CHAPTER IV
CONTEMPORARY INDIAN WOMEN

It is definitely after Independence that the Indian women gained considerable importance within their country in social and political spheres. At Independence the majority of women still remained ignorant but they did not allow the fire that burnt in their hearts to die. They took many progressive decisions such as organizing themselves to fight for a new set of goals. The goals were getting equality based on gender, job opportunities, reforming the existing laws which gave women only partial justice, and creating a society which did not oppress women intellectually, physically and emotionally.

Eventhough the efforts made by women activists and concerned organization were slow in getting a real break-through, despite the conservative outlook of their counterparts, they succeeded in creating a focussed consciousness among middle-class and upper-middle-class women at large. Slowly it spread to the lower rungs of the existing political setup. From then they have been desperately trying to evolve a new self-concept or a new self-identity which is totally free from the traditionally imposed one.

To assess the contemporary Indian women's position we have to analyse the women's movement after Independence up to the present. This will definitely include the different organizations and schools of thought which have evolved in India in the wake of Independence.

4.1 The Reawakening

The Indian women's movement unlike other movements has a definite beginning in a historical context. It began in the late eighteenth century with the Hindu social reformers of modern India and the missionaries. It was directed against the dead moral
reflexes and conventionalized life of Indians who marginalised their women and kept them under physical and mental servitude. It was also directed against the sacrosanct prejudices of that time. This was definitely the result of the contact with the West. And the most distinctive feature of the Indian women’s movement was that it was introduced by the Western-educated Indian men. It was Raja Ram Mohan Roy and other social reformers who were thoroughly influenced by the European liberalism that initiated the upliftment of the Indian women.

The position of contemporary Indian women is a historical accretion of multifarious factors working out their solution to many kinds of problems thrown up by a dead and deadening past. From 1947 the Indian women’s movement took a different path. It began to fight for complete freedom of women from the age-old shackles. Many women connected with the national movement became conscious of getting legal sanction for their rights and securing equality based on gender. They were first of all not happy with the provisions in the Indian constitution which gave them equality before law and equal rights. The main reason was that the so-called protection and measures to ensure equality based on gender never offered women a better status. The majority of women suffered despite provision for different rights enshrined in the constitution, statutes and the rule books of the State.

The activities of the modern women activists caused a rift between them and the existing conservatives in the Indian society. The modernists claimed equal opportunities for women in all spheres of activity. Their efforts culminated in the founding of the All India Women’s Conference. “Thus the All India Women’s Conference (AIWC) which had been established in 1924 had grown to become the single largest national voice of the divergent groups and political tendencies infusing all its old and new demands
with an equal-right perspective."\(^1\)

Through the relentless pursuit of these enlightened modernists, education was extended to many, and so was secured the right to husband's income, pension for widows and the right to abortion. Securing the right to abortion shocked the conservatives but it actually provided an opportunity for women to take a decision to safeguard their health and to uphold their right of choice. It also jolted their stereotyped role as child-bearing machines and ensured them at least a limited amount of freedom. As far as family was concerned many middle class women found a place in the expanding services, educational sector and other professions.

Many women's organizations like National Federation of Indian Women (1954) the Samajwadi Mahila Sabha (1959) were formed to work for championing the cause of Indian women. Since the country was facing a social, political crisis after the British rule many demands of the women activists were not supported by the Government. But during this period from 1947, the Indian women got an opportunity to participate in confrontational politics.

By 1970 the political atmosphere began to change in India. Many leading political parties realized the importance of including women in their struggle for realising their objectives. It was partly on compassion and partly for securing their ends that they included women as a vanguard force.

But according to Gail Omvedt what is striking about women's movement in India is:

the most powerful pro-women themes and actions have come not

so much from the ranks of the nationalist movement or upper-

caste moderate social reformers as from those of the radical anti-caste leaders who often found themselves in confrontation with the non-brahmins and the new dalit leaders — like Jotibha Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, E.V. Ramaswami "Periyor."  

