

Gender, Body and Morality: From an Indian Feminist Perspective

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The phenomenon of creating ethical and moral boundaries for women continues to have its hold even today in Indian Society. It has taken on both new and familiar ways. The familiar ways continue - surveillance over where women go, what they wear, how they walk, how they speak and laugh, who they speak to, with whom should they relate, how far should they relate, how they dress up, and so on. And the newer forms are seen in legislative force or coercive violence or institutional alarm, or a nebulous and unwritten moral social force. This is done often in the name of protecting the Indian culture and traditions against Westernisation. Moreover the guardians of Indian culture seem to justify their horrendous actions against women by disseminating that the behaviour of women affects the dignity and the ethics of Indian Society.

In the first part of this paper, the author brings to light and debates how some of the issues concerning female morality in India, threatens the very right and dignity of women, creating an environment of threat and terror. The author also poses the following questions to those who consider themselves guardians of the Indian culture and morality; Where is the dignity and ethics of Indian culture when year after year so many babies are killed right inside their mother's womb? Where did the guardians of Indian culture go when women are tortured right inside their homes, burnt to death, or even buried alive during communal riots?

In the second part, she explores the possibilities for Indian feminists to evolve ethics for themselves in the given context of India.

1. Introduction

India is a land of ethics and morality. It is a land of non-violence and peace. It is a land of many gods and goddesses. It is a land of many religions and religious founders. It is a land of saints and sages. It is a land of many temples or *mandirs*,¹ churches, mosques and *gurdwaras*.² It is a land of *pujas* and *puranas*. It is a land of religious ritual and highest spirituality. However, a peep into the Indian reality forces one to raise eye-brows and ask the following question; is the country moving towards pseudo-morality?

The mechanisms and the politics of control that has been strategically manipulated and adapted under the garb of morality to keep women under constant threat and surveillance are heart-rending. Here below we shall see few important moral issues³ that impinge on women's dignity and life.

1.1 Dress Code and Women

One of the ways by which the morality of a woman is determined is their attire. Humiliating statements and destroying dictates concerning dress code are visible even today in India. One such evidence is the remark made by the Karnataka Chief Justice on February 9, 2008, about women's immodest attire being partially responsible for increasing crimes against them. His statement goes like this: "Nowadays, women wear such kind of dresses even in temples and churches that when we go to places of worship, instead of meditating on God, we end up meditating on the person before us." He

¹ A *mandir* is a place of worship for followers of Hinduism. It can be a separate structure or a part of a building.

² A *Gurdwara*, literal meaning "the doorway to the guru", is a place of worship for Sikhs, the followers of Sikhism and also a place where weary travellers and pilgrims may rest and eat. A *Gurdwara* is also referred to as a "Sikh temple".

³ I choose these issues because I consider them very important for women.

added, "Provocative dresses that women wear in buses" put the "men travelling in buses" in awkward situations and hence, "women must dress modestly."⁴

The schools and colleges that young women attend have been the common battlegrounds for moral policing regarding dress code.⁵ The horrific event like women being shot dead and be-headed just because they did not follow the dress dictate promulgated by a militant group insisting that all women wear veils, continues to create waves of fear among girls in the Kashmir valley even in 21st century. This has even led them to go into hiding and their attendance in schools and colleges have begun to drop drastically. The problem of dress code is raised not just in conflict zones like the Kashmir valley but also in the relatively peaceful state like Tamilnadu.

The ugliest head of dress code was also seen in Delhi, the capital of India, when the Delhi Police distributed a booklet tips for Northeast women in the capital. This booklet is nothing but a suggestion on their dress code. Under security tips: "Revealing dress to be avoided." "Avoid lonely road/by-lane when dressed scantily". And "dress according to sensitivity of the local population." The booklet suggests indirectly that crime against women could be because of the way they dress.

⁴ Shoma Chatterji, "Dress code Wars Continue," *India Together* (23 Feb 2008), 1.

