

Comparison Between Mainstream and Indigenous Feminism: A Study of Lepcha and Galo Tribe of North-East India

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Abstract

This paper examines the differences between indigenous and mainstream feminism by studying the folktales of the Lepcha community of Sikkim and the Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Mainstream feminism puts its main emphasis on ensuring women and men are treated equally by the rules of law, politics and society. Meanwhile, indigenous feminism is shaped by the real lives of indigenous people where gender duties alter and form a pivotal role in community's life. This paper further deals with the indigenous feminism perspective in the folktales of both Lepcha and Galo tribe of North-East India.

Keywords: Mainstream feminism, Indigenous feminism, Lepcha, Galo, Folktales.

Introduction

Feminism as a global movement has evolved into diverse frameworks that address gender inequality through different cultural, historical and political lenses. Mainstream feminism in India has its root from the Western liberal thought which emphasizes Universal women's rights, legal equality and individualism autonomy. In contrast Indigenous feminism in India challenges these perspectives by centering indigenous sovereignty, relational accountability and de-colonial resistance. Mainstream feminism has historically prioritized issues such as workplace discrimination and reproductive rights, indigenous feminism expands the discourse by addressing intersecting operations including racism, environmental injustice and the legacy of colonial violence. Kim Anderson (2016) argues that indigenous feminist thought is not merely an offshoot of mainstream feminism but a distinct paradigm that asserts self-discrimination and cultural continuity as inseparable from gender justice.

This paper emphasizes on the feminist perspective of two communities of the North-East India namely the Lepchas aboriginal inhabitant of Sikkim and Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Further, it even highlights how mainstream feminism fails to recognise this indigenous feminism. The Lepchas are believed to be originally come from Mt. Khangchendzonga, there is a Kingdom of *Mayal* (Lepchas) (Mullard, 2011). The Galo tribe is one of the major communities in Arunachal Pradesh. They reside in the district of west Siang, Leparada and lower Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh (Taipodia, 2025). Both of these communities are rich in oral history and folklore, thus there are certain folklore which represent the importance and empowerment of women within their communities. Unlike mainstream feminism, indigenous feminism has its root on the mythology which basically talks about the strengths and powers

of the women.

Origin of Feminism

Feminism is the doctrine of social, political and economic equality of the sexes nevertheless; feminism has not been the same in the world at large. Feminism in the Western world has evolved with respect to legal and political disparities, like voting rights, educational and employment. This current of feminism is termed as mainstream feminism, which tends to focus on the experiences of White middle-class women in Europe and North America. It has helped in the fight for women's rights however; it has neglected to give voice to marginalised women due to which it gave birth to indigenous feminist movements with a focus on inter-sectionality. The Indigenous feminism emerged in the Global South and among marginalised communities. It encompasses the struggles of women who undergo multiple oppressions not only gender discrimination, but also caste, class, race, colonialism, and religion. Indigenous feminism in India, for instance, encompasses the voices of Dalit, Adivasi, and minority women challenging both patriarchy and caste violence.

Indigenous feminism started to “gain its prominence when some scholars from the Global South challenging the essentialist assumption of white feminist thought in order to advocate for more inclusive of non-Western perspective in gender studies” (Ekka and Giangthandunliu, 2024). There are some stances in which the scholars have argued that the mainstream feminism does not take into account the cultural variations in women's position and completely ignored the fact the colonialism gave birth to patriarchy. Therefore, mainstream feminism tends to generalize its perspective worldwide to which Ekka and Giangthandunliu (2024) states “Western feminism assumed the global as local”. In India where the patriarchy is deeply rooted has historical evidences of social evil practices and violence perpetuated against the Indian women. Thus there has been rise in the feminist movement since 19th century in India in order to emancipate and empower women as unlike Western feminism, Indian feminism also struggles against the cultural norms, caste hierarchies and even socio-economic inequalities (Sohini, 2023).

Issues and goals of Indigenous Feminism

Indigenous feminism de-constructs the concept of suppression experienced by the indigenous women and gendered diverse population. Inter-sectionality is the term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, in which she refers the interplay between different types of social stratification- race, gender, class and colonialism which creates specific modes of discrimination and upgradation (Green, 2007). Indigenous feminism imagines self-determination where there will be freedom from violence, the ability to live in healthy communities where families can be raised to be able to speak indigenous languages and the freedom to articulate gender and sexuality in culturally implicit ways. Furthermore, the indigenous feminist asks to re-enact the indigenous epistemology and cosmologies which recognize the sacred and the leadership of the women (Green, 2007). While mainstream feminism plays special attention to gender inequality through legal and institutional reforms, which concentrates on workplace discrimination, the gender gap, lack of women representation at leadership level. Another major area mainstream feminism focus is that of political empowerment targeting to increase women participation in governance. However, indigenous feminism are proponents of an identity politics that is based not only on gender and race but also in nationhood, culture resurgence and even right to self-determination (Green, 2007).

The Indigenous Feminist perspective in the folklore of the Lepcha and Galo tribe

In the Lepcha community of Eastern Himalayas, *Etboo-Deboorum* is known as mother creator an intrinsically powerful feminine element that served within the birth of cosmos and culture. This peak of idiosyncratic feminism which reverse wisdom of matriarchy lines, ecology preservation and confident women's position in creation of life and death (Bain, 2018). Moreover, there is also the presence of the legend of *Nyuliknyusung* who is remembered as a female healer in the Lepcha community who expresses a deep intersection of spiritual dominance, ecological protection and feminine power. She is the mediator between the human and the spirit world. In the Lepcha community she is considered to be the first *Mun* (traditional healer), only after her existence the presence of *Zor Bongthing* (who is considered as the first male traditional healer). It was believed that before the existence of the first *Bongthing* it was the *Mun* who performed all the rituals in the Lepcha community (Doma, 2018).

In Galo tribe, the *Mopin* festival is celebrated for harvesting and to mark the feminine divinity and matriarchal symbolism. According to the mythology, the *Ane Mopin* (the mother goddess) and her daughters Pinku and Pinte taught Abo Tani- the mythological ancestors of the Galo tribe about the knowledge of cultivation and the tools. This position women not only as nurturers but as providers too, who brings wisdom to human life, while Abo Tani, who is always considered as the sources of knowledge however, became the recipient here indicating a feminine influence in societal development (Padu, 2022). The tradition of naming children after the father's sister suggests a subtle but meaningful recognition of female lineage and kinship importance. One of the most significant parts of the *Mopin* is a ceremony carried out exclusively by women by carrying granary baskets and rituals items to the altar. This ceremony symbolizes that women are the custodian of community wealth, ritual purity and spiritual offering.

Conclusion

This showcases the limitation of mainstream feminism in taking into account the indigenous feminism which was practiced by the various tribes of the Global South such as the Galo and the Lepcha tribes of North-East India. The members of these tribes can be deemed to be proto-adherents of feminist principles even before the inception of feminism diffused as a worldwide movement. For instance, in the case of the Lepcha tribe both males and female shamans (*Mun*) possesses equal shamanic insight, power to propitiate the deities and conduct rituals. Adding further to this there is more number of female *Mun* and they are the one who conduct obsequies. Hence, the folklores of these communities stand as a quintessential in highlighting the role of women and place that has been conferred to women among these tribes which is contrary to the popular belief in other parts of the world. Even through Galo festival –*Mopin* one can understand the gender equality practiced by such tribes where they allow women to be imperative part of this celebration. Although, mainstream feminism is one of the most dominant school of thought but it is imperative to take into consideration the indigenous perspective on feminism, as in these small movements intersectional ideas and political identity exist.

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