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INTERSECTIONALITY IN INDIAN FEMINISM: GENDER, CASTE, CLASS AND REGIONAL REALITIES

Bharat Rambhai Nandania
M.A., B.Ed.

ABSTRACT

Feminist discourse in India has undergone significant transformation over the past century, gradually expanding beyond a singular focus on gender to incorporate multiple dimensions of social inequality. The concept of intersectionality has emerged as an important analytical framework for understanding how various forms of oppression - such as caste, class, region, religion, and ethnicity - interact to shape the experiences of women in Indian society. Unlike universalist feminist approaches that treat women as a homogeneous category, intersectional feminism highlights the diverse and unequal realities faced by women belonging to different social groups. In India, the historical presence of caste hierarchies, economic disparities, and regional inequalities has created complex patterns of discrimination that affect women in distinct ways. Dalit women, tribal women, rural laborers, and women from marginalized communities often face multiple layers of oppression that cannot be understood solely through the lens of gender. This article explores the development of intersectional perspectives in Indian feminism and examines how gender interacts with caste, class, and regional realities to shape women's social experiences. By analyzing historical developments, feminist scholarship, and contemporary movements, the article highlights the importance of intersectionality in building a more inclusive and socially responsive feminist framework in India.



KEYWORDS: Indian animation; visual effects; social influence; children and young adults; cultural studies; media ethics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminism in India has evolved through multiple historical phases, responding to changing social, political, and cultural contexts. While early feminist movements in the country focused primarily on issues such as women's education, legal rights, and social reform, later developments in feminist theory and activism began to recognize the limitations of viewing women as a uniform social category. Indian society is characterized by deep structural inequalities shaped by caste hierarchies, economic disparities, regional differences, and religious diversity. These factors significantly influence the

experiences of women and create diverse forms of marginalization that cannot be fully explained through gender alone.

The concept of intersectionality has therefore become increasingly important in understanding the complexity of gender relations in India. Intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of social categories such as gender, caste, class, and ethnicity, which together shape systems of discrimination and privilege. In the Indian context, intersectional feminism seeks to highlight how women from marginalized communities experience multiple forms of oppression simultaneously. For instance, a Dalit woman may face discrimination not only because of her gender but also due to caste-based prejudice and economic marginalization.

Indian feminist scholars and activists have emphasized that gender inequality must be analyzed in relation to broader social structures. The experiences of urban middle-class women differ significantly from those of rural agricultural laborers, tribal women, or women belonging to socially disadvantaged communities. As a result, contemporary feminist discourse in India increasingly focuses on the intersection of gender with caste, class, and regional realities.

Understanding these intersections is essential for developing inclusive feminist policies and movements that address the needs of all women rather than privileging the concerns of a limited social group.

2. THE EMERGENCE OF INTERSECTIONAL THINKING IN FEMINIST THEORY

The idea that social inequalities are interconnected has long been present in sociological and feminist scholarship, but the formal concept of intersectionality was articulated in the late twentieth century. The term was introduced by the American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to explain how different forms of discrimination overlap and reinforce each other.¹ Although the concept originated in the context of Black feminist thought in the United States, it has proven highly relevant for analyzing gender inequality in societies with complex social hierarchies, including India.

In the Indian context, feminist scholars began recognizing during the 1980s and 1990s that mainstream feminist movements often focused primarily on the concerns of urban, educated, and middle-class women. This limited perspective sometimes overlooked the experiences of women belonging to marginalized communities who faced multiple forms of social exclusion. Scholars and activists therefore began advocating a more inclusive approach that considered the impact of caste, class, and regional differences on women's lives.²

One of the most significant contributions to intersectional feminist thought in India came from B. R. Ambedkar, whose work highlighted the connection between caste oppression and gender inequality. Ambedkar argued that the caste system was maintained through strict control over women's sexuality and marriage practices, particularly through endogamy. By regulating women's reproductive roles, caste hierarchies were preserved across generations.³

Ambedkar's analysis demonstrated that gender inequality in India cannot be understood without examining caste structures. His ideas have strongly influenced Dalit feminist thought and continue to shape contemporary debates on intersectionality in Indian feminism.

3. GENDER AND CASTE: THE EXPERIENCES OF DALIT WOMEN

Caste remains one of the most significant factors shaping social inequality in India. The hierarchical caste system historically placed Dalits at the lowest level of the social order, subjecting them to discrimination, exclusion, and economic exploitation. For Dalit women, the intersection of caste and gender creates a particularly harsh reality characterized by both patriarchal oppression and caste-based discrimination.