⁵In September 1997, the co-educational Christ College in Bangalore banned girls from wearing jeans and short skirts, as they were termed 'indecent'. In March 1999, Berhampore Girls College placed a placard at the gate banning entry to all girls not wearing the sari. The announcement endorsed a 1947 decision by the college authorities to ban any form of dress other than the sari for girls on the campus. In 2000, almost all girls' colleges in Kanpur implemented the dress code laid down by Akhil Bharthiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP, the student wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party) ruling that women cannot wear jeans or skirts to college. In September 2007, eight teachers of Bakrahahat Girls High School in Bishnupur, on the southern fringes of Kolkata, attended work eight days after they were heckled, threatened and humiliated by students, parents and even the general public for having worn the *sahwar-kameez* to school. The police escorted them to duty. In a complaint lodged with the Bishnupur police station, the eight teachers said that they were scared to return to school.

The girls and young women have no freedom of choice regarding their dress code even today. The parents, authorities, and the society continue to come on them powerfully in the name of morality and Indian culture. Behind these dictates and expectations, lie both fear and a desire to control. The fear arises out of the widely held belief that women must be protected, that they will unwittingly invite rape and sexual violence if they don't hide their sexuality, if they don't conform to the way society (that is men) want them to dress.

And the second reason is the desire to control. Women, more especially, women's sexuality must be controlled, so that they do not upset the status quo. A woman, who refuses to conform to male dictates, is considered as lacking morality. When a dress code is imposed on women, it is always accompanied by threats of violence, or punishment. This is where the issue of free choice ends and regimentation begins.

1.2 Ban on the Livelihood of Bar Dancers

On July 21, 2005, in Maharashtra, a bill was passed to ban the dance bars and the ban came into effect from August 15, 2005. The issue came into the public eye when a ban was proposed by the Maharashtra government on women dancing in dance bars across the state in March 2005, stating that this was "corrupting the young" and tainting the moral fabric of society.

What is important to be noted here is the manner in which an important issue relating to women was discussed and the comments that were passed on the floor of the House, by the elected representatives of India, who are under the constitutional mandate to protect the dignity of women.⁶ For instance, an esteemed member narrated an incident of his friend's daughter

⁶ Although some of them had withdrawn their statements still this cannot obviate the fact that this is the way the elected representatives think about women. The women who opposed were made fun and laughed at.

who had committed suicide because she did not get a job. He said it was more dignified to commit suicide than to dance in bars. The message for women is clear: If you happen to be born in a poor family, you are better off dead! Another esteemed member declared, 'We are not Taliban, but somewhere we have to put a stop. The moral policing we do, it is a good thing, but it is not enough ... we need to do even more of this moral policing.'⁷

Besides, when the bars are raided, it is the girls who are arrested, but the owners are let off. During the raids the police molest them, tear their clothes, and abuse them in filthy language. At times, the girls are retained in the police station for the whole night and subjected to further indignities. But in the litigation, the concerns of these girls are not reflected. While for the bar owners it is a question of business losses, for the bar girls⁸ it is an issue of human dignity and right to livelihood.

1.3 Inhuman Practice of Chastity belt

A lady was found bleeding from her thighs in a public bus in the north-western Indian state of Rajasthan. The doctors who examined her found that she was wearing a chastity belt; the bleeding was a result of injuries from the belt.⁹

The practice of forcing women to wear a chastity belt is so common in Rajasthan that a website hosting advertisements of Indian industries boasts various designs of chastity belts, including those made from precious metals like gold and silver. Forcing women to wear chastity belts is only one indicator

⁷ Flavia Agnes, "Hypocritical Morality," *India Together* (October 2005), 1.

⁸ The newspapers reported that the bar girls in Mumbai alone around 75,000 in number. The newspaper interview revealed that 50 percent of the women were from backward castes, marginalized communities and notified tribes of Madhya Pradesh. 50 percent were illiterate and only 25 percent had studied beyond the primary level while in 60 percent of the cases, women were the sole breadwinners of their families.

