CHAPTER - VI

PRESENT TRENDS IN FEMINISM AND CONSEQUENT EVILS

Feminism appeared in the Western society during the end of medieval period as a philosophy of life with social status of women its core idea. It was formulated not as a mere theory but as a call for action against the age-old oppression and suppression of women by the men, mainly in the institutions like family and Church. Many women thinkers during this period had shared their feministic ideas, through their writings and activities, for promoting social, economic and intellectual emancipation of women and also tried their best to promote a general concept of humanity rather than sex-based division that prevailed in the Western society.

Later, the economic, social and political changes that cropped up in the Western society following the industrial revolution had made remarkable changes in the attitude of women towards male authority. The desire to acquire an equal status with men in their personal as well as social life made the Western women fight against male authority and to protest against the male domination in the social, economic and political fields. The so-called anti-male domination movement initiated by modern Western feminists took the shape of a revolutionary movement paving way for the evolution of feminist activism in a later period.
The feminist activism took many forms during the 19th century and in the early 20th century in the history of Western society. Radical feminism, Marxian socialist feminism and Liberal feminism are some aspects of modern feminism. The feminists who belong to these groups believed that the oppression of women was caused by the male hierarchy in the Western society and they hold the view that the prevailing socialisation will badly affect individual potential of women in modern society. “Most feminists believe that the pernicious effect of socialization makes women suppress the greater part of their human potential."

The modern feminist thinkers wanted to stop male hierarchy by establishing female power over the male authority in her personal as well as social life. They strove for achieving individual rights in social, economic and political life of women so as to enhance their individual potential in various fields of their activities. This attitude was very much evident in the theories of the 20th century feminist thinkers.

The changes that occurred in the ideology of feminism during the 20th century with individual liberty and personal development in the life of women as its main motto had badly affected the two major social institutions of marriage and family in the Western world. The newly emerged feminism in modern Western society had helped women only to lose their individual identity and live and behave like man by voluntarily adopting masculine
qualities. It also failed in promoting values and individual identity among Western women and to provide an everlasting solution to the actual problems faced by women in the modern world.

Western feminism, in its strict sense, can only be regarded as an Utopian ideology which had ultimately degraded itself as a theory of empty words provoking activism with its anti-men approach. A critical analysis of the implication of western feminism in the modern Indian society can help to reveal the fact that the application of European paradigms and parameters had eroded the foundations of India’s cultural heritage. A comparative study between the Western and Indian ideals of womanhood emphasizes the need for developing an Indian theory of feminism in the present day society.

**STATUS OF ANCIENT WESTERN WOMEN**

History tells us that human problems anywhere in the world, whether it is in West or East, depend purely on the cultural, social and economic environment in which people live. As far as the problems of women are concerned, one can conclude that the very same factors affect their existence also. They determine their status and position in society. When we go through the history of Western civilization, we may very well notice that the Western culture and heritage from the ancient period onwards had given women a mythical image and that they were regarded as the cause of all evils and sufferings in this world. This image of women in the ancient
Western society was highlighted in *The Second Sex* by Simone De Beauvoir as, "There is a good principle which has created order, light and man, and a bad principle which has created as chaos, darkness and women. So said Pythagoras."  

Judaism believed that the first sin in this world was caused by none other than a woman, Eve the first woman in the world who tempted Adam the first man in the world, to commit the sin: “Eve, given to Adam to be his companion, worked the ruin of mankind.”  

For this reason, from the very early age of its civilization, almost all Western countries had treated women as inferior to men and placed them far away from the mainstream of society. “The responsibility of the female, a marginal creature in bringing on this plague is continually emphasized, and so also the justice of her degraded condition. The condition of woman, sex, and sin constitutes the fundamental pattern of western patriarchal thought thereafter.”

The Old Testament had mentioned that the first woman was created from the rib of man. Woman was created by the Lord as a helper to man and to satisfy his passions. “But for Adam no suitable helper was found…..Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man……For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.”  

Thus women were considered merely as the objects of sensuality. “She is the mysterious female veiled and desired an object of sensuality, a weak helpless piece of human flesh and denied a soul.”
Women had occupied a very low status in Western societies during ancient times. They were put to slavery and had enjoyed no freedom or independence under the dominating power of the men. They had also undergone many unpleasant circumstances with the implementation of the system of patriarchy by the law-givers during that time. In Greece and Rome, women were considered as the private and movable property of the male members. The husband had even the right to kill his wife. Society treated her as the object to satisfy man’s passions and she was meant for no other purpose than procreation of children. Man was permitted to rule over her. The Old Testament had mentioned the curse given to women by the Lord as a punishment for her act against the Lord’s will. “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in ‘sorrow thou shalt bring forth children. And thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.”

Under the system of patriarchy, sex was the main criterion of the division of labour. Women were excluded from all civil and public affairs of the country and even from the social economy. Her only duty was domestic work and the rearing up of children. The custom of polygamy and inviting concubines to the husband’s bed during the time of her illness, pregnancy and lying in her dignity and self-respect. Along with these, the custom of ‘Epiclerate’(the custom of compulsory marriage of a female heir with her eldest relative from her father’s family) which was in practice in Western countries during ancient time had also led to strengthening male domination.
By arresting the personal as well as social growth of women, the intention of the law-givers was to seclude them and to give them only a subordinate position in society.

