
UNIT 1 WOMAN AS QUESTION/WOMAN IN QUESTION IN THE WEST: 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

Krishna Menon

Structure

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Objectives
- 1.3 The Plural Nature of Feminism
 - 1.3.1 Feminist Foremothers: Early Feminist, The Limits of Enlightenment – A Reformist Approach
 - 1.3.2 Women Talk of Rights – The Seneca Falls Convention—Mid—19th Century Issues of Race and Gender
 - 1.3.3 Cycles, Typewriters and the Vote! The Rapid Advances of the Late 19th Century
 - 1.3.4 The Vote and After
- 1.4 The Second Wave or Is It Waves?
- 1.5 The Backlash and the Response
- 1.6 Post-Modernist Turn in Feminist History
- 1.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.8 Glossary
- 1.9 Unit End Questions
- 1.10 References
- 1.11 Suggested Readings

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this course on “Theories of Women’s and Gender Studies,” we begin our discussions with history. That is because it is important to understand the historical context within which women’s movements were born, before we look more closely at the theoretical ideas which inspired the woman’s question in different time periods and different cultures. This unit will introduce you to various strands of the notion of the history of feminism, and explain how the notion evolved both as a concept and movement. Discussions on the history of feminism unfolded the idea that women across the globe have diversifying experiences, realities and positions emerging from the institutions and situations where the women are located. There is no universal history of feminism is the key and central argument here. We will use the operative definition of feminism as an agency to challenge

women's oppression and exclusion in every society. We will also discuss the role of grass-root women's initiatives and actions emerging across time and society in the ongoing demand for change and social transformation.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Define and explain what feminism means;
- Critically analyse women's oppression from diversifying positions and contexts;
- Describe various approaches of feminism in historical context;
- Explain women's diversifying realities across caste, race, ethnicity, time and society; and
- Analyse the development of feminism in different spans of time.

1.3 THE PLURAL NATURE OF FEMINISM

We will begin by drawing your attention to the title of this section which employs the plural to refer to feminism. Thus, from the very beginning we seek to establish that there is no one history of feminism. Indeed, the unfolding of the history of feminism alerts us to the idea that women all over the world have very different experiences and realities to contend with. No one narration can presume to encapsulate the experience of all women all over the world. In other words a universal history of feminism is not possible, nor is it desirable.

If we must have a broad definition of feminism then it can best be described as a challenge to the oppression and marginalization that women face in their diverse contexts. Since these contexts are different, obviously the experiences are different and hence the feminist challenge to these experiences would also be different. What we could do at best is to plot the broad contours of the attempts that women the world over have made to challenge and change the oppression that they are faced with. Again, a word of caution, it would not be possible for us to look at all such attempts, we will have to make choices and thereby exclude many. But if you find this account of the histories of feminism interesting we are sure that you will explore further and witness startling differences as well as amazing similarities.

But, before we embark upon the history of feminism, we need to spend some time clarifying certain fundamental issues. For instance, how do we define feminism? Does anyone who is concerned with women's issues in general and women's oppression in particular qualify to be described as a feminist? This is an issue that divides scholars and activists alike.

It is impossible to define feminism in terms of a core set of concepts. Women in the distant past have sometimes very courageously questioned the social structures that oppressed them, does that make it an instance of feminist resistance (for instance Mira Bai). There are many instances of women's initiatives and actions from our times that we would hesitate to describe as feminist (the *kar sevikas* who assisted in the demolition of the Babri Masjid by organizing food and nursing care).

There is clearly a kind of consciousness that imbues feminism and a specific historical context that made it possible for feminism to emerge. By familiarizing ourselves with some of the currents in the history of feminism, let us try to achieve some kind of clarity on the question of what is feminism and then its varied history.

Feminism as a term emerged long after women started questioning their inferior status and demanding a change in that status. Should all theories and actions intended to "improve" women's position intentionally or unintentionally be seen as feminist? Or is feminism to be understood as a body of thought and action that has its own distinctive history, practice and ideas? We would be more comfortable with the latter position and of course we hasten to add that there is no one history of feminist practice or idea.

For centuries, women's voices and struggles have not been heard or recorded. Thus there is not much access to what women thought, but the fact is that women have always thought about their lives and tried to resist their subordination. Women were not seen as political creatures for most part of history; their lives were seen as confined to the home and the hearth. Thus, not much is known about the political views or aspirations of women, as women's voices in general were not considered worthy of record (much less their political voices which were thought to be non-existent). But the fact is that in the rich corpus of oral history including poems, folktales etc, women's attempts to understand, explain, ridicule and challenge the basis of their lives may be glimpsed. In the next section, we will look at women's early attempts to voice feminist ideas, and their dissatisfaction with their given roles in society.

1.3.1 Feminist Foremothers: Early Feminist, The Limits of Enlightenment — a Reformist Approach

With the broad sweeping changes that Europe began to experience around the 14th century a new way of being and thinking was inaugurated. As you know, feudalism was on its way out, and new ways of organizing the economy emerged. Trade, in the wake of navigational advances, became the fulcrum around which society, economy and indeed the polity came to be organized. The state needed to be less fragmented, more centralized, and needed a standing well-organized army to guarantee law and order on trade routes

to meet the demands of the new class of mercantile capitalists. Many parts of Europe saw the development of centralized states which organized and generated revenue. Old feudal ties began to weaken, and new methods of organizing social, familial and religious life gradually emerged. New questions about the individual and the state and society came to be asked; indeed the idea of the individual itself was new. Women were also obviously affected by these changes and feminism may be broadly defined as a specific response to the challenges and opportunities that “modernity” brought in its wake albeit, like most things, unequally for women.

By the second half of the 17th century, the distinction between the public and the private came to be etched rather sharply in England. The nature of agriculture changed and a growing army of wage labourers, very different from the earlier family based system of production, became the order of the day. Thus, for the first time a distinction between the public world of employment and the private world of the home emerges.

Women who were up until now partners in work, found themselves squeezed out of work. **Economic activities that were carried out from homesteads now increasingly shifted to new locales outside the home.** Aristocratic women who partnered their husbands in the management of their estates were increasingly restricted to the running of the household. A host of economic and demographic factors created a situation where women began to look at marriage as the only viable solution to their economic insecurities.

As boundaries between the public and the private became sharper, and women’s role in this new divide became a matter of contention. Such a distinction was unheard of in earlier societies, and hence the question of women’s sphere and role was not a very pertinent question. The beginnings of capitalist modernity create a new kind of social and economic organization relegating women to the private sphere with adverse impact on women. **Thus, to ask questions about women’s role and life, and to either reject or challenge the public-private divide, is in some sense characteristic of the feminist articulation. And this is what makes feminism “modern”.**

Since England was in the throes of economic changes and political unrest, obviously these changes affected men and women. However, women’s voices typically went unheard, so that we literally have to ferret out voices of the likes of **Mary Astell (1661-1731)**, who employed the newly emerging liberal discourse in a classic way to examine the impact of these advances on the lives of women. In a way her arguments lay down the foundation of the classic liberal feminist question. **If all human beings have rationality and therefore are deserving of freedom of choice and autonomy, how come women are kept out of this charmed circle?**

Ironically, through many politically conservative arguments (she does not expect political rights for women, and enjoins married women to accept

their husbands in the likes of a monarch, much like the sovereign state in the private sphere), Mary Astell concludes that women should think of life, work and learning without men in secular nunneries. Sadly however, Mary Astell was written out of public memory of the history of 18th century England.

Mary Astell was not a solitary voice in the wilderness; there were many other women who articulated similar concerns, indicating that **women had begun to think of themselves as a group, with similar quests in search of similar answers.** However, **these women stopped short of challenging the existing social and economic arrangements that marginalized women.** They definitely did not challenge the existing norms of division of labor, nor did they have any coherent political programme for an extension of rights to women. Most of these women belonged to the upper echelons of society and addressed other women like themselves, so in the end they were socially and politically conservative. But they did take cognizance of the fact that women as a group were battling certain unresolved issues and they more often than not thought of education and opportunities as the solution.

The 18th century has a mixed record to report in Europe, with the early years being somewhat hostile to feminist consciousness as represented by the “**bluestockings**”. Hannah More who is a good representative of this group argued that women are endowed with sensibility rather than reason, and that they are best suited to pursue domestic roles which however would be performed well with exposure to education. Despite the fact that these women’s opinions are not close to what we may describe as feminist ideas, still the existence of a group of women engaged in intellectual discussions was enough of a challenge to the prevailing notions of womanhood.

By the **second half of the 18th century**, the **American and the French Revolution** unleashed people’s political energies and created the context for interrogation of all accepted norms, and structures in society. It was truly revolutionary times. On both sides of the Atlantic, women began to question the basis of their inequality. **On the one hand, philosophers of the revolution spoke eloquently about freedom and rights of men, grounding it in the fundamental and universal faculty of reason.** But on the other hand, they not only failed to extend this possibility towards women, they actually argued that such an extension is not possible because women are fundamentally different and do not possess reason and therefore are not deserving of freedom!

The best known challenge to some of the ideas mentioned above came from **Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women*** published in 1792. Once again, she was not the only one to articulate this challenge, many others in France and the United States of America echoed similar sentiments.

You would be interested to know of women's role and dramatic instances of participation in the **French Revolution** (women in Paris demanding bread, the *tricoteuses* knitting under the guillotine have passed into the legend of the French Revolution) that sparked the fire of women's desire for **liberty and equality**. Their role, typically, was never read as part of the main script of the Revolution but it laid enough of a firm foundation for women to draw inspiration from later on in France and elsewhere.

Interestingly, in the initial days of the Revolution, women's clubs and women's cries for change were encouraged, but as the movement gathered momentum, all this was brought to an abrupt end. Women's voices were gagged, in fact some of the most prominent spokeswomen were imprisoned or put to death, but all this was not before igniting among women in France and elsewhere a passion for freedom and dignity. Many believed that of all the evils that the French Revolution unleashed, women speaking out must surely be the worst and the most dreaded!

Coming two years after the Revolution, Mary Wollstonecraft's book seemed like an extension of the "unruly women of the French Revolution". Thus it seemed like a book steeped in revolutionary fervor. She was writing at a time when **industrialization had gathered steam but not enough to provide women with respectable employment. The only options existing for women were low-paying jobs in appalling conditions.** Middle class women continued to be economically dependent on marriage and husbands, with lifestyles which had become very stifling given the complete separation of the private and the public.

Mary Wollstonecraft's basic argument was **an extension of the liberal principles to women. She wished to claim for women universal reason, autonomy, freedom and equality.** She sought to demonstrate that "feminine vanity" was a social construct and not a natural attribute, and that given education and exposure, women could function as rational, free-thinking individuals. She insisted that women too must be in a position to freely choose their actions; this added a radical twist to her arguments.

The conviction about equal ability to reason was extended by Wollstonecraft, unlike Mary Astell, to a **demand for equal rights.** This clear political programme for equal rights articulated by Mary Wollstonecraft thus took the nascent feminist consciousness in a clearly political direction. A road map for change was presented, and in a sense, this could be seen as the earliest feminist call, for it had within it a concrete demand for political change. From here to the demand for suffrage was not a very long distance, at least in terms of ideas. Wollstonecraft presented ideas that were converted into concrete political strategies by later feminists.

Mary Wollstonecraft rejected the public-private divide on which the liberal worldview was based, but this did not take her very far because despite

arguing against a devaluation of the private sphere, the fact remained that domestic work was unpaid and not recognized as work. It is this that later feminists have identified as the reason for the perpetuation of women's economic dependence on the institution of marriage.

Carole Pateman has suggested that the problem with the arguments of Mary Wollstonecraft, like with those of most other liberal feminists, lies in an underlying dilemma - that of claiming citizenship for women on gender-neutral grounds, while at the same time recognizing their specific qualities and roles within a framework that would allow women to become full citizens only by being like men.

1.3.2 Women Talk of Rights – The Seneca Falls Convention: Mid-19th Century Issues of Race and Gender

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the anti-slavery discourse was gathering ground in the USA. This became an ideal context for women to examine their lives along the matrix of freedom and dignity. America was experiencing a churning and it was not long before issues of gender came to be talked of in the same breath as race. You will notice that the parallels between the two systems of marginalization are very similar. To make matters more complicated, white women who questioned their unequal lives often compared their position to that of black slaves. In doing this, they overlooked the dual marginalization faced by black women who were oppressed not only by the system of slavery, but also by the men of their own race. This is not to give you the impression that all white women opposed slavery, but many white women did take an active part in the anti-slavery campaign only to find themselves completely ignored in the anti-slavery convention held in 1840 in London. This embittered women like **Elizabeth Cady Stanton** who had been active members of the anti-slavery movement in the USA. The momentous **Seneca Falls Convention of 1848** was an attempt to deal with this rejection. This is considered a landmark event in the history of feminism because this is the **first ever women's rights convention** which Stanton described as "the inauguration of a rebellion such as the world had never seen" (Stanton, 2003 in Bryson, p. 29-34). If we set aside the slightly dramatic assessment of the Convention by Stanton we would notice that it was basically asking for the principles of liberal republicanism to be extended to women and in itself was not all that revolutionary.

The Convention continued to be plagued by the same **dilemmas** that were faced nearly a century ago by Mary Wollstonecraft- the **recognition of women as a distinctive group was accompanied by a strong denial of any significance of this distinctness!** Of course, the women who came together at the Convention seemed not to be aware of the fact that appeals to reason and principles of justice would not persuade men to voluntarily part with their privileged position in society. The Convention did not think it

pertinent to challenge the understanding of women's role in the family and the household. Despite these limitations there is no denying the tremendous significance of the Seneca Falls Convention in any history of feminism that is being written.

Both in England and in America socialist groups sought to expose the limitations of capitalism and critiqued its inherently unequal nature. Many women too were part of such groups and by the mid-nineteenth century were soon disillusioned by the unquestioned acceptance of patriarchy by their fellow-men. **Sylvia Pankhurst** was amongst the first to challenge the male domination of socialist politics. She saw a clear link between the expansion of working class rights and the emancipation of women. She advocated collectivization of house work and the replacement of marriage, (which she likened to economic bondage), with relationships based on free love.

Meanwhile, in the colonized world too, women were questioning the basis of their oppression. Colonialism, however, was the most formative influence in this interrogation. By the mid-19th century, in India for example, women's education, the campaign against Sati and widow remarriage remained the most significant. The influence of colonial politics and the apprehension of cultural hegemony often meant that women's quest for freedom and opportunity got entangled with concerns for community identity and autonomy. More often than not, it was women who were seen as the preservers of tradition and identity through the many archaic traditions and practices that they were expected to follow.

By the end of the 19th century women like **Pandita Ramabai** had challenged the existing construction of womanhood and spearheaded a campaign for women's rights. **Tarabai Shinde**, while not departing from the path of tradition, wrote passionately about the innate power and resilience of women. The social reform movement led by towering figures such as Raja Rammohun Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar raised questions regarding women's role in Indian society. Indian women responded to reformist efforts with enthusiasm, taking up the new opportunities of education and employment. Soon, however, anxieties over community identity and fears of 'westernisation' began to assert themselves. By the late 19th century, women in India had taken to education in a small but sure way, and even set up groups and associations to further the cause of women's rights and opportunities.

***Check Your Progress:** Why do you think the Seneca Halls Convention was so important to the women's movement in the west? Can you relate some of the issues being faced by western women with those faced by women in the colonized world at the same time?*

1.3.3 Cycles, Typewriters and the Vote! The Rapid Advances of the Late 19th Century

In Britain by this time, much as in America, religious ideals of womanly virtues were intermingling uneasily with ideas of equality and rights for women. Rights were often demanded in order to become like men, and at other times to realize the sex-specific roles ordained for women. Thus we can say that there was a great deal of contradiction within Victorian feminism, of which **John Stuart Mill** is a good illustration.

Organized feminism came to America before it came to England, but by 1869, when Mill published his *Subjection of Women* there were many feminist writers engaged with issues of equality and opportunity for women in England as well. Amongst them was **Harriet Taylor** who wrote the *Enfranchisement of Women*. (John Stuart Mill you would be interested to know was Harriet Taylor's husband).

Mill argued rather forcefully that women's subjugation, far from being natural, was a consequence of force and should be rejected as a relic from the barbaric past. He reiterated the belief that men and women both possessed reason and should therefore be given the same kind of education and opportunities. Despite making strong pleas for women's equality and education Mill finally concludes with the rather surprising assumption that rational women would willingly choose a life of dedication to a husband and the tedious task of home management. In the practical conduct of life he subscribed to the idea of separate spheres for men and women!

He suggested that an arrangement where men earned outside the house and women managed the household affairs was by far the most sensible division of labor. Under these circumstances he argues that a married woman should not go out to earn a living thus neglecting her family and children. He obviously assumed that it is only women who are suited to perform household duties and the thought of men taking on this responsibility wholly or even partially never occurred to him. Thus a married woman would continue to be dependent on her husband especially economically. However her potential to earn outside the home in Mill's suggestion made her worthy of respect and dignity. He like many other feminists in England made impassioned pleas for legal and political rights for women, thus moving forward from the 17th and early 18th century where although women were recognized as a group with grievances, no organized effort to secure them rights was initiated, indeed there was no talk of rights at all.

By the end of the nineteenth century most of the demands made by the earlier feminists had been fulfilled. Opportunities might not have been

equal but education for women had opened up in big way. Of course we need to remind ourselves of the sex-specific nature of this education aimed at producing educated mothers and wives and not necessarily women who could take charge of their own lives. There was also some significant legal reform endowing women with rights such as ownership of property for married women as well a degree of protection against violence within marriage.

On the ground level, women's self-perceptions were beginning to change and by the late 19th century many books and newspapers began to project them as free-thinking and economically independent. These portrayals were never entirely complimentary, often tinged with ridicule and sarcasm. This indicated that women had begun to challenge existing norms and that explains the ridicule.

The humble bicycle and the typewriter changed women's lives specially in America. Cycles freed women from the need to be chaperoned, and this led to an almost epidemic of young women cycling. This "revolt of daughters" (who now had education) was further facilitated by new kinds of employment opportunities, such as that of the office secretary who could type and of course that of school teaching, which was an extension of the traditional nurturing role.

