

Current Developments in Feminism

by Nandita Gandhi and Vasantha Kannabiran

The definition of feminism raises several questions. How open-ended should it be? What do we exclude? What do we include? How necessary is it to spread its ideology at this juncture? Feminism emerged as a reaction to certain aspects of party politics (especially methods of organisation, structure and hierarchy within) and the bias in fellow workers' or comrades' attitudes. Since these have undergone certain changes as a result of the women's movement, is it still necessary to define feminism and its ideological contours? Would it not be more appropriate to take up the task of restructuring socialism which addresses the very issues that concern us so deeply - a vision of a new economic order, human relations with nature, a classless society, etc.? Do we feel the need for feminism merely because women are biologically different and so need a separate ideology? Given a background in Left politics and some experience in working with Left organisations, a good approach would be to work towards theoretical clarifications that would enrich socialism instead. While Marx thought of his work as an exploration, that spirit of openness has been lost in the course of practice. Mao articulated the role of the peasantry and raised the question of women. Yet today there remain large gaps in both the theory and practice of Left movements on the question of peasants, dalits, women and ecology. These inadequacies are evident from the fact that even in socialist countries where women have made progress on all fronts, they still

suffer discrimination and oppression. Within revolutionary movements, women continue to face problems including overt violence. Their criticism and questioning of party structure, organisation and functioning has also raised problems for them. It is this experience of continuously being marginalised in mainstream politics that make women feel a continuous need for participating in feminist activity and politics. Women feel it is necessary to continue to articulate this

movements of the past. Feminism stands for a total transformation of patriarchal relations and of society and not just equal rights or other bourgeois democratic rights. It marks a definite shift in ideology from that of other periods and movements, just as socialism has a definite ideological character and cannot loosely be applied to anyone like Z.A. Bhutto or Rajiv Gandhi for instance, who may choose to call themselves socialists. It might be more accurate to say that, in the earlier period, individual women rather than the entire movement could be characterised as feminist. If we do not recognise and mark such a shift we could end up going all the

Feminism is an awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation and oppression at the material and ideological levels, of women's labour, fertility and sexuality, in the family, at the place of work and in society in general, and includes action by women and men to transform society.

marginalisation and the bias we confront, in common with other women who are not politically active. There is a continued need also to articulate our problems, name them and develop our theory, because experience which is not theorised is often lost. This attempt is subtly undermined both within and outside the movements as no longer being necessary. It is in this context that we need to clarify our own perspective and work out the possibilities and linkages that are emerging through the women's movement.

...Another issue was: would we use feminism as a term to describe other movements for women's rights in the 19th and 20th centuries? Would we differentiate between a feminist movement and a women's movement? One opinion was that we cannot use modern definitions to understand

way back to the Prophet Muhammad, who made some very radical changes, giving women the right to inheritance and education, in addition to introducing progressive reforms. Many movements for change in society have had a component addressing women's needs but they cannot be called feminist. For example, the Mother's Front in Sri Lanka, now extinct, was basically a welfare group, not feminist at all.

The opposing viewpoint was that one cannot date feminism any more than one can date socialism. Marx, as we know, drew from the Utopian Socialists before him. Without getting involved in questions of methodology, we can say that feminism, the word and concept, comes from a long tradition spread over several different epochs in history. We can see the struggle in the late 19th and

early 20th centuries as one mainly concerned with equal rights for women. Although control over one's body and fertility is considered one of the key demands of feminism, there was no demand for contraception in India because there was no material basis for it, though some individuals might have propagated it. Therefore, even the definition of feminism changes with what is historically possible.

Our definition of socialist feminism applies to the present period and cannot be used for earlier periods. Our feminist tradition and history give us a sense of strength and continuity, so that feminism can also be used generally to describe different movements which took up the rights and issues of women. If we go into history, we will

see women activists, their lives, their travelling and networking have a familiar ring. Or there are actions, so bold and daring for their time that we might want to call them feminist. What is important, however, is that definite ideological shifts were made from time to time. Today we emphasise the struggle against patriarchy and capitalism; this does not mean that all groups are waging anti-patriarchal/capitalist struggles but that there is a movement towards it. In Pakistan, women are campaigning against their personal laws and going to vote against the wishes of their men. There is a consistent effort in the development of feminist theory towards an international perspective which takes into account the processes of imperialism.

Note: This article and the following one were taken from the nine day workshop attended by 23 women from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in 1989. The two reports were a result of the debates on critical issues being faced by women in South Asia. It focuses on current trends in feminism and the women's movement. ☐

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Feminism, Women's Movements and Mass Movements

by Gail Omvedt

In taking "mass movements" and "autonomous women's groups" as the two main forms in which women's action can be seen, these can be viewed as almost polar opposites. Further, feminists whose main experience was in small groups and have gone through the process of working with Left parties and organizations, have often seen mass movements as inherently inimical to the values of feminism.

In conventional terms, it has to be said that, at the very least, mass movements seem to work on a different level than the new "feminist movement" - if we have the image that most



in South Asia do, of mass movements as strikes, rallies, demonstrations in the streets, roads or government offices, involving thousands or hundreds of thousands. Judging by this crite-

riion, the women's movement would indeed seem to be of secondary status, for it is clear that women do not come out in huge numbers in response to calls by feminist leaders; rather there is much more massive and enthusiastic participation by women themselves in mobilisation by class or caste-based organizations or those taking up the nationality question. Mobilisation even on clearly reactionary appeals to religious identities has also outstripped that by women's organisations, while even on "women's issues" mass calls seem to have to be done on the fronts with more "general issue" mass organisations or party wings. This seems