Contours of Change: An Empirical Review of Feminism in Contemporary India

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Abstract: This paper provides an empirical review of feminism in India, focusing on its diverse trajectories, evolving discourses, and intersectional challenges. Drawing on peer-reviewed studies, field-based research, and feminist scholarship from the past two decades, the review interrogates the relationship between feminist praxis and broader social structures, including caste, religion, class, and region. It critically examines key sites of feminist activism—such as legal reform, education, digital platforms, and grassroots mobilization—while highlighting tensions between liberal, Dalit, Adivasi, queer, and Islamic feminist frameworks. The analysis foregrounds the experiences and epistemologies of subaltern women and gender minorities to challenge hegemonic constructions of Indian feminism rooted in urban, upper-caste, and English-speaking milieus. Additionally, the review evaluates empirical contributions to debates on gender-based violence, labor rights, and political representation. Despite gains, the evidence reveals persistent patriarchal control within families, workplaces, and state institutions. The review concludes with a call for decolonial, coalition-based feminist praxis that prioritizes intersectionality, community-led research, and policy engagement rooted in local realities.

Keywords: Indian feminism, intersectionality, caste and gender, feminist activism, empirical review, gender-based violence

1. Introduction

Feminism in India is not a monolithic or linear project but a contested, multi-vocal, and evolving field of thought, activism, and research. Unlike Western feminist trajectories that often emphasize a singular timeline of "waves," Indian feminism is marked by discontinuities, multiple points of origin, and embeddedness in distinct socio-cultural

contexts. It is shaped by—and simultaneously shapes—complex power relations involving caste hierarchies, religious identities, regional disparities, and economic stratifications.

Since the post-independence period, feminist mobilizations in India have contributed significantly to the reshaping of legal frameworks, educational opportunities, and public discourse around gender. They have intervened in issues ranging from dowry and domestic violence to workplace harassment and reproductive rights. Yet, Indian feminism's empirical terrain is riddled with tensions. Questions of who speaks for whom, whose experiences are foregrounded, and which forms of resistance are recognized, remain central to contemporary debates.

This review seeks to map key empirical contributions that have examined the practice, evolution, and impact of feminist thought and activism across the Indian subcontinent. It gives particular attention to intersectionality—especially the interplay between gender, caste, religion, and class—and explores the emerging shifts brought about by digital activism, legal reform, grassroots mobilizations, and critiques of institutional co-optation. The review draws on a broad spectrum of empirical studies, ethnographies, and community-based research to foreground feminist praxis that is both contextually rooted and structurally aware.

2. Historical Trajectories of Feminism in India

2.1 Pre-independence Feminist Movements

Indian feminism has deep historical roots, emerging not solely in reaction to Western feminism but in tandem with local struggles against colonialism, casteism, and gendered exclusion. The pre-independence period witnessed the rise of reformist and radical figures who challenged prevailing norms around women's education, widow remarriage, child marriage, and caste-based violence.

Savitribai Phule, often regarded as the first female teacher in India, co-founded schools for girls and Dalit children alongside her husband Jyotirao Phule, directly contesting Brahmanical patriarchy and caste apartheid. Her writings and activism addressed the intersecting oppressions faced by lower-caste women, making her an early exemplar of intersectional feminist praxis (Rege, 1998). Similarly, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a Bengali Muslim educator and reformer, advanced women's education through the founding of the

Sakhawat Memorial School for Girls and critiqued patriarchal interpretations of religion through her satirical writing, including *Sultana's Dream* (1905).

Pandita Ramabai, a Brahmin convert to Christianity, provided searing critiques of upper-caste Hindu patriarchy, especially through her work *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (1887). She also established institutions for widows and orphans and worked to empower women through education and vocational training. These early reformers did not always identify with the term "feminist," but their work laid the foundations for a distinctly Indian feminist consciousness that was deeply concerned with both social justice and gender equity.

Importantly, much of this activism unfolded within and alongside nationalist struggles. However, many nationalist leaders expected women to serve the cause of freedom while maintaining traditional roles, leading to tensions that feminist scholars continue to explore (Sarkar, 2002). This paradox—wherein women were both mobilized and marginalized—has remained a recurrent theme in Indian feminist historiography.