Women began to organize themselves into public associations and clubs, on the one hand, and their growing numbers in the organized work force meant their involvement in trade union activities, on the other. We must not, however, exaggerate the numbers involved.

Thus, when we take stock we see that by the end of the 19th century, women were no longer completely kept out of public life and growing educational and employment opportunities that had earlier been the keen demand were now extended to the **right to vote**. The focus in the coming years came to be on 'votes for women'. While there was apparent unity around the slogan, there were diverse ideologies that led to this slogan, with some advocating a position of equality with men, and others focusing on the differences. This bifurcation in approaches remains one of the fault lines in contemporary feminism as well.

Issues of race and class divided the movement, many women in America were not sure about extending suffrage to black people, whereas in England some women saw the property qualification for franchise as an effective class strategy to block working classes from public bodies and decision making. Of course many white middle class women campaigners did not subscribe to these rather restricted ideas on suffrage. You will read in greater detail about this in Unit 3 which will focus entirely on the issue of suffrage.

Meanwhile, Marxism with its vast body of theoretical work and insights attracted many women, who questioned some of its basic assumptions and tried to broaden its scope. **Nadezhda Krupskaya** as early as 1903, in the surge towards the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia argued for greater participation by women in the work force. She sought a recasting of roles for men and women, and suggested that boys should also be taught the basic housekeeping skills. **Lenin, however, while agreeing with his wife Krupskaya, did not prioritize women's issues. In fact he treated issues of sex and marriage as frivolous distractions that the revolution could do without.**

It was **Alexandra Kollontai** who began from a conventional Marxist position of faith in the Revolution's ability to address all wrongs but finally moved to a radical critique of socialist practices that marginalized women. She fought for separate women's wings within the party and kept insisting on the need to forefront women's issues. **After the 1917 Revolution, Kollontai became the first woman in modern history to hold a cabinet position. She laid the foundations for emancipated womanhood in the Soviet Union by initiating laws that gave women full legal independence within marriage. It was her initiative that saw abortion being legalized, she introduced equal pay for equal work and among many other revolutionary features she banned illegitimacy as a legal category.**

Box 1.1

The outbreak of the First World War however changed everything rapidly. The economy was in ruins and the country itself was fighting for survival. Under such circumstances, there was not much support for Kollontai's ideas of revolution from below which would have necessitated resources being set aside for common childcare and women's education. This led to her being discredited and finally shunted out of the central decision making bodies to far away Norway on a rather insignificant diplomatic mission. Thus, the flicker of radical hope that women in Soviet Union had was snuffed out. The statist pro-women policies of later years were a far cry from Kollontai's vision. She sought a complete restructuring of the basic social, familial and sexual organization of the Soviet society. However, by the end of the War, the ideas of the Communist Party were rather tame on these issues; indeed such a reconstruction was not even considered.

Elsewhere in the western world, by the beginning of the First World War in 1914, the right to vote had been extended to women in many parts of the world. New Zealand in 1894 pioneered this to be followed soon by Australia, Finland and Norway. Many other European countries extended

suffrage just after the First World War, and some even moved towards universal adult franchise. This however should not lead us to conclude that the world at that time was full of feminist politicians, on the contrary political expediency, the need for political stability and the need to counter new immigrant populations were all factors that influenced the extension of franchise. Of course the consistent campaign by women remains the single most significant reason. And the extension of franchise to women must remain one of the biggest victories of the feminist movement.

Women's participation in the vote, however, did not bring about the kind of qualitative changes expected, nor did it bring about drastic changes in their lives. It was also clear that women did not vote as a group- class, race or religious affiliation affected their interests as they did in the case of men.

1.3.4 The Vote and After

As a consequence of sustained campaigning, women in Europe and America were able to expand the range of rights they possessed. Women continued to organize and participate in public activity, although in contrast with the years of the suffragette movement the post-vote years seemed rather silent.

New kinds of issues and ideological battles came up among feminists. Two conflicting positions that continue to plague the feminist movement to this day began to be articulated clearly around this time- on the one hand, the demand to be treated just like men and, on the other hand, the claim that women's specific qualities and roles should be accorded special recognition and support.

The two positions may be characterized as '**equal rights**' vs. '**welfare feminism**', the former focusing on the question of the woman as an individual and the latter recognizing the sex-group identity of women. Welfare feminism facilitated a shift within feminism that had up until now been seen as basically a middle class woman's desire for greater freedom towards another dimension- that of the working class mother who now emerged as the new symbol of oppressed womanhood.

In general, we can surmise that another approach to understanding women's oppression that was prepared to take a more collectivist stand emerged. This also implied a greater acceptance of interventionist strategies if need be.

By the **end of the Second World War**, women in most of the western world had made considerable advancements and consolidated the gains of the earlier struggles. Welfare feminism grew in the inter-war years and women made rapid strides. The compulsions of the war years were such that **an unprecedented number of women joined the workforce**. Although this was seen as a temporary measure, the fact is that the need to restructure the economy after the war meant that women continued to find paid

employment not only of the kind earmarked for them, but even highly skilled, highly paid and high status jobs came their way. **In the post-war years, thus, the campaign for equal pay for equal work gathered momentum.**

The increasing number of women who worked outside the house gave rise to new kinds of issues; the demands on their labor were always at loggerheads with the cult of domesticity. While appliances had made housework easier, the fact is that standards of housekeeping and childcare touched virtually impossible heights. This was in addition to the guilt that women felt at having to leave the children while at work. The overall improvement in incomes and standards of living, the explosion in the variety of household appliances and the shrinking family size all made housework seem less tedious than before. Childcare became the central focus for women, and staying at home minus the earlier drudgery of housework looked to be an ideal life that women could aspire for; though, of course, a minority were free to choose careers and work, as an alternative to marriage and motherhood. **It now seemed that feminism was redundant because all the demands made by women in the earlier period had been met with.**

But the truth was that despite the formal equality that had been achieved women still remained on the margins, they had less chances of getting a highly paid job and they were discriminated against in most public contexts. The promise of a feminist future remained unfulfilled. The struggle to translate this dream into reality left many women tired and anxious.

There was a deceptive calm that prevailed in the post war years, but underlying this calm was the turbulence of unfulfilled and dissatisfied women who just were not able to enjoy the supposed joys of the post-war prosperity. In America, it seemed the American dream was actually a nightmare for women.

Meanwhile, in the Soviet Union, the other super power of the times, social structures were rapidly ossifying; the Communist party became a pale shadow of its earlier revolutionary self. It was argued that the 'woman question' was a product of capitalist patriarchy; hence Communist societies did not need to worry about these issues, as the revolution would settle all such contradictions.

For women in the colonized countries, the inter-war years were crucial because it exposed the weaknesses of colonial powers. This was also a time of intense political mobilization and organization in countries like India. Women were drawn into the anti-colonial movement, in India women became enthusiastic participants in the Gandhi-led Congress movement and even in the Communist party that had begun mobilizing peasants and workers. You will learn more about these events taking place concurrently in India in the next unit. Let us now turn to some important events in the post war period in the west.

1.4 THE SECOND WAVE OR IS IT WAVES?

The complacency of the post war years meant that young women who were growing up had no occasion to hear of any feminist campaigns or movements that preceded them. It was in this context that the almost iconic book *The Second Sex* by **Simone de Beauvoir**, published in 1949, opened the floodgates in a manner of speaking. Her famous observation that a woman is not born but rather becomes one, stirred women's imagination everywhere.

She demonstrated the ways in which apparently non-political areas of life such as family were determined by the wider power structures of a society. The project of her book was to demonstrate the artificial nature of womanhood in order to reject the imposition of its norms. **She believed that a woman would have to overcome her biology in search of freedom.** This is in sharp contrast with some later radical feminist positions that have sought to celebrate a woman's body.

Simone de Beauvoir argued that an individual alone is responsible for the life that she crafts and leads- there are no predetermined structures or constraints. Thus, in contrast with the psychoanalytical approach as well as the cruder variety of Marxism, **existentialist feminism** suggested that an individual has to take total responsibility for her life and in fact has total freedom to do so. For Jean Paul Sartre, who initiated this philosophical outlook, the sex of the potentially free individual was insignificant, but not so for de Beauvoir.

Although de Beauvoir seems to be stressing on individual struggles and individual transformation, the fact is that by **the late 1960s** she began to identify herself as a feminist and was in the forefront of many feminist movements in France, especially the campaigns to legalize abortion. These movements in France and elsewhere came after the deceptive lull we spoke of earlier and have often been referred to as **second wave feminism**. It began essentially in America as a liberal protest mounted against the American society's inability to deliver the promises made to women in the earlier decades. By the 1960s there was some re-thinking going on within Soviet Union as well, given the spirit of de-Stalinization. Elsewhere in the world as well, 1960s was a period of political resurgence. The New Left movement and the civil rights campaigns in Europe and America, along with the vigor of the student protests in France, led to a close re-examination of the basic tenets of socialism.

One of the strongest voices of discontent in this phase is **Betty Freidan's** who in her book the *Feminine Mystique* suggested that **despite the advance made in education and employment, the bulk of American women were expected to live life vicariously through their husbands and children.**

The tremendous explosion in the things that could be bought, possessed and consumed led only to bleak despair which however a woman dare not express for she had to conform to the stereotype of the happy and fulfilled suburban wife and mother. This **'problem with no name'** led women to depression and mental health issues. The book was received very enthusiastically. Ironically, **this was a time when the actual numbers of women in the workforce was steadily going up and demands for equal pay were being asserted rather vociferously.** (You must have noticed how some of the issues that women had been raising now for nearly three decades, for example equal pay for equal work just refused to go away.)

Betty Freidan published her book in 1963 and by mid-1960s, President Kennedy had already set up a commission to look into the condition of women in America and the Equal Pay Act had also been passed. While we can not suggest a direct causal link, it is evident that the storm of protests and the expression of unhappiness over their sense of entrapment prompted these initiatives and the changes introduced by the American government. The tardy and somewhat incomplete implementation of these new legislations by the administration angered women across America who got together and set up the **National Organization for Women (NOW)** which had Betty Freidan as its first President.

Another strong current that emerged during this period suggested that socialism is inseparable from the feminist agenda. One of the most significant debates that exploded centre stage was around the issue of domestic labor. It was generally agreed upon that housework done by women does not simply represent a personal service to an individual man, but that it serves the interests of the capitalist economy by reproducing and maintaining a workforce in a cheap and efficient way. This implies that male supremacy within the household is a result not just of a personal patriarchal dispensation but is embedded in the economic structures of the society itself.

Box 1.2

Socialist feminists like Maria Mies have argued that just as capitalism within the west depends on exploiting women's unpaid domestic labor, unpaid labor by third world women and especially peasant women, subsidizes the international capitalist economy. This insight is truly revolutionary given the fact that in most third world countries we often hear of the redundancy of feminism because of its western origin, but socialist feminist ideas actually help us to establish the nature of exploitation experienced by poor women in the countries of the south and its inextricable links with global capitalism.

Meanwhile elsewhere, such as in the newly-independent states like India, in the first couple of decades after independence, there was a relative lull as far the women's movement was concerned. The promises made by the post-independent sovereign state were too tempting to be discounted and it seemed for a while that the only real culprit was colonialism and with the end of colonialism, women's lives would see a dramatic turnaround. However by the end of the 1960s it was clear that such a turnaround was far from reality. Peasant and *Adivasi* women, women workers and educated urban women all began to feel uncomfortable and restless about the unfulfilled promises and the growing exploitation and violence faced by women in India. The **Shahada** and **Dhulia** movement are but some of the instances of poor women of India coming together to raise questions of their livelihood, wages and violence. Women participated in and organized anti-price agitations very successfully.

Socialist feminist on the other end began to question Engel's view that women's entry into the labor market would lead automatically to their freedom. Rather, they argued that employment might reinforce their oppression in other ways, given the fact that they join the labor market from a position of disadvantage. Socialist feminist insights have helped us understand that the dynamics of hierarchy within the labor market in capitalism are influenced greatly by the relationship between men and women in a given society. This explanation has added a significant new dimension to our understanding of patriarchy and the nature of the economy. Capitalism thrives on the exploitative possibilities offered by a large reserve army of labor and this is exactly what women provide. The use of women's labour to meet the variations in market is legitimized by the view that women are not being primary breadwinners but homemakers earning a supplementary income to help the family (this is the argument used to justify lower wages to women). A deeper understanding and analysis of the alienating nature of sexuality and motherhood under capitalist patriarchy makes socialist feminist explanations of women's lives rather attractive.

In America, however, it was NOW and Betty Freidan's leadership which came to epitomize equal rights feminism and its impact has been felt across the globe including in India. By the end of the 1970s, well paid senior positions were increasingly opening for women, at least in Europe and America. In fact, the full time housewives whose nameless problems Freidan had so famously theorized about, were dwindling in the western world. However, despite these advances, women, even in the western world, continue to battle against many kinds of inequalities, and remain economically and professionally vulnerable. Women continue to congregate in the most poorly paid and insecure jobs, the steep rise in their employment is not in response to feminist campaigns as much as compelled by the need for cheap labor.

The 1960's saw feminism moving ahead in yet another direction. The insights of **radical feminism** added some unique dimensions to feminism. While some women reviewed socialist ideas, others moved away from both equal rights perspectives as well as socialist ideas. They argued that neither was able to address the root cause of women's oppression.

Radical feminism proceeds from the assumption that in order to understand the fundamental nature of and reasons for women's oppression, a move away from received theoretical paradigms was necessary. The fresh perspective emerges from the insights and lived experiences of women. The second crucial argument is that women's oppression is the fundamental oppression on which other forms of domination and control are resting. It follows that women, as a group, are united by a common cause and their interests can never be reconciled with that of men. In fact, so strong is this common cause that race, class or ethnicity may be overcome in the pursuit of this common sisterhood. Hence, also, the assumption that women can seek to change the world by sharing their personal experiences, and not merely through endless theoretical speculation. Finally, the idea that gave our times the catchy feminist slogan of 'personal is political'- this slogan rests on the argument that politics is not confined as traditionally understood to the public sphere, but is very much a part of the personal sphere as well, spheres hitherto regarded as sacrosanct such as that of the family and of sexuality.

By the 1970's these new ideas were reflected in Kate Millet's classic *Sexual Politics* and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* among many other books. It was the former book that is credited with the popularization of the idea of **patriarchy** as used by feminists the world over today. Her rather simple but forcefully stated argument was that in all societies the relationship between men and women is based on power and this makes the relationship between the sexes political in nature. She gave a dramatic twist to her explanations when she proclaimed that all history has been a history of men oppressing women, albeit in different forms in different contexts- American women were dying in illegal abortion facilities, Indian women committed sati, African women underwent clitorodectomy and Chinese women were subjected to foot binding. All these women are united across time and space by a single factor-patriarchy. Radical feminism while being very attractive has also been criticized for being ahistorical, essentialist and Universalist. Later radical feminists have responded rather creatively to these allegations.

However, it is thanks to radical feminist insights that it is possible today to understand and theorize issues such as domestic violence, pornography, and sexual violence of all kinds including within the home. Radical feminism opened up spaces for debates on motherhood, reproductive technology and

of course on heterosexuality. In the process feminism was able to go to places that were hitherto sealed off as personal. The personal truly became political. Issues such as dowry, rape and violence came to dominate the campaigns at this time.

In the south Asian subcontinent, the 1970s was a period of great turbulence and disturbance. The national emergency was imposed in 1975 in India, post-emergency many women's groups began to self-consciously describe themselves as feminists. Most of these groups had moved away from the established political parties and were looking to write history on their own.

Check Your Progress: What were some of the changes taking place in the role of women, and the evolution of feminist ideas in the post-war period?

1.5 THE BACKLASH AND THE RESPONSE

By the end of the 1980s there was a strong feeling in America that equality between the sexes had been achieved, and in fact women were now in a position of advantage as compared with men. This became the theme song of the anti-feminist backlash that fed into the ideology of the New Right. Feminism came to be held responsible for all the ills of the American society. Susan Faludi has captured the nuances of these arguments in her well-known book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women*.

In the 1990's feminism of the liberal equal rights variety consciously tried to move away from the image of the oppressed woman to that of the woman with initiative and agency. Significantly, the political import of coercive sex and the need to act politically against it is increasingly acknowledged by liberal feminists. It is no longer pushed into the private sphere where it is treated as a mere personal matter. Moving away from the earlier demand of joining men in the workplace, the demand now is for a restructuring of the workplace itself to make it more compatible with family life. Parallel to this a greater involvement by men in the domestic sphere is sought. ***The shift is worth noticing. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s, the focus was entirely on the public sphere, by the nineties there is a realization that the public cannot be changed without addressing the private. This shift is not only politically significant; it is also a fundamental challenge to the liberal idea of the dichotomy between the public and the private.***

Thus many equal rights feminists have moved away from some of their key liberal positions and have acknowledged the shared nature of apparently isolated individual private experience. This has led them to ask for substantial changes in the manner in which the private domain itself is organized,

especially the whole issue of care and responsibility within the family. Yet another significant departure is their asking for state intervention in the private sphere of life as well.

The Story As it Unfolds Today

In the post-1980s world of feminism, a lot of discussion has centered around the question of whether there is at all a fundamental form of oppression. The next questions have been: Who can speak for whom? Can the category of 'women' hold ground in the context of the differences that have now been highlighted? In fact, today many feminists would agree that opening up the feminist field to differences has permitted us **to place women in a matrix of oppression and privilege**, where no one is a permanent occupant of either of the two positions. **This approach challenges the idea of permanent contradictions and frozen hierarchies.** It also suggests that different forms of oppression intersect at different historical points and indeed there is no hierarchy of oppressions rendering one more significant than the other. This insight has led to women from different backgrounds to question the validity of what seemed like the outpourings of white women from the west.

