

Revisiting the Contemporary Indian Women's Movement: Decentralisation, Resistance, and Local Governance

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Abstract: The contemporary Indian women's movement has undergone significant developments over the past several decades. This study aims to examine the journey of contemporary Indian feminist ideas and movements from the time frame 1970–1990, specifically focusing on the trajectory of intersectional feminist campaigns in the context of local governance. It will critically examine the maturity and challenges faced by the movements, particularly the issues of gender inequality and the need for substantive representation of women in governance, which are often linked with caste, class, urban–rural divides, and community factors.

Furthermore, the study will provide a brief and critical overview of the current status of local governance in India and offer a forward-looking perspective. Overall, the study aims to contribute to the literature on contemporary Indian women's movements and explore the ways in which local governance can serve as a platform for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in India.

Keywords: Local Governance, Feminism, Contemporary Indian Women's Movement, Representation Politics

Introduction

India's complex and diverse patriarchal society has led to a myriad of gendered issues deeply embedded in its social, economic, and political systems (Kumar R., 1999). Women's movements in India have played a crucial role in addressing these issues and advocating for women's rights. Beginning in the early 20th century, feminist ideas began to gain traction in the country, and early feminist campaigns focused on education, employment, and political representation for women (Kumar R., 1999).

Over time, the movements underwent significant growth and maturity in the late 20th century, with a range of movements and campaigns feeding into Indian feminism. These

included the women's liberation movement, the anti-rape movement, and the movement for equal pay for equal work (Kumar R., 1999). Despite these achievements, the movements have faced a series of challenges and attacks in recent years, which underscores the need to continue exploring new and innovative approaches to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in India.

One such approach is through examining the potential and role of local governance structures in advancing these issues and campaigns. Local governance systems can provide a platform for the meaningful representation of women's issues and their solutions, especially for those from marginalized backgrounds. However, these structures also face challenges in promoting gender equality and overcoming intersecting barriers related to caste, class, urban–rural divides, and community differences.

Despite the hardships, these contemporary movements remain a vital force for change and progress in the country. The movements' resilience and ability to adapt to changing circumstances have been critical to their continued impact. As a result, new interpretations of their struggles have emerged, further deepening our understanding of the significance of the contemporary Indian women's movement.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to contribute to this growing body of knowledge through case studies and to explore ways to harness the potential of local governance structures for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in India. The study also critically analyses the role played by local governance in empowering the contemporary Indian women's movement and feminist ideas from 1970 to 1990.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative secondary data analysis approach to examine the contemporary Indian women's movements from 1970 to 1990, and their implications for local

governance and gender equality. The main source of data was secondary, involving the review and synthesis of viewpoints from various scholars through academic journal articles, books, reports, and online databases—primarily Google Scholar, *Economic and Political Weekly*, and JSTOR, considering their robust repository on the topic in comparison to other databases. These sources were examined along with the theoretical frameworks they offered, covering the historical, political, social, and cultural aspects of the women's movement with respect to local governance in India.

The analysis involved identifying and interpreting the key themes and patterns that emerged from the literature, guided by the purpose of this study. The validity and reliability of the analysis were ensured by adhering to ethical standards concerning plagiarism, citation, and source methodology, while following academic guidelines and ensuring the verifiability of the publications.

The context to Local Governance in 1970 to 1990

To set the context, the 73rd¹ and 74th² Indian Constitutional Amendments were the ones that established a formal system of local governance in India and provided for greater decentralization of power and decision-making at its local levels. Additionally, the reservation of seats for women in these local government bodies was a major step towards empowering women and increasing their participation in the politics and decision-making (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, n.d.).

