'A Revisit to The Journey of Contemporary Indian Women's Movement Through the Lens of 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 the 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 is often linked with caste, class, urban, rural and community factors.

Furthermore, the study will provide a brief and critical overview of the current status of local governance in India and look into a future perspective on the way forward. 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 society has led to a myriad of gender issues being deeply embedded in social, economic, and political systems (Kumar, 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, 1999).

Over time, the movements underwent significant growth and maturing 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, 1999). Despite these achievements, the movement has also 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. Local governance systems can provide a platform for meaningful representation of women's issues and its solutions, especially for those from marginalized backgrounds. However, these structures also face challenges in terms of promoting gender equality and overcoming intersecting factors such as caste, class, urban, rural, and community factors.

Despite the hardships, such 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 its continued impact. As a result, new interpretations of their struggles have emerged, further deepening our understanding of the contemporary Indian women's movement's significance.

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 the empowerment of 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 its implications for local governance and gender equality. The main source of data was secondary, which involved reviewing and synthesizing points of views of various scholars from various esteemed academic journal

articles, books, reports, and online databases along with their given theoretical framework on the topic, that covered the historical, political, social, and cultural aspects of the women's movement in 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 from the sources were ensured by considering the ethical issues of plagiarism, citation, and methodology of sources by following the academic standards and guidelines and ensuring the verifiability of the publications.

The context to Local Governance in 1970 to 1990

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments were significant in that they established a formal system of local governance in India and provided for greater decentralization of power and decision-making at 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.

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 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 women had limited opportunities to participate in local governance (Bhat, Rouf, Wani, & Mohd., 2022).

According to a report published by the UN (United Nations, 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 did attempt 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 members of Panchayats were women, and only 5.5% of members of Municipalities 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 being 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 at that time period, the progress was slow and incremental. For example, in some states, local governments implemented programs aimed at improving women's access to the 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 often faced significant barriers due to cultural and social norms that limited women's opportunities and restricted their 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 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, 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 for the world, and it was marked by issues, including reproductive rights, workplace equality, sexual harassment and assault, gender roles, domestic violence and so on (Kumar, 1999). In India on the other hand, new Leftist ideas and movements developed. The most interesting movements for feminists in India in 1970s among these were:

The Shahada- briefly, it took place in Maharashtra's Dhulia district. It was a Bhil tribal landless labourer's movement in Maharashtra against anti-price hike agitations and exploitative local non-tribal landowners. This period's drought and famine in Maharashtra made the poverty already brought on by obscene sharecropping rates, land expropriation, and exorbitant finance fees even worse. All these factors fuelled the Bhil community's growing militancy. In the late 1960s, the Shahada movement got its start as a folk protest (through radical devotional singing clubs). As the New Left joined the movement in the early 1970s, the movement's campaigning became more aggressive. This movement later formed an organisation known as the Shramik Sangathana in 1972 and saw a huge participation of women. (Kumar, 1999)

The Nav Nirman Movement of 1974 was the Shahada Movement's successor in Gujarat and other regions of the nation. Nav Nirman began as an anti-rising-price, anti-corruption, and anti-black marketeering student movement. This 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. In the three months it took the authorities to put an end to the Nav Nirman movement. (Kumar, 1999)

Taking its inspiration, Chipko Andolan, took place in 1973 in the village of Mandal, in the state of Uttarakhand, India which clearly showed how much women had to defy local governing officials (Pathak, S., & Chaudhary, M., 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 who work in various trades in the unorganised sector. However, these women had a lot in common, including harassment from 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 circumstances while also promoting Gandhian ideals of honesty, dignity, and simplicity (Kumar, 1999).

The Ideas Behind Early Feminist Campaigns

These new women's groups that were getting formed declared themselves that they were "feminist," even though most of them were from *leftist organisations* (Kumar, 1999). And the left saw the feminist groups to be bourgeois and divisive. Although the majority of them belonged to other political groups, they insisted on being an independent organisation as well. They quickly established networks with one another.

Since the early feminist groups were primarily composed of urban educated middle-class members, they complicatedly influenced the feminist movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s because they were unable to speak for all Indian women. Some of the feminist groups believed in autonomy since they do not want to share the space with political organisations or parties. Many feminist groups were critical of *political parties and local governance* as 'hierarchical, self-interested and competitive.' (Kumar, 1999) Nevertheless, they also believed that political *participation in local governance by women can enact valuable reforms and fulfil feminist aims*. Mahila Dakshata Samiti (Women's Self-Development Organisation), which was founded by socialist women in 1977 in alliance with the Janata Party, was one of the party-based women's organisations that was formed in the late 1970s.