One of the strongest challenges has come from **black women in America** and to some extent Britain. The general mood of Islamophobia that seems to have gripped the world now is ironically also the context for a great deal of discussion on what has been described as **Islamic feminism**. Closer home is the articulation by **Dalit feminists** and the serious charge that feminism in India is guilty of being Brahminical in its orientation. Able-bodied feminists have been rightly told repeatedly about the completely different experience of womanhood by women with disabilities, and thus **the encounter of women with disabilities of a world characterized by patriarchy is substantially different from that of able-bodied women.** You will read about all of these specific claims in much greater detail in subsequent units of this course.

Angela Davis is of the opinion that a feminism that begins with the experiences of white middle class women would have very little room in it for the experiences of black women. After all, a key aspect of white women's privilege is to talk of themselves as though they are indeed talking about all women, and if there are some women whose experiences and struggles don't fit, they are seen as marginal. This is very similar to the situation of upper caste feminists in India who, it has been pointed out by Dalit feminists, are guilty of the same lapse. Of course, the whole discourse on black feminism has been challenged as being not sufficiently sensitive to differences among black women, for example black women in America do benefit from the exploitation of the labor of black women in Africa. In other words, this is a warning against using any category in an essentializing or universalizing way.

Besides the issues mentioned above, the end of the 1980s saw an increasing concern within feminism to understand sexuality not just in terms of sexual violence but also as desire and pleasure, and take sexuality beyond the pale of **heteronormativity**. The issue of sexuality with a different focus and the greater acceptance of lesbian, gay and bisexual issues within the fold of feminism have come to characterize the 1990s. (Issues of normative and non-normative sexuality will be dealt with in Unit 4 of Block 5, while Block 3 and Block 6 of this course will present you with detailed discussions around issues related to queer sexualities.)

1.6 POST-MODERNIST TURN IN FEMINIST HISTORY

Yet another dimension to the feminist discourse has been provided by **post-modernism**. Since the late 1980s, post-modernism has been relentlessly questioning binaries of all sorts, doubting the possibility of certitude and finiteness in the pursuit of knowledge as well rejecting the idea of an objectivity based on rationality. Most of these ideas sit very comfortably within the fold of feminism, for the latter has accused existing norms of reason and objectivity of being partial and based on male reason.

By the end of the 1980s, it was obvious to women's groups that there was no uncomplicated "woman" as the subject of feminist politics or of the pursuit of gender justice in India or anywhere else. **Nivedita Menon** has argued that these developments have brought forth the realization that "women" as a readymade subject of feminist politics does not exist, instead women are located within a grid of identities ranging from caste, class, religion among other possible identities. She argues that people are mobilized along the grid of multiple identities; at different times and in different political conditions, different identities are foregrounded. In other words, just because many women have come together it does not mean that they have indeed come together as "women", they could have gathered together because they are upper caste or because they are Tamil. Subjecthood, to put it differently, has to be the conscious result of deliberate political mobilization. Only when women are consciously thinking about their lives as women in the context of gender inequality and marginality, and seek political solutions, do they become subjects of feminist history.

The Universal (for example to only talk of women as if no differences exist among women would be the use of a universal category) needs to be critiqued, for it more often than not tends to become undemocratic, hiding within it all kinds of differences and discrimination. But we need to remind ourselves that often the specific also tends to become universalizing, and then it needs to be challenged (in the section on Black feminism we saw how the term Black itself which is supposedly specific, universalizes the experiences of diverse groups of Black women, such as Black women in

America versus Black women in Africa and so on). In other words there really cannot be permanent and frozen identities. It is the admission of this conflict and tension that will generate a more democratic feminist history and politics where no category, not even that of the Dalit feminist, can be seen as final and finished. The unmarked woman can no longer be the ideal subject of feminism.

The impact of these new arguments is that it is no longer common to hear of feminist sisterhoods as it is to hear of **feminist solidarities**. **Bell hooks**, for instance, has argued that sisterhood suggests similarity and thus leads to the inevitable trap of homogenization; whereas, solidarity suggests the possibility of various kinds of diverse oppressions coming together; indeed even men who are oppressed could be part of this solidarity. (Bell hooks deliberately spells her name without capitalization as a strategy to draw attention to her marginalization as an African-American woman.)

However, some feminists have today woken up to the pitfalls of walking all the way with post-modernism, for it could create a new set of issues. Post-modernism emphasizes differences and shifting subjectivities. (You will read in greater detail about this topic in the unit on ‘Feminism and Deconstruction’ in the course on ‘Constructing Gender through Arts & Media.’) This has profound implications for feminist politics. If it is no longer possible to talk of women in any meaningful way (since all identities are fluid and all social groups are constructs), then, on whose behalf would feminists now mobilize? This renders the possibility of collective politics of the old style irrelevant. In response to these fears, others, like **Judith Squires**, in her book *Gender and Political Theory*, has talked about the possibility of forging strategic sisterhoods, constantly keeping in mind the power relations that created particular identities. Nivedita Menon in her book *Recovering Subversion* has argued that it is possible for feminist politics to employ both the **strategies of deconstruction** and interrogation of the identity of woman thereby exposing the constructed nature of identities, and at other times to employ the strategy of **invoking an identity** in order to engage in the radical politics of subversion.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

The unit would have helped you to view women’s oppression in both historical and present contexts, and engage with issues of right, identity, sexuality, political participation, heteronormativity and so on. Thus “women” as an identity may be deconstructed when faced with a conservative agenda (if you hear a statement such as ‘women don’t do this or that’, you could turn around and ask which women, of what class, which community, in what time period etc.) and at other times faced with the need for progressive political mobilization it should be possible to invoke “women”. While this unit has presented you with as comprehensive a picture as possible of the

account of the history of feminisms, it is of course beyond the scope of any one unit to cover every possible event and topic. Therefore, this account of the history of feminisms has had to make some choices and focus on a select and representative range of issues and contexts. The idea was to give you a sketch of the vast terrain of feminism. You will explore this further in the rest of the courses of this programme and also, we hope, on your own.

1.8 GLOSSARY

NOW : National Organisation for Women

1.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Define feminism and discuss its various trends in the historical process.
- 2) Discuss and analyse the shift in women's situations and self-perceptions in the pre and post war periods.
- 3) What were some of the issues that caused widespread dissatisfaction among women during the early modern period in western countries? Compare these with the situation of Indian women of the same time period.
- 4) Critically examine the statement, "woman is a universal category".
- 5) Try to explain the relevance of socialist feminism vs. radical feminism in your own words.
- 6) How have feminist movements dealt with women's issues in different periods of western history. Discuss with suitable examples.

1.10 REFERENCES

- Jagger, A. (1983). *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*. Brighton: Harvester.
- Manisha, P., Menon K. & Banerjee, M. (2009). *Human Rights, Gender and the Environment*. New Delhi: Pearson.
- Menon, N. (2004). *Recovering Subversion*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Kumar, R. (1998). *The History of Doing*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- Stanton, Cady in Bryson, Valerie (2003). *Feminist Political Theory*. New York: Palgrave.
- Tharu, S. & Niranjana, T. (1999). 'Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender'. In N. Menon (Ed.), *Gender and Politics*. New Delhi: OUP.

1.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

- Jagger, A. (1983). *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*. Brighton: Harvester.
- Menon, N. (2004). *Recovering Subversion*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Bryson, V. (2003). *Feminist Political Theory*. New York: Palgrave.

UNIT 2 WOMAN AS QUESTION/ WOMAN IN QUESTION: INDIA IN THE 19th AND 20th CENTURIES

Maitrayee Chaudhuri

Structure

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Objectives
- 2.3 Why the Women's Question is a Social Question?
- 2.4 The Need for an Intersectional Analysis
- 2.5 Histories of the Women's Question: Some Methodological Issues
- 2.6 Colonialism and Indian Modernity: The Women's Question
- 2.7 The 19th Century Social Reform Movement
- 2.8 Political Participation of Women in the 20th Century
- 2.9 The Indian Women's Movement from 1970s
- 2.10 Women's Rights/Community Rights
- 2.11 Globalization, New Economic Policies and Political Participation of Women
- 2.12 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.13 Glossary
- 2.14 Unit End Questions
- 2.15 References
- 2.16 Suggested Readings

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, you were acquainted with the broad canvas of the history of women's movements in western countries. This unit seeks to provide a broad overview of the manner in which the women's question emerged in modern India and developed subsequently. The overview includes: (i) Elaboration of **why the women's question is necessarily a social question** by elucidating the manner in which the role and status of women structure the very character of society, its institutions and values. (ii) Explanation of how, therefore, the gender question is linked to other social institutions such as family and kinship, marriage and caste, the private and the public order. And, why **intersectional analysis** has to be adopted to understand the women's question. This means that the women's question has to be understood along with questions of caste and class, race and ethnicity.

(iii) A sketch of the way the women's question emerged in modern India and why the women's question was so central to the 19th century social reform movement and the 20th century political movement for freedom from colonial rule. In other words, this account foregrounds the women's question as a pivotal social question and outlines its links to other organizing structures of society such as caste, class, tribe and nation. (iv.) Finally, you will come to major changes that have reoriented the gender question after the 1990s when the Indian state initiated the new economic reforms. This will give you a synoptic sense of the broad trends in the 21st century.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing the unit, you will be able to:

- Critically analyse the women's question in social institutions and practices;
- Describe the women's question and women in question in the Indian context;
- State the history of women's issues in both social reform and political freedom movements; and
- Explain women's issues and concerns in the contemporary context of economic changes.

2.3 WHY THE WOMEN'S QUESTION IS A SOCIAL QUESTION

The women's question emerged in India in the 19th century. This was the period marked by the growth of middle class reform movements across different parts of India which raised critical questions about a range of social practices such as sati, prohibition of widow remarriage, child marriage, denial of education to women etc. As the list indicates, the central social reform concerns pertained to women, their social status and role. We need to ask why so many of these social issues pertained to the status and role of women. Is it a mere co-incidence or does this reflect the way society is gendered?

We will seek to answer the above questions separately.

- First, we will try to understand why so many social questions are about women. This will be done in Sections 2.3 and 2.4.
- Second, we will try and understand why social reformers were so concerned with questions pertaining to traditional customs and beliefs

regarding women, on the one hand, and modern visions of women's status and role in society, on the other. This will be done in Sections 2.6 and 2.7.

The answer to the above question of why so many of the 19th century social issues were about the women's question entails a discussion on **the role of gender as an organizing principle of society**. Gender, like class and caste, defines not just locations of individuals within a caste or class but also structures the entire society- its institutions such as family and kinship, work and politics, as well as the values that inform society. For instance we can take the dominant Indian society and see that it is clearly patriarchal. By the term **patriarchal** we mean that it is a society, which is dominated by patriarchal authority, that is, an authority vested in a dominant male figure within a social structure which allows men to have greater power and control than women. Further, this dominance appears to be both natural and just. Patriarchal authority is reflected in the structure of its family, marriage and kinship on the one hand and in the structure of economy, polity, society and culture on the other. We can take the help of two other related concepts such as **patrilineal** and **patrilocal** to explain how patriarchy operates through basic social institutions such as the family and marriage. In a **patrilineal** society, the line of descent runs from father to son. In other words the son carries his father's name, inherits his property and is the legitimate heir to conduct all affairs in the name of his father, ancestors and family. **Patrilocal** residence pattern means that in a patriarchal society the bride leaves her natal family to live in her husband's residence, adopts his name, and bears children not just to the husband but equally to secure future progeny for his family and lineage. This is the gender structure at the micro level of the patriarchal family, marriage and kinship system that exists in large parts of India. The story is different in matrilineal societies such as the Khasis, but there too authority resides often with the maternal uncle, even when the line of descent runs from mother to daughter. Thus, while patriarchal societies do exist, matriarchy (i.e. authority residing with women in all spheres of life- private and public) does not exist even where matriliney persists. In the course of the last century, the dominant patriarchal model has become increasingly the norm and even traditionally matrilineal societies have begun to adopt patriarchal practices.

It is important at this point to emphasize that the family/kinship structure does not operate in isolation from other systems such as the economic, political or cultural. For instance patrilineal line of descent implies that the son alone inherits his father's property and carries on his name. In other words, the daughter in such a society would not have the right to property

or the possibility of an independent existence. Thus, even today, while the law may allow daughters to inherit property, many daughters forego the right in order to maintain their familial relationship with their brother, which is about affection but not entitlement. A quote from a study conducted on Hindu women may illustrate this better:

.... The haklenwali, the woman who “takes her rights,” is evoked here as the specter to be avoided if all natal links are not to be broken. In claims such as “where the sister takes her share all those things (gifts, respect) are not there any more, they say, ‘now you’ve got your share so go away, why are you back here again?, the connection to the natal family can be seen as a concrete fund, and taking property exhausts that link, such that women are cut adrift from customary gifts, emergency shelter, and even affection. (Basu, 2001, p.130)

The quotation points to the linkages between the social institutions of the family, property and work, social mores and cultural expectations. Srimati Basu has shown that **gender is an organizing principle of society. Any effort to reform society, of the kind that our 19th century social reformers made, would, therefore, invariably raise gender questions.** These would include questions about the role of women, about family honour and sexuality, about control and power over women, about women’s access to resources such as education or property, or about their space in the public sphere or cultural world. As you move further into this unit you will get to know more about the actual social issues that made debates on the women’s question so central to the 19th century.

So far, we have discussed the issue of gender as an organizing principle as though all families are the same and as though all individuals are located within the same kind of families. This, as we know, is not true. Thus, middle class urban families are different from the working class family. Likewise the Dalit family and the landed family of a twice-born caste in the same village are located differently. It is here that one would like to introduce the term intersectionality to explain that not only is gender an organizing principle of society, but that it structures society along with caste and class.

2.4 THE NEED FOR AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS

Indian society is deeply unequal and incredibly diverse. Yet in large parts of the country, the caste system did operate. It is important to elucidate how customs pertaining to women not only reproduced existing gender but

also existing caste relations. Let us take the example of widowhood. In a traditional Hindu society, taboos against 'upper caste women' were severe, cruel and unjust. Widows, including child widows had their heads tonsured, and were made to wear stark white clothes, bereft of any ornaments. They were deprived of all pleasures including good food. This apart, they were made to live as 'impure', 'inauspicious' women. Their very existence was seen as a shame and affront. In contrast, women who belonged to the so called 'lower caste' were not subject to such censure on widowhood. Significantly, unlike their 'upper caste' counterparts, their sexuality was not severely controlled even without 'widowhood'. Young upper caste women/girls were controlled completely in their mobility. Even the possibility of 'a bad name' was seen as a danger, a threat to the 'honour' and 'good name' of the family and community at large. What do the different mores for 'low caste' and 'upper caste' women tell us about the social structure of a society that is both patriarchal and caste-based?

Box 2.1

Feminist scholars have explained that the difference in the norms for women of different castes exists because gender norms are responsible for the production and reproduction of not simply the gender system, but also the caste system.

Let us explain the above statement. The 'upper caste' woman has to bear legitimate heirs for propertied 'high caste' men. Their sexuality has to be tightly controlled to ensure legitimate heirs, critical to the smooth functioning of the system. At the other end, the 'lower caste' woman remains sexually accessible to the 'upper caste' men. Not only is her labour appropriated but so is her body. Thus, the control exercised over the 'upper caste widow' has to be understood not simply as a social evil that could be eradicated with good intention but a practice critical for the sustenance and reproduction of the larger structure of caste and gender. The custom in a sense reproduces both gender and caste hierarchy because it ensures control over women's bodies as well as sustains the division between castes. The linkages are strong and formed the foundation of a patriarchal caste society.

Debates raged in the 19th century about the need to reform practices such as child marriage, prohibition of widows from remarrying, sati, purdah and the need to educate women. In each of these cases, the complex interconnection between gender, caste and community surfaced. Reformers argued whether these reforms could be justified by tradition or not, each appealing to different kinds of evidence and authority from the past. There

was no consensus on these matters. While some social reformers sought to justify the persistence of many of these grave injustices against women, others argued that tradition has been misinterpreted and misused to oppress women. This therefore led to debates on tradition itself leading some feminist scholars to claim that the 19th century social reform movements were less about women and more about debating tradition and modernity, culture and nation. We shall return to these questions. But first a few methodological questions about how we see the past, the histories of the women's question and women's movement.

Activity: *Think about some of the reasons why the women's question is a social question by discussing this with other learners, or with peers, friends or family. Try to formulate your own responses to this.*

2.5 HISTORIES OF THE WOMEN'S QUESTION: SOME METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

We have moved a long way from the time when history was simply a narration of self-evident facts from the past. The arbitrary nature of recording history-writing, the political character of its project, the affirmation of multiple and plural locations, have made the task a daunting one. But we may leave such questions to be resolved by professional historians. Let us instead focus on garnering certain largely well established ideas about the way the women's question emerged in modern India and evolved over time. **The story has been written and rewritten, each time as responses to challenges of movements and re-conceptualization.** This has been one of the salient contributions of both women's movements and women's studies. Taking into consideration both the mainstream accounts and its critiques, it runs roughly like this: a mandatory mention of the 19th century social reform movements and the articulation of the women's question; the growth of women's writing and voices in the same period; the emergence of women's groups in the early part of the twentieth century; the links between the women's movement, the national movement and the early left movements; the caste and gender question within and outside the national movement that history writing had excluded for long; independence and the state domestication of the women's question; the 'second phase' of the women's movement in the 1970s, its character and its interrogation, and new issues and institutionalization of women's studies; the new economic policies, the new social movements and the gender question from the 1990 onwards.

In this unit we do not touch upon all these dimensions nor do we dwell at any length on the more contemporary period. **But we need to acknowledge that the way we look at the past changes with both new evidence and new perspectives.** For instance, we shall see that while the women's movement and feminist studies forced renewed attention on women's role in the past, the Dalit feminist movement has forced a re-look at the specificity of Dalit women's experiences and the role of Dalit women in the past.