Dalit women often face violence and exploitation in both public and private spheres. In many rural areas, they are disproportionately employed in low-paying and physically demanding forms of labor such as agricultural work, sanitation, and domestic service. These occupations often expose them to unsafe working conditions and economic insecurity. Additionally, caste-based prejudices frequently restrict their access to education, healthcare, and social mobility.⁴

Feminist scholars have argued that mainstream feminist movements in India have sometimes overlooked the specific experiences of Dalit women. In response, Dalit feminist activists have developed independent movements that highlight the intersection of caste and gender oppression. These movements emphasize the need to challenge both patriarchal norms within communities and caste-based discrimination within broader society.

Dalit feminist writing and activism therefore play a crucial role in expanding the scope of Indian feminism and ensuring that the voices of marginalized women are represented in feminist discourse.

4. CLASS INEQUALITY AND WOMEN'S ECONOMIC MARGINALIZATION

Economic inequality is another important factor that shapes women's experiences in Indian society. Class differences influence access to education, employment, healthcare, and political participation. Women from economically privileged backgrounds often have greater opportunities for education and professional careers, while women from poor and working-class communities frequently struggle with limited resources and economic insecurity.

Working-class women are often concentrated in informal sectors such as domestic labor, agricultural work, construction, and small-scale industries. These sectors typically lack job security, fair wages, and adequate legal protections. As a result, women workers frequently experience exploitation and discrimination in the workplace.⁵

Feminist movements in India have increasingly focused on issues related to labor rights, economic independence, and social welfare. Organizations advocating for women's rights have worked to improve wages, working conditions, and legal protections for women workers. These efforts highlight the importance of addressing economic inequality as part of the broader struggle for gender justice.

5. REGIONAL AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

India's vast geographical and cultural diversity also contributes to significant regional variations in women's experiences. Social customs, economic conditions, and cultural traditions vary widely across different states and communities, influencing the opportunities and challenges faced by women.

For example, women in urban metropolitan areas may have greater access to education, employment, and healthcare services compared to women living in rural or remote regions. In many rural areas, limited infrastructure and traditional social norms continue to restrict women's mobility and participation in public life.⁶

Similarly, tribal and indigenous women often face unique challenges related to displacement, environmental degradation, and loss of traditional livelihoods. Development projects such as mining, industrial expansion, and large-scale infrastructure initiatives have sometimes displaced tribal communities, disproportionately affecting women who depend on natural resources for their livelihoods.

These regional and cultural variations highlight the importance of adopting a localized and context-sensitive approach to feminist activism in India.

6. INTERSECTIONALITY IN CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST MOVEMENTS

In recent decades, Indian feminist movements have increasingly embraced intersectional perspectives. Activists and scholars recognize that gender inequality is closely connected to other forms of social injustice, including caste discrimination, economic exploitation, and regional marginalization.

Contemporary feminist activism addresses a wide range of issues, including violence against women, access to education, labor rights, environmental justice, and representation in political institutions. Feminist organizations often collaborate with social justice movements working on issues such as caste equality, tribal rights, and labor rights.

Digital platforms and social media have also created new opportunities for marginalized voices to participate in feminist discourse. Online campaigns and digital activism have helped bring attention to issues affecting women from diverse social backgrounds, contributing to a more inclusive feminist movement.⁷

7. CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite significant progress, intersectional feminism in India continues to face several challenges. Deeply entrenched social hierarchies, economic disparities, and cultural norms often limit the effectiveness of feminist initiatives. In addition, tensions sometimes arise between different feminist perspectives regarding priorities and strategies for social change.

However, the growing recognition of intersectionality represents an important step toward building a more inclusive and representative feminist movement. By acknowledging the diverse experiences of women and addressing multiple forms of inequality, intersectional feminism provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding gender justice in contemporary India.

Future feminist movements in India will likely continue to emphasize the importance of solidarity across different social groups and the need for policies that address the structural roots of inequality.

8. CONCLUSION

The development of intersectional perspectives has significantly enriched feminist discourse in India by highlighting the complex and interconnected nature of social inequalities. Gender discrimination in India cannot be understood in isolation from other structural factors such as caste hierarchies, economic inequality, and regional disparities. Women belonging to marginalized communities often experience multiple forms of oppression that require a broader analytical framework.

Intersectionality therefore provides an essential lens for understanding the diverse realities of women's lives in India. By integrating gender with caste, class, and regional perspectives, intersectional feminism challenges narrow definitions of women's issues and promotes a more inclusive approach to social justice.

As feminist movements in India continue to evolve, the incorporation of intersectional perspectives will remain crucial for addressing the needs of all women and for building a society based on equality, dignity, and human rights.

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M.A., B.Ed.