While city-based organisations dominated the effect of feminist campaigns in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was a parallel rise in feminist consciousness in *rural areas and its local government*. For example--- the 1950s Telangana's share cropper's movement (it was a peasant movement by the cultivators of Hyderabad). The movement was renewed again in 1970s and began with a campaign against the kidnapping of a woman and murdering her husband (Sucha Singh Gill, 2005).

Dowry and Rape- Priority for Indian Feminists

The dowry and rape were the targets of the initial campaigns of the modern Indian feminist movement (Kumar, 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 an emergency, this did not fully materialise. Following the emergency in Delhi, a new anti-dowry movement was launched throughout India. This movement opposed violence against women for dowries, including the aiding and abetting of murder and suicide. (Kumar, 1999)

Despite the fact that the Mahila Dakshata Samiti was the first women's organisation in Delhi's modern feminist movement to address the issue of dowry, Stri Sangharsh, a fledgling feminist organisation created in 1979, was responsible for bringing dowry-related crimes to the public's attention. Up until that point, women who died in fires were thought to have committed suicide, and dowry harassment was rarely associated with suicides. Nobody, not even the police, has ever bothered to look into or even classify them. They were made to appear as though they were family affairs that the state had no business getting involved in. (Kumar, 1999)

All these feminist groups came up and campaigned against all these and encouraged women to come up and complain regarding all these issues. They also did street plays and organised a series of public meetings. The government introduced a legislation against dowry-related crimes in 1980, one year after the anti-dowry movement gained traction. This law designated aiding suicide due of dowry demands as a particular offence and mandated a police investigation into any woman's death within five years of marriage. The law, however, significantly let down the feminists. (Kumar, 1999)

The Criminal Law (Second Amendment) Act was once more passed in December 1983, making cruelty to a spouse a cognizable, non-bailable offence punishable by up to three years in jail and a fine. The law also expanded the definition of cruelty to encompass verbal and physical abuse (Ministry of Law and Justice , 2018).

This overall campaign against dowry related crimes led feminists to various conclusions. They understood that they can get *massive support for campaigns against some kinds of crimes* and found out how *hard it was to fight with the law from local level* against such crimes if one is not attached to the *local governance or any political alliance*. (Kumar, 1999)

The agitation against rape began with campaigns against *police rape* just a few months following the campaign against dowry-related offences. In rural and tribal areas, *local government employees commit rapes* more than once every day, according to police statistics (excluding mass rapes by the police). Since the Maoist Movement tackled local police and landlord rapes, the new feminist groups founded in 1970 were already familiar with these categories. However, a 1978 incident in Hyderabad where a woman was raped by numerous cops brought this to the public's notice (Barkha, 2013).

These efforts became more intense in 1980 after feminist groups launched a campaign in response to an open letter sent by four senior lawyers opposing a ruling in the rape of a police officer in Maharashtra. Mathura was a free-spirited woman who had a lover, according to the

letter. So, she will not be deemed to have been raped. Then, a new phase in the advancement of feminism in India was characterised by the rape movement. The networks that had started to form were later widened and used to plan out the course of action. In February 1980, the Forum Against Rape (FAR), now known as the Forum Against Oppression of Women, decided to campaign for the case's reopening. They wrote to feminist organisations across the nation to suggest holding demonstrations on March 8 to demand a new trial. This was the first national campaign that feminist organisations had coordinated. (Kumar, 1999)

In response to the FAR letter, groups in seven cities held protests calling for a new trial. *Political parties at all levels* used the issue of rapes for their benefits. The Supreme Court Judgement redefined what is rape. (Kumar, 1999)

Transformation of the Feminist Tactics

Many feminists questioned the strategies used in the anti-dowry and anti-rape campaigns as a result of their uneven results. They discovered their demands were not into effort of implementation of laws *unless they are coming from some local government affiliation*. So, regardless of how long it took, they chose to take on specific cases and see them through the complexities of the legal system. Due to their belief that these earlier forms of agitation had limited impact, feminists started to distance themselves from public campaigns, marches, and street theatre. (Kumar, 1999)

In the early 1980s, therefore they established women centres in various cities. These new centres were different in many ways- centres decided to provide help on a wide inter related issues unlike older centres. The new centres were explicitly feminist unlike older ones which had social welfare ideology. They put an effort to have feminist concept of sisterhood into practice. Hence, many centres had names like "Saheli" in Delhi, and "Sakhi Kendra" in Kanpur.