The condition of women was not so fair even in the medieval period. Feudalism emerged during the medieval period stood as a threat to the dignity and freedom of women. Society denied economic as well as social independence to women and they were put under the control and guardianship of male members. Even the attitude of the Church was also unfavourable to women. As the laws were formulated in favour of the male members, women were incapable of receiving any legal protection from the court. Capitalism followed by Feudalism in the Western society also had a negative impact on women. Capitalism played a great role in degrading the status of women in society, besides intensifying male domination. The industrial revolution which was brought about by Capitalism appeared to be a curse that fell on the individual as well as the social life of the working classes, especially women. The place of productive activities had shifted from the domestic scene to the industries and the revolution had converted the working class into mindless machines. “A life-destroying uniformity was engulfing the West, reducing men to machines. And when men became machines, a civilization did not survive for a long.” 8 The male members of the society took charge of the public sector and the women were secluded to the private sector by providing them with the responsibilities of household
management. These changes which took place in the society during the medieval period had arrested both economic and social independence of women.

It was the French Revolution that brought about a break from obscurantist ideas about women that prevailed in the Middle Age and survived into Renaissance. The demand for the working forces had promoted women workers in different fields and they gained economic importance for the first time in history. Though they had enjoyed independence and freedom in social economy, the attitude of the male members towards women had not changed, leaving them to lead a life as victims of exploitation by the men. Even progressive writers like Rousseau were not free from prejudices against women. “Woman, for Rousseau, was incapable of reason, and only man could be trusted to exercise thought and reason. Thus, for Rousseau, women could not be citizens, only men could.” 9 Women had also to face high exploitation in their working places. Industrial organizations had given poor facilities and hectic work and they had to face many health problems, sexual harassment and starvation.

THE GROWTH OF FEMINISM IN THE WEST

From the very early stage of its civilization, women in the West were conscious about how to get themselves free from the male domination and oppression. But, they were not in a position to fight against this male
domination due to their legal, social and economic limitations. However, with the gain of social and economic freedom which was brought about by French revolution, the women belonging to the upper middleclass had acquired strength and energy to fight against the prolonged male oppression and subjection. They had formed various social groups and started concentrating on gender issues. Gradually, the women from all classes of society began to join the newly formed woman’s movement. “Women’s movement has encountered various types of resistance and feminism analysed women’s self-image, public image, social role of womanhood, sexual revolution and politics of patriarchal language.” Later they had introduced permanent organizations in different parts and stood against the discrimination made on their sex and fight for their rights. Many educated middleclass women belonging to these organizations had protested against the social, cultural and economic injustice towards women through their writings.

From the very beginning itself, women’s organizations had to face strong resistance from the male folk. Later, the newly formed Women’s Suffrage Organization, through their revolutionary movement against male authority, had made revolt against the pressures enforced by the dominating male members of the society to implement social, political and economic independence for women in the West. The long-lasteded struggle at the Suffrage had helped to bring about political freedom for Western women by
winning them the right to vote, besides giving them economic and political liberty and freeing women from the male authority by ensuring various political rights to them.

The Feminist ideology in the West had undergone a great change in the modern age. The modern feminists of the 20th century had reinterpreted the feminist theory and had modified its objectives in accordance with their own interests. Many a modern feminist in the West had promoted some sort of an individualistic feminist theory and stood for individual rights than social duties of women. Feminism had changed its form and appeared as a political movement against the so called dominating male members of the society. It asserts power as the criterion of relation between men and women and has ignored their individuality. Many of the modern feminists were inspired by Utopian socialism which led to anarchism in Western societies. Instead of finding a solid solution for the problems of women through practical measures, modern feminism helped only to question the male authority and make agitations for their equality with men. In short, modern feminism started changing women to behave like men envisage a condition wherein woman replicates male behaviour.

Modern Western feminism took many forms in later period against the male supremacy in society and all of them were, in effect, anti-men movements. Marxian socialistic feminism was one among them which appeared as a
militant revolutionary movement against the male domination in the Capitalist Western society. The feminists under this group believed that the oppression of women resulted from the institution of private property which was enjoyed only by the dominating male members. “Within the family, the husband is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat.” 11

In order to stop the oppression of women by the prevailing socio-economic system in the society, socialist feminist stood for social and economic equality of women with that of men. Radical feminism was another feminist theory which appeared as a biological revolutionary theory against male domination. The feminists under this group wanted to bring about a radical change in the prevailing male-centric social atmosphere by providing orientation to women against the supremacy of male power in their mental as well as physical life. They also wanted to abolish the sex discrimination from each and every field of Western society. These feminists strongly hold that the main reason for suppression and oppression of women in the male dominating societies all over the world is dependency of women on the male members at different stages of their life due to their physical weakness owing to biological factors. They had spread the message among women that maternity is only an option for women and that can not be regarded as her social duty and insisted them to lead a life of free love. They promoted free use of contraceptives, choosing artificial method of reproduction and the right for abortion through which women will be able to get rid of male
dependency. What they really wanted was to liberate women from child-
bearing and rearing and help them to lead an independent and free life in the 
society. “The family’s consequent disappearance will abolish the prototype 
of the social ‘role system’, the most important form, both historically and 
conceptually, of oppressive and authoritarian relationships. They believe that 
the `role’ system must be abolished, in its entirety even in its biological 
aspects.”