⁹ Asian Human Rights Commission – Statement, "Forcing women to wear a chastity belt is a common practice in Rajasthan," August 3, 2007.

of the violence against women's body exercised in Rajasthan. A woman who wears a chastity belt is considered as a woman of high morality. Otherwise, she is considered as a loose woman in character. Besides, this also reveals about the society in which women are not safe and trusted.

1.4 Honour Killing

Honour killing is another horrific way by which women suffer in India. Human Rights Watch defines "honour killings" as follows: "Honour crimes are acts of violence, usually murder, committed by male family members against female family members, who are held to have brought dishonour upon the family. A woman can be targeted by (individuals within) her family for a variety of reasons, including: refusing to enter into an arranged marriage, being the victim of a sexual assault, seeking a divorce—even from an abusive husband—or (allegedly) committing adultery. The mere perception that a woman has behaved in a way that "dishonours" her family is sufficient to trigger an attack on her life."¹⁰

Women across India are murdered for daring to marry without their family's acceptance and in some cases for marrying outside their caste or religion. In Haryana, for example, a couple of such incidents still occur every year.¹¹ Bhagalpur in the northern Indian state of Bihar has also been notorious for honour killings.¹² Recent cases include a 16-year-old girl, Imrana, from Bhojpur was set on fire inside her house on Monday in a case of what the police called 'moral vigilantism'. The victim had screamed for help for about 20 minutes before neighbours arrived only to find her still smouldering. She was admitted to a local hospital where she later succumbed to her

¹⁰Cf. "Violence Against Women and "Honour" Crimes". Human Rights Watch. http://www.hrw.org/press/2001/04/un_oral12_0405.htm. Retrieved 2001-04-06 Viewed on 12.10.2009.

¹¹ "Indian village proud after double 'honor killing.'" *Reuters*. May 16, 2008.

¹² "Eight beheaded in Indian honor killing". *United Press International*. February 12, 2009.

injuries.¹³ Another case in May 2008, Jayvirsingh Bhadodiya shot his daughter Vandana Bhadodiya and struck with her in the head with an axe.¹⁴

The concepts of women as property and honour are so deeply entrenched in the social, political and economic fabric of Indian culture that the government, for the most part, ignores the daily occurrences of women being killed and maimed by their families. Frequently, women murdered in “honour” killings are recorded as having committed suicide or died in accidents.

1.5 Public Physical attack on Women

On January 24, 2009, 40 male members of the Sri Ram Sene, an ultra-orthodox Hindu political group based in Mangalore, entered a Mangalore pub called Amnesia and beat up the women who were present, dragging them into the streets. The public physical attacks by the Ram Sene on women in Karnataka in January 2009 illuminate middle class anxieties around the legitimacy of women occupying public urban spaces as citizens, upwardly mobile professionals, and global consumers.

These above incidences demonstrate a state of injustice which is being legitimized in the name of culture and morality. They are not accidents or rare occurrences; they are the routine of a perverse society. These live issues from the soil of India not only convey men’s irresistible desire to control and to take hold of women and their body and sexuality but also raise serious questions about the whole notion of Indian morality which brings to light the contradictions inherent in the Indian culture.

¹³<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Cities/Lucknow/16-year-old-burnt-in-Gzb-honour-killing/articleshow/4311952.cms> Viewed on 22.11.2009.

¹⁴“Father_kills_daughter_in_honour_killing_in_western_India”

http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/southasia/news/article_1405020.php/ Viewed on 22.11.2009.

2. Moral Policing on Women through the Ages

Morality has historically been a powerful tool of social and political control over women. The discourse of morality in India has been largely focused on and targeted at women, particularly related to their body and sexuality. The bases of these declarations of 'morality' are often prejudices, which are often used as an argument to justify the inferiority of women. Historically, moral declarations have served to mark and maintain the boundaries and limits within which women can operate, and have been fundamental to preserving the sanctity and legitimacy of patriarchal institutions of religion, family, nation, race, caste and community. Any challenges to these institutions have been met with outraged moral affront.