During the period of 1970-90, local governance in India saw a growing feminist movement that diversified into various activities such as slum improvement work, employment generating schemes, health education, environmental ethos, and trade unions. The movement also had an impact on professions such as journalism, academia, and medicine, with major English daily newspapers having one or more women journalists writing exclusively on feminist issues. The Voluntary Health Association of India and other medical organizations also worked closely

with women's organizations on campaigns against harmful pregnancy testing and contraceptive drugs. (Kumar, 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 the ecological crises and the marginalization of women in 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, the Gandhian philosophy, the socialist ideology, the 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.

One of the main themes of ecofeminism in India is 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.

Another theme of ecofeminism in India is the critique of development models that are 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. Ecofeminists 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.

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 analyze the stories and struggles of women who have fought against environmental injustice and oppression in

different settings. Some of the examples of such movements are: 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 environment 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 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 that this requires systemic changes in social and economic structures at local level. With the current scenario, there is a long way to go.

Challenges of the Decade- Case of Intersectionalities

In 1985, feminists became especially divided over the subject of family law that is based on personal, or religion-based, distinctions. This is what is illustrated well in the Shah Bano Case. It became a controversy over the relationship between *secularism, communalization of local governing 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, 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 judgement was widely criticised by feminists, liberals, and secularists who saw it as a setback for women's rights, as well as Muslim leaders for it seemed unduly weighted critical comments on Muslim personal law. The religious priests issued a fatwa (proclamation) that the judgement violated the teachings of Islam. Within few months the whole issue became communal agitation claiming that Islam was in danger. However, one needs to know that the issue became heated because the Babri Masjid issue and the Shah Bano case began to be linked as representing a Hindu communal onslaught on Muslims (Kumar, 1999).

The Matrabhumi now, is presented as a *repeatedly raped female body* and the myth of the *enemy within and of Muslim lust* plays 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 the 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 in the secularism they practise. Muslim women were having a choice of being Indian or Muslim. Women on the right were set up feminist project which supported the caste and class hierarchy and othering of Islam. (Susie, Tharu, & Niranjana, 1999)

Locally, this whole event brought a trend for others to follow where a *"real woman"* will be the one who followed men in demonstrations against Shah Bano. This position of "real women" was in total opposition to the feminism. Similarly, another case of Sati during 1987-88 also followed the heels of the Muslim agitation. In September 1987, an incident of Sati in the

village of Rajasthan sparked off a campaign that gave rights to the debate of right and wrong of Hindu women. Various Rajputs claimed that Sati should be recognised by the *State and local governments including panchayats and municipalities*, and delegitimizing it will be a deliberate attack on the traditions of the Rajputs. Various Pro-Sati campaigns claim Sati was a true desire of Hindu women and accused the feminists of being unrepresentative. *Local governing bodies were becoming helpless to feminist ideas.* (Kumar, 1999)

The debate over *tradition vs modernity* separated feminists even further. 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 was a significant loss for the movement. (Kumar, 1999)

Another case of challenge to feminist movement can be seen in the introduction of national 'family welfare' or 'population control' programmes of long-acting hormonal implants or injectables, RU 486, the abortifacient pills which contradicts with the feminist demands of *freedom, choice and self-determination*. It emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, since the issue of population control was a key concern for the Indian government, various policies and such programs were introduced to address it through local governments that were controlled by state as has been mentioned before. The introduction of national family welfare or population control programs, 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 their 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 their reproductive health. Women's life, self-determination and choice rights, 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 situations, the feminist credentials of those who research and advocate these contraceptives are seamless.

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 with women's groups and health activists and then report to state and central government in a meaningful way to understand their concerns and incorporate them into policies and programs.

While there was some success in slowing population growth from all this, the policies also led to widespread abuse and violations of human rights. Since the local governance structures in place 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 front in almost every field. Gender bias were seen as the reason behind poverty and the economist began to stand for women empowerment. (Susie, Tharu, & Niranjana, 1999)Politicians were seen to campaign for women and many of them came to be elected as the leaders through proxy, by their husbands to gain mass attraction, starting first from local governing bodies.