Thus the efforts of the early leaders like Jotibha Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, E.V. Ramaswami and the leaders of the later period like Sharat Patil, Sharat Joshi and Vandana Shiva not only intellectualized the women’s movement but also intensely motivated the Indian women by touching their inner core of consciousness. So this Indian women’s movement which “... existed as an emotion, an anger deep within us, has flowed like music in and out of our lives, our consciousness and actions.”

The radicals began to introduce new revolutionary ideologies like Naxalism and communism to fight against the socio-political and economic inequalities that existed among the people of India. It led to a lot of political unrest and confusion. This period also witnessed the formation of many parties other than the Congress party. After securing Independence the first task for “the midnight’s children” was to place the country on the road to progress and development. The extremists were quite unhappy about the Gandhian constructive work and Ahimsa. The dissenters began to opt for communism and other totalitarian forms which ensured sudden progress. So a large section of women belonging to the middle class began to feel that the real freedom for women is possible only through communism which offered equal rights and equal participation of women along with men.

Another hallmark of the age was that it created a political and social consciousness

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among women. In many agitations that followed, middle and working class women participated in great numbers especially in cities.

In 1975, the Lal Nishan Party organized a joint women’s conference which was well attended by women in Pune in Maharashtra. Similarly the communist party in India in 1975 organized a National Seminar which was attended by women in Maharashtra. The National Seminar for women held at Trivandrum in the same year was also well attended by women from all walks of life.

The well-known women’s organisations which were formed during this time are the Stree Mukhti Sanghatana, the Stree Sangharsh and Mahila Dakshata in Delhi, Vimochana in Chennai, Baijja in Maharashtra, Pennurumai in Chennai. The Feminist Network in English and Manushi in Hindi were some of the first women’s news letters and magazines to appear. The issues that they raise are rape, wife-battering, divorce, maintenance and child custody along with legislative reforms. This progressive outlook is indeed a by-product of the changing economic, social and political climate in the country. Thus the women’s movement in India after Independence struggle not only strove for emancipation but also averred the need for creating a non-class socialist society where women can be completely free from apprehension and violence. The rumblings of changes, intermittent and sporadic at the beginning, began to be heard rather loudly from the middle of the 20th century.

The reforms, changes and challenges all reached a crescendo at the time of the Indian Independence in 1947. Since that point of time the strident voice has been ultra vocal and highly effective in forming and shaping a new image of Indian womanhood.

4.2 In the Shadows

cut my shadows. Deliver me from the
torture of beholding myself fruitless.4

In the late 60’s the Indian women’s movement felt a sense of rootlessness. Many were disillusioned by the economic crisis, social and political unrests both in urban and rural areas. But women participated in groups in the struggles that followed. Vibhuti Patel, a feminist activist, refers to the developments thus: “The crisis of the mind and late 1960’s gave rise internationally as well as in India, a radicalization process of the masses, of the struggling working class.” 5

According to Vibhuti Patel it was during the Naxalite movement women belonging to West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala were radicalized. Tribal women in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh participated in the struggle against landlords. Slowly these socio-political movements like anti-price rise movements of the early seventies agitated against “empty hearths.” 6 The famous Chipko movement which was basically an ecology movement created not only an awareness among middle class and rural women, but also enunciated a new theory that women should be given the right for self-determination. It also brought to the fore, the existing “shadows” in the socio-political structure as far as women are concerned. The Chipko movement also picturised women as being an exploited class along with nature, and any violence against nature began to be identified with violence against women. The lingering shadows in the life of Indian women can be classified as violence, oppression, socio-political inequalities, bride-burning, female infanticide, rape and dowry system.

6 Ibid., p. 36.
Violence against women has been the most pervasive theme of the new women's liberation movement in India since 1974. With the cases of Maya Tyagi, Mathura, Rameeza Bi, the problem of rapes also burst out of the shadows to stand as a symbol of women's oppression. Violence has been the most effective and powerful weapon used by men in controlling women. As far as women are concerned it has become ubiquitous, and it is the way in which the whole existing order controls her.