Down the centuries there are myths that perpetuate these understanding of morality. One such myth is the myth of *Sita* and the *Lakshman Rekha*.¹⁵ This myth treats *Sita* as a bad woman just because she crossed the *Lakshman Rekha* to offer alms to *Ravana* who came in a beggar's disguise to her hut in the forest. From then, this myth is used to keep women within boundaries. All Indian women till today, are conditioned by the invisible *Lakshman Rekha*, censoring their own spaces of resistance, growth, mobility and social roles. They are either stopped from crossing all the *Lakshman Rekhas* that govern their lives, or ostracized by their families, societies, institutions, and places of work if they dare to cross any of them. The strong belief is that every time women try to cross *Lakshman Rekha*, the family's honour is at danger. And whenever they cross it, they have to be punished, because women have the duty to preserve the family honour. So women have for centuries been discouraged to cross the line, to remain indoors, and within limits.

Furthermore, portrayals of women in historical religious and ancient texts also carry a subtext of morality – whether it is the monogamy of *Sita*,

¹⁵ It is a line which is drawn by *Sita*'s husband *Rama* to not to cross it when he is away in forest.

the polygamy of Draupadi, the devotion of Sati, and so on – which have resonance in continuing notions of ideal womanhood. Whenever women try to challenge these notions, there has been controversy. Even in literature, whenever women and men have written against the oppression of women or female sexuality, or exposed certain aspects of religion, patriarchy, or culture which perpetuates women's subservient role, there has been a violent backlash. Moral pronouncements and fears have over time been institutionalized and are being perpetuated through popular discourses.

3. Paradox and Double standards in Morality

Feminists are of the opinion that there is obviously inconsistency and a dichotomy in the understanding of morality in India. For instance, the censure of female ways of dressing harks back to a history that repeatedly stresses socially sanctioned control over women's choice of dress.¹⁶ While clothing for men signifies social distinction and status, for women, it often signifies her moral virtue. Terms and vocabularies like decency, modesty and decorum suffer from a serious gender bias and morality assume new meanings when they are assigned to women. They are used mostly to refer to women alone.¹⁷ Morality is construed almost entirely in terms of *sexual* morality, because clothes, through their proximity to the body, encode the game of modesty and sexual explicitness, denial and celebration of pleasure. This is also visible in the rebirth of the moral police in recent times, threatening women in jeans. The fact behind all these is the long history of gender bias in the moral policing of dress and space.

¹⁶ There have been several reports of women principals (some in women only colleges) insisting on such regulations as well. Women can be as conservative as men, socially as well as politically - there is no good evidence that prudishness is an exclusively male phenomenon.

¹⁷ How 'decent' is the sight of men of all ages, shapes and size, nonchalantly moving about in designer Bermudas revealing hairy legs that border on the vulgar? How 'modest' is the sense of dress of men who sport transparent shirts, or wear jeans that show the tops of their underwear, or unbuttoned right down to the belly? No one points out the indecency of men wearing dhotis that show up their thighs the minute they begin to walk. Why?

The patriarchal society in India conveniently continues to impose codes of moralities on women. Measuring decency by the yardstick of the apparel one drapes is a crude measure imposed by the patriarchal society which has objectified the woman by keeping her in 'her' place by sanctions in the form of controlling her dressing.

Similarly, the vulgar and obscene display of the female body for the pleasure of drunken male customers, which was promoted by the bar owners with the sole intention of jacking up their profits is not treated immoral, while a woman dancing in the bar is considered immoral. The Indian morality does not treat fashion parades or women acting in films with bare clothes or an 'item number' of a Hindi film screened in public theatres as vulgar, while what happens inside the bar, it considers immoral.¹⁸ In the same way, it overlooks the use of women's bodies in the flesh trade while 'censoring' a film that demonstrates the sexual violence against women in a communal massacre.

