

WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN INDEPENDENT INDIA (1970 to 2010)

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PAPER: FEMINIST THOUGHTS AND PRACTICES I

SCHOOL OF WOMEN'S STUDIES

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DETAILS OF THE MODULE

▶ FOCUS OF THE MODULE

- ▶ The module traces the trajectory of Indian women's movements in its plurality and diversity through the continuum between family, community and state in independent India from the 1970s to 2010.

▶ OBJECTIVE OF THE MODULE

- ▶ The module aims to give an idea about the social-political-economic context in which women movements started organising on the issue of violence and progressed to deal with various challenges faced within the framework of difference and conflict to fight for women's rights.

PLURALITY OF INDIAN WOMEN AND WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS

- ▶ The plurality of Indian women reflects in the plurality of their politics.
- ▶ The categories of class, caste, community, region, language, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, etc define the role of women in the scope and thrust of women's movements.
- ▶ Women define themselves and identify themselves through difference and conflict rather than through similarity or common belonging.
- ▶ Yet we continue to use the term 'women's movements' and thereby try to capture the plurality of the movements and its common threads from the 1970s onwards.

ROLE OF THE INDIAN STATE

- ▶ Women's movement has an ambiguous relationship with the state.
- ▶ The independent state granted franchise and constitutional equality to Indian women. It was therefore believed that modernisation and development would deliver well-being for women along with others.
- ▶ The Indian government published a report, *Towards Equality*, in 1975 placing the women's question on the national agenda by arguing that the position of Indian women has declined since 1911 (CSWI 1975).
- ▶ As a result, development and progress became gender issues.

FROM THE 1970s...

- ▶ The mid 1970s was a tumultuous decade in Indian politics with ruthless repression by the Indian state on the one hand, and spirited resistance from different segments of society in rallies, gheraos, strikes, demonstrations and marches.
- ▶ There were important social movements within which popular women's voices found their first platform. Some of the important events were:
 - ▶ Shahada movement initiated by Bhil landless labourers in Maharashtra, 1972
 - ▶ Formation of Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), 1972
 - ▶ Formation of United Women's Anti-Price Rise Front, 1973
 - ▶ Nav-Nirman – a student movements against price rises in Gujarat, 1974
 - ▶ Formation of Progressive Organisation of Women (1973-74)
 - ▶ Chipko movement was a precursor of eco-feminism, 1973
 - ▶ Bodhgaya movement for radical demand of women's land rights, 1978

IMPORTANT INTERNATIONAL EVENTS

- ▶ Women's questions were internationalised through United Nations which resulted in the following events:
 - ▶ Celebration of International Women's Day for the first time – 8 March 1975
 - ▶ International Year of Women – 1975
 - ▶ International Decade of Women – 1975 to 1985
 - ▶ International Conferences on Women – Mexico (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), Beijing (1995)
 - ▶ These conferences on women enabled a global circulation of feminist ideas and strengthened national women's movements; they became a rich source of resources and campaigns

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

- ▶ Women's movement acquired a national character through networks of protests organised around incidents of violence against women in the 1970s and 80s.
- ▶ The three main sites of violence were – family, community, state – where structures of power are often in interplay, and deploy common instruments of brute force.
- ▶ There were countrywide protests led by women on two cases of custodial rape where rape was perpetrated by the police on women in official custody -- Mathura case in Maharashtra (1972), Rameeza Bee case in Andhra Pradesh (1978).
- ▶ Forum Against Rape was formed in Bombay in 1978 which led a joint action campaign drawing on women's groups across the country.
- ▶ There were protests by women's groups (like Stree Sangharsh, Mahila Dakshita Samiti) across the country for dowry deaths/kitchen fires where wives were murdered by their husbands or his relatives for not meeting dowry demands.

GOLDEN AGE OF WOMEN-FRIENDLY LAWS – 1980s

- ▶ The Indian state responded to the protest of women's movements which resulted in a spate of legislations and amendments to existing laws on issues of rape, dowry, domestic violence, trafficking, indecent representation of women, sati, sex determination tests, regulation of prenatal diagnostics techniques, etc.
- ▶ It seemed that the more the law changed, the more things remained the same. Without political will or an enhancement in women's ability to claim and assert legal rights, laws existed only on paper.
- ▶ There was more focus on women's groups seeking recognition and realisation of women's rights to lead a life free from violence.

AUTONOMOUS WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

- ▶ Women's organisations were formed in late 1970s which signalled their differences with women's wings of political parties.
- ▶ They viewed political parties as patriarchal and gender blind as male dominated space of political parties were not viewed as hospitable for mobilisation of women.
- ▶ These organisations rejected hierarchies embedded in formal associative activity and focused on raising consciousness about gender issues.
- ▶ They drew their leadership from elites who could draw links with state agencies and intelligentsia.
- ▶ They critiqued women's groups in political parties for subsuming women's question under class and not giving significant leadership to women.