Liberal feminism was also such a movement against the growing male 
power during the 1960s and 1970s in the Anglo-American society. The 
feminists under this group stood for implementing more new rights to 
women in their social and political life such as equal pay, elimination of sex 
discrimination in different fields of labour, social and political liberty from 
the dominating male. They fought for liberating themselves from their 
traditionally enforced duties of maternity and housekeeping prevailed in the 
ancient patriarchal society. FEW (Federally Employed Women) and WEAL 
(Women’s Equality Action League) were the two major organizations which 
came under the liberal feminist group. They demanded the legal equality and 
equal employment opportunities to women members of society and 
promoted women to come to the public sphere monopolised by the 
dominating male members.
Liberal feminism slowly turned into Extremist Feminism which carried out agitations against male members with the intention to demolish their power by cultivating an anti-male attitude in the minds of women through which they wished to sideline the dominating male from the mainstream of the society. “The women’s liberalist pattern is a pro-woman, anti-men model. It argues that the values for women’s freedom should be derived at by woman. It adopts a woman over / against men or women-separate from men stance.” The intention behind the formation of S.C.M (Society for Cutting up Man) by the liberal feminists was none other than to give both mental and physical torture to men. Through consciously adopting male characters in their appearance and behaviour and denying their feminine qualities, the Liberal Extremist Feminists tried to implement their ideology of parity in the social status of men and women in the society. The burning of brassieres in public places organized by the Liberal feminist group named WITCH (Women’s International Conspiracy from Hell) was motivated by the ideology of liberal feminism.

Lesbian groups had developed as an offshoot of liberal feminism which stood for cultivating an attitude of hatred towards the opposite sex. They wanted counterbalance the male power in sexuality by promoting homosexuality. They also regarded themselves as bisexuals. In short, no modern feminist movement in the Western countries acted as a supporting hand to the suppressed female members of the society but only helped them
to demoralize the male members of the society through organizing agitations against them. What these feminists actually wanted was to create a new model of women who behave and live like men.

WOMEN IN MODERN WESTERN SOCIETY

In Western society, by the end of 20th century, women have gained social, intellectual as well as economic powers which were exclusively enjoyed by men in the past. There are many sociological, economical and political elements which had directly influenced them in realizing their status, freedom and powers in society. The most important factor among them is the economic independence arising out of the changing industrial policies and mechanisation. Machines took away all the difficulties at working places by making the working condition smooth. “As mechanisation increased rapidly, the clear division of labour between men and women ceased.”14 This enabled women to enter into the working fields which were monopolised by the dominating male members and to gain economic independence.

The development in the field of science and Technology also stood as another influencing factor in determining individual freedom in the personal as well as social life of women in the modern Western society. Technological development had brought an end to physical difficulties in almost all fields of life and provided women the liberty to develop
themselves in different fields of activities. This, in turn, prompted to generate a materially independent group of women who stood for their rights rather than their social roles and duties. Consumer economics has taken control over the personal as well as social life of women. The ‘use and throw’ culture adopted by the modern Western society even in matters of human relationships had paved the way for the withering away of the bonds of network of social relationships and ethical framework of the society.

The newly evolved trends in the modern Western society had adversely affected the institution of marriage, which is regarded as the most important factor for social stability. Marriage became a factor meant for nothing more than individual pleasure. This attitude of the modern generation has shaken the very foundation of the stable family structure as well as the interpersonal relationship among family members. Legal marriage and family settlement became unpopular in modern Western society and one can feel an ethical vacuum also in the sexual relationship between partners. Cohabitation and non-marital relationships became socialised in modern Western society.

Widespread use of contraceptives and its easy availability in the developed countries granted women the opportunity to control the process of pregnancy and to escape from the responsibilities as a mother in bearing and rearing of children which, according to them, stood as a barrier on their way to liberty
and career development. They denied their innate ideal of motherhood and preferred to behave as equal to men by intentionally cultivating certain masculine qualities in them. This undesirable tendency of modernity leads women to lose their bio-social identity as a mother. Modernity has become a fashion in western society today and women consider it as a symbol of liberty from men.

When we go deep into the problems of modern Western women, we can notice that no school of feminism in the Western world had succeeded in liberating women as she wishes to be. In most of the developed Western countries, women were enslaved by consumerism and they were exhibited in such a way as to satisfy the male desire. Modern Western women wear costly cloths and cosmetics only to seek attraction and attention from the opposite sex. “The young girl will enjoy dressing like a mature woman, the older woman like a little girl, the courtesan like a woman of good society and the latter like a vamp.”

Exhibiting their body as part of the modern trend, women actually seek not liberation from male supremacy, but surrender themselves before the dominating men in order to satisfy their passions.

