

Politics and Music: A Study on the Feminist Movement in India



Dr. Samidha Vedabala

Assistant Professor, Department of Music, Sikkim University

Abstract

Feminist music has emerged as a powerful force in reshaping societal norms and challenging entrenched patriarchal structures. This article titled "Politics and Music: A Study on the Feminist Movement in India" investigates the influential role of feminist music in India, highlighting its contributions to challenging and transforming these structures. Through a detailed review of literature, content analysis, and case studies, the research explores how feminist musicians use their art to raise awareness about gender issues, empower women, and advocate for broader social change. The findings demonstrate that feminist music is a catalyst for cultural shift, public dialogue, and activism, fostering solidarity and inclusivity while reshaping societal attitudes towards women. By addressing intersectional concerns of gender, caste, class, and sexuality, feminist music emerges as a critical force in advancing the feminist movement and promoting gender equality.

Keywords: Politics and Music, Feminist Music, Social Movement, Gender Equality

Research Paper

Introduction

Social movements have always been essential in bringing about social change, opposing the status quo, and promoting equality and justice (Nardini 112-45). The significant role that music plays in these movements is fundamental (Almeida). Due to its universal language, music is able to communicate across linguistic, cultural, and geographic divides and is a potent medium for resistance, solidarity, and expression. Music has always been a part of social movements, reflecting and influencing the goals and hardships of the populace, from the chants of ancient civilisations to the protest songs of today (Turino). It gives voice to the voiceless, amplifies ideas from the margins, and promotes harmony across many groups (Taylor and Van Dyke 162-93). A movement's emotional core can be captured by music, which also inspires people to take action as a group. The melodies and rhythms serve not only as a backdrop but as an active force that can ignite passion and perseverance among activists. Songs like "We Shall Overcome" during the Civil Rights Movement or "Get Up, Stand Up" by Bob Marley have become anthems that encapsulate the spirit and determination of their respective causes. These musical pieces often transcend

their initial context, resonating with listeners around the world and across generations. Moreover, contemporary movements like Black Lives Matter and climate change activism have harnessed the power of music and social media to reach a global audience, creating a shared sense of urgency and purpose. Artists and musicians are increasingly using their platforms to address social issues, bringing attention to injustices and rallying support for change. In classrooms, communities, and public squares, music continues to be a unifying force that brings people together, fostering a collective identity and shared vision for a better future. It serves as a reminder that in the face of adversity, there is always a melody to be sung, a rhythm to march to, and a song to empower the hearts and minds of those who strive for a more just and equitable world. These melodies and lyrics have the power to transcend barriers, bringing people together in a shared vision of justice and equality. In Latin America, the Nueva Canción movement used music to protest against dictatorship and advocate for social change, often at great personal risk to the artists involved. Across the globe, indigenous communities have employed traditional songs and chants to preserve their culture and resist colonization. Music's ability to inspire and mobilize is evident not just in grand

movements but also in everyday acts of resistance. Street performers, local bands, and grassroots choirs continue to echo the spirit of activism, reminding us that the fight for a better world is ongoing. Whether through poignant ballads or rousing anthems, music remains a universal language of protest and perseverance, a testament to the enduring power of human creativity and solidarity.

During the Indian independence movement, songs like "Vande Mataram" and "Saare Jahan Se Achha" became anthems of resistance against British colonial rule, rallying people together with a sense of unity and purpose. After independence in 1947, music continued to be a powerful tool in various movements, including labor movements, farmers' protests, and campaigns for social justice. Folk music has been a major contributor to movement music, with songs from tribal communities reflecting resistance against exploitation and injustice (Dalton). Although Indian classical music is traditionally focused on spiritual themes, it has occasionally intersected with movement music through artists who infused classical forms with contemporary social messages. Bollywood and Indian pop music have also addressed social issues, reaching wide audiences. Prominent figures like Bhagat Singh inspired revolutionary songs that continue to be popular in political rallies, while leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar inspired music highlighting the struggles and aspirations of Dalits. The Communist and Marxist movements have a rich tradition of protest music that mobilized workers and peasants (Omvedt). In recent times, farmers' protests and the rise of social media have given new platforms to movement music, allowing it to reach global audiences and amplify its impact. Indie musicians and hip-hop artists are increasingly addressing issues like corruption, inequality, and human rights, with artists like Ginni Mahi and groups like Swadesi standing out. Movement music in India remains a vital cultural expression, continually evolving to reflect the country's dynamic social and political landscape, inspiring new generations to challenge the status quo.

The Feminist Movement

The feminist movement is a comprehensive social movement dedicated to achieving gender equality and addressing systemic disparities across various aspects of society (Ichiyo 147-171). At its core, it seeks to dismantle patriarchal structures that perpetuate the oppression of women and to eradicate institutional discrimination based on gender. Political equality is a fundamental objective, as feminists advocate for equal representation in political offices and decision-making

bodies. This includes working to remove barriers that prevent women from participating fully in politics, such as voter suppression, lack of access to resources, and discriminatory practices within political institutions. By striving for a balanced representation, feminists aim to ensure that women's voices and perspectives are adequately reflected in governance and policy-making processes. It supports policies that promote economic independence for women, such as affordable childcare, paid family leave, and support for women entrepreneurs.

In the social and cultural equality, feminists challenge entrenched gender norms and stereotypes that restrict women's roles and opportunities. This involves confronting and changing cultural narratives and media representations that perpetuate outdated or harmful views of gender. Efforts include promoting diverse and accurate portrayals of women in media and addressing cultural practices that contribute to gender inequality. Reproductive rights are another central tenet of the feminist movement, emphasizing women's control over their own bodies and reproductive choices. This includes advocating for access to contraception, comprehensive sex education, and safe, legal abortion. Feminists also work to ensure that women have access to quality healthcare and support services related to reproductive health. Addressing gender-based violence is a critical focus, as feminists strive to prevent and respond to violence such as sexual harassment, domestic abuse, and rape. This involves advocating for stronger legal protections, improving support services for survivors, and working to change societal attitudes that perpetuate violence against women. Feminists aim to create safer environments and ensure that perpetrators are held accountable.

