

BOOK REVIEW

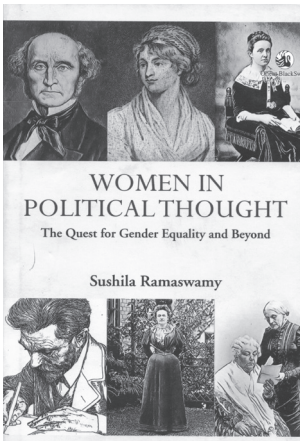
WOMEN IN POLITICAL THOUGHT

The Quest for Gender Equality and Beyond

ARVINDAR
SINGH

**WOMEN IN POLITICAL THOUGHT:
THE QUEST FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND BEYOND**

Author: Sushila Ramaswamy
Publisher: Orient BlackSwan, 2018
Details: pp. 393; Price: ₹995



The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world—this well-known proverb underlines the crucial role of women in various spheres of society since time immemorial. Feminism, in its various hues, has dominated political thinking in several countries since it was first used by the Oxford Dictionary in 1895 to signify the theory of sexual equality and the movement for women’s rights. Incidentally, the word ‘feminism’ owes its origin to the Latin word *femina*.

This book gives the reader a comprehensive feel of the subject of women’s movements, and the spirit behind them down the years. The author has done a good deal of research on the topic, which is evident. The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed a major impetus in the progress of women’s roles in political thinking as well as in other areas of activity. From this perspective, the invention of the bicycle in 1817 played a crucial role; for the first time 2 per cent of women took part in the Paris Olympics of 1900. Around this time, it became socially acceptable for girls of respectable families to work for pocket

money. In terms of suffrage, by 1918, all working-class men, and women from the age of 30, had secured the right to vote in Great Britain. This was reduced to 21 years in 1928, and to 18 in 1969.

Ramaswamy has covered events beginning with the French Revolution (1789), culminating with the Russian Revolution (1917) and the end of the First World War (1918), which brought exceptional changes in the status of women. Also worthy of mention is her attention to Mahatma Gandhi's role in providing suffrage and equal status to Indian women by involving them in a prominent manner during India's freedom struggle. This will undoubtedly be of interest to Indian readers of the book. Gandhi had given much support to the suffrage movement in England in his writings during the period the movement was at its peak. In the context of women's activism vis-à-vis the creed of non-violence, he had said: 'If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women.'

Women such as Aruna Asaf Ali, Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Madame Bhikaji Cama, played a vital role in national affairs to promote the cause of gender equality. Ramaswamy also holds forth on how effectively Ela Bhatt (the founder of SEWA [Self Employed Women's Association]), which provided avenues for economically weaker women to organise themselves by procuring loans and setting up small entrepreneurship), and Mohammad Yunus of Bangladesh (who established the Grameen Bank to help needy women by creating opportunities for self-employment through easy credit), led the way to women's emancipation. South Asia has also had a number of women as heads of state—Srimavo Bandaranaike, Indira Gandhi, Chandrika Kumaratunga, Khaleda Zia, Benazir Bhutto and Sheikh Hasina—which has contributed greatly to enhancing the cause of feminism in the region.

From a broader perspective, the book examines the references to sexual equality down the ages. Of the ancient thinkers, Plato was the first to argue that men and women ought to receive similar training for they were equally gifted intellectually. Although he disagreed with Plato on equality of the sexes, Aristotle emphasised that women be part of the educational system of Ancient Greece.

Coming to modern times, the issue of feminism in the United States will interest the discerning reader, and the book does not disappoint on that score. A significant role in this regard was played by Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams, the second president.

Through letters to her husband and other leaders, titled *Remember the Ladies* (1776), she stressed that laws framed by the new nation should protect women from the capricious and unrestrained power of male citizens. By 1841, many women were employed as bookkeepers in the United States, and by 1843 women had learnt to type. The demand for women's suffrage began to gain momentum in the 1840s, and was one of the main issues at the National Women's Rights Convention in 1850. Ultimately, the right to vote was granted nationally to women in 1920.

Philosophers like John Stuart Mill also played a significant part in the movement for woman's liberation in the 19th century. In his writings, Mill felt that gender was irrelevant to the grant of political rights; women ought to have an equal share in good governance as this concerned the welfare of society as a whole, and women were no longer in personal servitude. The Nobel Laureate Lord Bertrand Russell was another strong exponent of women's suffrage. He believed that women should have the right to vote as that would enable them to be the best judges of their interests. Russell went on to state that the right to vote enabled people to think responsibly and seriously, which cultivated self-respect; the right to franchise was a great mover of political education and would result in a broader outlook of life for women. Above all, he felt it would bring a sea change in the attitude of men towards women, thus enhancing their overall position in society.

The experiences of the First World War, as the author points out, brought about a marked change in fundamental thinking on the issue of women's empowerment, given the contribution of women to the war effort and their palpable ability to do jobs hitherto regarded as the exclusive domain of men.

The book covers feminism in the post-Second World War phase as well. The augmentation of franchise, the occupational diversification among the working class, the proactive role of trade unions, and a period of growth and prosperity among the developed countries, accompanied by a phase of relative peace the world over, resulted in the growth of women's participation in various walks of life, coupled with a betterment of their lot in general. Moreover, adequate light has been thrown by the author on liberal feminism as well as the feminist movement in Russia post the 1917 Revolution.

Women's issues can often be controversial as well. This aspect, though not part of this book, is relevant to the subject. The line from William Congreve—'Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned'—remains fairly true even in the present day. Morarji Desai realised it in 1977, when, soon after he became prime minister, he said in an interview to *Time* magazine, 'When a woman turns devilish she beats all records, no man can equal her.' This led to women demonstrating vociferously outside the prime minister's residence and in Parliament. Although he had made the comment in the context of Indira Gandhi's role during the Emergency, even a generally unyielding man like Morarji Desai had to tender an apology, bringing out the might of women's power.

The book holds a good deal of in-depth material on the role of women, both in political thought and gender equality, and promises to be useful to scholars as well as the general reading populace. Having said that, one must mention that it is written with the emphasis of the textbook genre. This steals the colour which could have come about if some real-life incidents had been added. A more detailed mention could have been made of some prominent women and their contributions the world over: Florence Nightingale, who made nursing a devotion rather than a profession; Mother Teresa, who did enormous work among the ill and homeless; Marie Curie, who played a major role in the invention of the X-ray machine, and was the first woman recipient of the Nobel Prize; Clara Barton, who founded the American Red Cross Association; Amelia Earhart, the first woman to fly across the Atlantic; Helen Keller, the first blind-deaf-mute to receive a Bachelor of Arts degree, and a great champion of the rights of people with disabilities; and Emmeline Pankhurst, who founded the Women's Social and Political Union, to name a few. This would indisputably have added lustre to this work.

However, looking at it as a bibliophile one can indeed say that Ramaswamy has done justice to the subject which is relevant in the present day with a historical perspective.