**STATUS OF INDIAN WOMEN IN VEDIC PERIOD**

Unlike Western civilization and culture, Indian tradition and social structure, from the very beginning of its history, had always emphasized on social
interests rather than personal interest of the individual. Its traditional value system had provided equal importance to each of its members irrespective of sex and the members of each sex were aware of their capacity and limitations and they had proved their individual identity within the sphere of their activity. Even though the members of either sex had different status in the society, each one was great in his or her position in society. Ancient Indian society looked upon its womenfolk with great respect and devotion because India had a great traditional value system which regarded women as the custodians of its ageold cultural heritage through whom it can be passed down to the next generation. This was the reason why women were given a higher position in the ancient Indian society. Women in ancient India had enjoyed liberty in her personal as well as social life and they led their social life within a network of relationships in which each woman had to play different roles in society, sometimes as daughter, sometimes as wife, mother, grandmother and so on. The most interesting thing to note is that economic factor never stood as a barrier in the interpersonal relationship within the society during that period and men and women led a co-operative social life in which each one was ready to accept the other and so there existed no question of the feeling of superiority or inferiority among the two sexes.

In the ancient patriarchal society, women used to live a dependent social life in association with the male members of society. Though women had only a limited role in the material development of society, she acted as a strong
spiritual force in bringing about peace and harmony within the family. Male members of the community had contributed much to the economic welfare of the family while women contributed much to the spiritual prosperity of both the family and society and acted as an agent for conveying the traditional cultural heritage from one generation to the other.

The ancient Indian society had also given her the highest public honour and dignity. Indian history tells us about the vibrant women with outstanding skills and intellectual capacities during the period and the society had given them opportunities to express themselves without any hesitation. They had also enjoyed all privileges and powers in different stages of their social life. Women, during the Vedic period were regarded as the symbols of purity and chastity and they were regarded as an unavoidable factor in both private and public activities in the social life of man. “Throughout the Vedic period, woman was given a status equal to man to participate in sacrificial rites, to undergo the investiture ceremony and to be man’s equal upholding dharma.”16 One can also notice this attitude towards women even in the post-Vedic period in India’s history. The great epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata had mentioned many incidents in which we can notice how men and women lived their social life with mutual respect and dependence. The terms like Ardhanarishwara, Ardhangini, Dampati, Dharmapatni, etc in the ancient literature had highlighted this interdependence of man-woman relationship.
CONDITION OF INDIAN WOMEN IN POST VEDIC PERIOD

The later history of India shows that the respectable position, intellectual and spiritual freedom and economic independence enjoyed by the ancient Indian women had deteriorated from the very beginning of the Christian era. The power of male domination had appeared in almost all social customs. The influence of male domination in society, the high inflow of foreigners and above all, the physical and biological limitations of women had gradually changed the general attitude of society towards her and the society as a whole viewed her as inferior to men physically, mentally and intellectually. The high rate of inflow of foreign invaders had adversely affected the security of Indian women. The crime against women by the foreign invaders had increased. Women also suffered from the torture and sexual harassment from the male members of their own society. “Women in the country are regarded no better than ‘goods’ which can be used, abused, molested, abducted, exploited, hated, raped and even burnt to death.”17 In order to safeguard them from various unfavourable circumstances, the law-givers had imposed restrictions on the society which restricted the individual freedom of women.

Patriarchal system became a prominent feature of Indian society in the post-Vedic period and the power of male domination had appeared in almost all fields of individual and social life. The tradition, culture and high ideals
attributed to women by the ancient seers were overthrown by the newly evolved male dominated society. Frequent pregnancies and the problems connected with child rearing had forced women to depend on the male members of society and this dependency was exploited by the dominating males. “Patriarchal societies cleverly exploited this temporary weakness of women and linked the social system with the belief that woman by nature was dependent and therefore subordinated to man. Henceforth woman was perceived as a commodity which man might use in anyway he liked.”

This, in turn, brought the women to withdraw themselves from the mainstream of the society.

The deterioration in the position of women was first noticed in the field of education. The society in general was against imparting education to females and the ambition of the girls to gain knowledge and spiritual salvation became a mirage. They had lost their intellectual freedom and the power of creativity. The society had insisted on absolute virginity for the brides and the over-anxious parents feared about the security of their girl child. “Virgins who had the misfortune of being criminally assaulted, had therefore hardly any chance of an honourable marriage with any other person.”

So they preferred to give their daughters in marriage at an early age. The girl who married at a very early age could not receive any education and so there was a considerable decline in the rate of female education. Thus the newly evolved custom of child marriage had put an end to the ceremonial initiation
of Vedic studies to girl children and they were sidelined by the rest of the society.

Lack of Vedic education had made woman unfit to recite Vedic mantras and kept her away from Vedic sacrifices. When the Vedic sacrifices were replaced by ancestral worship, women were considered as impure due to their menstrual cycle. They were exempted from all religious activities. As a result, women participation in religious rites became gradually dwindled in society and men were regarded as eligible for offering religious rites. Citing the *Adharva Veda*, the writer observes marriage was regarded as the only sacrament in the life of a woman because, apart from the marriage ceremony, women were not allowed to perform any other sacrifices by reciting Vedic mantras. “It is evident that a female child was not considered worthy of all Samskaras, and the only samskara to be performed in the case was marriage”\(^{20}\) The custom that when an unmarried girl dies, she was made to unite with a male before she was cremated was also in practice.

