

( ARTICLE )

## ECHOES OF DEFIANCE: A CENTURY OF THE INDIAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND THE REDEFINITION OF POWER

History, as we are often taught it, is a choir of male voices singing of wars, treaties, and industrial triumphs. But beneath that booming baritone, there has always been a persistent, rhythmic hum—the sound of women's footsteps on the streets, the scratch of their pens in dark rooms, and the defiant songs of those who refused to be merely the backdrop of a nation's birth. In India, the women's movement isn't a modern "Western" import, as some critics like to claim; it is a centuries-old fire, stoked by the labor of Dalit peasants, the bravery of queens, and the quiet persistence of the first female doctors and teachers.

### **The Early Sparks: Beyond the Zenana**

Long before the term "feminism" traveled across the oceans, Indian women were articulating a desire for autonomy. As early as the 6th century BCE, Buddhist nuns composed the Therigatha, singing of their liberation—not just spiritual, but physical—from the "drudgery of the kitchen" and "husbands who treated them like umbrellas".

By the 19th century, this yearning for freedom collided with the brutal realities of colonialism and Brahmanical patriarchy. We often hear of the Great Rebellion of 1857 through the lens of sepoys, but the movement was fueled by women across the social spectrum. While figures like Rani Laxmibai and Begum Hazrat Mahal led from the front, Dalit women like Jhalkari Bai and figures from marginalized backgrounds like Azizun Bai fought with equal fervor, breaking feudal shackles even as they challenged the British.

### **The Battle for the Mind and Body**

The late 1800s saw a surge in women challenging the "custodians of tradition." This wasn't just about reform; it was about the right to exist as an intellectual being. Take the case of Rukhmabai, who at 13 was married off but refused to live with her husband upon reaching adulthood. She faced a vitriolic backlash from the "guardians of society," including figures like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who mocked her in the editorials of Kesari. Yet, Rukhmabai stood firm, choosing the prospect of prison over a forced domestic life, eventually becoming one of India's first female doctors.

Similarly, the labor of Savitribai Phule cannot be overstated. Alongside her husband Jyotiba Phule, she opened schools for girls and faced the literal filth of the streets—protestors threw mud and manure at her—as she walked to teach. These women weren't just asking for education; they were dismantling the idea that a woman's purity was tied to her seclusion. By the time Tarabai Shinde wrote *Stri-Purush Tulana* (A Comparison Between Women and Men) in 1882, the critique of patriarchy had become sharp, systemic, and home-grown.

## **Revolutionaries and the Red Flag**

The 20th century brought the women's movement into the heart of the political struggle. The "International Women's Day" we celebrate today was born not from government decrees, but from the grit of communist and socialist women workers in New York and Europe, a legacy that the All India Progressive Women's Association (AIPWA) reminds us is often erased by corporate "gift-giving" culture.

In India, this revolutionary spirit manifested in the 1920s and 30s. Women weren't just spinning khadi; they were throwing bombs and raiding armories. Pritilata Waddadar died leading an attack on a European club, and young girls like Shanti Ghosh and Suniti Chaudhary executed a notorious British magistrate.

Parallel to the nationalist struggle was the rise of the organized peasant and labor movements. In the 1940s, the Tebhaga movement in Bengal saw women like Rashmoni and Ahalya standing at the front lines against landlords and police bullets. In Telangana, women took up arms against the Nizam's Razakars, fighting for land and dignity. These weren't middle-class debates in parlors; these were life-and-death struggles where the demand for "Bread, Land, and Peace" became a feminist manifesto.

## **The Post-Independence Betrayal**

When the dust of 1947 settled, women expected their share of the "Tryst with Destiny." However, the struggle for the Hindu Code Bill revealed the deep-seated conservatism within the new Indian state. Figures like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar fought to give women equal rights in marriage and inheritance, but he was met with fierce opposition from the RSS and even senior Congress leaders. The bill was eventually passed in a diluted form, leading Ambedkar to resign in protest—a stark reminder that the state often views women's rights as secondary to "religious sentiment".

## **The 1970s and 80s: The Personal Becomes Political**

The 1970s saw a rebirth of radicalism. The Naxalbari uprising in 1967, where eight women were martyred by police, lit a fire that spread to the plains of Bihar and Andhra Pradesh. In the villages of Bhojpur, women fought against the "Doli" system—a euphemism for the sexual exploitation of poor peasant women by landlords.

This era also saw the rise of the "autonomous" women's movement. Issues that had been hushed up for decades—dowry deaths, custodial rape, and domestic violence—were dragged into the sunlight. The Mathura rape case sparked nationwide protests, forcing the government to amend rape laws. The anti-liquor movements in Andhra and Uttarakhand, led by rural women, showed that feminism was, at its heart, a struggle for the survival of the family and the community.

## **Modern Challenges: The Corporate and the Communal**

Today, the movement faces a dual-headed monster: neoliberalism and communalism. We see International Women's Day being hollowed out into a "market spectacle," where men are encouraged to buy gifts while the actual labor rights of women are eroded. While the government boasts of "NREGA" schemes, women workers still face wage discrimination and a lack of basic facilities like crèches.

Furthermore, the rise of identity politics has created new battlefields. From the Shah Bano case to the recent protests against "moral policing" by organizations like the Bajrang Dal, women's bodies remain the site where communal battles are fought. The "Honor Killings" sanctioned by Khap Panchayats and the targeted violence against Dalit women in places like Kherlanji and Mirchpur prove that the intersection of caste and patriarchy is as lethal as ever.

### **Conclusion: The Unfinished Symphony**

The history of the women's movement in India is not a straight line of progress. It is a series of waves—sometimes receding, but always returning with greater force. From the Buddhist nuns to the tribal women of Chhattisgarh today fighting against "Operation Green Hunt" and corporate land grabs, the spirit remains the same.

True liberation, as Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai argued a century ago, cannot exist in a world where one human exploits another. The Indian women's movement teaches us that feminism is not just about a seat at the table; it is about changing the very architecture of the room. It is a struggle for a world free of hunger, fear, and inequality.

The road is long, and as the martyrs of Naxalbari or the activists like Manju Devi remind us, the cost is often high. But as long as there is an "Ahalya" in a village or a student on a city street refusing to be silenced, the history of this movement will continue to be written in the ink of defiance.

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