There is another methodological issue that we should briefly touch upon. You have already read in the previous unit about the way feminism emerged in the west, and the great feminist texts that gained worldwide attention. And maybe you have begun to wonder whether that story and ours is connected. The answer is "yes". Just as our nationalists in colonized India were inspired by Western ideas of liberalism and nationalism, Indian feminists, even if they did not use the term, were enthused by struggles in the west. Inspired by the modern western ideas of 'equality for all', they turned around to ask, "If all people are free, then why was India unfree under an alien rule?" They asked, "If all people are free, then why are Indians not entitled to self rule and vote?" And further, if all are equal, "Why do women remain unfree?" **The emergence of the women's question in India thus reveals a rich and complex account of the manner in which Indian nationalists and feminists negotiated western ideas, accepted many, and reworked others to create a parallel but distinct account of the women's question.**

It is important then to emphasize the specific context of India's colonial modernity within which the women's question emerged. A point of clarification is needed here. Are we arguing that Indians had no idea of injustices against women earlier? That is certainly not the case. Women's writings, reflecting on a sense of oppression, have been in existence in India from the earliest times. However, what did not exist was the sense that these are injustices and that therefore there ought to be deliberate efforts by state and society to bring in reforms. Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha's volumes are a collection of women's writings in India from 6th century B.C. and they reveal this long legacy (Tharu & Lalita, 1993). What is remarkable however is that the volumes, drawing upon women's writing so many hundreds of years ago, were compiled only in 1993, at the tail end of the 20th century. You may find the readings on early Indian feminist utopias interesting too (Chaudhuri, 2004, p.80-114). In other words, the new perspectives regarding gender inequality and women's marginalization that the women's

movement brought forward led women's studies to unearth past scholarship and endow it with new meaning. **It was a central challenge to women's movements and women's studies to retrieve the stories of women from the past and record their presence.** However, the manner that the women's question emerged in modern India has to be located within the colonial context.

2.6 COLONIALISM AND INDIAN MODERNITY: THE WOMEN'S QUESTION

India's tryst with modernity has been inextricably linked with British colonialism. The two cannot be disengaged even as the women's question cannot be disengaged from our complex relationship with colonialism. The complexity is rendered more so not just because of the nature of colonialism but also because of 'our' differential relationship with colonialism. This difference could be on the basis of regions, classes, castes, and communities. Not surprisingly, therefore, there has been considerable interrogation from the Dalit viewpoint about the nationalist framework as well as about the purported role of colonialism. Sharmila Rege writes:

History of late colonial India has always prioritized Indian nationalism, such that it came to be assumed that the world of political action and discourse can be comprehended only through the categories of nationalism, imperialism and communalism. The radical historiographies of colonial India, though they emphasized the autonomous role of peasants, labour and other subaltern groups, equated the historiography of colonial India with that of Indian nationalism. The non-brahmanical re-constructions of historiography of modern India in the works of Omvedt... and Alyosius have underlined the histories of anti-hierarchical, pro-democratising collective aspirations of the lower caste masses which are not easily encapsulated within the histories of anti-colonial nationalism. In fact these histories have often faced the penalty of being labeled as collaborative and have therefore being ignored in a historiography which is dominated by narratives of nationalism. (Rege, 1998)

British colonialism spread over India at different stages, impacting different regions differently, both because of the stage of colonialism, as well as because of the nature of different regions. Thus, there were periods of reluctance to meddle with India's social customs such as those related to women, periods of active involvement to intervene such as abolition of sati

in 1829 or raising the Age of Consent for Women in 1863 which brought forth a fury of hostile reaction leading again to a phase where the British preferred to rely more on their conservative allies. What one can infer is that the colonial rule, the humiliation of the subject population, the impact of western education, the role of Christian missionaries, growth of an English knowing Indian middle class- all led to an intense and contested debate over the women's question in the public sphere. This debate itself has been scrutinized carefully from different perspectives. We thus have a question whether the debate on sati was about women or about reconfiguring tradition and culture; we have, as Rege points out, questions on why Dalit women's public initiatives and intervention went unwritten about; we have arguments that suggest social reforms were more about efforts to introduce new patriarchies rather than about women's rights and gender justice. Much of this questioning is of recent times. And importantly, women studies scholars have been at the forefront of this.

2.7 THE 19TH CENTURY SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENT

In India, the trajectory of colonial capitalism and modernity led to the recasting of women as creatures of domesticity and the housewife came to represent both a full-time and a natural vocation. Some major aspects in the culture of Victorianism influenced the emergent model of reformed women. Some of these can be identified as domesticity, respectability, improvement and conventional Christian morality. Conjugal duties, the laws of God and the peace of society were indissolubly linked in the minds of the Victorian dominant class (Chaudhuri, 2011, p.17). Indian reformers in turn popularized the new model of the domesticated but educated Indian woman.

Females are not required to be educated by the standard which is adopted for men. ...Woman has but one resource, Home. The end and aim of her life is to cultivate the domestic affections, to minister to the comfort, and exercise her little supervision over domestic economies. (Chaudhuri, 2011, p.31)

In the nineteenth century, it was claimed that the status of a nation could be gauged by the status of its women. Indians were thus berated for the pitiable condition of their womankind.

Indian social reformers responded to this challenge and we had a major recasting of women in modern India. In this recasting we had a construction of middle class domesticity, similar to that of Victorian England, which

defined the normative Indian woman as gentle, refined and skilled in running a 'home'.

Today we may have set ideas about a 'home' and about 'Indian women'. Both however are historical constructs. Indeed the nineteenth century reformers and nationalists alike wanted to liberate the upper caste women from her world of superstition and ignorance. An audience of educated men were thus asked whether they did not feel in their daily lives that their mothers and wives were 'great impediments' in the way of their own intellectual and moral improvement (Chaudhuri, 2011, p.51).

Reformers thus wanted to device a system of education for females that would "enable the wife to serve as a solace to her husband in his bright and dark moments... to superintend the early instruction of her child, and the lady of the house to provide those sweet social comforts, idealized in the English word—Home" (Chaudhuri, 2011, p.51). This 'home' is therefore new but 'homes' like 'nations' appear as natural entities with a history that extends to a past which is 'time immemorial'.

With the intensification of the national movement, however, new ideas of socialism, of equality and development also gained ground. The actual entry of women into political action altered the parameters of imagining women's roles in the nation. Ideas of liberalism, of equality and citizenship gained ground. Yet the idea of a modern middle class domesticity remained a powerful influence. A contemporary look at matrimonial advertisements would show how strong and pervasive the notion of a 'modern', 'educated, but 'homely' woman is. Along with ideas of liberal equality, rights and citizenship we therefore had new notions of domesticity. At the same time the issue of cultural pride in one's own tradition for a colonized society continued to be of great importance. However what defined 'tradition' in a diverse and unequal society was and remains a contested question. The long term implications of this have been examined later in this unit in the section on the conflict between gender rights and cultural or community rights. What we need to emphasize here is that there were different kinds of ideas which influenced the making of the women's question in India. The history of the construction of the women's question challenges the idea of a 'natural' 'Indian' 'womanhood'.

Generations have studied the nineteenth century reform movement as simple straight forward measures to do away with sundry social evils like sati and child marriage. The last thirty years have witnessed a plethora of literature in this field belying any such notion and foregrounding both the complexity

and ambiguity of the reform processes. One central aspect of this problematising of social reforms is the recognition that the early initiatives had been taken largely by men and that the reformers belonged mostly to the upper castes. The specific problems addressed and the modes of their addressing were very often restricted by region and caste location. A more dramatic instance of how these researches have made us rethink issues is the case of the Widow Remarriage Act, which legally allowed upper caste widows to remarry, but simultaneously through codification of laws obliterated the rights lower caste widows had traditionally availed of under their customary laws (Chaudhuri, 2011, p.38-41). Recall our discussion on intersectional analysis in Section 2.4. The more recent cases of what has ironically been labeled as “Honour Killing” too reveal the manner that caste and gender hierarchies are sought to be reproduced. Any challenge to gender norms and practices is deemed as a challenge to the community itself. Further the community seeks to generalize its own norm as ‘Indian’ or ‘tradition’ even when these are clearly not applicable across all regions.

The other process, as we saw initiated, was the reinterpretation of ‘Indian culture’ and the special role within it marked for ‘Indian women’. In the idea of a cultural regeneration were embedded complex ideas of what constitutes culture. Cultural practices often chosen as emblematic of community identity pertained to women’s mobility, control of sexuality, for example, child marriage, purdah, sati, the social death of widows. But if **women are to be icons of Indian culture**, the contentious question in a plural society like India is which of its women and which of its cultures ought to become the ‘national’ icon. And **one of the most vexing issues of modern India has been fought over the rights of community identity versus rights of women and rights of the state**. Thus Indian feminist scholars have always had to approach the gender question within an intersectional framework even though the term itself was coined in the west and many decades after its actual use in Indian scholarship.

While the concerns of the nineteenth century reform movement left its mark on the women’s question, it is important to emphasise that with the intensification of the national movement and the spread of **internationalist ideas of socialism and democracy**, the women’s question could not be contained within the restrictive parameters of one or other reform movements. Women within women’s organizations like the All India Women’s Conference (AIWC) and women within the national movement insisted on greater political and economic participation. The legacy of women revolutionaries, trade union activists, and underground nationalists is as much part of the historical legacy that the independent Indian state inherited.

2.8 POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE 20TH CENTURY

“Unless women of India work side by side with men, there is no salvation for India, salvation in more senses than one. I mean political salvation in the greater sense, and I mean the economic salvation and spiritual salvation also. (Gandhi, 1925)

It was a stirring spectacle, that of tens of thousands of women, who for centuries were chained to the narrow domestic life and whom an authoritarian social system had assigned the position of helots at home, stepping out into the streets and marching with their fellow-patriots in illegal political demonstrations. (Desai, 1975, p.346)

That nationalist leaders desired women's political participation and that women participated in the national movement are accepted facts. There is, however, no consensus on what political participation meant for women and for nationalist leaders. One view is that “even the most cursory examination of women's organized activism from the beginning of the twentieth century explodes the myth still being pursued by many, that women's role in the national movement(s) against imperialism was male-dictated and male-manipulated” (Kasturi & Mazumdar, 1994, p.16). The other, as Mies points out is:

To draw women into the political struggle is a tactical necessity of any anti-colonial or national liberation struggle. But it depends on the strategic goals of such a movement whether the patriarchal family is protected as the basic social unit or not. The fact that the women themselves accepted their limited tactical function within the independence movement made them excellent instruments in the struggle. But they did not work out a strategy for their own liberation struggle for their own interests. By subordinating these goals to the national cause they confirmed to the traditional *pativrata* or *sati* ideal of the self-sacrificing woman. (Mies, 1980. p.121)

Other scholars like Gail Minault and Geraldine Forbes argue that the concept of the extended family in Indian culture could extend virtually indefinitely to justify women's activities beyond the household. The metaphor of the extended family certainly assisted middle class women's performance of some public roles through their associations (Minault, 1982, p. 220-21).

While at one time an uncritical lauding of women's political participation in the national movement was common, more recent views have veered

around to the belief that women's political participation "gave the illusion of change while women were kept within the structural confines of family and society" (Jayawardena, 1986, p.107).

You could argue, however, that active political participation often challenges the boundaries of intended models. Indian women also had a history of militant participation in political struggles- in working class strikes, in peasant rebellions, in anti-imperialist and democratic movements. It was simply not ideas (important as they were) which led to the Congress adopting the Fundamental Rights Resolution in 1931. Significantly, the Lahore Congress of Asian Women for Equality, the Geneva International Conference on Women's Equality and the Congress of the Chinese Communist Party adopted a resolution on gender equality in the same year. Here again you will notice the complex ways in which international and national events shaped the modern women's question in India.

2.9 THE INDIAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND ITS MANY CHALLENGES: FROM THE 1970'S

We have seen that the women's question arose early in India's modern political history. Unfortunately neither women's political rights, nor women's economic role were seriously addressed in independent India's state discourse where women were primarily understood as recipients of welfare as wives, mothers and daughters. The state documents themselves accept that "while women have often been in the forefront in mass movements, their presence has not been felt strongly in structured decision-making and institutions" (MHRD, 1995, p.67).

The failure of the state not surprisingly led to a resurgence of the women's movement in the nineteen seventies along with wide ranging left and democratic movements. The state was confronted with the questions that the women's movements were raising, to name but a few: land rights; the gender blind nature of development; political representation; laws pertaining to divorce, custody, guardianship or sexual harassment at work; about alcohol, dowry and rape. The women's movement in turn interrogated its own relationship to the state. While on the one hand women, particularly poor women, faced violence from the state, it is the state from which the women's movement sought ameliorative intervention.

From the mid nineteen seventies the women's question became central in public discourse. The media increasingly reported dowry deaths and custodial rapes for instance. Women's movement interrogated the existing laws, for

example rape laws, which went against women. Indeed many of the greatest achievements have been in the reform of Indian laws. Globally, the Indian women's movement and Indian feminist writings made their presence felt.

Ilina Sen writes:

The last two decades have seen a conscious articulation of women's issues among many urban and educated middle class women. Women's issues have gained prominence in academics, with 'Women Studies' beginning to take shape as a discipline. The media have played a role in highlighting issues of women's rights and their violation. Many women from educated backgrounds have come together in groups in a realization of their strength and potential and have lobbied and protested against the blatant forms of discrimination they face in our society. ...Some of the issues they have opposed include invasive reproductive and family planning technologies, anti-women legal structures, sex discrimination in employment etc. Women have asked for a secular personal law that guarantees women's equality. (Sen, 1990, p.1)

Vina Mazumdar sums up the new trends within the women's movement in the late 1970s and emphasizes its embryonic relationship with gender studies. She writes:

The revival of the women's movement in the late 1970s brought new dynamism and directions to women studies. Issues of violence- domestic and social, sexual exploitation in old and new forms, identification of complex structures of domination and their reassertion in new forms in the ideology of revivalist, fundamentalist, communal and ethnic movements- are some of the most significant of these new dimensions that the movement has brought into women's studies. Similarly, investigations of peasant women in the rural economy and of their undiscovered history have prompted new questions and drawn women's studies closer to issues being also raised by ecological and environmental movements. Investigations into women's marginalization and exploitation in the economy, formal and informal, in the educational process, in communication and media and, also in the political process, have turned women's studies into one of the major critics of the pattern of "development" and the choice of strategies. (Mazumdar, 1994, p.44 emphasis added)

Significantly this focus on women in the rural economy and in the unorganized sector brought forth new conceptualization of 'work' as well the meanings

of the public and private domain. The report of the 'Committee on the Status of Women in India' *Towards Equality* presented a grim picture of social reality that sharply contrasted with the goals of equality laid down by the Indian Constitution. The result of the report was to define a new agenda for women's studies in the country, an agenda that stressed the dynamism and pluralism of an Indian society in contrast to the often monolithic discourse of the nationalist or development schools.

The movement also emerged at the forefront of democratic and secular rights in general, a point developed in the next section. This complex relationship between community rights and gender rights will once again foreground the importance of intersectionality in understanding the women's question in India.

Check Your Progress: Try to explain in your own words the evolution of the women's movement in India in the 19th and 20th centuries.

2.10 WOMEN'S RIGHTS/ COMMUNITY RIGHTS

Questions of culture, community identity and scriptural sanctions have been very much part of the manner in which the women's question emerged in India. One of the first issues where this comes up is the sati dispute. While the Brahmo Samaj marshalled enormous shastric evidence to show that sati is not mandatory, the Dharma Sabha pleaded with the British not to pay heed to those Indians who themselves did not follow their customs. Raja Rammohun argued that Manu enjoined a widow to live a life of denial and austerity while the Dharma Sabha petitioned "that in a question so delicate as the interpretation of our sacred books, and the authority of our religious usages none but Pundits and Brahmins and teachers of holy lives, and known learning ought to be consulted- not men who have neither faith nor care for the memory of their ancestors or their religion" (Chaudhuri, 2011, xxiii). The Age of Consent Bill that raged through India in the end of the nineteenth century asserted the natural and nationalist right of a community to decide when and how to reform, rejecting the right of an alien and state to legislate on the private matters of Indians (Chaudhuri, 2011, p.72-78).

Western feminists have claimed that in the western world women have been seen as nature and men as culture. While similar arguments can be made about women's roles in the Indian contexts, we also know that women

are represented as cultural emblems in India. The dichotomy between 'nature' and 'culture' is a problematic one. Moreover, defining what constitutes 'national culture' was a contentious project from the very start. Both the trends towards a hegemonic, homogenous Hindu upper caste notion of culture as well as a well articulated idea of a 'composite culture' with the far sighted slogan of 'Unity in Diversity' fought itself through the trajectory of Indian nationalism and the doings of the Indian state. For women, it implied once too often a conflict between women's rights as equal citizens and a community's rights to cultural practices which hinged upon gender discriminatory practices, be it sati, purdah, child marriage, denial of inheritance rights or polygamy.

As noted above, in India women have often been projected as emblems of culture. For instance, Hindu upper caste models may uphold cultural models like Sita or Savitri, dominant Muslim models may emphasize the need for Muslim women to practice cultural forms of dress or behaviour, a secular nationalist model might portray the Indian woman as a cultural emblem of tradition and modernity, drawing from both the west and non west, while a politically left based model would highlight the cultural strength and authenticity of the working class and peasant woman.

Even in the national and women's movements in the colonial period fissures had clearly emerged between the promise of political and economic equality of women and equality for cultural practices that more often than not were discriminatory to women. Amrit Kaur and Hansa Mehta had objected to the guarantee of religious propaganda and practice. They felt that the term 'propagation' and 'practice' might invalidate future legislation prohibiting child marriage, polygamy, unequal inheritance laws and untouchability as these customs could be construed to be part of religious worship. Kaur suggested that freedom of religion be limited to religious worship (Chaudhuri, 2011, p.192-94).

Culture is perceived to be construed through long historical processes. In all modern nation states, including India, the state, however, plays a critical role in shaping what it feels ought to be the national culture. The national language is therefore a high standardized version that most people would not 'naturally' speak but would learn to speak in educational institutions entrusted with developing national culture. In a culturally diverse society like India, where women came to represent 'culture', community leaders actively defined what constituted authentic cultural practices of a community. It has been argued that the women's question itself became a site for defining what tradition is. On the other hand women themselves often

questioned this. We saw how Amrit Kaur felt that the freedom to practice religious rights may sometimes violate the freedom to gender rights. Today, we thus have a Constitution with Article 15 which deals with the Right to Equality. But the constitution also contains articles dealing with other categories of rights, like the Right to freedom of religion, as embodied in Articles 25-28. And the question can be asked that “Can a State which proclaims opposition to discrimination based on sex... permit religious personal laws, which affect the life of women in a basic manner?” (Desai, 1994, p. 41-49).