Through the prohibition of Vedic education, the intellectual development of women ceased and they were forced to follow the path of devotion instead of reflective reasoning. They started sticking on to superstitions and taboos without making any reasoning upon them. As a result, they became more emotional rather than rational. The religious freedom and privileges enjoyed by the women in the past had lost with the prohibition of ceremonial
initiation into Vedic studies to girl children and the custom of child marriage. The marriage became obligatory and in the custom of pre-puberty marriage, owing to the immature age, the girl child was incapable of choosing her life-partner and therefore had no voice in the settlement of her marriage. It was the parents who selected the bridegroom for their daughter according to their own interests. The parents from the economically backward families considered wealth as the criterion for selection of the bridegroom and they preferred to give their daughters in marriage for getting the highest bride price to choosing a suitable groom for her.

The lowering of the marriageable age actually stood as a barrier against the individual freedom of women in society. Lack of education, inexperience, and responsibility fell upon her due to the early maternity forced the women to remain away from public activities. The feeling of insecurity caused by the male domination, the inflow of foreigners and her physical and biological limitations had restricted women from going out of her house without any male escort. Taking advantage of these discomforts of women, the dominating selfish male members, under the pretension of taking the tutelage of women, prevented them from mingling with the public. With strict rules of sex morality, they secluded her from the mainstream of the society. They had also attributed certain qualities like patience, self-sacrifice, tireless service, tolerance, self-suffering, etc to her, restricting the individual freedom in her social life. Male domination can be noticed in
each and every stage of her life. Marriage itself became a custom of transference of domination of the father to the husband over her.

The socio-economic position of women had also faced deterioration with the implementation of the custom of child marriage. This custom had also brought about a drastic change in the attitude of the husband’s family members towards the wife. The uneducated and inexperienced wife was unable to take up the responsibilities, consequently leaving the household management and authority in the hands of the elder members of the husband’s family who impose their power and authority on her, subjecting her to mental and physical harassment. The early marriage resulted in early maternity and its periodic recurrences presented her with many health problems, forcing her to depend completely on her husband and other members of his family. She was not even cared and consoled by the authoritarian husband and other family members. Along with this, the ill-effects of the custom of dowry, which demands a high price for the bridegroom in the marriage market, coupled with the recurring demand for financial support from her parents that often lead to torture by the husband and his family members, used to make life miserable to the women ultimately forcing many innocent women to commit suicide at their husband’s house itself.
The miserable condition of the wife was worsened by the custom of polygamy, which the society had allowed in favour of its male members. The dominating husband entering into a second marriage without the consent of his first wife and compelling her to stay in the same house along with his second wife was a mental torture to her. Her physical and mental harassment at the hands of the husband and his family members too become hard with the arrival of his second wife. The suppressed wife had to lead a life of misfortune in her husband’s house. Along with this, the society had given the husband the freedom to supersede his wife, if he felt any discomfort from her side. The society had also given him the right to send her away if she is not able to deliver a boy child and punish her for this misfortune by torturing her mentally.

The society had cultivated an unsympathetic attitude towards the widows too who led a painful and dreadful life and were sidelined from the main stream of the society. They were also subjected to severe sufferings due to the irrational customs prevailed in the society. ‘Sati’ was one such custom by which the widow of the dead man had to burn herself in the funeral pyre of her husband in order to `purify’ him from those sins which he had committed during his lifetime. There also existed a custom known as ‘Sankalpa’, in which the widow of the dead man was forcefully burned by tying her with the body of the dead man in his funeral pyre. At the same time, the society allowed the widower to remarry just after he had performed
the funeral rites of his deceased wife. “Having thus, at the funeral, given the sacred fires to his wife who dies before him, he may marry again, and again kindle (the fires).” 21 This custom is a clear proof of the male domination existed in the society.

Remarriage was prohibited to the widows and they were forced to lead an ascetic way of life. This was the main intention behind the irrational custom of ‘Tonsure’. But the widows who did not wish to lead such a life became concubines which in turn had adversely affected the spiritual and cultural values of society. Another custom called ‘niyoga’ or temporary union of the widow with her brother-in-law which became the order of the day was against India’s cultural heritage which had given the sister-in-law, the noble position of mother. The brother-in-law who himself could not consider her as his temporary wife causing mental discomfort to both of them. Again, this custom was an unpleasant event which had cultivated a feeling of rivalry in the minds of both the widow and the wife of the brother-in-law. But they never received any attention from any members of the husband’s family.

Society had also shown injustice towards woman in her property rights. The right for inheritance of the paternal property to single and unmarried daughters had ceased to exist in due course of time. The joint ownership of the husband and wife on the family property of the husband had existed only in theory. In real life, she had enjoyed no freedom in his family and had no
legal right for her share in his property. Even ‘Stridhana’ which was regarded as the woman’s private property was in the hands of the husband and other members of his family. As a result, the woman had also lost her economic independence under the domination of the male.

