advocate of education for women. Such was his influence and power, and his will to bring a change that he is considered as the "Father of the Bengal Renaissance" by many historians.

The next and one of the most important women in India's story of feminism was Savitribhai Phule, also popularly known as 'The mother of Indian feminism'. She is also considered as the first female teacher of India. Her husband, Jyotirao Phule also played a very important role in improving the condition of women in India. He fought against his family and the society for the empowerment of his wife. They both were strong advocates of female education and together started the first school for women in Pune in 1848. They fought for the rights of women in historic India and played an

important role in improving the condition of women in Maharashtra, despite strong opposition from the local community. Divya Kandukuri, remarks that the teaching methodology adopted by Phule was far better than the ones in government schools, which is evident from the fact that at that time, the number of girls enrolled in Phule's schools were way more than the number of boys enrolled in schools run by the government.

In one more such instance, Savitribai noticed the plight of the widows in India. Already going through the pain of losing their loved one, they were subjected to extreme physical and mental punishment. They were forced to shave their head, wear a white sari and lead a life of complete isolation. Widow re-marriage was considered a sin. Savitribai noticed this and decided to do something against it. She organized a strike against the barbers, to resist them from shaving the heads of the widows. She also took note of the plight of the sexually harassed women and opened a care-centre for them, to help them lead a life without the fear of boycott from the society.

The next feminist of the 19th Century India was- Tarabai Shinde, a Marathi author known for publishing the first feminist text - *Stripurush Tulana* (which translates to - Comparing men and women) in 1882. The text criticized the upper castes Male dominance and also challenged the Hindu scriptures. This was considered a bold move in those times, especially by a woman, given the Hindu dominated society at that time.

The society at that time was majorly dominated by the Hindu caste system, a system in which the stature of the people in the society was determined by their castes. Pandita Ramabai, was one such feminist who did not just fight for the women rights but also set an example for the women by marrying outside her caste, thereby breaking the stereotypes and challenging the Hindu caste system. She also worked towards improving the life of the widows.

Talking about feminism, how can we not mention the greatest warrior of all time- Queen Rani Laxmi Bai, who did not only fight against the British and their unfair rules, but in doing that set an example for many women who were afraid to raise their voice against the injustice. Such was her bravery and valour that whenever we talk about the greatest warriors and freedom fighters India had ever seen, the first name that comes to our mind is that of the Queen of Jhansi. True to her name, Queen Manikarnika is indeed a gem of India's freedom struggle.

One more queen who fought against the oppressive rule of the Britishers and against the unjust system of 'Doctrine of lapse' was the queen of Kittur - Queen Chennamma. She was one of the first Indian queens to revolt against the Britishers and in doing so, became a source of inspiration for many women, teaching us a very important lesson that no matter how powerful your enemy is, at the end of the day what matters the most is the courage of your heart and the strength of your soul.

Bhikaji Kama, popularly known as Madame Cama, was the first woman who showed the courage to hoist the Indian flag on a foreign soil. At a very young age, she became inclined to politics and became aware of India's freedom struggle. She had a fall out with her husband for his pro-British outlook. At a time, when women rarely walked out of their homes, and even rarely spoke against the patriarchy, she became a symbol of strength by being actively involved in India's struggle for independence. Her house in London became a head quarter for those fighting for India's independence.

In 1896, Bombay presidency was hit by one of the worst pandemics - the Bubonic Plague. It was then, when women like Madame Bhikaji Cama and Savitribai Phule, came forward, risked their lives to save the lives of the masses, showing the grit, strength, determination and at the same time the care a woman can exhibit.

In August 1907, Madam Bhikaji Cama, hoisted the first design of the Indian flag at the International Socialist Congress that took place in Germany. The flag is still remembered for its tricolour scheme and the words '*Vande Mataram*' written in the middle. The flag was also a symbol of the Hindu and Muslim unity. Through this strong gesture, Madam Cama made the entire India proud in a foreign land. She, hence, gave courage to many women to contribute in India's war of independence in whichever way possible.

The 20th Century saw the rise of many feminists and one of them was the father of our nation - Mahatma Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi is known worldwide for his non-violent practices and philosophies. He was one of the main men behind India's freedom struggle and hence has rightly been given the title of the father of the nation. However, many do not know that Gandhi's very strategies of '*satyagraha*' (holding to the truth) and '*ahinsa*' (non-violence) have been inspired from feminism. Gandhi had admitted that he had designed the philosophies to encourage and ensure maximum

participation from women. The philosophy of non-violence allowed women to participate in the freedom struggle without any fear. Such philosophies adopted by Gandhi to fight against the colonial oppressors was very different from the traditional methods of politics and violence. It encouraged women to come out of the prison of the four walls of their houses and show the world the strength of their character and what they were capable of doing. Gandhi played an important role in promoting the rights of the women, supporting them and encouraging them to fight for their rights. An All India Women's Conference was formed in 1927 and with Gandhi as its leader; it became a major supporter of several anti-colonial movements. On 10th April 1930, Gandhi invited women to be a part of the freedom struggle by boycotting foreign clothes and liquor. Thousands of women joined in, thus breaking away from the shackles the society had bound them in for years.

Madhu Kishwar, an Indian academician, remarked that Gandhi saw women as the epitome of suffering and sacrifice. Indeed the same is reflected from the very philosophies adopted by Gandhi to fight the Britishers. His philosophies indeed have a feminine touch to them.

One more prominent feminist was the nightingale of India - Sarojini Naidu, a very important part of India's freedom struggle. She was a prodigy. At a young age of 16, she won a scholarship and went to study in King's College at London. Her poems and excellent literary work made her earn the title of "The Nightingale of India". She travelled the country, gave powerful speeches on women empowerment and inspired many women to become a part of the freedom movement.

In 1918, Naidu along with the Indian and British feminists of that time, launched a magazine called "Stri Dharma" to report the happenings around the world from the perspective of a female. In 1925, she became the second female President of the Indian National Congress. Indian National Congress was one of the most important nationalist movements at the time of India's freedom struggle and having a woman as its head was indeed one of the many important milestones for the feminist movement in India. During the famous Salt March initiated by Gandhi against the tax on salt, women participation in the march was not encouraged, for it was a long walk from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi. However, Naidu was the first

woman to join the movement and break all the stereotypes. This encouraged a lot of women to come out of their houses to contribute to India's freedom struggle. A fearless individual, she was also arrested by the Britishers and put behind the bars. However, this did not deter her and she came out even stronger to fight against the oppressive regime. The same British government awarded her the Kaisar-i-Hind Medal, in recognition of her work, which she later returned as a symbol of protest against the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

One of the greatest politicians, she served as the first governor of the United Provinces of India for a period of two years from 1947 to 1949, post-independence. Not just in India, she worked outside India too. In South Africa, she was the leader of the East African Indian National Congress. It is difficult to summarize the contribution of one of the greatest politicians and poetess that India ever had. It is matter of pride for the rich past of India to have such women leaders, who continue to inspire generations of women through their stories of grit and valour.

Our history has several examples of women who tried to break the stereotypes and refused to accept the boundaries set for them by the society. They in fact wrote their own history and in doing so became an integral part of India's history. They continue to inspire generations of women. It is matter of pride for the Indians, especially the women of India today to look back at the struggle of our ancestors and carry forward the legacy they left behind.

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