In recent times, women have been targeted for visiting pubs, smoking, interacting with the opposite sex, wearing western clothes, etc. And these women are branded immoral because they have gone against the traditional culture, morality and values of India by exposing themselves in public spaces and adopting non-Indian behaviours such as drinking, dating and shopping.¹⁹ Nobody objected to these pubs or liquor shops as long as men were their only patrons, and it is these very men who were creating and being a nuisance to the society and a threat to their women. Man is allowed to go where he wants and do what he wants while woman should not wear what she wants, go where she wants and do what she wants. There is a double standard of morality.

¹⁸ The bar dancers imitate what they see in Indian films, television serials, fashion shows and advertisements. All these industries have used women's bodies for commercial gain. There is sexual exploitation of women in these and many other industries. But no one has ever suggested that you close down these industries because there is sexual exploitation of women!

¹⁹ See Manjima Bhattacharjya, "Morality through the ages: Old strategies, new threats," Infochange Analysis: News and Analysis on Social justice and development issues, Oct 26, 2008.

Indian ethics speaks of non-violence, while violent in its dealings to women, children, transgenders, homo-sexuals,²⁰ etc. It speaks of peace while people fight in the name of religion. This has been and is in the history.

What remains shocking is the hypocrisy of it all. The very men who cry themselves hoarse when women wear jeans in colleges or sportspersons wear regular sports attire in their field, are silent when female foeticide or dowry murders take place. The ministers who vociferously call for the ban on women dancing in bars themselves organise a fundraising event in which they invite an 'item girl' to dance on stage for the enjoyment of the police force and their cadres. The men who are up in arms against a comment by an actress that premarital sex is alright as long as safe sex is practised, look the other way when sexual assault occurs around them, or remain quiet when acid is thrown by spurned 'lovers' on the faces of unsuspecting young women. This is evidence enough of the capricious nature of Indian notion of morality.

The dichotomy in Indian morality and ethics goes on endlessly. On one hand, it talks of retaining 'non-violent culture' for a better society and, on the other hand, it allows brutal activities such as female foeticide, bridal burning, wife-battering, etc. People learned to live with it as though it were the natural order of things. Men think that violence against women being a minor issue in reality and just something women's groups exaggerate about. Menon Sen said, "In India, as far as violence against women is concerned, it is as if enacting the Domestic Violence Act has taken care of everything. Things we raise are dismissed as isolated incidents. Reports from SRs are simply ignored."²¹

²⁰ Transgenders are often made fun off. Homo-sexuals are treated as abnormal.

²¹ Manjima Bhattacharjya, "Cosmetic changes on violence against women?" *InfoChange News & Features*, (April 2009), 4.

The existing mechanisms in India have failed miserably to protect women. It has failed to realize or acknowledge that violence against women is in fact, a violation of women's human rights. There are social practices that continue to undermine women in the name of culture and it is being sanctioned by religion.

While looking at the situations of women, the discourses of morality promotes gendered patterns of domination and subordination, gendered role differentiation, gender-biased unequal access to resources and spaces. The attitudes, behaviours, ideologies, beliefs, and theories of patriarchal society continue to perpetuate and reinforce gender discrimination. As always, women are seen as the bearers of culture and tradition, and it is their conduct and control which is sought to be reined and tightened, the boundaries redrawn and reminders of the punishment of transgression announced. As a result, there is a loss of secular spaces, end of dialogue, a threat to rights, democracy, and freedom. And the slow, dangerous rise of a new kind of fascism and fundamentalism, that threatens to erode the many small victories of progressive movements.

A culture that denies justice and promotes violence and destruction cannot be romanticized simply because it is 'our culture. In fact, such a culture is not and cannot be a "civilized" culture.