GROWTH OF WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

Deterioration in the status and position of women in the later period in the history of India had badly affected the existing social order disturbing the social equilibrium. Various social organizations and reformers at different ages had adopted measures to patch up this disorder and prevent further disturbance in the social equilibrium by improving the living condition of women, who were the custodians of India’s cultural heritage. They had taken efforts to reinterpret ancient scriptures for helping women to attain economic independence, freedom, as well as social and political identity in the social life.

Unlike in the West, men in India were active supporters and sympathisers of women and the guiding force behind the open fight against the unjust customs and practices that prevailed in society during the post-Vedic period. Many of the social as well as religious reformers during 18th and 19th century had realised the need for women’s welfare for the material as well as spiritual advancement of India. They also wanted to bring women into all fields of activities. “Great thinkers realized that, if India wants to advance,
women must play their part as equal citizens with men in all works and vocation of life. It was the reason that the women’s movements in India did not take the form of an angry feminist revolt.” 22

Among the social reformers from the elite intellectual class in Indian society, the reformists tried to promote modern ideals of womanhood and the revivalists tried to promote the Indian ideal of womanhood that prevailed in ancient Indian society as the method of women’s emancipation programme. Revivalism became the most popular women’s movement in the 18th and 19th century India. Many organizations were formed during this period with the intention of awakening women physically, mentally and spiritually by promoting social service and education among women. Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj and Ramakrishna Mission were some among them which served the above purpose.

Efforts of the social thinkers had paved a way for the development of women’s movement and formation of their associations in the later period, which was corporate in nature, and uphold the traditional value system in a conservative manner. Most of the participants in such movements were educated women from urban areas. Unlike the Western feminists, they were not concerned about achieving economic independence and political rights, but about the ill effects of the sex discrimination that prevailed in Indian society during that time. In association with the male members of society,
they worked for eradicating the social injustice towards women members with the objective of making women realize their potential and responsibility in the building up of a new nation. They also worked hard to implement all the privileges and rights to women which were enjoyed by the other sex by improving the social, economic and intellectual status of women.

Unlike the feminist movements in the Western countries, women’s movements in India, in its early stages, had adopted a revivalist ideology and worked for improving the social condition of women by reviving India’s traditional ideal of womanhood in modern society. Even the women activists stood for the complementary sex roles and not against the division of labour based on sex. They also discouraged the competition between the two sexes for economic independence. They took measures to spread the light of knowledge among women by opening different educational centres throughout the country in association with various social organizations. Most of the women’s associations of the 18th and 19th century had adopted ‘self help’ as their motto for women’s emancipation.

The women’s movement had brought about a great impact on the personal as well as social life of women in modern Indian society. It had opened the way for the self expression of women and provided them with a constructive role in various fields of activity and to express their views on the mode of education they required, choosing the life partner of their own interests and
the type of employment which will satisfy their material as well as mental needs. It also helped women to gain social, economic, and political independence, besides enhancing their spiritual development. Unlike their Western counterpart, modern Indian women have gained legal and constitutional support from the nation without any opposition from the male half of society.

Modern Indian society had also improved the legal status of its women providing them legal protection. Many rights were actuated in order to bring about economic independence, freedom and social and political equality to women. Abolition of Sati Act of 1829, Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1925, Hindu Succession Act of 1956, Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act of 1956, Hindu Widow’s Property Act of 1937, the legislation passed on raising the minimum age of marriage for girls as 18 in 1955 are some among them. Many irrational customs prejudicial to women like Sati, female infanticide, tonsure, etc were legally banned and considered as punishable crimes. The implementation of Hindu Women’s Right to Property Act of 1937 had helped women to get economic independence. The widows got the right to inherit a share from her husband’s family through this act. The Hindu Code Bill which was passed in 1952 had allowed the married daughters to avail a share from her paternal property which is equal to that of sons.
Along with legal security and economic independence, modern society had also given her the freedom in decision making in her personal as well as social life and to enter different fields of work which were once monopolised by the males. “In many respects, women working as labour force lived a less constrained and socially more equal life which is not different from that of their men folk.” The active participation in the freedom movements along with men had given them sufficient energy to concentrate on individual as well as social problems of the Indian women and help themselves as well as other women in India in addressing their individual, social, economic, and political problems.

**IMPACT OF WESTERN FEMINISM ON MODERN INDIAN WOMEN**

One can notice the influence of Western feminism in the women’s movement in India during the later period of its development. Indian feminists had changed their feminist ideology from revivalism to assimilationism uncritically following the Western ideology without reflecting upon the cultural heritage of the Indian society. The modern Indian feminists regarded the traditional ideals and value system, which stood as the landmark of the rich Indian culture, as blind faith that arrested women’s individual freedom and progress towards modernity. Sidelining the multi-faced network of relationship which women had shared with the other members of the society and their duties or ‘Dharma’ towards each and every
member of the community, they had concentrated on achieving their personal rights and individual development in order to become equal to man in each and every field of activity. As a result, the modern women’s movement in India too took the shape of activism as in the case of Western countries. The new trend in Indian feminism made women fight against the existing concept of the role of sex in society and to yield economic independence from male authority leading to an unhealthy competition between the two sexes and even hatred between them. The feminism borrowed from the West, in fact, has stood as a barrier for the spiritual development of the Indian women.