Before the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments were passed in 1992, the system of local governance in India was largely controlled by state governments. In rural areas, there were traditional village councils, which were often dominated by men and lacked

¹ The 73rd Amendment created the Panchayati Raj system for rural areas, empowering local self-governments at the village, intermediate, and district levels. (Bhat, Rouf, Wani, & Mohd., 2022)

² The 74th Amendment established Municipalities for urban areas, ensuring a structured governance system in cities and towns. Both 73rd and 74th amendments mandated state governments to adopt these systems, thereby enhancing democratic participation at the grassroots level. These amendments were crucial for promoting decentralized governance and empowering local communities. (Bhat, Rouf, Wani, & Mohd., 2022)

formal recognition under the law. In urban areas, municipalities existed, but they had limited powers and were largely controlled by state governments, were male-dominated, and offered limited opportunities for women to participate in local governance (Bhat, Rouf, Wani, & Mohd., 2022). According to a report published by the UN (*Report of the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development, and Peace*, 1985), women in India faced significant barriers to political participation at all levels of local government and faced discrimination and harassment when they attempted to participate in politics. Another report, published by the Government of India (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1988), noted that women's representation in Panchayats and Municipalities was extremely low. The report stated that only 3.5% of Panchayat members were women, and only 5.5% of Municipal members were women.

Women in India faced significant barriers to empowerment in all areas of life during that time, including education, employment, and political participation. According to the report (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1988), women's literacy rates were extremely low, with only 29% of women able to read and write. This lack of education severely limited women's opportunities for employment and economic empowerment. Additionally, women faced significant discrimination in their workplaces and were often relegated to low-paying and low-status jobs. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) noted in a report published in 1989 that women in India were concentrated in low-wage, labour-intensive industries such as agriculture and were largely excluded from higher-paying industries such as manufacturing and technology (United Nations, *Report on the organizational meeting for 1989, the special session and the thirty-sixth session*, 1989).

While local governments in India did make some efforts to address issues related to women's empowerment during that period, progress was slow and incremental. For example, in some states, local governments implemented programs aimed at improving women's

access to education and healthcare. In Kerala, for instance, the state government implemented the "Kerala Model" of development, which included initiatives to improve healthcare and education for women. As a result, Kerala had one of the highest literacy rates and lowest maternal mortality rates in India during this period (Government of Kerala, 2021).

In addition, some local governments implemented programs aimed at improving women's economic opportunities. For example, the Women's Development Corporation in Tamil Nadu provided training and loans to women to start their own businesses (Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women, n.d.). However, these efforts were limited in scope and region and often faced significant barriers due to cultural and social norms that restricted women's opportunities and mobility.

The Context to Contemporary Feminist Ideas – 1970s

Following India's 1947 declaration of independence, the Congress government made sporadic attempts to keep its promises to women by stipulating in the constitution that men and women are equally seen and valued, establishing several administrative bodies to foster opportunities for women, and appointing several feminists to key positions in the executive branch. There was no feminist activism during the 1950s and 1960s (Kumar R., 1999). However, the movements that started in the 1970s grew out of several radical movements of the time. The feminist movement of the 1970s was known as the Second Wave of feminism globally, and it was marked by issues including reproductive rights, workplace equality, sexual harassment and assault, gender roles, domestic violence, and so on (Kumar R., 1999). In India, on the other hand, new Leftist ideas and movements developed. The most prominent movements for feminists in India in the 1970s among these were:

The Shahada Movement – Briefly, it took place in Maharashtra's Dhulia district. It was a Bhil tribal landless labourers' movement in Maharashtra against anti-price hike agitations and exploitative local non-tribal landowners. The drought and famine in

Maharashtra during this period exacerbated the poverty already brought on by obscene sharecropping rates, land expropriation, and exorbitant finance fees. All these factors fuelled the Bhil community's growing militancy. In the late 1960s, the Shahada movement began as a folk protest (through radical devotional singing clubs). As the New Left joined the movement in the early 1970s, the campaign became more aggressive. This movement later formed an organisation known as the *Shramik Sangathana* in 1972 and saw huge participation by women (Kumar R., 1999).