Almost sixty years on, the fears of India’s early feminists have come true. Worse still there is a near consensus that the Uniform Code Bill is best kept in abeyance. There have been efforts on the part of some political parties to appropriate the demand for a uniform civil code. It is important to recall today therefore that the stiffest opposition to the Hindu Code Bill came from the then Hindu Mahasabha. One of its leading members, Nirmal Chandra Chatterjee, argued that the Act would encourage the conversion of Hindus to Islam. Amrit Kaur lamented that “‘religion’ in danger is a very potent caveat which scares even the seemingly intelligent (Chaudhuri, 2011, p.196). Many of these arguments seem as relevant today as in the past.

While the establishment of an independent state in a way alters the terms of discourse, the problem of differing identification of communities to the state persists. The majority community ‘naturally’ identifies with the ‘nation state’ while degrees of discomfort persist among the other communities. That India attained independence with the partitioning of the country and unprecedented killings on ‘communal’ grounds have marked the discourse of state and communities till date. So far as women are concerned the questions that persist are: Who decides who speaks legitimately for a ‘community’? Who decides what constitutes the ‘culture’ of a community?

The Shah Bano case dramatically brought all these questions to the fore. On 23 April 1985 the Supreme Court of India passed a judgement granting maintenance to a divorced Muslim woman Shahbano (A.I.R., 1985). The court awarded Shahbano maintenance of Rs.179.20 per month from her husband and dismissed the husband’s appeal against the award of maintenance. The judgment of the Supreme Court sparked off a nation wide controversy. The principal argument put forward by conservative Muslim opinion was that the Muslim Personal Law was based on the Shariat, which is divine and immutable. Though sections from the Muslim community defended the judgment, the state was more willing to listen to the voice of conservative spokespersons of the community. Shahbano herself was

pressurised to such an extent that in an open letter she denounced the Supreme Court judgment:

...which is apparently in my favour; but since this judgement which is contrary to the Quran and the hadith and is an open interference in Muslim personal law, I, Shahbano, being a Muslim, reject it and dissociate myself from every judgement which is contrary to the Islamic shariat. I am aware of the agony and distress which this judgement has subjected the Muslims of India today. (*Inquilab*, 1985 cited in Chaudhuri, 2003, p.362)

The state passed the Muslim Women's Bill and the Hindu communal forces saw this move as an appeasement of the minorities. Significantly, the fact that it was Muslim women who were at the losing end, passed them by. The question that arose is who exactly was the Bill seeking to protect- community leaders, divorced husbands or women? (Pathak & Sunder Rajan, 1986)

It is important to emphasize that the tendency among the conservative leadership of a community to affirm gender discriminatory practices as authentic culture is not confined to the minor community. Soon after the Indian state passed the retrogressive Muslim Women's Bill on 4th September 1987, an eighteen year old widow, Roop Kanwar, was burnt alive on her husband's pyre in the full gaze of about 3000 spectators, accompanied by the full panoply of Rajput ceremonials.

2.11 GLOBALIZATION, NEW ECONOMIC POLICIES, AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

Few processes have had a more dramatic impact in recent times than globalization or the neo-liberal model of development. It is perhaps no exaggeration to state that it has in many ways transformed the social, cultural and political landscape of India. Not surprisingly, serious transformations have taken place in women's movements and concomitantly in gender and development scholarship. I argue that the women's movement has succeeded in making gender a major issue in the public sphere. Major actors such as states, civil society, market, international institutions have had to take cognizance of gender inequality. Yet with the growing achievements of the women's movement, not least of which has been a certain "mainstreaming" of gender whether in developmental programmes or in the corporate sector or in the media, there has often been not just a delink with visions of justice articulated by women's movements but often significant reconfigurations of the very ideas of freedom, justice,

equity, autonomy, choice, activism and empowerment. Many of these developments are new. And many have to be understood in conjuncture with the rise of an assertive and vocal new middle class. This class itself is not a homogeneous entity but rather composed from castes other than the traditional 'upper caste.'

Some of these developments can be linked directly to the global rise of a neo-liberal vision and India's own tryst with it. But not all trends evident in the growing body of studies on gender and development can be attributed to the rise of neo-liberalism. Many fundamental interrogations of both women's movements and women's studies are linked to the challenges thrown up by new movements that have focused on the rights of 'the discriminated and socially excluded'. These interrogations have brought fresh insights to our understanding of central categories such as the nation and caste and therefore also of possible ways of looking at 'globalisation' itself.

In the early developmental vision such as the first plan document on women in India, one of the 29 sub-committees under the National Plan Committee (NPC) instituted by the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1938 to plan India's development post independence, labour in general and women workers in particular were privileged in the national imaginary. The document was tellingly titled "*Women's Role in a Planned Economy*" (WRPE). The state and national capital who worked in close connect to the state were identified as the key agents to propel India's development path (Chaudhuri, 1996). The 1990s altered this paradigm. Capital, (not necessarily national capital) and market (not the state) acquired ascendancy. This shift in public discourse reconfigured both class and gender in the national imaginary and therefore necessarily in the developmental priority. For instance, while the state withdrew subsidies, given as rights flowing from a welfare state model, we had the emergence of banks giving credit to poor women as clients. We also notice a slow retreat of the organized workforce, which is primarily male, but also includes some women. Moreover, wives and children of the organized male workers have suffered greatly from the pressures on this sector. There has been overall an erosion of organized movements and less bargaining power for workers, men and women. The decline in bargaining power subsequently leads to greater insecurity of job and wages

In a neo-liberal framework that informs the current model of globalization, the informal sector is at the heart of the market economy and represents its prime model. And most important of all, since there are a considerable number of women in this sector, it is their creativity and potential that

needs special attention (Kalpagam, 1994). The World Bank report draws upon this kind of understanding, focusing on “the incredible range of tasks poor women perform, their often greater contribution to household income despite lower wage earnings, their ability to make scarce resources stretch further under deteriorating conditions, all of which were documented and debated in the past, are now reworked: through a crucial shift in signification, these findings are no longer arguments about *exploitation* so as much as proofs of *efficiency*” (John, 2004, p. 247-48). Here, what we see is that older feminist findings about women’s work are being reused for quite another purpose by the new developmental practitioners.

Not surprisingly, therefore, a great deal of gender development discourse is now exclusively addressed within the microcredit framework, premised upon the idea that women are efficient managers and can be trusted to repay. Recent crises in the sector in some parts of the country have shown that in the name of ‘empowerment of poor women’ commercial banks and financial institutions have moved into the sector in a big way, leading to a situation where microcredit becomes yet another loan shark instead of an aid agency for women’s empowerment. This is very different from the vision articulated by the WRPE.

The Indian Government has projected the new economic policies as representing a consensus, above ‘politics’. Along with this, the emphasis on producing a commitment to what is called ‘empowerment’ of the people is reiterated. We can look at the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1993 ensuring 1/3 of total seats for women in all elected offices of local bodies in rural and urban areas in this light. The 1995 Country Report thus writes, “Women have thus been brought to the centre-stage in the nation’s efforts to strengthen democratic institutions” (MHRD, 1995). State documents suggest that at last we are going back to the constitutional pledges of political rights irrespective of caste, creed and gender. This ‘going back’ is not a simple return to the past. What is happening in both the economic and political spheres is that the new economic developmental visions that have gained ground since the 1990s have started giving new meanings to the older ideas of women’s political participation and economic empowerment. Thus women’s reservations at the panchayat level have started making a very big difference. These are not empty gestures as evident by the fact that the promise to legislate 33 per cent reservation for women in Parliament has been repeatedly scuttled. However, **it is important to understand that there has been a shift from a rights discourse of women as citizens to women as efficient micro managers.**

Recent years have seen abortive efforts to introduce what has come to be known as the Reservation Bill for Women. That women are not adequately represented in the parliament is widely accepted. In the 12th Lok Sabha, out of 547 members of the Lok Sabha only 32 were women. It has been observed that as long as the promise of 33 per cent reservation remained in the realm of pious hope and pontification, there was 'uniform goodwill towards women and their cause'. In Parliamentary circles, the main opposition to the bill came from those who demanded sub-reservation for the OBC women within the 33 per cent quota. Critics have wondered what the champions of the OBC had been doing for the last 50 years. Other views opposing the bill are: first, that 'women were not yet ready for political office' and they have to be 'sensitised and educated' and second, that reservation for women will lead to the perpetuation of dynastic politics. In a political climate where a large number of male members in both the parliament and legislatures are charged in cases ranging from murder and dacoity to rape and economic offences and where nepotism is widespread both criticisms sound hollow. Despite repeated efforts, it has not been possible to pass the bill these last fifteen years; the concerted opposition to women's political participation is amply demonstrated.

In a 21st century India, where women's presence in public life is widely visible, the fierceness of some of the 19th century and early 20th century resistances return to haunt us as we bear witness to a growing number of so-called "honour killings," executed at the behest of the khap panchayat, traditional village councils, to punish defiant young adults for marrying against society's norms. Organized opposition to gender justice is evident in the fate of the Women's Reservation Bill (WRB). The Bill was passed in the Rajya Sabha on 9 March 2010 after violent scenes and the physical removal of recalcitrant Members of Parliament by marshals. A month later when an all party meeting was convened to discuss the Bill, the ranks of the opponents had risen sharply. While honour killings are usually defended in the name of custom, the rhetoric opposing the WRB is articulated differently; though the 'custom' argument is not entirely absent. The WRB has evoked a wide set of varying responses, ranging from the crude anti-women remarks that the presence of women would invoke cat calls and whistles to a more politically correct invocation of the downtrodden women which this Bill would purportedly marginalize.

2.12 LET US SUM UP

This has been a long story, going way back to the 19th century, to the curious mix of ideas that the impact of British colonialism and Indian social reform movements had on shaping the women's question. Many of those 'old' ideas of domesticity and 'homely' women linger on in contemporary India. Many of the 'old' ideas of tradition and culture persevere also. Alongside remain ideas of political and economic rights of women as citizens and workers which the women's movement, the national movement and the left movement together made visible in the Indian Constitution and in the broader vision of a modern India. Yet other notions and practices which are contrary to women's rights continue to remain very strong too. The deplorable spate of "Honour Killings," of female foeticide, the refusal to pass the Women's Reservation Bill, are all testimony of the challenges ahead.

2.13 GLOSSARY

INC	:	Indian National Congress
NPC	:	National Plan Committee
WRPC	:	Women's Role in a Planned Economy

2.14 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Discuss women's issues in the context of social institutions and practices.
- 2) What is the meaning of the women's question in the Indian context? Substantiate your answer with suitable examples.
- 3) How do you relate gender issues to political and economic changes in India in the 1990s?

2.15 REFERENCES

Basu, Srimati (2001). *She Comes to Take Her Rights: Indian Women, Property, and Propriety*. Delhi: Kali for Women.

Chaudhuri, Maitrayee (2011). (First print, 1993). *The Indian Women's Movement*. Delhi: Palm Leaf.

Chaudhuri, Maitrayee (1996). 'Citizens, Workers and Cultural Emblems: An Analysis of the First Planned Document in India'. In Patricia Uberoi (Ed.), *State, Social Reform and Sexuality*. (pp.211-235). New Delhi: Sage.

Chaudhuri, Maitrayee (2003). 'Gender in the Making of the Indian Nation State'. In Sharmila Rege (Ed.), *Sociology of Gender: The Challenge of Feminist Sociological Knowledge*. New Delhi: Sage.

Desai A.R. (1994). 'Gender Role in the Constitution'. In Lotika Sarkar. & B. Sivaramayya (Eds.), *Women and the Law: Contemporary Problems*. New Delhi: Vikas.

Jayawardena, Kumari (1986). *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. Colombo: Sanjiva.

John, Mary E. (2004). 'Gender and Development in India, 1970s-1990s: Some reflections on the Constitutive Role of Contexts'. In Maitrayee Chaudhuri (Ed.), *Feminism in India*. (pp. 246-258). Delhi: Women Unlimited/Kali.

Kalpagam U. (1994). *Labour and Gender: Survival in Urban India*. New Delhi: Sage.

Kasturi, Leela. & Mazumdar, Vina (1994). 'Women and Indian Nationalism', *Occasional paper No. 20*. Delhi: Centre for Women's Development Studies.

Mazumdar, Vina (1994). 'Women's Studies and the Women's Movement in India: An Overview'. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 3&4.

Mies, Maria (1980). *Indian Women and Patriarchy*. New Delhi: Vikas.

Minault, Gail (1982). 'Purdah Politics: The Role of Muslim Women in Indian Nationalism 1911-1924'. In Papanek, Hanna. & Minault, Gail (Eds.), *Separate Worlds*. Delhi: Chanakya.

Pathak, Zakia & Sunder Rajan, Rajeshwari (1989). 'Shahbano'. *Signs*, 14(3), 558-52.

Rege, Sharmila (1998). 'Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Toward a Dalit Standpoint'. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33 (44), October 31st -November 6th, WS 39-WS46.

Sen, Ilna (1990). (Ed.). *A Space With the Struggle: Women's Participation in People's Movements*. Delhi: Kali for Women

Tharu, Susie. & Lalitha, K (1993). (Eds.). *Women's Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Reports

Ministry of Human Resource Development. (1995). *Country Report, Fourth World Conference on Women Beijing*, Government of India, Department of Women and Child Development.

2.16 SUGGESTED READINGS

Chaudhuri, Maitrayee (2011). (First Print, 1993). *The Indian Women's Movement*. Delhi: Palm Leaf.

Jayawardena, Kumari (1986). *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. Colombo: Sanjiva

John, Mary E. (2004). 'Gender and Development in India, 1970s-1990s: Some reflections on the Constitutive Role of Contexts'. In Chaudhuri, Maitrayee (Ed.), *Feminism in India*. Delhi: Women Unlimited/Kali.

Mazumdar, Vina (1994). 'Women's Studies and the Women's Movement in India: An Overview'. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 3&4.

Sangari, Kumkum & Vaid, Suresh (1989). (Eds.). *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. New Delhi, Kali for Women.

UNIT 3 SUFFRAGE

Yuthika Mishra

Structure

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Objectives
- 3.3 Defining Suffrage
- 3.4 World History of Woman's Suffrage
- 3.5 Suffrage as an Issue of Women's Movement in India
- 3.6 The Second Phase of Suffrage Movement in India (1927-1937)
- 3.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.8 Glossary
- 3.9 Unit End Questions
- 3.10 References
- 3.11 Suggested Readings

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Suffrage, or the right to vote, implies a very important human right especially in the contemporary democratic scenario of the world. Voting is a key political rights enjoyed by people in a democracy. In different societies people had to suffer a great deal for the acquisition of this political right, particularly women. In almost every country, women achieved this political right much later than men and that too after prolonged struggle. In India, however, women were granted voting rights along with men under the new constitution upon achieving independence from British colonialism.

In 1906, Finland was the first nation in the world to give all citizens full suffrage, that is, the right to vote and to run for office. New Zealand was the first country in the world to grant all citizens the right to vote in 1893, but women did not get the right to run for the New Zealand legislature until 1919.

In the previous units you have seen how the struggle for the rights of women, both political and social, gave birth to a phenomenon called the women's movement. Here, you will learn about how suffrage or the political right to vote became an important element of the women's struggle for equal rights, which intensified into a movement over a period of time.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to:

- Explain the meaning of the term suffrage;
- Discuss various types and uses of the concept of suffrage;
- Critically analyse the role of suffrage in women's movements all over the world; and
- State the contribution of suffrage in the context of the Indian women's movement.

3.3 DEFINING SUFFRAGE

The word suffrage derives from the Latin *suffragium*, meaning “voting tablet”. In the present context different types of suffrage have been identified, depending on the fundamental principles involved in each, such as, universal manhood suffrage, universal suffrage and women's suffrage, to name a few. (A Dictionary of World History, 2000)

In its simple form, suffrage implies the right to vote or the civil right to enfranchisement. The term stands for the democratic rights and liberties of people and their legal right to vote in their respective countries. In a broader sense, suffrage also implies the right to get voted. The right to run for office and the right to vote are together known as ‘full suffrage’. However, the legal right to vote need not imply that the practical right to vote is bestowed on each person automatically since having the legal claim to vote doesn't by itself confer upon a person the **opportunity** to vote. As you would be aware, many a times, rights are mere paper tigers. eg. wWomen's right to property, especially in a patriarchy. This was true of the right to vote in early times. In this sense, it implies elections and may also mean the right to participate in a referendum. **Thus, suffrage implies not only the legal right to vote but also the opportunity to vote** (The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth edition, 2008), since it is evident that the legal right to vote cannot be realized unless there are opportunities to do so.

Types of Suffrage

Several types of Suffrage have been identified based on the notional aspects involved in each:

Universal Suffrage

As the term suggests, this implies the unrestricted right to vote. Nevertheless there are restrictions of citizenship, age, criminality and sanity.

Women's Suffrage

This expression covers the right of women to vote on the same terms as men. The women who fought for this cause are known as suffragists or suffragettes.

Equal Suffrage

This type of suffrage refers to the removal of the special privilege a person holds in terms of the number of votes or she is entitled to, depending upon his/ her wealth, social status or income; eg. this was the practice in the medieval ages in England when the nobles and Lords exercised the right to have more votes than people from the lower classes. This need not be confused with universal suffrage.

Census Suffrage

Under this category, the number of votes a person can give is determined by that person's rank in the census. This might impose limitations on suffrage.

Compulsory Suffrage

This form of suffrage is enforced by the rule of law and those who are eligible to vote are bound to do so.

There are still various forms of exclusion from suffrage such as religious restrictions, wealth, tax, social class, nationality etc. However, the women's movement had been able to ensure voting rights for all adult women by mid 20th century. This has been a very major achievement as earlier, women were categorically denied the right to vote the world over.