Advancement in the field of science and Technology, industrialisation, economic development and social mobility had provided the Indian women more opportunities in various fields of activity and economic freedom in the post-independence period. Withering away of the joint family system and urbanisation had made them the deciding factors in both the private and public sector by the end of the 19th century. The influence of Western feminist ideology had altered the lifestyle and morality of modern Indian women, especially those belonging to the urban upper and middle strata who believed that what is Western is modern. They were more conscious about their individual rights and economic independence. The women who belonged to that society, which stood for sacrificing one’s own interest for the sake of social interest, were now in a position to demand their individual
rights against the interest of society. Their claim to get the right over their body, their lifestyle, co-habitation without marriage and even negation of motherhood as in the West had now gained legal support in India too. They try to become more selfish in their individual as well as social behaviour. “This negative obstinacy makes them enemies of their own existence and hostile to others: good meals spoil the figure, wine injures the complexion, too much smiling brings wrinkles, the sun damages the skin, sleep makes one dull, work wears out, love puts rings under the eyes, kisses redden the cheeks, caresses deform the breasts, embraces wither the flesh, maternity disfigures face and body.”

They also want to deconstruct the traditional and religious conventional feminine ideology that prevailed in the ancient Indian society, and to follow the Western lifestyle. This attitude had turned the young women in modern society to lose their identity, culture, religious beliefs and spiritualistic values which were preserved by the ancient Indian seers for the future generation. By throwing away all their feminine qualities, they make themselves fit for the consumerist society guided by materialistic values.

Western culture had a tremendous influence on modern Indian women. Women belonging to the young generation had cultivated a belief that what is Western is modern and try to imitate the Western lifestyle, personal interests, food habits and even in their way of dressing in order to become
modern. Mass media, advertisement companies, cinema and fashion shows also influence the modern Indian women to cultivate a desire for glamorous life and accepting it as a symbol of modernity. Women belong to the higher socio-economic order spend a lot of money on dress materials and cosmetics in order to preserve their physical appearance and exhibit themselves before the opposite sex. “This social significance of the toilette allows woman to express, by her way of dressing, her attitude towards society. If she is submissive, to the established order, she will assume a discreet and stylish personality”

India, with a rich tradition in which the people were guided by the social norms provided by the ancient Indian law-makers, now, is guided by money and fame and other material benefits as in Western societies. Modern women are keen on seeking attention of the society and they do not mind discarding the rich cultural heritage, moral norms and values of the society in this respect.

Though the parents are providing more freedom and care to their children in the modern nuclear family set up, one can easily perceive deterioration in the interpersonal relationship of parents and children. The society that had held a devotional attitude towards parents, placing them on a position equivalent to God, now began to treat them as a burden or hackles that pose problems to their individual freedom and independence. The young girls in
modern society are in less need of parental guidance in their personal as well as social life. The newly emerged trend of modernisation has changed even the very concept of marriage in the Indian society. Economic independence had brought about a desire for independence in every aspect of life among the modern women. A large number of young women today wish to get away from the ties of marriage as well as settlement and to enjoy life as free birds. To them, self-dedication and service to the members of the husband’s family is nothing but the slave mentality of the ancient women. They also prefer to lead a life of co-habitation than to engage in the bonds of marriage.

The traditional concepts like dampati, dharmapatni, etc have almost lost their meaning and relevance as far as modern women are concerned. They are unaware of the aims and objectives of marriage in the Indian society. “Marriage is the union of a man and woman for two purposes firstly for procreation and secondly for comradeship and mutual assistance in life to fulfill life’s duties and true function.” But in modern society, the couple are willing to enter into marriage not to become the companion or helpmate of their husband in fulfilling the duties as householders, but only for gratification of the senses. It is true that sex has to play an important role in the married life of a couple and it is also true that no other culture except that of India had considered sexual union giving its due place in life. But Indian culture regarded sexual union as not merely a means for satisfying one’s own sensual passions throughout his or her lifetime, but for the
procreation of a spiritually, intellectually and morally enlightened new
generation for preserving its rich cultural heritage and tradition. This was the
reason why women in ancient India regarded sex as only a part of their
married life and had expanded not too much zeal on sexual life as in the case
of women of the new generation.

Though sex was regarded as one of the factors in determining inter-personal
relationship between the married couple, socio-religious responsibilities and
advancement of age restrains and gives a higher direction. But in the modern
age, influence of the Western culture had attributed a greater place to
sexuality in the life of young men and women. Western education, economic
independence and legal support enable modern women to cultivate a liberal
attitude towards divorce and throw away all sorts of bonds created by the
institutions like marriage and family. Modern Indian feminists had shown a
positive approach towards co-habitation which is a common feature in the
West. This was the reason why they welcomed the judgment issued by the
Allahabad High Court in May, 2001, favouring co-habitation of men and
women without marriage.

Through establishing the right of sexuality, modern Indian feminists are now
in a position to question the sanctity of the institution of marriage and family
which were preserved by our ancestors. Indian tradition and culture had kept
an exclusive attitude towards sexuality and the society as a whole had
cultivated a sacred attitude towards sexual union. It was not merely a self-imposed personal appetite, but an essential requirement for social regulation. But, today, as that of Western women, most of the modern Indian women are giving excessive importance to sexual life. Many of them spend their time and energy in making their physical figure more attractive and exhibit themselves to attract the opposite sex.