Mass media also took a stand in support of the women by highlighting more of their role. Many women joined the literacy campaign and gained enough power to destabilized the economy of states (Case of Andhra Pradesh). In all matters, women and local governance stood for the subject of feminism itself and therefore, the new perspective is an index of the success of the women's movement, but this success also has a problem within it.

Projects and initiative issues critical to feminism such as the subaltern forces opened up and disturbed the working of local bodies. These crises were related to the crisis of democracy and secularism. The feminist theorists attempting to establish the term 'gender' during the 1970s and 1980s organized campaigns such as bringing the hostility and sexually threatening conditions of lower caste women every day to the forefront. They demanded legal right and enforcing law on such cases as custodial rape, family violence, dowry, inequalities in gender

relation etc. They also demanded real changes which would make law more sensitive. (Susie, Tharu, & Niranjana, 1999)

To keep gender and women's concerns from being absorbed by class analysis, feminist thinkers tried to broaden Marxist conceptions of labour to include domestic production. They also pointed out the vulnerability of women in workforce and neglection of the issue in local area politics and governing body at central level. Gross inequalities between gender in relation to factors such as health care were also demonstrated by examining patriarchal ideologies.

The late 1980 till 1990 faced a whole new set of political questions. This phase demanded engagement with issues of caste and religion and other new problems of liberalization. These questions came into contradictions with women's freedom, their self-determination, or their right to choose. The kind of contradictions that confront gender analysis are structurally like class analysis, case initiatives or democracy and secularism today.

Gender analysis, like class analysis, has exposed how the humanist subject and the social structures based on it functioned to legitimise bourgeois and patriarchal objectives. (Susie, Tharu, & Niranjana, 1999)What has never been clear is how both Marxist and feminist politics continue to utilise other aspects, such as caste or community, as well as the premises of secularism - democracy - that it invokes.

The formation of the normative human subject included a dialectical connection of inequality and contradiction with the classical subject of Western liberalism on the one hand, and its structure as upper caste, middle class, Hindu, and male on the other. This structure, elaborated and strengthened via a succession of confrontations, became invisible as this citizen - self was designed as contemporary, secular, and democratic. (Susie, Tharu, & Niranjana, 1999)

These impasses imply a breaking of the humanist consensus that has served as the foundation of both left and right-wing politics, as well as an opening up of opportunities for new political alignments and projects, preferably beginning with local administration, in order to provide regional diversity a solid framework. (Susie, Tharu, & Niranjana, 1999) Because we are focusing on the now, we are more concerned with the impact of past on the present.

The Way Forward

From 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 efforts to encourage female entrepreneurship, such as the Stand-Up India scheme, which gives loans to female entrepreneurs.

However, the contemporary women's movement in India still faces several challenges. Despite the increase in women's political representation, women's decision-making power in local governance remains limited due to societal norms, stereotypes that see women as an object of reproduction, and patriarchy. Women also face neglection of justice in cases of discrimination and violence in various forms, such as sexual harassment in local governing bodies specifically, even after so many 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 and 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. The government and civil society need to continue supporting women's entrepreneurship and education, as well as 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 the primary caregivers and have a unique perspective on issues related to food, water, and land.

In conclusion, the contemporary women's movement in India has made significant progress towards women's empowerment in the last two decades, but there is still a long way to go to implement it inside local governing bodies to make big impact locally. By addressing the challenges and building on the progress made, India can continue to empower women and ensure gender equality in all aspects of society.

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 progress towards 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, and ecofeminism could provide an alternative explanation for the interconnection between local governance, women's empowerment, and environmental sustainability.

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Author bio

Tanya is a dedicated Social Science Researcher with a focus on gender dynamics, media influence, climate change, and the sociology of ethics. She has done her Masters in Sociology from Jawaharlal Nehru University, and was trained in methodology, statistics, and techniques in social sciences. Awarded several travel grants for presentations and guest lectures including by Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (The Netherlands), and Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (Korea), she brings a global perspective to her work. Her recent studies delve into the construction of public discourse in contemporary India, exploring the impact of neo-colonization and globalization. Committed to advancing knowledge and fostering meaningful dialogue, she brings a nuanced perspective to the intersection of societal trends and global forces.