The Nav Nirman Movement of 1974 was the Shahada Movement's successor in Gujarat and other regions of the country. *Nav Nirman* began as an anti-price rise, anti-corruption, and anti-black-marketeering student movement. It later grew into a significant middle-class movement, to which thousands of women contributed. The tactics of protest included processions to welcome the dawn of a new age, mock tribunals that judged corrupt politicians and state officials, and mass hunger strikes. It took the authorities three months to put an end to the Nav Nirman movement (Kumar R., 1999).

Chipko Andolan, which took inspiration from these earlier movements, took place in 1973 in the village of Mandal in the state of Uttarakhand, India. It clearly showed how much women had to defy local governing officials (*The Chipko Movement: A People's History*, 2022).

Meanwhile, Gandhian socialists affiliated with the Textile Labour Association (TLA) in Ahmedabad made the first attempt to establish a women's trade union in Gujarat. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), founded in 1972 at Ela Bhatt's initiative, is a group of women working in various trades in the unorganised sector. These women had much in common, including harassment by those in positions of authority, relatively low pay, and exceedingly unfavourable living conditions. Through technical assistance, training, and

education, SEWA sought to enhance the members' working conditions while also promoting Gandhian ideals of honesty, dignity, and simplicity (Kumar R., 1999).

The Ideas Behind Early Feminist Campaigns

The new women's groups that were being formed explicitly declared themselves "feminist," even though most of them originated from leftist organisations (Kumar R., 1999). The Left, however, regarded feminist groups as bourgeois and divisive. Although most members belonged to other political affiliations, these feminist groups insisted on functioning independently. They quickly established networks with one another.

Since the early feminist groups were primarily composed of urban, educated, middle-class members, they had a complicated influence on the feminist movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s, as they could not represent all Indian women. Some of these feminist groups believed in autonomy, choosing not to share space with political organisations or parties. Many were critical of political parties and local governance, viewing them as "hierarchical, self-interested and competitive" (Kumar R., 1999). Nevertheless, they also believed that political participation in local governance by women could bring about valuable reforms and fulfil feminist aims. Mahila Dakshata Samiti (Women's Self-Development Organisation), founded by socialist women in 1977 in alliance with the Janata Party, was one of the party-based women's organisations formed in the late 1970s. While city-based organisations dominated the feminist campaigns in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was a parallel rise in feminist consciousness in rural areas and within local governance. For example, the 1950s Telangana sharecropper's movement (a peasant movement by the cultivators of Hyderabad) was renewed in the 1970s and began with a campaign against the kidnapping of a woman and the murder of her husband (Sucha Singh Gill, 2005).

Dowry and Rape—Priority for Indian Feminists

Dowry and rape were the initial targets of the modern Indian feminist movement (Kumar R., 1999). The Progressive Organisation of Women (POW) organised the first anti-dowry demonstrations in Hyderabad in 1975. However, due to Indira Gandhi's declaration of Emergency, the movement could not fully materialise. After the Emergency, a new anti-dowry movement was launched across India. It opposed violence against women for dowries, including murder and abetted suicides (Kumar R., 1999).

Although Mahila Dakshata Samiti was the first women's organisation in Delhi's modern feminist movement to address dowry, it was Stri Sangharsh, a fledgling feminist organisation formed in 1979, that brought dowry-related crimes into public attention. Until then, women who died in fires were considered to have committed suicide, and dowry harassment was rarely associated with these deaths. Even the police did not investigate them, as these were framed as private family matters outside the purview of state intervention (Kumar R., 1999).

Feminist groups mobilised to campaign against this injustice and encouraged women to come forward. They staged street plays and held public meetings. The government introduced legislation against dowry-related crimes in 1980, one year after the anti-dowry movement gained traction. This law defined aiding suicide due to dowry demands as a specific offence and required police investigation into any woman's death within five years of marriage. However, the law was a major disappointment for feminists (Kumar R., 1999). The Criminal Law (Second Amendment) Act, passed in December 1983, made cruelty to a spouse a cognizable, non-bailable offence punishable by up to three years in jail and a fine. The definition of cruelty was also expanded to include verbal and physical abuse (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2018). The overall campaign led feminists to conclude that they could

garner public support against some types of crimes but that it was difficult to fight legally from the grassroots without links to local governance or political alliances (Kumar R., 1999).