3.4 WORLD HISTORY OF WOMAN'S SUFFRAGE

The suffrage issue was taken up by the women's movement in the 1870's in the west, and in the early 20th century in India. The issue of suffrage was a political issue since its very inception. It got intertwined with the various types of views expressed by the different ideological positions that had emerged by then, and which were finding influence within feminist and women's movements across the globe, viz. radicals, liberals, Marxists, and socialists.

The crucial question is how and why suffrage became such an important issue in the women's struggle in the 19th century. The explanation may be found in the fact of subordination of women to men, especially in legal matters and rights. This was nothing typical of one region or country but was a phenomenon across the globe. Women had to face deprivations on all fronts. They were excluded from university education, they could not vote and had limited or no control over the financial resources of the

family. There was stiff resistance to the idea of women's progress because men feared that the 'new woman' would demand equality of opportunity in all fields including education and politics.

Box 3.1

The term 'new woman' came from the title of a lecture given by the Italian feminist Maria Montessori (1870-1952), a doctor and originator of innovative schools that encouraged creativity in children. When a female Greek scientist gave her first lecture at the University of Athens, male students disrupted her lecture with shouts of 'back to the kitchen'.

The Polish born French scientist, Marie Curie, who discovered radium and won two Noble Prizes, related the isolation and challenges of her studies in Paris in early 1890s: "It seems that life is not easy for any of us. But what of that? We must have perseverance and above all confidence in ourselves. We must believe that we are gifted for something and that [our goals], at whatever cost, must be obtained" (Cited in Gutek, 2004, p. 5-7).

Even Britain's Queen Victoria called demands by women for equal rights "on which her poor feeble sex is bent... a mad, wicked folly... forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety" (See www.historyofwomen.org).

The beginnings were difficult for women. Those demanding equal rights faced considerable opposition. The struggle for suffrage marked the beginning of the women's movement the world over as this became the main plank in the debate over women's rights. Right-wing political parties opposed women's suffrage on principle. The moderate among them claimed that women could not understand political issues and left wing socialists in Catholic countries feared that if women had the right to vote they would support religious candidates. However, socialist parties and unions gave their support to women workers fighting for better wages and conditions. In France, a plummeting birth rate gave rise to a different set of concerns regarding women's social roles. The demand for suffrage was seen as a dangerous 'liberation' of women from subordination to their husbands.

The struggle of the suffragettes shaped not only the women's movement but also the concept of feminism at this time. The feminist movement developed very slowly in Europe and was most active in Britain, where women had gained the right to vote in municipal elections in 1864, and for country and parish councils six years later. In 1889, at the time of the centennial of the French Revolution, the first International Congress on

Women's Rights and Feminine Institutions took place in Paris. By 1900, more than 850 German associations were working for women's rights which included improved educational and employment opportunities and equal wages.

By the end of the 19th century, British women's groups prepared a petition calling for reforms, with more than quarter of a million signatures and presented it to the Parliament. As more occupations such as jobs in department stores and teaching opened up for women, the campaign for women's suffrage widened. The International Women's Suffrage Alliance, constituted in Berlin in 1904, set up branches in a number of countries. Its President, Carrie Chapman Catt, and first Vice- President, Millicent Fawcett, led the moderate wing of the British-American suffrage movement. A more militant group of feminists undertook a campaign of direct action. Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928), who had been elected to the school board in Manchester, founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1903. Its members campaigned for female suffrage by breaking shop windows, tossing acid on the golf course and bombing the house of Liberal Party leader, David Lloyd George. Other "suffragettes", as they were called, went on hunger strikes and upon being arrested, they were force fed or else arrested and re-arrested. In 1907, British women gained the right to serve in local government. Three years later, Parliament considered a bill that would grant the vote to single women who owned property, but the Bill was dropped. This created a lot of unrest and dissatisfaction among women and took the movement to the next level.

Box 3.2

The decision for the establishment of the International Alliance of Women (a non- governmental, feminist organization) was taken in Washington in 1902 by suffragists frustrated at the reluctance of the International Council of Women to support women's suffrage. The Alliance was formally constituted in Berlin in 1904 as the International Woman Suffrage Alliance. Among subsequent congresses were those held in Copenhagen (1906), Amsterdam (1908), London (1909), and Stockholm (June 1911). The IWSA also started its own monthly journal, the *Jus Suffragii*. The IWSA, influenced by Millicent Fawcett against the militancy of suffragettes in the style of Emily Pankhurst, initially refused membership to the WSPU at their 1906 Copenhagen meeting. In the late 1920s the organization changed its name to the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, and in 1946 this was altered to its current name, International Alliance of Women: Equal Rights - Equal Responsibilities. (www.smith.edu/libraries/lib/ssc)



Fig.3.1

Carrie Chapman Catt and Millicent Fawcett

The leaders of the moderate wings of the British and American Suffrage Movements were President Carrie Chapman Catt and first Vice- President Millicent Fawcett of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance. They are seen here at the 1913 Budapest meeting of the Alliance with other Board members. Fawcett is seated front left, Catt is next to her. *Copyright Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (123)*

The suffrage movement in America was also growing by leaps and bounds and the giants of the American suffrage movement included names like Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902). They were life-long friends and partners in the suffrage movement. Both devoted their lives to the crusade because they believed that, as Anthony put it: "failure is impossible." Neither lived to see the Nineteenth Amendment that gave women the vote passed in 1920, but the amendment was known as the 'Anthony amendment'.



Fig.3.2

Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902)

Courtesy of the Library of Congress, available at arkansasrussianreflections.blogspot.com

As the women's suffrage movement developed, cooperation between the American and British women became frequent and fruitful. In a meeting held in honour of Susan Anthony and Elizabeth Stanton in June 1883 at the Prince's Hall in London, the latter spoke on the social, educational, political and religious position of women in America. The struggle by the British and American women was carried on by the second generation suffragists. Harriot Stanton Blatch (1856-1940), daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Sylvia Pankhurst, daughter of Emmeline, (whose mothers had become close friends when Blatch lived in England), worked in close collaboration in support of the cause of suffrage. By the beginning of the First World War, marches and demonstrations were acceptable to most members of the British and American suffrage movements, provided the appropriate permits were obtained.



Fig.3.3

Woman Suffrage Parade, Washington, 1913

To dramatize nationwide demand for a constitutional amendment to enfranchise women, a suffrage army, 8,000 strong, marched in grand procession in the nation's capital on March 3, 1913, the day before President Woodrow Wilson's inauguration. Ill--treatment of the suffragists led to a congressional investigation and brought new support for the suffrage cause. Copyright *Manuscript Division, Library of Congress* (125)

The role of parliamentary bodies had expanded in every Western country during the last decade before the Great War as universal manhood suffrage had come to France, Italy, Belgium, Norway, Sweden and even imperial Germany. Women's movements became the foremost force for democratization that gained considerably during the war. They had suspended their suffrage campaigns for the duration of the conflict and at the end of the war women's groups demanded recognition for taking the place of conscripts in factories and fields during the war. After the war, women won the right to vote in Germany, Scandinavia, ultimately in France, where the original women's suffrage bill had failed in 1922, and other countries in Western Europe- excluding Spain, Austria, Portugal, Switzerland. Women could also vote in the newly created states of Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary. The legal position of women was perhaps strongest in Britain where they voted for the first time in the elections in December 1918 and the first woman was elected to the House of Commons soon after. The Sex

Disqualification Act of 1919 opened the way for women to enter professions from which they had previously been excluded. But still many women returned home to their domestic duties at the end of the war. In most jobs, men returning from the war replaced the women. Nonetheless, a greater variety of jobs became available to women.

Activity: Based on the historical overview that you have just read, create a timeline of important dates and events while specifying the country where this event took place. This will help give you a perspective on the significant developments in the struggle for suffrage in the west.

3.5 SUFFRAGE AS AN ISSUE OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN INDIA

In the pre- independence era, that is, before 1947, women gradually got the right to vote the world over. However, Indian women got the right only after Independence with the making of the Constitution of India wherein this discrimination was removed. When the suffrage movement was in full swing in the West, the process of socio-religious reform was taking place in India in which women were the main beneficiaries. As the Indian women slowly gained their self-worth, a women's movement began to take shape. Between 1917 and 1937, women started demanding the right of political representation for Indian women. The campaign for women's suffrage took place within the framework of the constitutional reforms of 1919 and 1935. This activity also coincided with the burgeoning national movement in the second decade of the 20th century. Given the colonial context and the very partial enfranchisement of men, the movement for women's suffrage ran parallel to the struggle for political rights such as in the freedom struggle.

In 1917, Secretary of State for India, Edwin Montague, and the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, toured the country in order to introduce political reforms which are generally known as the 'Montague- Chelmsford Scheme of Reforms for India'. Among the suggested reforms was one for the larger representation of Indians on the Legislative Councils and the widening of the electorate. However, no mention of women was made and the question of their rights appeared to be totally ignored. Consequently, several women and women's groups like the *Bharat Stri Mandal* (normally *Stree*), the newly formed Women's India Association, Margaret Cousins and Dorothy Jinarajadasa, (the

latter two having also worked for suffrage in England), took advantage of the opportunity to create a favourable opinion for women's suffrage. Sarojini Naidu led an all-India delegation of women in December 1917 which apprised the imperial representatives (Montague and Chelmsford) of the awakening of Indian women (something on the lines of the West) and registered the demand of women to have the status of "people" (representation in the legislative councils). The first demand of the delegation was that "when the terms of the Indian Franchise were drawn up the word 'people' should be understood as including women and that the whole should be 'worded in such terms as will not disqualify our sex, but allow our women the same opportunities of representation as our men'" (Tata, n.d., p.1-2).

This marked the beginning of the Indian women's struggle to secure political and civil rights for all women. The Indian women's suffrage movement had to face rough weather right from the start as they faced the criticism from both British officials and nationalists. The former accused them of ignoring the poor masses of Indian women while the latter did not like their critique of patriarchy and they were labeled as being disloyal to their culture.

In 1918, egged on by the growing fervor in the country in favour of women's suffrage, the Provincial Conferences (legislatures) of erstwhile Bombay and Madras (now Mumbai and Chennai), passed resolutions to remove sex disqualification from the then proposed reform bill. They were soon followed by Andhra Provincial Conference, the Indian Home Rule League, the Bombay Special National Congress and the Muslim League. In the same year, in the Bombay Special Session of the Congress, Sarojini Naidu tried to convince the five-thousand strong audiences about the rationale of extending the franchise to women by emphasizing that it was scientifically and politically sound, compatible with tradition and consistent with human rights. Dispelling the fears of men that this might mean interference by women in their official, civic and public duties, Naidu stressed that this would rather help lay the foundation of national character in the hearts of children and would instill in them ideals of national life. The 33rd Session of the Indian National Congress was held in Delhi in 1918 and Sarladevi Chaudhurani presented the resolution supporting the vote for women. Going beyond the assertions of Sarojini Naidu, she contended that the "sphere of women" included comradeship with men in all spheres of life including politics (Cited in Basu, 2008, p. 132). The purpose of all the resolutions was that the word 'people' or 'persons' should be taken to refer to both men and women, instead of to men alone.



Fig.3.4: Sarojini Naidu

(Source: www.whereincity.com)

As if the whole scene was ignited - meetings and gatherings followed one after the other all over India. Women's organizations played a very crucial role in expressing support for women's franchise and they were supported by the tireless efforts of prominent women, both British and Indian. Promoting petition politics as the best *modus operandi*, British suffragists like Millicent Fawcett came forward to help the Indian women in their mission.

The year 1918 was indeed a very eventful one for the suffrage movement in India. In order to implement the reform scheme, two committees were appointed by the Government to investigate the suggestions put forward by various sections of people. Of these two, the Southborough Franchise Committee was assigned the task of discovering Indian opinion on the question of Reforms, and of collecting for the British Parliament all available criticism on the Franchise proposals. Seizing these opportunity, Indian women left no stone unturned to bring to the notice of the Committee all possible evidence which showed the need for including women in the new Electorate. The Committee toured India to gather information and in Bombay (Mumbai) a requisition signed by about 800 women was submitted to them asking that women should be included in the Franchise proposals. Several resolutions expressing the strong claim of Indian women for inclusion in the Franchise proposals were presented to the Committee by various women's unions, associations and organizations. But in the report of the Committee in April 1919, the claims of Indian women were totally ignored on the ground that social customs regarding Indian women made the granting of franchise

premature. Only two gentlemen, Mr. Hogg and Mr. C. Sankaran Nair advocated votes for women. In July 1919, declaring the grounds for refusal as untenable, the women of Bombay held a public meeting to protest against the indignity and to express their deep regret at the recommendation of the Southborough Franchise Committee. Protest meetings were held all over the country by the women's associations, resolutions were passed and cablegrams were sent to officials in England urging the need for granting right to franchise to women too. The women's franchise proposal was indeed passing through the rough and tumble of official opinion, on the one hand, which was invariably unfavourable, and the Indian public opinion, on the other, which was in favour of giving votes to the 'qualified women of India'. This limited demand for right to vote was distorted by Lord Southborough, to argue that Indian women did not themselves desire enfranchisement. However, a meeting was immediately called and a resolution was passed and sent to the Secretary of State in the name of Mrs. Jaiji Jehangir, which not only expressed the pain of Bombay women but claimed suffrage as their right. A similar resolution was sent to the Joint Select Committee by the Sir Narayan Chandravarkar, President, Bombay Presidency Social Reform Association. The General Secretary of the Women's India Association, Mrs. Dorothy Jinarajdas, sent the messages from forty five branches to the Joint Committee asking for votes for the women of India. Mrs. Annie Besant and the members of the All-India Home Rule Deputation, as well as the various deputations that went to London in 1919 to give evidence before the Joint Committee, stirred up widespread interest in the views and efforts of the Indian people for reforms. In August 1919, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu handed a paper to the Joint Select Committee in London supporting women's franchise in India. At about the same time, a committee of twenty prominent ladies from different communities of the Bombay Presidency was formed and in a public meeting it was decided to send their representatives to England to work for women's franchise. Consequently, Mrs. H.A. Tata and her daughter Miss M.A. Tata went to England as deputies with Sir Sankaran Nair and their statement was taken in writing because of shortage of time. They emphasized the fact that from time immemorial, the Indian woman has been considered the equal of man and her magnificent past inspires her to future progress. They reiterated that the vote improves the status of women and her self-development and in turn affects the growth of the country. Thus, they expressed their hope that the British people would understand the hopes and aspirations of the Indians, which in turn would hasten the realization that in India, as in England, responsible and satisfactory Government can only be achieved when men and women each bear their share in electing their representatives.

In Great Britain, all these delegations and women's representatives were well received and they were joined by many indigenous women's organizations which not only showed sympathy but took interest in the cause of women. Resolutions to support the cause of Indian women were passed by the public bodies and were sent to the higher authorities. One of them read:

That the Women's Association of Great Britain approves the principle of equality in the citizenship of men and women and urges that the proposals in the present Bill for India for the enfranchisement of men should be extended to women possessing the same qualifications so that popular Government in India may start without any sex disability.
(Cited in Tata, n.d., p. 9)

The Montague-Chelmsford Reforms left the question of women's suffrage to be decided by the provincial legislatures. The Princely state of Travancore-Cochin was the first to give voting rights to women in 1920. However, Madras was the first province to grant votes to women followed by Bombay and, between 1921 and 1930, one by one the provinces extended the franchise to women and allowed them to stand as legislative candidates. But franchise was extremely limited and women could vote only if they had qualifications like wifehood, property and education. Madras was again ahead with 8.46 per cent of total voters which was the largest amongst the states. It was followed by Bengal and UP with 3 per cent women voters and Punjab trailed behind with 2.5 per cent women voters. In another first, Madras was the first one to throw open its doors to women legislators and elections were held in 1926 in which Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay fought for the Madras Legislative Council seat from Mangalore but lost by a small margin. The Madras government then nominated Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, a well-known social worker and doctor, who worked for the cause of women's rights in the Legislative Council.

Activity: As a follow-up to the timeline you created at the end of Section 3.4, do the same here to represent important dates and events in the first phase of the Indian women's struggle for suffrage. Try to draw comparisons between the two timelines you have created.

3.6 THE SECOND PHASE OF SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT IN INDIA (1927-1937)

In the years 1928-1937, there were debates on the terms under which women's franchise should be expanded. The British Government supported reservation of seats for women, separate electorates and less stringent franchise qualifications. But most of the leaders of the women's movement opposed separate electorates and reservation of seats for women and demanded adult franchise.

The second phase in the battle for female franchise started ten years after the Montague Chelmsford Reforms when the Simon Commission was appointed in 1927 as the first step in the making of a new India Act. The Commission was boycotted by many organizations including the Indian National Congress and the WIA (Women's Indian Association) on the ground that there were no Indians in the team. However, members of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), a newly founded organization, were divided and some of them led by the Rani of Mandi, met the Commission and presented their demands of votes to literate women and reserving seats for women. Another sop was announced by the Viceroy in 1929 in the form of a Round Table Conference (RTC) to be held in London to discuss the next step towards Dominion Status. Again, this was boycotted by the INC and the WIA. However, the Conference was attended by Begum Shahnawaz Khan and Mrs. Radhabai Subbarayan in their individual capacity and they did not represent any women's organization. They proposed adult franchise as the ideal and special reservation for women as an interim measure. Another important step was the Gandhi-Irwin Pact of 1931, whereby the Congress agreed to attend the Second Round Table Conference. The AIWC, under the chairmanship of Sarojini Naidu, took up the task of preparing a memorandum to be submitted to the Franchise Committee of the Second RTC. A Drafting committee was formed consisting of eight women: Hansa Mehta, Taraben Premchand, Margaret Cousins, Faiz Tyabji, Hilla Fardoonji, Shareefa Hamid Ali, Malini Sukhtankar and Rani Lakshmibai Rajwade. The memorandum demanded universal adult franchise, mixed general electorates and no reservation, nomination or cooption for women. Various women's organizations were also involved and their approval was taken for the proposal. A fifteen member deputation of AIWC members led by Rajkumari Amrit Kaur met the Viceroy to appeal for adequate women's representation at the RTC. As a result a few more delegates were added like Sarojini Naidu and two government nominees, namely Begum Shahnawaz Khan and Mrs. Radhabai Subbarayan. The demand of the women's movement for equal political

rights and women's active participation in the freedom struggle led the Indian National Congress at its Karachi session in 1931 to pledge gender equality before the law and universal adult franchise. This pledge was honoured in the Constitution of free India.