To increase the dependency of women, the existing social, political order has envisaged many ways. Patriarchal family, which is the single most powerful unit, denies her access to law, and keeps her property-less. It indoctrinates women with multiplicity of misconceptions regarding her gender and role in the society and family. This process of indoctrination has gained so much of power that we tend to relate it as natural:

Through the slow magic of time, such customs by long repetition become second nature in the individual. If he violates them, he faces certain fear, discomfort or shame; this is the origin of conscience or moral sense which Darwin chose as the most impressive distinction between animals and man.\(^7\)

No wonder a working mother feels guilty when she leaves home for becoming economically independent. The father at the same time feels nothing unusual when he leaves home for work. So here too, even at the familial levels, women are tortured mentally, if not physically. The working mothers are also accused of neglecting their so-called “duty” towards children. The basic institution like family also gives emphasis to women’s duty rather than to man’s duty. Here too the equality of genders loses its

relevance and becomes more ambiguous when we consciously confuse it with biological differences that exist between the two sexes. "Thus it appears violence keeps women economically dependent and super exploited while economic dependence and exploitation render them unable to combat violence." 8

The question why women become victims of such violence has always tormented women in general. Their vulnerability, their silence when brutally violated, has incurred a lot of criticism and has also provoked the resolvent anger of many feminists since 19th century. They maintain that offenders and violators escape punishment. Elizabeth A. Stanko substantiates this silence thus:

Women do resist, persistently, tenaciously, the effects of male violence; women are survivors. They have done so for hundred years. Our survival is our strength, our experiences the reminders there is so much to do. 9

The new feminist theories expound that violence, exploitation and sexuality are the three factors which divide the structuring of women in society.

In the post-Independence era, the Indian feminist activists are sandwiched between traditional Marxism and Radical feminism which were contributed by the Western school of thought. Thus the third accepted form was liberal feminism. As far as Indian women's movement is concerned, these three forms do have a very significant impact.

The traditional Marxist theory focuses on production, exploitation and property. It stresses the removal of economic inequality that exists between the classes as the only solution to establish equality. Thus it is the wide chasm that exists between the have and have nots.

have-nots in Marxism which actually mars the development of a nation. So it was easy for the oppressed and exploited women to fit into the large canvas of the have-nots.

Engels in his *The Origin of the Family and Private Property and The State* has traced the origin of the exploitation of women. According to him there existed a basic equality between men and women in ancient times, though there was a gender division of labour. Men were basically hunters responsible for production while women were responsible for reproduction. So they had a high social status since reproduction was a crucial issue. Moreover in such an organised group the paternity of the child was unknown; so mother's right prevailed and therefore women had a dominant role.  

The fundamental Marxist theories believe that when the gap between the haves and have-nots ceases to exist, the exploitation will also come to an end. So they give importance to a collective consciousness among women which will definitely oppose patriarchy and violence in a bigger frame work. In the absence of collective work for equality, the old system by and large continues even in contemporary India especially in rural India.

### 4.3 Radical Feminism

It was in the late 1960's that Radical Feminism evolved. It pictured men as real enemies of womanhood and women's power. Shula Smith Firestone's *Diacektis of Sex*, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* were the two books that evolved the Radical Feminists theory. Radical Feminism sees patriarchal family as the main oppressor of women. The main weapon used by the family to subjugate women is violence. According to radical feminists this power ideology which is androcentric, tears the capacity of woman

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for self-determination into fragments. Radical Feminists feel that this conflict between the sexes existed in prehistoric times. They believe that all the existing ideologies have succeeded in marginalising women. So their main objective is to get recognised "...as individuals in their own right."  

They always stand for female self-determination and autonomy. Their goal is to create an egalitarian society which is free from all kinds of oppression and violence. Their motto is action and counter acting violence with violence. They also do not accept the biological distinctions and differences that exist between man and woman. According to them all major revolutions which stressed the basic human rights ignored the slaves and women. The right of self-determination was never extended to these two groups. Even now she is owned by "...medicine men, statesmen, churchmen and of course men in general."  

The idea of saving the self, defending it from the so-called forces that stymies her development becomes an obsession for radicals. Maria Mies highlights the fact that "...the demand for self-determination was therefore a defensive one, based on the right to existence, the right to defend the self."  