The agitation against rape began a few months after the dowry campaign. Police statistics revealed that local government employees, especially in rural and tribal areas, committed rapes regularly—excluding incidents of mass rapes by police. Since the Maoist movement had addressed rapes by landlords and police, the new feminist groups formed in the 1970s were already familiar with these patterns. A 1978 incident in Hyderabad, where a woman was raped by several police officers, brought the issue into sharp focus (Barkha, 2013). The issue intensified in 1980, when feminist groups responded to an open letter by four senior lawyers opposing a court ruling in the rape case involving a police officer in Maharashtra. The court dismissed the rape claim because Mathura, the victim, was considered "free-spirited" and in a consensual relationship. This sparked a new phase of feminism in India. The networks formed earlier were widened and used to plan a campaign. In February 1980, the Forum Against Rape (FAR), now the Forum Against Oppression of Women, initiated a campaign demanding the reopening of the case. They urged feminist organisations across India to organise protests on March 8. This became the first national feminist campaign (Kumar R., 1999). In response to FAR's call, protests were held in seven cities. Political parties at all levels sought to capitalise on the issue. Eventually, the Supreme Court redefined the legal understanding of rape (Kumar R., 1999).

Transformation of the Feminist Tactics

Many feminists began to question the tactics of the anti-dowry and anti-rape campaigns due to their uneven results. They realised that without affiliation to local government bodies, their legal demands were rarely implemented. As a result, they chose to take up individual cases and guide them through the legal system. Convinced that earlier mass actions had limited effect, feminists began to withdraw from public demonstrations,

marches, and street theatre (Kumar R., 1999). By the early 1980s, they began establishing women's centres in various cities. These new centres differed significantly from their predecessors. They addressed a wide range of interrelated issues and were explicitly feminist, unlike earlier welfare-oriented centres. They aimed to put the feminist ideal of sisterhood into practice, as reflected in their names—like "Saheli" in Delhi and "Sakhi Kendra" in Kanpur.

From 1970 to 1990, feminist engagement in local governance diversified into activities such as slum improvement, employment generation, health education, environmental activism, and trade union work. The movement influenced professions such as journalism, academia, and medicine. Major English newspapers had dedicated feminist journalists. Organisations like the Voluntary Health Association of India collaborated with women's groups in campaigns against unsafe contraceptive practices and harmful pregnancy testing (Kumar R., 1999).

Echoes of Eco-Feminism – Another Paradigm

Ecofeminism is a term that encompasses various perspectives and practices that link gender and environmental issues. It emerged as a response to ecological crises and the marginalization of women in the 1970s from different contexts. It has played an important role in shaping the discourse and practice of local governance in India, both before and after the constitutional amendments. Ecofeminism in India has been influenced by various factors, such as the colonial legacy, the nationalist movement, Gandhian philosophy, socialist ideology, indigenous traditions, the global environmental movement, and the feminist movement. Ecofeminism in India has also been diverse and dynamic, reflecting the different contexts and experiences of women across regions, castes, classes, religions, and ethnicities. (Shiva, 1988)

One of the main and initial themes of ecofeminism in India was the recognition of women's special relationship with nature, based on their roles as producers, consumers, nurturers, and protectors of natural resources. Ecofeminists argue that women have a holistic and harmonious view of nature, as opposed to the dominant patriarchal and capitalist view that sees nature as a source of exploitation and domination. Women are more vulnerable to the impacts of environmental degradation and disasters due to their socio-economic and cultural disadvantages. Therefore, ecofeminists advocate for women's rights to access, control, and manage natural resources, as well as their participation in environmental decision-making and action. (Shiva, 1988)

Another theme of ecofeminism in India is the critique of development models based on industrialization, urbanization, modernization, and globalization. Ecofeminists challenge the assumptions and values that underlie these models, such as growth, progress, efficiency, competition, and consumerism. They expose the negative consequences of these models for both nature and women, such as deforestation, pollution, displacement, poverty, violence, and alienation. Ecofeminists propose alternative visions of development that are based on sustainability, equity, diversity, cooperation, and solidarity. (Guha & J., 1997)