POLITICAL WOMEN'S GROUPS

- ▶ There were differences between autonomous women's movements (AWM) and women's groups of political parties.
- ▶ Political women's groups criticised AWM for the following reasons:
 - ▶ AWM were cut off from mass Indian women
 - ▶ They were in alliance with feminist groups of the West
 - ▶ They made a virtue of 'autonomy' from class, caste and other organisations
 - ▶ They were excessively obsessed with personal issues
 - ▶ They attacked the 'self-styled' Indian feminists and accused them of disrupting class movements

IMPORTANT ISSUES IN THE 1980s

- ▶ The 1980s was a period of growing crisis in India with the secular consensus having broken down and communal conflicts escalating.
- ▶ The Shah Bano case (1985)
 - ▶ A divorced Muslim woman, Shah Bano, sued her husband for financial support and the Supreme Court gave a judgment in her favour by granting her maintenance under provisions of criminal law (Section 125).
 - ▶ The judgment emphasised the need for a Uniform Civil Code which signalled not only a judgment in favour of Shah Bano but also a judgment against Muslim personal law.
 - ▶ This was followed by furious Muslim opposition and precipitated a national crisis with a woman's issue becoming a communal issue.
 - ▶ Muslims challenged the right of courts to interfere in their law and the Rajiv Gandhi government brought the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights in Divorce) Act in 1986.

IMPORTANT ISSUES IN THE 1980s

▶ Deorala Sati incident (1987)

- ▶ In September 1987, an incident of widow immolation, sati, in a village in Rajasthan sparked off a campaign which raised important questions on the issue of rights and wrongs of Hindu women, religious identity, communal autonomy, role of the law, and role of the Indian state.
- ▶ The debates raised many binaries such as rural/urban, tradition/modernity, complementarity/sameness, state/religious communities, spiritualism/materialism.
- ▶ There were accusations against the Indian feminists of being agents of modernity and they were labelled as Westernists, colonialists, cultural imperialists.
- ▶ The women's organisations of the Hindu Right too claimed that they represented the true desires of Indian (Hindu) women.

THE DECADE OF THE 1990s

- ▶ The decade of the 1990s brought the women's movement into a new and unfamiliar terrain.
- ▶ The regimes of state-led development were abandoned as economic liberalisation started in India followed by globalisation.
- ▶ The concatenation of Mandal and Masjid transforming India's political landscape. While the Mandal Commission made further reservations for backward castes, the demolition of Babri Masjid was followed by riots.
- ▶ By early 1990s, it was clear that one could no longer speak of 'women' without reference to class, caste and community.
- ▶ The initiative to undertake constitutional amendments 73 and 74 to reserve one-third seats in the panchayati and municipal governments was taken in 1994.
- ▶ The women's movement was divided on women's reservation showing the impossibility of articulating a politics of gender not inflected with caste and communal identities.

CASTE-BASED CRITIQUES OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS

- ▶ There was the rise of dalit women's organisations in the 1990s.
- ▶ They critiqued both party-affiliated women's groups and autonomous women's organisations of failing to mount any significant challenge to Brahmanism.
- ▶ Scholars have highlighted the relationship between upper caste domination and the reproduction of caste hierarchies.
- ▶ There have been battles of honour fought between the upper and lower castes men over sexuality and bodies of women.
- ▶ Dalit women's organisations like the National Federation of Dalit Women openly condemned the political and cultural marginalisation of women in mainstream dalit organisations.

CHALLENGES OF NON-NORMATIVE SEXUALITY

- ▶ The lack of knowledge and panic related to the effects of HIV/AIDS resulted in passing off the 'blame' to the non-sexually normative.
- ▶ While a section of the medical establishment argued in favour of legalising homosexuality for managing AIDS epidemiology in India, the demand also gave new energy to gay rights movements.
- ▶ After repeated attempts, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code has been struck down with the landmark judgment passed on 2 July 2009.
- ▶ The voices of lesbian women emerged to question the exclusion of lesbian identity from the politics of Indian women's movements.
- ▶ Lesbian women used a liberating language of gender and sexuality to critique heteronormativity and argued a case for coming out, becoming visible and claiming a social space.

TO CONCLUDE...

- ▶ The different challenges to women's movements have brought into recognition the fact that 'women' do not simply exist as a category that is available for feminist mobilisation.
- ▶ The category of 'women' emerged from the feminist positing of difference as a challenge to the abstract category of 'citizen'.
- ▶ The slogan 'sisterhood is global' set up a universal that was in its turn oppressive with the upper caste, middle class, urban, heterosexual women marginalising the experiences of many other women.
- ▶ The disabled women have also been questioning the women's movements on marginalisation of the disabled.
- ▶ Another challenging question is how, if at all, will women's movements communicate and make the new generation participate in their politics?
- ▶ It is thus important to engage seriously in debates between various margins and centre(s) for a re-visioning of feminist politics.

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