Perhaps it might be the same fear of man owning her and mercilessly denigrating her life force which led to their frenetic representation of all men as potential rapists. Other reasons which might have contributed to this outlook might be the Hegelian and Marxist concept of history and progress which acknowledges the de facto right of the stronger subjugating the weaker as a part of their struggle for survival. They also infer

13 Ibid., p. 219.
that a perfect relation can never be there between the sexes. The relationship is thus constantly under the threat of man using his power to exploit and violate women. But they totally overlook the fact that this is true even in the case of a relationship between a woman and a woman. Here also the threat of power and exploitation exists but a woman raping another woman is ruled out. It is perhaps this belief that a woman is capable of more tenderness and that there is no threat of reproduction might have contributed to this portrayal of all men as potential rapists. But the theory has not been validated with any sort of tangible evidence, statistical data or observation from any competent person who judges upon rape cases in different parts of the world. This extreme view of radicals stands condemned in contemporary India. But at the same time the Indian women are intensely aware of the fact their rights will be constantly and systematically exploited by men for want of self-assertion on the part of women. The dichotomy that exists in reality is quite obfuscating for women activists in India. On the same count lesbian relationships are not considered criminal in nature like rape, even though violence and subjugation are often in vogue.

Radical Feminism looks upon science as a liberator. In other words science liberates women from the so-called responsibilities or biological liabilities of continuous child bearing. Then another blessing cited by them is reducing her work load by providing effective machines in the homefront. This literally gives her freedom from the drudgery that is associated with housework and also time for intellectual pursuits. But many studies point out that modernization and scientific progress have always affected women adversely. Science which is synonymous with nothing but absolute truth which is impartial, which is free from all kinds of prejudice, according to other feminists, is just a utopian concept. It is flagrantly misrepresented by its male practitioners. The empirical method
of dissection and experimentation actually mutilates other objects in nature. The natural cycle is thus obstructed. The next argument placed by them is that scientific pursuits which contribute knowledge actually make the existing structure more powerful. This knowledge is misused by its male practitioner in getting power and subjugating the female. This is reflected mostly in the birth control programmes in which women bear the brunt. Automatically compulsion enters the framework which denigrates the essence of human beings especially women.

Thus legalisation of Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) in this particular context becomes a sugar-coated pill as it can harm the female body in some ways. And the decision in this regard is mostly taken by the dominating males to suit their convenience rather than to preserve the dignity of women by means of self-determination. Thus the liberalisation of laws gives the state more freedom to intervene and to control. Thus, the "technological strategies of contraception have not eliminated this dominance nor led to the preservation and rebuilding of these living connections, but rather to further degrade and atomize women." 14

Here too the best logical conclusion we can come to is that if women are to experience real freedom, if they want their right of self-determination it can be reached only by resuscitating a healthy relationship between man and woman by completely re-fabricating the social and political structure and roles allotted by the former in a spirit of equality. This will definitely help women to conquer her many psychological fears that lay waste her powers of perceptions, her power to control and manage her life. This change, if whole heartedly supported by men, will have the power to alleviate

the psychological and social convulsions and to give perennial happiness to mankind.

4.4 The Liberal Feminism

The enlightened ideas of French Revolution brought another significant change in the status of women. The ideas of fraternity, equality and liberty along with the liberal philosophy of individualism made women conscious of the fact that it is the social processes that determine her life. This contributed to an intense dislike among women to these so-called tradition and culture. Freud justifies these developments thus:

If a society has not developed beyond a point at which the satisfaction of one group of its members depends upon the suppression of another, it is understandable that those suppressed should develop an intense hostility towards culture whose existence their labour has made possible, but in whose riches, they have too small a share. 15

Liberal Feminism unlike its Radical counterpart strives to create freedom within rather than striving for freedom from. It stresses the need for more “female space” within the existing structure, without the least amount of confrontation. They overlook the question of sexuality by accepting the sex roles as decreed by the Establishment. But they question all the other forces that label women as inferior. They champion that the civil rights of women, like the right to education and all her civil rights, should be enforced as a legality. Liberals feel that a radical restructuring of society will never have the power to withstand the ravages of time. It may be forceful and effective but will not be productive, if not supported unanimously by a generation that has been convinced about the legality, validity and genuineness of such social stratification by consensus,

rather than by confrontation. So they believe in social, political reforms along with the improvement of social customs, institutions and laws within the family. Instead of conflict they prefer the process of adaptation and change in a liberal atmosphere with least injury to the existing social structure.