A third theme of ecofeminism in India is the celebration of women's agency and resistance in various forms of environmental activism. Ecofeminists document and analyse the stories and struggles of women who have fought against environmental injustice and oppression in different settings. Examples of such movements include the Chipko movement in Uttarakhand (1970s–1980s), where women hugged trees to prevent them from being cut by contractors; the Narmada Bachao Andolan in Gujarat (1980s–1990s), where women opposed the construction of a large dam that threatened their livelihoods and culture; the Appiko movement in Karnataka (1980s–1990s), where women participated in planting trees and

protecting forests; and the Silent Valley movement in Kerala (1970s–1980s), where women campaigned against a hydroelectric project that endangered a rich biodiversity hotspot.

Ecofeminism has contributed to local governance in India by raising awareness about the interconnections between gender and environmental issues; by challenging the dominant paradigms of development; by empowering women to assert their rights and interests; by creating spaces for dialogue and collaboration among different stakeholders; by promoting alternative models of sustainable development; and by inspiring collective action for social change. Vandana Shiva, for instance, in her book *Staying Alive*, has emphasized the importance of promoting women's participation in local governance to promote environmental sustainability and social justice. She believes that giving women greater control over resources and decision-making processes can help to promote more equitable and sustainable forms of development, particularly in rural areas where women are often the primary caretakers of the land and the family. (Shiva, 1988)

Patriarchal norms and power structures have usually limited women's access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Promoting women's empowerment and gender equality is essential for achieving sustainable development goals, and this requires systemic changes in social and economic structures at the local level. Given the current scenario, there is still a long way to go.

Challenges of the Decade – Case of Intersectionalities

In 1985, feminists became especially divided over the subject of family law based on personal, or religion-based, distinctions. This is well illustrated in the Shah Bano Case. It became a controversy over the relationship between secularism, the communalization of local governance politics, and gender justice. Personal law in India is governed by religion, though individuals can opt for secular alternatives. Shah Bano, a 75-year-old woman (Kumar R.,

1999), who was abandoned by her husband, filed a petition for maintenance under Section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC), which provides for maintenance to be paid to wives, children, and parents who are unable to support themselves. Shah Bano's right to maintenance from her husband was upheld by the Supreme Court under both Section 125 and Muslim personal law. (Ummul Fayiza, 2021)

The case became controversial when, in 1986, the Indian government approved the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, which reversed the Supreme Court's verdict in the Shah Bano case. The Act limited Muslim women's entitlement to seek maintenance after divorce to the time of *iddat* (three months after divorce). (Jus Corpus Law Journal, 2022) The judgment was widely criticised by feminists, liberals, and secularists who saw it as a setback for women's rights, as well as by Muslim leaders, for it seemed unduly weighted with critical comments on Muslim personal law. Religious clerics issued a *fatwa* (proclamation) stating that the judgment violated the teachings of Islam. Within a few months, the whole issue escalated into a communal agitation, claiming that Islam was in danger. However, one needs to understand that the issue became heated because the Babri Masjid controversy and the Shah Bano case began to be linked as representing a Hindu communal onslaught on Muslims (Kumar R., 1999).

The *Matrabhumi* (motherland) was now presented as a repeatedly raped female body, and the myth of the enemy within and of Muslim lust played a key structural role (Susie, Tharu, & Niranjana, 1999). Hindutva, like the anti-Mandal campaign, appears to have fostered vocal, combative individuality for both men and women. Its total authority, in the Foucauldian sense, incites its subjects to speak up and act, becoming independent, agentive, citizen-individuals. The new Hindutva is portrayed as a viable national ethos that could include all other religions and groups. Two arguments are typically used to support this assertion. The first is a redeployment of nationalist interpretations of Indian history, in which