With the recommendation of the RTC for increased franchise for women and the subsequent approval of the British Parliament, a Franchise Committee was formed with Lord Lothian as the Chairman. The AIWC geared up with a rather impressive delegation which included Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, Rani Lakshmibai Rajwade, Malini Sukhtankar, Lakshmi Menon, C.N. Nallamutha Ammal, Hilla Fardoonji, Begum Sharifa Hamid Ali and Miss S.I. Vincent. The Lothian Committee, which came to India in 1932 and met the delegation, rejected universal adult franchise but recommended that two to five per cent of seats in the provinces be reserved for women and that wives of property owners and literate women be enfranchised. Their recommendations were published as a White Paper in 1933. Meanwhile, in the same year, the Communal Award reserved seats for Muslims and Scheduled Castes. The AIWC rejected the idea of reserved seats for women as they felt that the unity of Indian womanhood would be threatened by the Communal Award which would divide women. The women's organizations once again took up cudgels to reframe their demand for political rights. In a joint meeting of the AIWC, WIA and NCWI a memorandum was prepared to be presented to the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, who appointed a Joint Select Committee to discuss the White Paper. The memorandum consisted of suggestions, demands and protests- suggestions were for the transition period and protests were against reservation of seats and indirect representation of women in the Federal Assembly. The demand consisted of enfranchisement of all men and women above 21 years of age belonging to the urban areas. A delegation of women led by Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy and Begum Hamid Ali was deputed to represent the case of women before the Committees and they reiterated their demand for universal adult franchise. In this they got the full support of British women's organizations which strove to educate public opinion in England.

By the mid-1930s, as the pace of the nationalist movement picked up, the AIWC in its 1933 annual session demanded the right to franchise and equal status for women in the future constitution of India. In the 1934 session, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, in a resolution, acknowledged the fact that the Joint Select Committee had granted greater franchise to women and a definite place for them in the new constitution but also regretted the fact that it ignored many of their demands. Their dissatisfaction grew further when the

Government of India Act of 1935 was announced, which again rejected the proposal for universal adult franchise. It did, however, increase the number of enfranchised Indians and the proportional suffrage rights of women since until now, only some women had the right to vote. Their numbers increased slightly as their qualifications, age etc were slightly lowered and some of the previous qualifications were also relaxed. Now, all women over 21 years could vote if they fulfilled the qualifications of property and education; but the women's organizations were disappointed with this and expressed their disapproval of the provisions of the Act. However, they realized the need to educate the women as a majority was not even literate and this was a major hurdle in the way of achieving voting rights. Women soon made efforts to overcome the problem of education and also gave their wholehearted support to the national movement.

The new constitution framed in 1950 ultimately fulfilled their dreams of universal adult franchise and Indian women finally got what they had been asking for since 1917. The democratic constitution of India gives equitable political participation to all citizens irrespective of caste, class, color, race, gender or religious preferences. After independence, the Gram Panchayat Act was passed which resulted in the setting up of gram panchayats at the village level on a mandatory basis. In an effort to further extend the political rights of women, the Indian Parliament passed the 73rd and 74th Amendment to the constitution in April and June 1992 making Panchayats and Municipalities 'institutions of self government'. The most important feature of the Act is the reservation of at least 1/3rd of the total seats for women both at the membership level and at the level of functionaries. The question often arises as to why there is ongoing resistance and opposition to giving women a similar reservation in the State Legislatures and the Parliament, despite the fact that men politicians agreed to give 1/3rd reservation to women in Panchayats. As you can see, the struggle for equal rights for women still continues.

3.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit focused on discussing the inherent meaning of the term suffrage in its historical context and its uses in the democratization of individual right to vote and liberty. It is implied in the definition itself. It further analysed the contribution of women's movement in granting/legalizing the right to vote for adult women in the mid-20th century. In India, the claim for women's suffrage was a struggle of the women's movement which started prior to independence. The campaign for women's legal right to

vote was undertaken within the framework of socio-religious and political reforms of the world and India respectively. Of course, their fight for it forms a separate chapter of History as the right to vote did not come easily to women. Women's active participation in the freedom movement laid the foundation for their claim to equal voting rights at the constitutional level. The unit concludes by explaining the emergence and implementation of the term 'suffrage' in India's political terrain.

3.8 GLOSSARY

AIWC	: All India Women's Conference
Enfranchisement	: Give a person the right to vote.
Franchise	: The right to vote at state especially parliamentary elections.
Suffragette/ Suffragist	: There is a difference between the terms "suffragist" and "suffragette". In the United States, supporters of woman suffrage preferred and used the term suffragist. In Britain, militant supporters of woman suffrage called themselves suffragettes. When the American press, or those who opposed woman suffrage, called an American woman a suffragette, it was intended to be derogatory.

3.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Define and explain the term suffrage by drawing suitable examples.
- 2) Discuss various types of suffrage and explain the term suffrage in Indian context.
- 3) What is the role of suffrage in determining the nature of women's movement the world over? Explain.
- 4) How far was the Indian women's movement shaped by the struggle for right to vote? What other factors influenced the demand for suffrage by the Indian women?

3.10 REFERENCES

All India Women's Conference Files, Govt. of India Public Home Department Files at the National Archives of India.

Basu, Aparna (2008). 'Women's Struggle for the Vote: 1917-1937', *The Indian Historical Review*, XXXV(1), January 2008.

Buhle, Mari Jo, & Buhle, Paul (2005). (Eds.). *The Concise History of Woman Suffrage: Selections from History of Woman Suffrage By Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and the National American Woman Suffrage Association*. University of Illinois.

Curie: www.vigyanprasar.gov.in (See also Madame Curie (1983), *A Biography by Eve Curie*, Heinemann).

Edwards, Louise. & Roces, Mina (2004). (Eds.). *Women's Suffrage in Asia-Gender, Nationalism and Democracy*. Curzon Studies in the Modern History of Asia. New York: Routledge.

Fletcher, Ian C., Levine, Philippa & Mayhall, Laura E. Nym (2000). (Eds.). *Women's Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, Nation and Race*. New York: Routledge.

Forbes, Geraldine (1999). *Women in Modern India*. Cambridge University Press.

Garner, Les (1984). *Stepping Stone to Women's Liberty: Feminist Ideas in the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1900-1918*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

Gutek, Gerald Lee (2004). (Ed.). *The Montessori Method: the Origins of an Educational Innovation*. USA: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc.

Harrison, Patricia Greenwood (2000). *Connecting Links: The British and American Woman Suffrage Movements, 1900-1914*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Hill, Jeff (2005). *Women's Suffrage*. Omnigraphics.

Matthews, Jean V. (2004). *The Rise of the New Woman- The Women's Movement in America(1875-1930)*. The American Ways Series. Ivan R. Dee Publishers.

Nanda, B.R. (1990). (Eds.). *Indian Women: from Purdah to Modernity*. Radiant Publishers.

Pankhurst, E. Sylvia (1970). *The Suffragette: the History of the Women's Militant Suffrage Movement 1905-1910*. Source Book Press.

Pugh, Martin (2000). *The March of the Women. A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women's Suffrage, 1866-1914*. Oxford Univ. Press.

Reddy, Muthulakshmi (1956). *Mrs. Margaret Cousins and Her Work in India*. Madras: WIA.

Reddy, Muthulakshmi (1964). *Autobiography of Dr. (Mrs.) Muthulakshmi Reddy*. Madras.

Tata, Herabai A. (n.d.). *A Short Sketch of Indian Women's Franchise Work*. The Pelican Press.

Varma, Sudhir (1997). *Women's Struggle for Political Space: From Enfranchisement to Participation*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications.

Indian National Congress Records. GOI.

Rathbone Papers and Suffrage. India Collection at the Fawcett Library. London.

The International Alliance of Women Records, 1906-2009. Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College. Northampton, MA. (see also www.smith.edu/libraries/libs/ssc/).

3.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

Ali, Aruna Asaf (1991). (in association with G.N.S. Raghavan) *The Resurgence of Indian Women*. New Delhi: Radiant Publishers.

Basu, Aparna (2008, January). 'Women's Struggle for the Vote: 1917-1937'. *The Indian Historical Review*, XXXV(1). New Delhi: ICHR.

Cousins, Margaret E. (1941). *Indian Womanhood Today*. Allahabad: Kitabistan.

Tata, Herabai A. *A Short Sketch of Indian Women's Franchise Work*. London: The Pelican Press.

UNIT 4 FEMINISMS: VARIATIONS AND CONTEXTS

Yuthika Mishra

Structure

- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Objectives
- 4.3 Defining Feminism
- 4.4 Evolution of Feminism
- 4.5 Feminist Theory, Feminism and Women's Movement
- 4.6 Western Feminisms
- 4.7 Indian Feminism
- 4.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.9 Glossary
- 4.10 Unit End Questions
- 4.11 References
- 4.12 Suggested Readings

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The very fact that a notion to highlight the condition of women evolved in the 19th century, and came to be known as **feminism**, shows that there was something amiss in the scheme of things. Firstly, it appeared that women were gradually asserting themselves to get the right to be treated like human beings; secondly, they were also by now convinced that this change in their position was possible thanks to the liberalizing and equalizing forces unleashed in the world by the capitalist-socialist combine. This combine had become a major force to reckon with by the end of the 19th and start of the 20th century.

As an idea and as a concept, 'feminism' has been identified as the main generator of women's and gender studies and also as the chief force behind the various women's movements all over the world. Feminist scholarship has been at the forefront of critical thinking in the last four decades, challenging and rethinking major theoretical and political formulations such as Marxism, and playing a leading role in the development of post-colonial, post-modern theories, among others. While women's movements may not always be about women (that is, women in movements may have different agendas from women's movements), the fact that feminism and women's

movements have been so intricately connected necessitates the need to study the linkages, similarities and overlaps between the two. In the various sections of this unit, we will try to describe and explain these linkages, and trace the evolution of various feminisms in the world.

4.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Describe feminism with reference to the women's movement;
- Analyze and identify different types of feminisms along with their backgrounds;
- Trace the evolution of feminism in the world with special reference to India; and
- Explain the need of feminism in the present social set up.

4.3 DEFINING FEMINISM

Etymologically speaking, the word feminism is derived from the French word '*féminisme*' and seems to have been popularized in the 1890's. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (Online Dictionary) it is the theory of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes and it also denotes organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests. The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines feminism as "a belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way". It also lays emphasis on the set of activities intended to achieve this state of equilibrium. Feminism is defined as the advocacy of social equality for men and women, in opposition to patriarchy and sexism. In brief, it can be said that feminism is a belief in the equality of sexes.



**FEMINISM
IS THE RADICAL
NOTION THAT
WOMEN ARE
PEOPLE**

Fig. 4.1

Source: Retrieved from: <http://www.amazon.com/FEMINISM-Radical-Notion-PINBACK-Feminist/dp/B003R0BPWW>

While it is very difficult to find out the precise meaning of the word one cannot help but agree with Rebecca West, the famous writer who wrote in 1913, “I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute” (West, 1982, p.5). In the early years, the word carried negative connotations as it sometimes does even now. Another question may be raised here in order to clarify the definition of the word feminism, that is, what would we call women who continued to work for the cause but did not call themselves feminists? There are several examples like the first-wave women trade unionists in Britain who fought for equal pay. Closer home, Sarojini Naidu totally disapproved being called a feminist. But in both the cases, the contribution to the cause of women’s movement has been of immense value politically. It may be emphasized here that the contexts of feminism keep changing and all those working for the cause come within its ambit. Writing about South Asia, Kumari Jayawardena defines feminism as, “embracing movements for equality within the current system and the struggles that have attempted to change the system”. (Jayawardena, 1986, p. 2) You would have realized by now that feminism might have different meanings and connotations in different regions, countries and spaces and it might differ according to the requirements of class, caste, background, educational level, consciousness etc. However, broadly speaking it creates an awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation in society and inspires conscious action by women and men to change this situation.



Fig.4.2

Source: Retrieved from: <http://bookmaniac.org/dealing-with-internet-drama-in-feminist-discourse-sxswi-panel-report/>

4.4 EVOLUTION OF FEMINISM

Evolution of the Three Waves of Feminism

Scholars have divided the history of Western feminism into three ‘waves’. The first wave in the 19th and early 20th century primarily focused on women’s voting rights. The second wave refers to the women’s liberation movement which began in the 1960’s and was concerned with the legal and social equality of women. The third wave, beginning in the 1990’s, builds on the apparent failures of second wave and tries to address them. You will read more about these “waves” in the context of western feminisms in section 4.6.1 below.

The concept of waves is not used to describe/analyse feminism in the Indian context. Given the significance of the colonial situation when the women’s movement first emerged and its close association with anti-colonial struggles, the term ‘feminism’ did not gain much currency in the women’s movement’s self-description in that period. In a later period, after Independence, women were engaged on multiple political fronts. Thus, the term ‘women’s movement’ is more commonly used in the Indian context.

It will be correct to say that even though the word feminism came to be used in the 19th century, the concept came into existence much earlier. As you have already learned in Unit 1 of Block 1, feminist writings first appeared in the 15th century with Christine de Pizan, Margaret Cavendish, Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft. Feminism got a boost and emerged by the 19th century in ‘waves,’ as noted above, especially in the US and UK.

New Feminisms

The term ‘New Feminism’ has been understood to include the varieties of feminist concepts that have evolved over time. At different times, various kinds of feminisms, and various phases of women’s movements, have been dubbed as “new” in order to indicate major turns and shifts. Post- feminism, power feminism, third wave feminism, libertarian feminism, babe feminism- all these terms have been used periodically to describe *new feminism*. The ongoing debate over the meaning of the term feminism has led to the coinage of the term *new feminism*. Contrary to the belief that these recent contributions on feminism are different or “do not easily fit into the more familiar models of feminist politics” these new feminisms have influenced feminist works academically and “have had a far ranging influence in the political, economic and cultural spheres” (Showden, 2009, p.1). Most of the new feminisms have been grouped under the rubrics of ‘post feminism’ or ‘third-wave feminism’ or both. Both these terms are often, unwittingly, used interchangeably. Although both are responses to dissatisfactions with liberal, socialist, and radical forms of second-wave feminist theory, they have different connotations.

Originally, the term was used in Britain in the 1920s to distinguish the new feminists from the old school of mainstream feminists, thus known because of the issue of suffrage which they championed and which marks the beginning of feminism in the modern period. The new feminists were also known as *welfare feminists* because they were more specifically concerned with the well being of mothers and the requirements of motherhood like family allowances being paid directly to mothers. They also vouched in favour of protective legislation in industry. They were led by Eleanor Rathbone of the *Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship*, an organization that took up the cause of the post- suffrage era of feminism. Those who opposed the *New Feminists* were mostly young women who did not believe in the idea of separate spheres for women. They were particularly opposed to protective legislation, which they saw as being in practice restrictive legislation, which kept women out of better-paid jobs on the pretext of health and welfare considerations.

In recent years, the term 'new feminism' has been revived by Catholic feminists responding to the call of the Pope for a "‘new feminism’ which rejects the temptation of imitating models of ‘male domination’ in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation" (www.vatican.va/evangelium-vitae, para 99). New Feminism also claims to be a Catholic philosophy, which emphasized the notion that men and women are complementary to each other, thus disputing the notion of superiority of men over women as embodied in patriarchy. Belonging to the genre of 'difference feminism', this notion not only believes in the equal worth and dignity of both the sexes, but also supports the notion of the strengths, perspectives and roles of women.

With the influence of New Feminism various world issues have been taken within the fold of feminism and have been studied with a feministic approach. Thus, varieties of feminisms have evolved, for example, the concept dealing with environment and women and their linkages is known as environmental feminism or ecofeminism. Ecofeminists see men as controllers of land and hence responsible for the oppression of women. The same dynamics operate for the destruction of the natural environment. One point of criticism could be that there is too much stress on the mystical aspect of women and nature. (You will read more about these issues in Unit 3 of Block 2). There are other types of feminisms that have developed around issues, regions or communities for example, Dalit feminism, Black feminism and Third-world feminism (which is closely related to Asian and African feminism).

These varieties of feminisms have come under the influence of ideologies like postcolonial feminism, which emphasizes not only colonial domination and marginalization of colonized women by Western feminists, but also the

ability of the colonized to remain active and articulate within this framework. Postmodern feminists argue that sex and gender are socially constructed, that there is no homogeneity in women's experiences because their cultures and histories are varied and that terms like gender, feminism and politics are too limiting. In a different vein the poststructuralist feminists believe that it is this difference which is one of the most powerful tools that women have, especially if it is combined with the various intellectual currents. Even opinion on the role of men is divided- according to some, men are also oppressed by gender roles while others consider men as agents of oppression, or complicit in fashioning sexist ideologies and practices. Contrary to common beliefs, most feminists are not rabid 'man-haters', indeed many of them have cordial social and personal relationships with men. The characterization of feminists as aggressively anti-men is, some feminists argue, a means of discrediting feminists and the feminist movement.

In our day to day interactions at home we may notice examples of 'feminism' being discredited on one pretext or the other. For instance when a young girl wants to leave home or go out for some vocation or for a job or for higher studies and gets adamant about fulfilling her dreams she is often accused as being under the influence of feminism or the new trends that have plagued the modern society. But when the very same girl earns a livelihood for the whole family and goes out to do so she is encouraged. Why? There is a lot of contradiction involved in the society and its regulations which are dominated by men and are modelled on patriarchy.

Similarly, there are attempts to control women's reproductive rights and choices. Women are, at times, forced to abort female fetus and go for a male child in keeping with the wishes of the husband's family whereas for a mother it makes no difference if the child is a boy or a girl. Many such instances may be recalled from our surroundings that we encounter daily.