Modern women, who belong to a society that had given high respect to the ideal of motherhood in every woman, now consider motherhood as a barrier on their path of individual development. Indian woman in the past, considered marriage as a means to achieve the ideal of motherhood in a woman’s life. “For most women, marriage and the role of wife was only a stepping stone to the fulfillment of their life’s ideal, i.e. Motherhood.”

Women’s involvement in external affairs and their employment opportunities had a great impact on the declination in the fertility rate in the present day Indian society. In the present day society, we can notice that a good number of women are employed in multinational companies at a very young age with high remuneration and keeping themselves away from all sorts of domestic duties. Though most of them are willing to take the role of a wife, many of them hesitate to take the responsibility of bearing and rearing of children. They are even unwilling to take care of their elderly parents at the cost of their personal freedom.
The raising of the standard of living and the desire for leading a glamorous life in modern society forced the upper and middle class women to ignore the treasure of social and moral value system which the ancient Indian society had preserved for its future generation. Ignoring the noble duties of a woman, they go after the world of glamour, spending their money, energy and time in beauty parlours and health clubs. They are more willing to follow Western materialistic ideology in their individual as well as social life. Imitating the materialistic Western culture has become the controlling factors in the life of modern Indian women too.

Though the modern Indian women had achieved constitutional rights and freedom in their social, economic and political life, the Indian women, knowingly or unknowingly, are chained by the neo-colonial, neo-capitalist and consumerist forces. Visual media, multinational advertising companies, film industries and fashion shows held in the metropolitan cities in India are all exploiting them. “Women are still, for the most part, in a state of subjection. It follows that woman sees herself and makes her choices not in accordance with her true nature in itself, but as man defines her.” In their quest for individual freedom and economic independence, modern Indian women had adapted Western feministic ideology by ignoring their cultural heritage, morality and spirituality along with their individual identity.
Now, as in the Western countries, in India, one can notice a willing submission to male authority in almost all fields in the personal as well as social life of women.

This newly trend will pave a way for withering away of the ageold Indian ideal of womanhood. Vivekananda, about 120 years ago had warned Indian women not to lose their culture and individual identity at the cost of Westernization and modernization which he feared will destroy the purity and sanctity of India’s year old ideal of womanhood. He said, “Any attempt to modernize our women, if it tries to take our women away from that ideal of Sita, is immediately a failure, as we see every day.”

Vivekananda was firmly against the modern Indian woman’s tendency to imbibe Western thoughts and culture through imitation. He strongly believed that imitation of Western materialistic thoughts and culture will not help to bring about any social progress in a country like India, where spirituality and morality determine the social life of the people. To be equal to man woman need not metamorphose herself into man. It underlines the wisdom of Swami Vivekananda that a copycat reformation can only further compound the existing problems.

INDIA NEEDS ITS OWN THEORY OF FEMINISM

Though modern feminism in India had helped to bring about a drastic change in the Indian society by providing privileges and economic freedom
to its women as in the case of their counterparts in the West, it had also brought about certain negative impacts on women in the modern Indian society. It had ruined the ageold cultural and traditional heritage of India which was preserved by the ancient Indian women for a long time. It has also failed to provide any remedial measure to eradicate social and economic inequality prevailing in the Indian society and sexual exploitation by the dominating male members of the society. In fact, the feminism borrowed from the West had weakened the uniqueness of the institutions of marriage and family in India. “When the position of women within the social whole is altered, new conceptions of self and society come directly into conflict with older ideas about a woman’s role, her destiny and even her ‘nature’.”

Feminism as a philosophy of reformation, should subjected to a historical analysis on the issues connected with women’s position, power and economic role in the family as well as the society and the general attitude of the society towards her. At any rate, no existing feministic ideology can provide an everlasting solution to women’s problems, if they view their problems as isolated from the rest of the community. The problems of women should be considered as one of the social issues of the community and so steps should be taken to eradicate the social injustice against women.

“We must accept that feminism is not concerned with a group of people it wants to benefit but with a type of injustice it wants to eliminate.” So the
present situation demands Indian feminist thinkers to develop an Indian
feministic ideology rooted in the country’s age old tradition, social and
spiritual culture and value system based on dharma which would help our
women to solve their own problems by themselves without seeking help
from any foreign ideology.

In the case of uplift of women, Vivekananda used to reiterate some general
principles according to which no one should imitate another. One tends to
judge another by his own standards, so does a nation judge another nation.
The Swami insisted that each nation has to decide upon what is best for it.

The contemporary reformers had always a Western model before them and
they conceived the new woman after the ideal of the wife. “It is unfair to
judge women by the East by the Western standard. In the West woman is the
wife; in the East she is the mother.” (C.W.III 505-506). “In India the woman
was the visible manifestation of God and her whole life was given up to the
thought that she was a mother.” (C.W.III 505-506). Vivekananda strongly
believed that women should be furnished with the necessary intellectual and
material wherewithal and they will uplift themselves.
REFERENCES


3. Ibid., p. 112.


18. Ibid., p.293.


25. Ibid., p.547.


31. Ibid., p.22.