Hindutva is portrayed as having a long heritage of tolerance; the second is an invocation of Western nation-states and their acceptance of dominant religious traditions within secularism. Muslim women were forced to choose between being Indian or Muslim. Women on the right set up feminist projects that supported the caste and class hierarchy and the othering of Islam. (Susie, Tharu, & Niranjana, 1999)

Locally, this whole event brought about a trend for others to follow, where a “real woman” was defined as one who followed men in demonstrations against Shah Bano. This position of “real women” stood in total opposition to feminism. Similarly, another case of *Sati* during 1987–88 followed in the wake of the Muslim agitation. In September 1987, an incident of *Sati* in a village in Rajasthan sparked off a campaign that brought the debate over the rights and wrongs of Hindu women to the forefront. Various Rajputs claimed that *Sati* should be recognised by the state and local governments, including panchayats and municipalities, and that delegitimizing it would be a deliberate attack on Rajput traditions. Pro-*Sati* campaigners argued that *Sati* was the true desire of Hindu women and accused feminists of being unrepresentative. Local governing bodies were becoming helpless in the face of feminist ideas. (Kumar R., 1999) The debate over tradition vs. modernity further divided feminists. The unstoppable force of modernity was so powerful that it obscured the fact that *Sati* was being used to establish "tradition" despite feminist efforts to fight it. For most feminists, the *Sati* campaign exposed traditionalist society's rising resistance to feminism and marked a significant loss for the movement. (Kumar R., 1999)

Another challenge to the feminist movement can be seen in the introduction of national family welfare or population control programmes involving long-acting hormonal implants or injectables, and RU-486, the abortifacient pill. These contradicted feminist demands for freedom, choice, and self-determination. Since the 1970s and 1980s, population control was a key concern for the Indian government, and various policies and programs were

introduced through local governments controlled by the state, as has been mentioned before. The introduction of these programmes, including the promotion of contraceptive methods, was one way that the government sought to control population growth. (Susie, Tharu, & Niranjana, 1999)

However, women's groups and health activists in India opposed these programs on several grounds, including concerns about safety, effectiveness, and potential impact on women's health and autonomy. They argued that women's lives and rights should not be sacrificed for the sake of population control, and that women should have the freedom to make their own choices about their bodies and reproductive health. Women's lives, rights to self-determination and choice, privacy, autonomy, and empowerment were now on the agenda of international capital, with local governments on board. However, when such programmes are presented as enabling and empowering women in conservative or religious contexts, the feminist credentials of those who research and advocate these contraceptives remain largely unquestioned.

These arguments and concerns raised by women's groups and health activists had implications for governance and policymaking at all levels. (Susie, Tharu, & Niranjana, 1999) Policymakers had to consider the voices and concerns of women's groups and health activists in their decision-making processes related to reproductive health and population control. They had to balance the need for population control with the need to protect women's rights and autonomy. This balancing act required local governance structures to engage meaningfully with women's groups and health activists and then report to state and central governments to incorporate their concerns into policies and programmes. While there was some success in slowing population growth, the policies also led to widespread abuse and violations of human rights. Since local governance structures at the time were often characterized by top-down decision-making, lack of community participation, and limited

accountability, the promotion of sterilization, for example, led to coerced and forced sterilizations, particularly of poor and marginalized women, as local officials were incentivized to meet sterilization quotas regardless of the methods used or the rights of the individuals involved. (Susie, Tharu, & Niranjana, 1999)

Problems from Intersectionality Theory in Gender towards Local Governance

Women were suddenly seen to be marching forward in almost every field. Gender bias was identified as a primary reason behind poverty, and economists began to advocate for women's empowerment (Susie, Tharu, & Niranjana, 1999). Politicians were seen campaigning for women, and many of them were elected as leaders through proxy by their husbands to attract mass attention, beginning with local governing bodies.

Mass media also took a stand in support of women by highlighting their roles more prominently. Many women joined the literacy campaigns and gained enough power to destabilize the economy of states (as seen in the case of Andhra Pradesh). In all these developments, women and local governance came to represent the subject of feminism itself. Therefore, this new perspective is an index of the success of the women's movement, though this success also contains contradictions within it.