4. Understanding the facets of morality

The discourse of morality touches every sphere of human life – whether it is in the home or in the area of work. Through politics, religion, the pronouncements of influential religious groups, media, morality is determined what one should choose to read and watch on television, how one should behave and live in the society.

However, morality varies from culture to culture, from time to time and from person to person. What is regarded as immoral by one nation or by

one religion or by one race may be moral in another nation or community. For example, being completely naked or showing one's body is considered immoral in India while it is common in the heart of Amazon Jungle. Similarly, polygamy is considered immoral in Christianity while in Islam, it is common.

Besides, the human history unveils that morality has not been a static concept and it has been manipulated to suit the changing times of socio-economic and cultural conditions of the society. Morality has been also constantly contested, resisted and re-framed.

What was considered immoral at one point in history is considered a normal thing in another period of time. For instance, women dancing,²² singing or acting in public, women wearing trousers, or riding bicycles, etc. is considered very normal in India today. This reveals how changeable the boundaries of morality are and they are socially constructed and subjective.

In fact, morality is derived from human consciousness and spiritual awareness. The more one matures, the more sanctified becomes one's acts. The aim of morality is to enhance one's lives and not to threaten. Morality is part of human life, just as knowledge is. Just as knowledge is personal, morality is also personal. However while exercising morality one has to be discrete and responsible.

Leading a moral life is not about dress and space. A life that is not gratifying is not worth living. Morality is about a personal choice, derived from maturity and spiritual understanding. Morality should not be imposed by a higher authority such as state or religion. An imposed morality is not morality. One who leads a moral life for the fear of punishment is not a moral person because he has not made his choices freely. Fear and greed, the traditional contrivances of religions, used as incentives to force people

² For example, Bharatanatyam, which is today seen as a respectable classical dance form, once faced a possible ban as it was considered to be of ill repute being performed by women of the devadasi tradition.

into accepting their morality do not make the society moral. First and foremost, the imposition of morality is unethical. Religions that threaten their followers with the hellfire or lure them with the promises of paradise do not make them moral. Every society should remember that the religious morality is not divinely ordained. It is the morality of the ancient people, their sages and their charlatans. Only the person who chooses the higher road freely can be called a moral person.

In final accounts, the true morality is never in contrast with ethics. Ethics and morality should promote life and dignity. All the same, one must be able to distinguish between what is immoral and what is unethical. Casteism for example, infringes upon the dignity of another human being. Another example, the morality that destroys the life, health, and dignity of the present generations is unethical. Therefore regardless of whether a society or a culture or religion sanctions it, it is an unethical practice. Imposing a dress code is infringing upon the human rights of the individual and restricting his or her freedom. It is unethical. Violating someone's freedom is unethical. Wife-battering is unethical, female foeticide and infanticide is unethical, bridal burning is unethical. Rape within the marriage is unethical. Hence, what harms others is unethical and it should be thoroughly chastised. This is what Jesus brings to light in his life-time.

4.1 Jesus, Gender and Morality

The paradox and the contradiction that one sees regarding morality in India were also seen in Palestine in the time of Jesus. The situation of Jesus was not very different from Indian situation. The Jews too had different measuring rods to define what is moral and immoral for a man and for a woman. Moreover, the attitude of the Jews concerning morality was one-sided. They in fact took up the morality of the women in their hand and tried to punish them. Having been aware of the reality, Jesus strongly condemned their attitude with strong language and set the standard for morality. One such example is seen in Mathew 5:27-28. While delivering the Sermon on

the Mount, Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Jesus warned the role of the mind in the process and thought that the trouble was with the physical organ involved in the transgression. He thus states: "If your right eye [or right hand] causes you to sin pluck it out and cast it out from you" (Mt 5:28-9).