2.2 Post-independence and the Women's Movement

In the decades following independence, women's issues were initially subsumed under broader development frameworks and nation-building goals. However, by the 1970s, a distinct feminist movement began to crystallize in response to the state's failures to address violence against women and gender inequality. A key moment came with the Mathura rape case in 1972, in which a young Adivasi girl was raped by police officers in custody. The subsequent acquittal of the perpetrators led to widespread protests and catalyzed a wave of feminist legal activism.

This period saw the rise of autonomous women's groups across urban centers such as Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, and Bangalore. These groups organized around issues such as dowry deaths, custodial rape, female infanticide, and domestic violence. Their work was deeply empirical, often relying on data collection, case studies, and community investigations to build public pressure and influence legislation. The protests led to significant legal reforms, including amendments to the Indian Penal Code and the establishment of more stringent provisions against rape (Kumar, 1993; Desai & Thakkar, 2001).

In parallel, feminist academics began critically engaging with development policies and social structures, documenting how patriarchal norms were embedded in state welfare schemes, education systems, and labor markets. For instance, studies by Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah (1992) illustrated how the state's development agenda often co-opted feminist vocabulary while sidelining women's autonomy.

Yet, the early Indian women's movement was often critiqued for its urban, middle-class, Savarna (upper-caste) orientation. Scholars such as Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege have argued that Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim women's experiences were insufficiently represented in mainstream feminist platforms during this era. These critiques set the stage for the rise of more diverse and decentralized feminist formations in subsequent decades, including Dalit feminism, Adivasi women's collectives, queer feminist networks, and Islamic feminist initiatives.

3. Intersectionality in Indian Feminist Research

Intersectionality—a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw—has become indispensable to understanding the layered experiences of gendered oppression in India. Indian feminist scholarship has increasingly turned to intersectional frameworks to analyze how caste, class, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, and region structure women's and gender minorities' lives. Empirical studies foreground the inadequacy of single-axis analyses and instead highlight how marginalities co-constitute one another within structures of systemic discrimination.

3.1 Caste and Feminist Praxis

Dalit and Bahujan feminist scholars and activists have long critiqued the Savarna-centric orientations of mainstream Indian feminism. While early feminist mobilizations focused on issues like dowry and rape, they often failed to address the systemic caste-based violence experienced by Dalit women. Rege (1998) introduced the concept of a "Dalit feminist standpoint," arguing for epistemic recognition of lived caste-gendered realities. Her ethnographic work in Maharashtra revealed how Dalit women's narratives disrupt both Brahmanical patriarchy and the middle-class liberal feminist canon.

Similarly, Paik (2014), through her extensive archival and field research, demonstrated how Dalit women navigate the oppressive triad of caste, gender, and colonial-modern state

structures—particularly in the realm of education and reproductive autonomy. Empirical studies from rural Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra (Teltumbde, 2018) illustrate that for many Dalit women, activism is not just about gender justice but about dignity, land rights, and survival.

Further, contemporary Dalit feminists such as Cynthia Stephen and Sheetal Sathe have contributed autoethnographic and participatory research that exposes how caste impinges on bodily autonomy, access to sanitation, reproductive care, and justice after sexual violence. Importantly, these critiques have led to calls for rethinking feminist solidarity through anti-caste coalitions rather than abstract sisterhood.

3.2 Adivasi and Indigenous Women

Adivasi and Indigenous women in India have been doubly marginalized—first by state developmentalism and second by feminist discourses that often ignore Indigenous ontologies. Empirical studies in Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Jharkhand (Xaxa & Boro, 2016) have documented the disproportionate impact of mining, displacement, and armed conflict on Adivasi women. For instance, state counter-insurgency operations in Bastar have led to routine sexual violence and surveillance of Indigenous women, a reality often invisibilized in national feminist agendas.

Narain (2019), through participatory fieldwork with Dongria Kondh women in Odisha, critiques the failure of environmental and gender justice movements to meaningfully engage with Indigenous epistemologies. Adivasi feminism is not merely about inclusion but about sovereignty, land, and the reclamation of traditional knowledges. The empirical evidence suggests a pressing need for solidarity models that are non-assimilative, locally rooted, and respectful of cultural specificity.