Projects and initiatives critical to feminism, such as those led by subaltern forces, began to disturb the functioning of local bodies. These disruptions were related to broader crises in democracy and secularism. Feminist theorists who tried to institutionalize the concept of 'gender' during the 1970s and 1980s organized campaigns that brought to light the daily experiences of hostility and sexual threat faced by lower-caste women. They demanded legal rights and enforcement of laws on issues such as custodial rape, family violence, dowry, and inequalities in gender relations. They also sought genuine changes that would make the law more sensitive. (Susie, Tharu, & Niranjana, 1999)

To prevent gender and women's concerns from being overshadowed by class analysis, feminist thinkers attempted to broaden Marxist understandings of labour to include domestic production. They also highlighted the vulnerability of women in the workforce and the neglect of these issues in local political agendas and central governance. Gross inequalities between genders in areas such as healthcare were also made visible through critiques of patriarchal ideologies. The late 1980s through 1990 ushered in a new set of political questions. This phase demanded engagement with issues of caste, religion, and the emerging problems of liberalization. These questions often stood in contradiction to women's freedom, their self-determination, or their right to choose. The kinds of contradictions that confront gender analysis are structurally similar to those in class analysis, caste-based initiatives, and debates around democracy and secularism today. Gender analysis, like class analysis, has exposed how the humanist subject and the social structures based on it have functioned to legitimise bourgeois and patriarchal objectives (Susie, Tharu, & Niranjana, 1999). What has never been entirely clear is how both Marxist and feminist politics have continued to rely on other categories such as caste or community, as well as on the premises of secularism and democracy that they frequently invoke.

The formation of the normative human subject included a dialectical relationship between inequality and contradiction on the one hand, and the classical subject of Western liberalism on the other—structured as upper-caste, middle-class, Hindu, and male. This structure, elaborated and reinforced through a series of confrontations, became invisible over time, even as this citizen-self was presented as modern, secular, and democratic. (Susie, Tharu, & Niranjana, 1999) These impasses imply the breaking of the humanist consensus that has historically underpinned both left- and right-wing politics. At the same time, they open possibilities for new political alignments and projects—ideally beginning with local governance—in order to give regional diversity a more concrete and resilient framework.

(Susie, Tharu, & Niranjana, 1999) Because we are focusing on the present, it is essential to understand the lasting impact of the past.

The Way Forward

From the 1990s till today, the contemporary women's movement in India has made significant progress towards women's empowerment in terms of political participation, education, and employment. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments passed in 1992 have increased women's representation in local governance, with women's participation in Panchayats and Municipalities increasing significantly. According to the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, the percentage of women elected in Panchayats has increased from 33% in 2005 to 44.74% in 2021 (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, n.d.). Women's literacy rates have also increased from 46.45% in 2001 to 68.42% in 2011 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022). Furthermore, the government has developed a number of programmes and initiatives to encourage female entrepreneurship, such as the *Stand-Up India* scheme, which provides loans to female entrepreneurs.

However, the contemporary women's movement in India still faces several challenges. Despite the increase in women's political representation, their decision-making power in local governance remains limited due to societal norms, stereotypes that view women primarily as objects of reproduction, and entrenched patriarchy. Women also continue to face denial of justice in cases of discrimination and violence, including sexual harassment in local governing bodies, despite the presence of numerous amendments and policies. Women from marginalized communities, such as Dalits and Adivasis, face additional challenges due to caste-based discrimination. The future of the contemporary women's movement in India depends on addressing these challenges while building on the progress made so far. It is crucial to address the intersectionality of gender with caste, religion, class, and other identities to ensure that women from all backgrounds can participate equally in political and

economic decision-making. Both the government and civil society need to continue supporting women's entrepreneurship and education while also addressing issues such as violence against women and gender-based discrimination. Additionally, the ecofeminist perspective highlights the importance of women's participation in decision-making related to environmental sustainability, as women are often primary caregivers and bring a unique perspective to issues related to food, water, and land.