For Jesus, morality is not about fulfilling laws and it does not stop with mere external activities. Rather it is something to do with inner life; something to do with inner-self and attitude. Morality for Jesus comes from inside. It is something very personal which one can easily hide under the garb of laws, religious cults, and pious practices. Not what goes from out but what comes from within matters a lot for Jesus. This will determine the whole life of a person; one's choices, options, directions, movements, etc. Morality is ultimately spirituality for Jesus.

5. Evolving Feminist Ethics and Morality

Evolving a right understanding of ethics in a country like India is very important today. Promoting the right to life and associated moral issues should be the focus around which its ethical discourses should take place.

It is important that such a discourse actively recognize the duties of various groups: the duty of the people to participate in social discourse, the duties of the state towards its citizens, and the duties of the state and civil society together to prevent outside influence that may bring death and destruction, while cooperating with those promoting the right to life.

In the case of women in India too, the vital ingredients necessary for their real empowerment lies in protection and promotion of life and dignity. They have been under the patriarchal control for many centuries and their morality has been defined and determined by men. By the arrival of feminism, women have become aware of their real status and role in the Indian society. Especially, they have become aware of the ways they had been strategically

discriminated and how their submissive status has been perpetuated through religious texts, cults and symbols. They realize that they are victimised in the present discourse of morality of Indian society which is a threat to their life and health, making them more vulnerable and stigmatized.

As it is already debated, that morality should be left to the individuals and it is derived from human consciousness and spiritual awareness, female morality should be derived from women's consciousness and spiritual awareness. It is high time that women chart their own morality. It must be evolved from their day today lived experiences and derived knowledge.

The pages that have just gone before discloses that there are many with amoral approaches to life which create obstacles to the incorporation of a moral basis for community life and organization. These approaches have been at the heart of Indian deliberations on social, political and moral philosophy for many centuries. It is in this tense atmosphere of moral conflict that a feminist has reason to rearticulate their vision and reformulate their strategies for ethics and morality.

Feminist identity is not based on the understanding of women as defined by female biology or feminine gender differences and societal-ecclesial roles but on the common historical experience of women as an oppressed people.²³ Therefore feminist ethics would refer to any ethical theory that locates its roots in feminism, especially in the contemporary feminist movement.

According to Sandra Schneiders a Christian feminist, "Feminism is a comprehensive ideology, rooted in women's experience of sexual oppression, which engages in a critique of patriarchy, embraces an alternative vision for humanity and the earth, and actively seeks to bring this vision to realization."²⁴

²³ Eleanor Humes Haney, "What is Feminist Ethics? A Proposal for Continuing Discussion," *The Journal Of Religious Ethics* 8 (1980).

²⁴ Cf. Sandra Schneiders, *Beyond patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 15.

Feminism in its most fundamental meaning it represents a position, a belief, a perspective, a movement that is opposed to discrimination on the basis of gender. It is, therefore, opposed to sexism in all of its forms, whether within institutional (social or ecclesial) structures and practices, attitudes and behaviours, or ideologies, beliefs, and theories that establish and reinforce gender discrimination.

In addition, feminism aims ultimately at equality of respect and the concrete well-being of all persons regardless of gender. Since sexism has been and remains pervasively discrimination against women, feminism aims to correct this bias by a bias for women. This includes a focal concern for the well-being of women by taking into account their experience and in coming to understand what well-being means for both women and men.

Hence major tasks that need to be undertaken by the feminist scholars and more especially by the proponents of feminist ethics is to include the critique of sources of sexism (religious, social, political, economic); retrieval of women's history and pro-women myths; reconstruction of theories of the human person and the human community.

The commitment to the well-being of women requires a widening attention to the experience of all women and therefore a serious consideration of the diversity of women's historical and cultural contexts and experiences.

Feminist ethics should also critique the patriarchal culture that perpetuates the gendered power relations at the same time focus on changing the structures related to production in society in order to secure economic parity and autonomy for women. It will be one in which men do not use sexual terror as a tool to control women, one in which women are not suspect for just *being*, one in which morality is linked to an intrinsic sense of justice, equality and democracy — and not as a tool for surveillance, subjugation and oppression.