There are also instances of oppression of men in the name of gender roles. In dowry cases or in cases of violence against women at times men are falsely implicated. More recently there are several cases where the law against dowry is misused by the wife to extract monetary gains or to extricate herself from the bond of marriage. All this happens at times at the instigation of her parental family. Here the role of law becomes very important and proper discrimination is required so that injustice is not perpetrated.

Check Your Progress: Describe what you have read so far by explaining when and how New Feminism evolved, and what it means.

4.5 FEMINIST THEORY, FEMINISM AND WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Most feminist theories have been generated based on the experiences of women, and have evolved through women's movements. Feminist theories form the main plank of women's studies which is spread over a variety of disciplines. These included history, geography, anthropology, sociology, art history, psychoanalysis, economics, science, literature, philosophy and theology apart from media, film and music.

The demands made by women's movements included the right to vote, to own property, reproductive or health rights and the right over their own bodies. They laid emphasis on the fundamental right to equality in every field of life and from this emerged the issue of equal pay for equal work, equal opportunity for careers, and opposition of oppression, patriarchy, domestic violence and sexual harassment. Initially beginning in the Western countries, the movement for female rights spread far and wide and this has led to the development of a variety of feminisms all over the world.

Both the concept of feminism and the idea of a women's movement are closely intertwined, so much so that they nourish each other and also depend on each other for their growth. Feminist ideology has been, and continues to be, in the forefront of the women's movements. Women's struggles have all been issue-based and changed from time to time, depending on the position of women at a given time and place. For example, the issue of suffrage was one of the first issues to be taken up by the women's movement at a global level. Of course there were other equally inflammable matters like sati, widow remarriage, age of marriage, purdah, and the social and economic inequality between men and women, but the question of suffrage became a political issue since its very inception and hence it became all the more important (see the previous unit on Suffrage in this block).

Feminist thinking has been associated with various dominant political theories at different stages. For many decades, the categorization of feminism usually followed the differences in the ideological positions of its major proponents and the issues prioritized by them- thus, radicals, liberals, Marxists, socialists etc. However, over time, these lines became increasingly blurred and historians of feminism followed different principles of classification, causing a great deal of confusion regarding nomenclature. On the whole, Radical feminism believed that patriarchy was the main cause of women's oppression and so a total restructuring of the society was necessary. They also do not absolve capitalism, (since it is based on patriarchal structures), but see patriarchy as more 'fundamental' and pre-dating capitalism. Liberal feminists aimed at the equality of men and women through reform without altering

the structure of society. While socialist feminists found a link between the oppression of women and their exploitation and labour, Marxist feminists felt that the end of class oppression would lead to the end of gender oppression too. There are several other approaches to the 'woman question', which suggest various alternatives, for example, cultural feminism, anarchist feminism and separatist feminism, to name a few. In the next section, you will get a closer look at varieties of feminism in the west and in India.

4.6 WESTERN FEMINISMS

It is generally believed that feminism first appeared in the 19th century. In the second half of the 19th century state sponsored social reforms were being carried out in Europe. In the backdrop of industrialization, liberalism and growing national consciousness, the domestic policies of most of the European states were influenced by these forces. In the years after the 1880's various progressive steps were engendered by state governments like universal manhood suffrage, expansion of the popular press, acts and laws to regulate factory hours and working conditions. But they fell short of fulfilling the needs and demands of most workers. The long economic depression that began in 1873 and lasted well into the 1890s added to social and political tensions in almost every country. Many feminists contended that social reforms would be inadequate as long as women were without the right to enter universities or vote. Thus, the suffrage movement took shape and forged ahead with the demand for voting rights for all adult women. Gradually the movement grew strong and drew within its fold various other issues of concern for women. This process of gradual undulation of women's demands is known as 'waves' of the women's movement, as you have already seen in Section 4.4.1 above. Let us now take a closer look at the notion of the three waves of Western women's movements, as they have been identified by scholars.

Feminism in the Three Waves of Women's Movements

The **first wave** of the feminist movement in the United States began in the 1840's as women opposed to slavery, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, drew parallels between the oppression of African Americans and the oppression of women. They also sought equality in property rights and changes in the marriage relationship. They are mostly known for their efforts for suffrage or voting rights for women. The Seneca Falls convention began the social movement by which women finally won the right to vote in 1920. But other disadvantages persisted, and a second wave of feminism arose in the 1960s and continues today.

Sometimes also referred to as the women's liberation movement, the **second wave** focused on the discrimination of women, and on cultural, social and political issues. Some of the most influential works of the second wave are

The Second Sex by Simone de Beauvoir (which was actually published in 1949 but gained its popularity during this time), *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan and *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett. The second wave has often been accused of catering to the needs of the upper middle-class white women and, sometimes, of biological essentialism.

Much of the scholarship on second-wave feminism has focused on divisions within the women's movement and its narrow conception of race and class. Feminists in the 1960s and 1970s also formed many strong partnerships, often allying themselves with a diverse range of social justice efforts on a local grassroots level. There were coalitions and alliances in which feminists and other activists joined forces to address crucial social justice issues such as reproductive rights, the peace movement, women's health, Christianity and other religions, and neighborhood activism, as well as alliances crossing boundaries of race, class, political views, and sexual identity.

Beginning in the late 1960s, women's health became a primary concern of feminist activists throughout Canada. Women's liberationists located in Vancouver were particularly active. In 1970, members of the Vancouver Women's Caucus organized an Abortion Caravan that traveled across the country in the name of women's rights to accessible abortion on demand. The following year, the women of the Vancouver Women's Health Collective came together to imagine and create new feminist options for women's health care, including the operation of a women-run clinic (Hewitt, 2009).

In the 20th century, two names stand out in terms of their originality. Simone de Beauvoir of *The Second Sex* fame (1949) and Germaine Greer who wrote *The Female Eunuch* (1970). The latter, like the former, is a monumental work. Both are works of piercing subjectivity, literary feats of self-description whose status becomes over time, ever more artistic and less political. Germaine Greer is the daughter, not the originator, of feminist culture, and she and her work are part of the 'second wave' of feminism. Greer believes that women can change their saga if they so wish to or they may change their lives for the better.

Third-wave feminism, begun in the 1980s or early 1990s, addressed feminism across class and race lines and has been grounded in culture rather than biology. Postmodernist feminists, with their interrogation of fixed categories like 'women' and 'gender', belong to the third wave. In the west, some people also refer to a contemporary 'post-feminist' era, which is based on the belief that the main agendas of feminist movements have already been met through an egalitarian society which offers equal rights and opportunities to men and women. However, there has been a groundswell of strong opposition to such assumptions as most third wave feminists continue to struggle in an unequal world. This is especially true in India, to which we will turn in the next section.

4.7 INDIAN FEMINISM

Women, increasingly aware of their rights and duties, helped in the formation of the first women's movement in India. The use of the word 'feminism' in the Indian context was still peripheral although its impact was being felt all over the country thus leading to the birth of the women's movement. More specifically, in the political context, women were increasingly making their presence felt by way of participation in the movement for national freedom. Women's struggle, the world over, has been marked by the efforts of the 'second sex' in dealing with the various material and non-material inequalities and hierarchies that have affected women's lives across time and space, such as those related to class, gender, 'race', caste, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, education, age or health. Women have, since ages, challenged or fought these inequalities through different types of politics and activism in the public sphere and through individual actions and forms of resistance in the so called 'private sphere'. Like the women's movement elsewhere, the movement in India may also be divided into three phases, if not waves.

The first phase began in the second half of the 19th century when socio-religious reforms prompted women's upliftment and gender equality. The second phase begins in the 1920s, when organized efforts were made to take up women's issues. This phase also coincided with the nationalist movement and at times both appeared to merge. Women were also being gradually initiated into feminism. The role played by women leaders and women's organizations also constituted a new feature of this period. The third phase started after independence, more specifically in the 1960's, when in the years after independence, the task of nation-building began. Another phase, the fourth one, has been identified by scholars of women's studies, beginning with the 21st century, when women's issues became more diverse and connected with movements against other forms of inequality and subordination.

Activity: Based on what you have read so far, create a table of the three waves of feminism, which shows the evolution of the waves in specific time periods, and also mentions important features and names associated with each wave. Make a separate column to represent the phases of the women's movements in India. Now, try to look for cross-cultural comparisons.

Post- independence Scenario: Indian Context

Like Western Europe and the United States, India too saw a feminist movement in the early twentieth century and like them it gradually waned after gaining certain demands. Later, a new feminist movement developed which brought together the contemporary radical movements. The sixties and early seventies saw the development of a whole spate of radical movements in India, from student uprisings, workers' agitations and peasant insurgencies to tribal, anti caste and consumer action movements. These spanned a political spectrum from Gandhian-socialist (that is, nonviolent protest based on explicitly moral values, over specific working or living conditions); to the far left, in particular, the Maoists. The Gandhian-socialists initiated several of the first women's movements in post-Independence India. These included an anti-alcohol agitation in north India, a consumer action and anti-corruption agitation in western India, and a women's trade union, also in western India.

Interestingly, however, neither they, nor others, looked upon these movements as feminist, nor did they advance any theories of women's oppression. These were advanced first by two women's groups which were formed in 1975, both of which grew out of the Maoist far left. The Progressive Organization of Women (POW) in Hyderabad offered an Engelsian analysis of women's subordination, and the League of Women Soldiers for Equality, in Aurangabad, linked feminism and anti-casteism, saying that religious texts were used to subordinate both women and the lower castes. Although the imposition of a State of Emergency on India in 1975 led to a break in most agitational activities, there was, in many ways, an intensification of theoretical discussion. In 1977, when the Emergency was lifted, several women's groups had developed out of these discussions which were able to come 'overground', and several new groups were also formed. Most of these groups were based in the major cities, such as Bombay (Mumbai), Delhi, Madras (Chennai), Poona (Pune), Patna and Ahmedabad. Though there was no particular uniformity between them, their members were largely drawn from the urban educated middle class, and this was an important reason for their feeling that their own needs were minor, and different from the needs of the large, and poor, majority of Indian women.

These women's groups comprised women from different sections of the far left, and there was, at this time, considerable debate on the class basis of women's oppression, the road to women's liberation, and the role that they themselves could play in this. Historically, the experience of the Maoist insurgency of the late sixties and its repression and disintegration in the early seventies, had led many to believe that a revolutionary transformation of society could only come into being if different oppressed groups, such as tribals, subordinate castes and women, first organized and represented

themselves, and then coalesced to fight their common enemies. The question facing the women's groups, therefore, was how women could organize and represent themselves. The general feeling was that the primary role of middle-class groups, such as their own, was to generate a consciousness of women's oppression not only among women but among workers, tribals and others. Broadly speaking, two different views were expressed right from the beginning and continue to be representative even now. The first view holds that socialist feminists should join trade unions and revolutionary mass organizations while continuing to be members of autonomous women's groups. The former were seen as activist forums and the latter as forums for the development of socialist-feminist theory. The second view professed the spread of these activities more spontaneously. It implied that once a feminist movement began, it would naturally spread and grow in multiple ways. The two positions were neither as abstract nor as crude as they sound. By and large, those holding the first had been, or were, active in radical and far left, organizations. They felt that these organizations contained space for the raising of feminist demands. The others had not been, or were not then, involved in such organizations. They felt that negotiating within them would yield small gains compared to those won by an independent women's movement which, through its very existence, would force political organizations to take note of it. In the event, most of the women's groups were sufficiently open to allow both views to coexist within them. They developed links with far left, working-class, tribal and anti-caste organizations, campaigned around specific issues, and debated and disseminated theories of women's oppression. In the early years, however, campaigns were relatively sporadic and minor compared to the pace of theoretical activity. Most of the groups remained fairly loose until the beginning of the eighties - so few even named themselves that at the first socialist-feminist conference in Bombay in 1978, their main identification was regional - as the 'Bombay group', the 'Delhi group', and so on.

By 1979-80, women's groups and campaigns had started all over India, and ranged from protesting dowry murders and police rape to unionizing women workers, domestics and slum-dwellers. The campaigns against dowry murders and police rape were in fact what 'launched' the women's movement, for it was these that caught the attention of the press and became public issues. The campaign against dowry murders started in Delhi in 1979. This was the first time that dowry deaths, hitherto regarded as suicide, were called murders and they also involved bride burning. It was also the first time that the private sphere of the family was invaded, and held to be a major site for the oppression of women. The public/private dichotomy was broken by groups of women demonstrating outside the houses and offices of those who were responsible for dowry deaths within their families, and demanding the intervention of both state and civil society. Interestingly,

feminists were joined by local residents and within some months of the campaign, groups of residents and professionals also began, independently, to make similar protests.

Indian feminists discovered the ironic process whereby an agitation gained numerical strength by being joined by political blocs, but at the same time found itself constrained, intellectually, morally and strategically, by them. By the early eighties, therefore, the women's movement had grown in such a way that autonomous feminist groups were only one of its several currents. Parties of all colours joined the movement, the socialist and communist parties were becoming increasingly active, as were the older, hitherto quiet, women's organizations. At the same time an interest in women began to be shown by diverse groups and radical movements. The socialists had actually formed a women's organization in 1977, which was affiliated to the newly formed and elected Janata Party, but between 1978 and 1980 their activities were fairly low-key and they were for that period marginalized by the feminists. The Communist Party of India had had a women's front from the late fifties, which had dwindled into inactivity. It was galvanized only in 1980-81, when the Party saw that women could again become an important constituency. The Marxists also noted the potential of the women's movement at this juncture, and formed two women's organizations in 1981, one of which was affiliated to their trade union. The first attempt to organize women's trade unions had been made in 1972, when the Self-Employed Women's Association, a kind of Gandhian socialist union of women vendors, was formed in Ahmedabad. By the late seventies SEWA had expanded, and to the union were added several craft co-operatives in and around Ahmedabad. In the eighties they had branches all over the country.

Working-class women's organizations which were set up in the late seventies or early eighties were formed of women belonging to different streams, tended to be different from SEWA. They, too, maintained a distance from the feminists as the issues they handled differed. They did not wish to expose their constituencies to the struggle for power which was being waged in the feminist movement. Perhaps it was for these reasons that the efforts to reach out made by feminist groups in the eighties took the form of neighbourhood rather than workplace politics, with groups of women working in urban slum areas and mobilizing women in campaigns for better water facilities, drainage, and so on. Interest in feminist ideas was meanwhile growing in the radical socialist student movement, which had spearheaded a consumer cum antistate agitation in Gujarat in the mid seventies, and had waged a campaign for land redistribution in one district of Bihar in the late seventies.

By this stage the Indian feminist movement was a multiplicity of organizations and activities. In spreading it had undergone a process of fragmentation

which is common enough to all movements but which affected the feminists in a particular way. As a credo, it is believed that feminism was based on the need for personal solidarity. This led many feminists to question the very basis of feminism. Whereas earlier a certain commonality of women's experience was stressed, as a point at which political differences could be transcended, it was now felt that differences could not be subsumed in this way, and that the quest for unity was not only futile but also counterproductive, for it allowed all sorts of evils to be glossed over. This affected the movement in various ways. A new element could be seen in the links between feminism and environmental, ecological, health, radical science, anti-communal and anti-caste movements which appeared to be multiplying and strengthening all over the country, and which led to new theoretical developments within the movement, as well as new forms of action.

4.8 LET US SUM UP

This unit has given you a broad overview of the emergence of feminism in the western and the Indian contexts. Though feminism has its origin in the women's movement of the west, the concept of equality and consciousness of rights could well be internalized in the changing context of Indian's political, economic, and social spheres. Does feminism have a future or has it served its purpose? The answer lies in the very emergence of various types of 'new' feminisms over a period of time, and in different historical, cultural and political contexts. This phenomenon shows that so long as the problems of women persist, feminism will remain relevant.

4.9 GLOSSARY

Suffrage	: The legal right to vote
POW	: Progressive Organization of Women
SEWA	: Self Employed Women's Organisation

4.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Define feminism and discuss the origin of the concept of new feminism.
- 2) Is feminism a movement? Explain it with suitable examples.
- 3) How does feminism deal with the women's question? Discuss.
- 4) Compare and contrast the evolution of feminism in the west and in India.

4.11 REFERENCES

Basu, Amrita (1999). (Ed.). *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective*. Kali for Women: New Delhi.

Chaudhuri, Maitrayee (2004). (Ed.). *Feminism in India, Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism*. New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited.

Forbes, Geraldine (1999). *Women in Modern India*. Cambridge: University Press.

Hewitt, Steve (2009, September). 'Clandestine Operations: The Vancouver Women's Caucus, the Abortion Caravan, and the RCMP'. *The Canadian Historical Review*, 90(3), 463-495.

Jayawardena, Kumari (1986). *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. London: Zed Books & New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Matthews, Jean. V. (2004). *The Rise of the New Woman- The Women's Movement in America (1875-1930)*. The American Ways Series. Ivan R. Dee Publishers.

Mitchell, Juliet. & Oakley, Ann (1986). (Eds.). *What is Feminism?* Pantheon Books.

Walter, Natasha (1998). *The New Feminism*. London: Little Brown & Company.

West, Rebecca and Marcus, Jane (1982). 'Mr Chesterton in Hysterics: A Study in Prejudice', *The Clarion* (14 Nov 1913). Transcribed by Ted Crawford, reprinted in *The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West 1911-17*. New York: Viking Press.

Moi, Toril (1999). *What is a Woman and Other Essays*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Showden, Carisa R. (2009). 'What is Political about the New Feminisms?'. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 30 (2), 166-198.

'The Gospel of Life'. Retrieved March 25, 1995 from www.vatican.va/evangelium-vitae.

4.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

Beteille, Andre (1995). 'Feminism in Academia: Changes in Theory and Practice'. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 2(1), 111-13.

Butler, Judith (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Gupta, Dipankar (1995). 'Feminification of Theory'. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30(12), 617-20.

Offen, Karen. M. (2000). *European Feminisms (1700-1950): A Political History*. Stanford. Stanford University Press.

Sangari, Kumkum. & Vaid, Sudesh (1989). (Eds.). *Recasting Women: Essays on Colonial India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.