3.3 Queer and Trans Feminist Interventions

Queer and trans feminist interventions have radically expanded the terrain of Indian feminism, challenging both heteronormative state structures and cis-centric feminist organizing. Community-based participatory research (Misra, 2021; Roy, 2020) has documented how trans-led organizations like the Karnataka Sexual Minorities Forum and

Sampoorna India have played central roles in campaigns around gender recognition, healthcare access, and livelihood security.

Particular focus has been placed on the critique of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, which many activists argue institutionalizes pathologization and surveillance. Field reports and interviews with trans activists in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal reveal dissonance between policy framing and ground realities, especially in terms of housing, employment, and legal autonomy.

Queer feminist work also addresses the exclusion of non-binary, intersex, and asexual individuals from legal and social frameworks. These interventions are backed by a growing body of empirical research, including oral histories, visual ethnographies, and digital storytelling projects, which resist dominant narratives of respectability and assimilation. Importantly, queer and trans feminists have raised critical questions about privilege, accessibility, and representation within mainstream Indian feminist spaces, often calling for an ethics of accountability.

4. Key Sites of Feminist Intervention

Indian feminism operates across multiple domains, responding to shifting political landscapes, neoliberal policy shifts, and changing cultural norms. Empirical studies have documented feminist interventions in legal reform, labor rights, education, and digital activism, revealing both gains and persistent gaps.

4.1 Gender-Based Violence and Legal Reform

The 2012 Delhi gang rape marked a watershed moment for feminist activism in India. It sparked national and international outrage, leading to the Justice Verma Committee Report and subsequent amendments to the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013. Studies by Chakrabarti and Dhar (2012) and Basu (2014) provided in-depth analyses of media coverage, protest repertoires, and the state's discursive response.

However, empirical studies in rural India and marginalized communities (Jha & Belliappa, 2019) underscore how caste, class, and location mediate access to justice. For instance, Dalit survivors of sexual violence often face police apathy, judicial delay, and societal

intimidation. Marital rape remains outside the purview of criminal law, despite persistent feminist advocacy. Moreover, the increasing use of carceral solutions—more policing, harsher punishments—has been critiqued by abolitionist feminists who emphasize restorative justice and community accountability.

4.2 Labor and Informal Economies

Indian women's labor force participation has stagnated or declined despite economic growth. Feminist economists (Ghosh, 2015; Kannan & Raveendran, 2019) attribute this trend to the informalization of labor, lack of childcare, and unpaid domestic work. Studies among domestic workers, street vendors, and home-based laborers reveal patterns of wage theft, sexual harassment, and absence of social protection.

Field research in Bangalore and Delhi (Sen & Kumar, 2020) highlights the emergence of feminist trade unions like the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and Gharelu Kamgar Union. These organizations employ feminist pedagogy and participatory governance to organize women workers across caste, religion, and ethnic lines. Yet challenges remain, particularly in extending labor protections to the gig economy and platform-based workers, many of whom are women.

4.3 Education and Empowerment

Government schemes such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, and the Right to Education Act have aimed to improve girls' educational outcomes. While statistical indicators show rising female enrollment, empirical studies paint a more complex picture. Research by Bhattacharya (2021) in Bihar and Rajasthan reveals persistent dropout rates among adolescent girls, largely due to early marriage, household labor, and lack of safe transport.

Qualitative studies also document the gendered nature of curricula, teacher attitudes, and classroom interactions. For instance, girls from Dalit and Muslim communities report facing both subtle and overt discrimination in school settings. Intersectional feminist pedagogy, though emerging in pockets, remains largely absent from national education policy.

4.4 Feminism and Digital Spaces

Digital platforms have opened new arenas for feminist mobilization, particularly among urban youth. Campaigns like #MeTooIndia, Pinjra Tod, and WhyLoiter have foregrounded everyday experiences of gendered violence, surveillance, and mobility restriction. Empirical analyses (Menon, 2020; Patel, 2019) show how social media enables affective solidarities, virality, and counter-publics.

However, digital feminism is also marked by exclusion and risk. Studies by Sharma (2022) indicate that rural, disabled, non-English-speaking, and queer voices are often marginalized in online movements. Moreover, women activists face relentless trolling, doxxing, and legal threats, often gendered and communal in nature. Intersectional digital activism must therefore be accompanied by robust strategies for online safety, consent, and inclusion.