Besides, the underlying principle of the present situation of women in India is the idea of inequality – the invincible inferiority of woman to man and therefore, woman must be controlled by man. Hence humanness of women should be specified by the inclusion of principles of mutuality, equality and autonomy.

5.1 Principle of mutuality: promotes celebrating the differences. First of all, the most fundamental awareness that a male or female, each sex has its own biological and psychological needs are to be esteemed as such. Feminist ethics should acknowledge and permit this difference and give space for each to grow without being controlled or dominated by the other. It should also reject strong theories of gender complementarity that, in the name of “different but equal” identifications, disguise patterns of inequality.

5.2 Principle of Autonomy: Generally in India, when a woman exercises agency, demands her rights and challenges oppression and injustice, or decides to be what she wants or even speaks out her views or voices forth her opinion, she is labelled as ‘immoral’ person. Because this goes against the traditional understanding of Indian morality which propagates that a woman must be controlled by men. So very often a good number of women tend to remain submissive.

In this patriarchal setup where most often men decide for women, the principle of autonomy claims that women also can decide for themselves. Many feminist ethics should insist that the essential feature of personhood, which modern philosophy identified as a capacity for free self-determination (autonomy), be appropriated for women as well as for men. Therefore this principle initiates women to become aware of their rights and freedom to reason out and to think for themselves and to exercise their ability of being responsible and self-directed.

5.3 Principle of Equality: No one is higher or superior in this world. No man or woman just because they are born as male or female, they are not greater than the other. Feminist ethics must specify the principle of “equal

treatment for equals,” noting the necessity of discerning who are equals in terms of basic humanity. On this basis, the feminist principle of equality, of the equal right of all persons to respect as persons, is maintained. Feminist ethics extends the principle of equality to some version of a principle of equitable sharing. That is, out of women’s experience of disadvantage and their perception of the disadvantaged histories of other groups, feminists argue for a universalized right of all to an equitable share in the goods and services necessary to human life and basic happiness.

Thus the insistence on the combination of principles of mutuality, equality and autonomy differentiates feminist ethics from some other ethical approaches. Feminist ethics reject the view of human persons that is self-isolating. Hence, it tends to combine some form of the principle of mutuality with the principle of equality. Its basis for doing this is a view of human persons that identifies relationality along with autonomy as an essential need and possibility.

Besides, today in the context of India, feminist ethicists need to address more specific ethical issues such as reproductive technologies, pornography, protective labour laws, population crisis, and ecological dangers. There are certain major questions that have produced common ethical concerns include: human agency, embodiment (especially in terms of sexuality), the nature of the human self, moral development, patterns of human relationships (both personal and political), and the value of the world of nature.²⁵

6. Conclusion - Evolving an Embodied Morality

In the existing discourse of morality in India, men have been taking control of women’s body. As women evolve morality for themselves, they need to take control of their body. This necessitates that they critique those religious texts that promote or propagate men’s right over woman’s body

²⁵ See Barbara Christian, ‘The Race for Theory’, *Feminist Studies* 14(1988) 67-79; Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990).

and sexuality. They evolve an ethics which would challenge the distinction of male and female as polar opposites (representing mind/body, reason/emotion, activity/passivity, autonomy/dependency) leading to the justification of the inferiority of women to men. They must also critique those myths and metaphors that confine them to limited spaces and treat them as symbols and causes of evil and destruction. Bodily integrity - freedom from violence, harassment, surrogacy, and freedom to choose or refrain from sexual intimacy - is essential for full personhood for women.

An "embodied morality" is one in which one's rationality and emotions are integrated, and one which considers the concrete, as well as the theoretical consequences of one's actions, and which celebrates the joys and the delights of women's sexuality, thus, enabling women to name themselves as acting subjects of their own history.