When we analyse “Feminism” or the new theories affecting women’s movement to re-weave their world, one thing surfaces very clearly. There is no unity between these divergent movements. Their end is the same but the means they use to achieve their goal is different. While radicals work for a complete restructuring of society based on gender-equality, the liberals accept the stratification, and fight for making women visible in history, and try to reclaim the significant role played by women in creating history. But the positive contribution of these movements to the Indian women is that she has become aware, though not very acutely, of the exploitation and violence that stymie her all round progress.

When we look at the contemporary social movements in India, the most powerful themes have come from the radical anti-caste leaders like Jotible Phule, B.R. Ambedkar and E.V. Ramaswamy Naikker (Periyor). Phule’s earliest writings on women’s oppression trace caste system as the main oppressor of women. He strongly protested against the double standards that exist for women in society. He exhorted people for a system of life based on truth where no inequality or discrimination exists.

Sharad Patil, another leading feminist, fought against oppression within the anti-caste framework. Patil is quite conventional in his approach to the issue of gender. While opposing patriarchy and traditional caste system he doubts supporting the matriarchal system. Gail Omvedt aptly points out the reason:

This undoubtedly represents the great psycho-cultural fear
underlying the conception of the Sthree Shakti in the Indian tradition, that is ultimately violent, deadly, distinctive and hence needs to be culturally bound and subordinated. 16

Another drawback in Patil’s theory is that he traces in the true Marxian way, economic inequality as the reason for women being a much-oppressed class. It definitely throws light on many issues of women, but they concentrate on production and social class. “They are sex blind as Hartmann notes, and thus unable to explain the position of women as women.”17

Shetkari Sanghatana, one of the most powerful farmers organisation in Maharastra, organised in November 1986, one of the largest gatherings of peasant women. The leader of this movement was none other than Sharad Joshi who wanted to incorporate into Indian women’s movement, the rural women. In a way it was to squash the elitism of the educated middleclass women in the movement, thus making it more effective. Joshi played an initial role in making his party egalitarian, even though the main objective was political. It stressed, in many ways the prerogatives of rural women in India. Thus the Shetkari Mahila Aghati and the Stree Mukthi Sangarsh had many objectives as part of their agenda, like fighting goondaism, procuring sanitation and drinking water facilities. Another important aim of the organisation was to make the village Panchayat self-sufficient. Joshi was also able to procure the support of women in his fight against religious fundamentalism. In the south E.V. Ramaswamy Naikkar of Tamilnad and V.T. Bhattathirippad of Kerala spearheaded movements for uplifting women from the unenviable situation marked by social discriminations, ban on widow remarriage and


such evils, during the 1930's and 1940's.

Eco-Feminism has given a new perspective to the sufferings of exploited Indian women. This is basically an intellectual movement which focussed on the amelioration of the condition of the Indian women as well as the improvement of the environment. Some Indian feminists have found that violence against nature and violence against women are interconnected. Especially for Indians, the identification of the feminine principle in nature becomes very self-evident. They believe that scientific development has polluted and exploited nature in many ways. It has also distanced man from nature. Similarly there is a change in his outlook. The man who looks upon nature with reverence and love now tries to dominate and manipulate nature through machines. In the same manner he distances himself from women and succeeds in creating submissive women who do not have the will to exercise their basic rights.

Vandana Shiva, the famous environmentalist and internationally acknowledged Indian feminist feels that feminism is not an expensive luxury but is synonymous with humanism, liberation and equality. She is known for her participation in the Chipko movement, the famous environmental resistance in India. According to Shiva the power to create does not have an effluvium. This creative power if channelised properly, will work against violence and destruction. She never pictures or looks at women as victims. On the other hand she visualizes women as possessing the power to create or as embodying the power to give life to, like nature. As Gail Omvedt says:

Thus her identification of the "feminine principle" is not a posing of women against men in which women are seen as biologically superior due to their productive and reproductive powers, but rather almost metaphorical way of stating an orientation to nature
and life in which women are seen as vanguard in liberation struggle."^{18}