In conclusion, the contemporary women's movement in India has made significant strides toward women's empowerment over the past two decades, but there is still a long way to go to implement these gains within local governing bodies in a way that makes a tangible impact at the grassroots level. By addressing the challenges and building upon the successes, India can continue to empower women and ensure gender equality in all aspects of society.

Developments in the New Millennium

The dawn of the new millennium has marked a critical period for the contemporary Indian women's movement, particularly as its interface with local governance has deepened following the foundational 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of the 1990s. This era has not only solidified women's presence in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), but has also brought to light new dimensions of their influence, persistent challenges, and evolving strategies within these decentralized structures. (Bharadwaj, 2024)

Quantifiable progress in women's representation has been a defining feature of this period. Building on the initial one-third reservation, several states have proactively increased the quota to 50% in local bodies. This has resulted in a significant number of elected women representatives (EWRs) across the country, exceeding 1.45 million (Kumar and Ghosh, 2024), and has contributed to India having among the highest levels of women's participation

in local governments globally, at 44.4 percent of elected seats (Kumar and Ghosh, 2024). This increased presence is not merely symbolic; studies and reports from the new millennium highlight the tangible impact of women in local leadership (Kumar et al., 2024). EWRs have been instrumental in reorienting developmental priorities at the grassroots level, bringing greater focus to essential public goods and services critical for communities, such as access to clean drinking water, improved sanitation, education, and healthcare. Their leadership has often been associated with enhanced transparency and accountability in local governance and, in some instances, a reduction in corruption. (Kumar, Kumar, & Dwivedi, 2024)

Beyond infrastructure and services, women in local governance in the new millennium have actively engaged with critical social issues. Reports indicate that EWRs have played a significant role in addressing gender-based violence, advocating against practices like child marriage, and promoting girls' education. Their presence is also seen as a catalyst for challenging regressive social norms and stereotypes within their communities, fostering a more inclusive environment. The engagement of women from marginalized communities, such as Dalits and Adivasis—though still facing significant barriers due to intersectional discrimination—has also opened avenues for addressing these complexities at the local level (Kumar et al., 2024).

However, the new millennium has also highlighted persistent and evolving challenges. While the number of women in local bodies has increased, the issue of 'proxy representation' or the 'Sarpanch Pati' syndrome—where male relatives exercise the authority behind elected women—continues to be a significant impediment to women's autonomous functioning. Furthermore, EWRs often face limitations due to a lack of adequate training, capacity building, and access to resources necessary for effective governance. They also continue to navigate patriarchal structures, gender-based discrimination, and, in some cases, violence and intimidation from powerful elements or male counterparts. The increasing

digitization of governance processes in the new millennium has also brought to the fore a digital divide, potentially hindering the effective participation of women with limited access to or literacy in digital technologies. (Sharma, 2025)

Despite these challenges, the new millennium has witnessed continued efforts and recommendations to empower women in local governance. Initiatives focusing on targeted capacity building, leadership training, and promoting digital literacy among EWRs are being recognized as crucial steps. There is also a growing emphasis on addressing the societal norms and patriarchal attitudes that underpin many of the challenges faced by women in these roles, through measures such as promoting positive masculinity campaigns and stricter enforcement of laws against proxy representation. (Bharadwaj, 2024)

Conclusion

Local governance in India has played a significant role in empowering women through the feminist movements of the 1970s and beyond. Despite significant challenges—including barriers to political participation and empowerment—the feminist movement has made notable progress toward women's empowerment, with women gaining visibility and success in various fields. However, there is still much work to be done to address issues related to subaltern forces, intersectionality, and opposition from traditionalist society.

Moving forward, policymakers and feminist theorists must work together to promote women's empowerment and gender equality through local governance structures. Ecofeminism could offer an alternative explanatory framework for understanding the interconnection between local governance, women's empowerment, and environmental sustainability.

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