

IMPACT OF WESTERN FEMINISM ON MODERN INDIAN WOMEN

Dr Nagamony PS*

Abstract

Influenced by Western feminist ideology, Indian women in modern times had changed their cultural identity in modern Indian society. They regarded the traditional ideals and value system as blind faith, which would arrest their individual freedom and progress towards modernity. Sidelining the multi-faced network of relationship which Indian women had enjoyed in the past, modern women concentrated their 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, women's movement in Modern India had taken 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. In fact, the feminism borrowed from the West stood as a barrier for the cultural and spiritual development of the Indian women and the future generations.

Keywords:

Indian History;
Feminism;
Women;
Western society;
Ideology.

Author correspondence:

***Associate Professor and HoD, Department of Philosophy, NSS Hindu College, Changanacherry, Kerala, India**

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 are 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 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."(1)

This attitude had turned the young women in modern Indian society to lose their identity, culture, religious beliefs and spiritualistic values which were preserved by the ancient 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 their way of dressing in order to become modern. Mass media, advertisement companies, cinema and fashion shows also influenced the modern Indian women to cultivate a desire for glamorous life and accepting it as a symbol of modernity. "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." (2)

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 in 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. Women today are unaware of the tradition 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."(3)

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. 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. 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. 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 enabled modern women to cultivate a liberal attitude towards divorce and to 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 common 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.

Modern women, who belong to a society that had given high respect to the ideal of motherhood, now consider it 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." (4) 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.

Though the modern Indian women had achieved constitutional rights and freedom in their social, economic and political life, they, 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." (5) 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 new trend will pave a way for withering away of the age old Indian ideal of womanhood which will adversely affect the cultural and spiritual development of our youths and the generations to come. About 120 years ago, Swami Vivekanandahad cautioned Indian women not to lose their culture and individual identity at the cost of Westernisation and modernisation

which he feared will destroy the purity and sanctity of India's own 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."(6)

References

- 1.Parshley H, M, (tr&ed), Simone De Beauvoir-The Second Sex, (Vintage pub, London,1997), p.550.
- 2.Ibid., p.547.
- 3.Sharma, Usha& Sharma, B, M,(ed), Woman and Society, (Commonwealth pub, Delhi, 1995), p.97
- 4.Khanna, Girija& Varghese, Mariamma.A., Indian women Today, (Vikas pub, Delhi,1978), p.108.
- 5.Parshley, H, M, (tr&ed), Simone De Beauvoir, The Second Sex, (Vintage pub, London, 1997), p.169.
- 6.The complete works of Swami Vivekananda, (AdvaitaAshrama, Calcutta, 1989), Vol.III, p.256.