5. Religion, Secularism, and Feminist Politics

5.1 Muslim Women and Feminist Agency

Empirical research on Muslim women in India has steadily moved beyond victim-centric narratives to illuminate the complex, agentic roles women play within and beyond religious frameworks. Rather than treating Islam as antithetical to feminist values, scholars have emphasized the multiplicity of interpretations and the capacity for internal reform. Bano (2017) and Zia (2012), for instance, highlight how Muslim women's organizations navigate Islamic jurisprudence (shari'a), challenge male-dominated religious authority, and create space for gender justice within personal law debates. Field studies from Kerala and Hyderabad document grassroots activism among Muslim women engaging with issues such as education, mobility, triple talaq, and communal violence, while also resisting the homogenizing narratives imposed by Hindu majoritarianism. These women negotiate dual patriarchies—one rooted in conservative interpretations of religion and the other in state and societal marginalization. Such empirical contributions underscore the situated knowledge and localized feminist praxis of Muslim women, revealing a vibrant terrain of activism informed by religious, cultural, and political pluralism.

5.2 Hindu Nationalism and Feminist Resistance

Feminist scholars have critically engaged with the growing influence of Hindutva ideology and its implications for gender and minority rights in India. Empirical analyses (Chatterjee,

2016; Jaffrelot, 2021) reveal how the Hindu nationalist state instrumentalizes gender by deploying the figure of the "Hindu woman" as a symbol of cultural purity, motherhood, and national honor. In doing so, Hindutva politics mobilize women not as agents of change but as markers of community boundaries and bearers of tradition. Studies document how state-sponsored policies and digital surveillance infrastructures disproportionately target Muslim and Dalit women under the pretext of protecting them—from "love jihad" to caste-based violence—while simultaneously erasing their agency. Ethnographic evidence from Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, and Delhi demonstrates how these strategies foster exclusion, fear, and communal polarization. Feminist resistance to such narratives involves both ideological critique and embodied protest—from Shaheen Bagh to student mobilizations—which assert secularism, intersectionality, and constitutional rights as the basis of feminist struggle.

6. Grassroots Feminism and Regional Mobilizations

The diversity of feminist praxis across India is perhaps most visibly articulated in regional and grassroots mobilizations that foreground local epistemologies, economies, and political conditions. Far from being peripheral, these movements often lead the way in redefining feminist agendas in contexts of poverty, militarization, environmental degradation, and political repression.

One of the most extensively documented grassroots initiatives is *Kudumbashree* in Kerala, which links gender justice with local governance, microfinance, and cooperative livelihoods (Nair & Krishnan, 2018). Through women's neighborhood groups and self-help collectives, the program facilitates economic empowerment and participatory decision-making, challenging the binary between welfare and rights-based approaches.

In the Northeast, feminist engagements are entangled with ethno-political struggles, colonial legacies, and military presence. Empirical studies (Baruah, 2010) from Manipur, Nagaland, and Assam illustrate how women's movements engage with militarization, especially through anti-AFSPA protests, peacebuilding campaigns, and indigenous knowledge reclamation. The Naga Mothers' Association and Meira Paibis exemplify how maternal symbolism and community organizing become tools for political resistance and social care. These mobilizations demonstrate that feminism in India cannot be confined to urban, English-

speaking spaces; it must be read through the plurality of regional histories, languages, and solidarities.

7. Challenges to Indian Feminist Praxis

7.1 Institutional Co-optation

One of the most pressing internal critiques of Indian feminism concerns its entanglement with the structures of neoliberal governance and international development agendas. As feminist organizations increasingly rely on donor funding and formal NGO frameworks, their autonomy, priorities, and accountability mechanisms have shifted (Sharma, 2008). Ethnographic research reveals that the bureaucratization of feminist activism often leads to depoliticization, where measurable outcomes, managerial tools, and donor expectations override grassroots consultation and democratic processes. This NGOization affects not only program design but also how feminist knowledge is produced and disseminated—privileging English, elite expertise, and technocratic logics.

7.2 Fragmentation and Gatekeeping

Indian feminism is not immune to hierarchies of caste, language, class, and region. Empirical studies (Roy, 2018; Soundararajan, 2020) highlight ongoing tensions within feminist spaces around inclusivity and representation. Dalit, Adivasi, Bahujan, queer, and trans activists have pointed to the dominance of savarna voices and the performativity of solidarity in mainstream feminist forums. These critiques often emerge from lived experience—documented through interviews, oral histories, and participant observation—which detail how institutional feminism can perpetuate forms of exclusion while claiming intersectionality. The debate is not merely ideological but structural: Who sets the agenda? Whose pain is centered? Whose knowledge counts?

7.3 Backlash and Repression

The resurgence of authoritarianism and digital surveillance in India has intensified the risks faced by feminist activists. State laws like the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) have been increasingly used to criminalize dissent, disproportionately impacting women human rights defenders, student activists, and journalists (Kaur, 2021). Empirical

documentation from Kashmir, Delhi, and Chhattisgarh shows how women at the frontlines face harassment, incarceration, and cyberviolence. Online abuse, including doxing and casteist-gendered slurs, has become a tool of intimidation and silencing. These developments signal a new phase of repression where feminist praxis itself becomes a threat to the state, even as it continues to generate solidarities across movements—from farmers' protests to anti-CAA mobilizations.

8. Toward a Decolonial and Intersectional Feminism

Empirical evidence across multiple sites—from rural grassroots movements to urban resistance networks—underscores the need for feminist praxis in India that is both decolonial and intersectional. Mainstream feminism, often anchored in urban, upper-caste, and English-speaking milieus, has struggled to represent the full spectrum of women's lived realities. Scholars such as Mohanty (2003) and Patel (2019) argue that feminist epistemology must shift from Western liberal paradigms toward frameworks that center subaltern knowledges and collective resistance.

Emerging empirical work reflects this shift. For instance, participatory action research with Adivasi women's collectives in Jharkhand and Odisha has revealed how Indigenous cosmologies, ecological knowledge, and land-based resistance challenge patriarchal development discourses (Narayan, 2022). Dalit feminist scholarship and activism have similarly foregrounded the centrality of caste in structuring gendered oppression—moving away from the often Brahmanical assumptions of "universal sisterhood."

Decolonial feminist praxis also involves interrogating knowledge hierarchies within academia. Field-based, community-led studies are increasingly replacing extractive research methods with co-authored knowledge production. For example, feminist scholars working with trans and queer communities in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra emphasize collaborative ethnographies that privilege community narratives and avoid voyeuristic framings (Menon & Kandasamy, 2020). This shift is also evident in digital feminist activism, where intersectional online campaigns—such as #DalitLivesMatter and #PinjraTod—are reshaping feminist discourses by foregrounding caste, religion, and regional diversity.

In sum, a decolonial and intersectional feminist approach in India is not merely a theoretical ideal—it is an empirical necessity born of decades of activism and research that challenge monolithic narratives of gender, identity, and justice.

9. Conclusion

Feminism in India continues to be a vibrant yet contested field marked by deep structural tensions and transformative possibilities. The empirical literature reviewed here reflects both the gains and limitations of feminist struggles. On one hand, Indian feminists have achieved significant victories in legal reform, educational access, and public visibility—often through strategic mobilization, litigation, and alliances with civil society. On the other hand, these gains are persistently undercut by enduring caste-gender hierarchies, institutional co-optation, NGOization, and state repression.

The review highlights the multiplicity of feminist expressions in India—from Muslim women's legal activism and Dalit feminist scholarship to Northeast-based anti-militarist movements and queer-trans resistances. Yet, challenges such as exclusionary practices within mainstream feminism, donor-driven distortions of movement priorities, and the criminalization of dissent remain significant.

Future feminist research and praxis must prioritize intersectionality not as a buzzword but as an analytical and political commitment. This involves centering the voices of those most marginalized—Adivasi women resisting mining projects, trans persons facing housing discrimination, Muslim women contesting Islamophobia, and Dalit women organizing against caste- and gender-based violence. Participatory methodologies, multilingual engagement, and coalition-building across social movements offer promising pathways forward.

Ultimately, the strength of Indian feminism lies in its plurality, its refusal to be co-opted, and its enduring aspiration toward collective liberation. It is not a singular narrative, but a polyphonic struggle that seeks justice not only for women, but for all those denied dignity by patriarchy, casteism, capitalism, and state violence.

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