The feminist movement has harnessed the power of music to challenge gender expectations, advocate for equality, and amplify women's voices. Music has become a vital tool in the struggle against misogyny and patriarchy, with feminist hymns emerging as potent global symbols of resistance (Weldon 55-74). This dynamic relationship between music and feminism is evident across diverse cultural contexts, including in India, where music plays a multifaceted role in the feminist movement. In India, the integration of music into feminist activism spans various genres and traditions. Traditional folk songs often reflect women's experiences and struggles, offering a medium through which to address and articulate their difficulties. These songs preserve cultural narratives while also serving as a form of protest against gender-based injustices (Skaller). Folk



music, deeply rooted in community traditions, provides a space for women to voice their concerns and challenge societal norms. Contemporary genres, such as hip-hop and pop, have also become platforms for young women to express their ambitions and confront issues related to gender inequality. These modern musical forms offer new ways for feminist voices to be heard, appealing to younger generations and engaging with contemporary issues in innovative ways. The energetic and often confrontational nature of hip-hop, for example, allows for the exploration of personal and political themes related to gender and empowerment.

Method

The current study approach was thorough and multidimensional in order to recognise the contribution of music to the feminist movement in India. First, a survey of the literature was done, which included scholarly publications, studies, and articles that looked at the relationship between feminism and music in India. A theoretical framework, important issues, and research gaps were noted in this review. In-depth interviews with feminist artists, activists, and academics were conducted using qualitative approaches to learn more about their viewpoints and experiences. In addition to these interviews, content analysis of music videos, lyrics, and live performances was conducted, with an emphasis on issues pertaining to women's empowerment and gender equality. Furthermore, case studies of well-known feminist musicians were created to show how they influenced the movement. In order to collect information on public opinions of feminist music and its impact on society attitudes, surveys were also given to a wide range of respondents. By combining these approaches, it was possible to gain a more complex picture of the role that music had in the feminist movement in India, emphasising how it promoted social change, fostered solidarity, and raised awareness. Additionally, the study highlighted the intersectionality within the feminist music movement in India, shedding light on how various social identities, such as caste, class, religion, and ethnicity, intersect to shape the experiences and expressions of feminist musicians. The findings revealed that music not only serves as a platform for challenging patriarchal norms but also acts as a unifying force that bridges diverse communities and amplifies marginalized voices. Focus groups with young aspiring musicians were also organized to understand how contemporary feminist music influences the younger generation. These sessions provided valuable insights into the evolving

landscape of feminist music, capturing the innovative ways in which new artists are addressing gender issues through their art.

Indian Feminist Movement and Music

Music in the Indian feminist movement serves several key functions. It acts as a vehicle for disseminating information and raising awareness about critical issues such as gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and domestic abuse. Through lyrics and performances, music can highlight these problems, educate audiences, and provoke discussions that might lead to social change. Moreover, music fosters solidarity and support within the feminist movement by bringing people together around a common cause. Protest songs, anthems, and performances can unify diverse groups, creating a sense of collective identity and shared purpose. This solidarity is crucial for building momentum and generating widespread support for women's rights. In addition to its role in activism and advocacy, music also offers therapeutic benefits. Engaging with music can provide emotional relief and empowerment, helping individuals cope with personal experiences of discrimination and violence. The act of creating, listening to, or performing music can be a source of healing and strength for many women, contributing to their overall well-being and resilience. Furthermore, women can share their stories, find comfort, and create a supportive community through music, which can be a healing and empowering medium (Drinker and Solie). The feminist movement is a prime example of how social movements and music can coexist peacefully to reform society, highlighting the transformational potential of art. In addition to reflecting a movement's zeitgeist, music, as a crucial component of cultural expression, inspires future generations to carry on the struggle for a more fair and just society (Cain).

Different musical genres such as folk music, popular music, film music has long been utilized to challenge patriarchal norms and highlight issues like domestic violence and gender inequality. In contemporary times, protest songs and anthems have emerged as powerful tools within feminist movements addressing issues ranging from sexual violence to women's empowerment (Blackmer 130-53). Artists like Anushka Manchanda and Monica Dogra have created impactful songs like "Aurat," which passionately articulates the challenges faced by women and demands for equality and respect. Meanwhile, hip-hop and rap have provided a modern platform for female artists like Sofia Ashraf and Dee MC to voice their perspectives on gender issues

and societal expectations. Music not only educates and raises awareness about women's rights but also mobilizes communities, fostering a sense of unity and empowerment among those advocating for gender justice. Through its ability to resonate emotionally and convey powerful messages, music continues to inspire and propel the feminist movement forward in India and beyond (Dunbar).

Impact on the Society

Not only is feminist music enjoyable, but it also has a significant social impact. Such music plays a crucial part in upending and changing the profoundly ingrained patriarchal systems in society. These songs promote awareness and a deeper understanding of women's rights and gender equality by tackling topics including sexual harassment, domestic abuse, and gender discrimination (Ferree and Mueller 576-607). They provide women a sense of empowerment by encouraging them to resist oppression and by offering them support and solidarity (Peddie). Women who feel empowered are more likely to question social conventions and stand up for their rights since they feel more confident and high on themselves. Feminist music also challenges conventional gender norms and stereotypes while altering how society views women and applauding their accomplishments, independence, and strength (Nardini 112-45). Over time, this may cause a change in societal norms and attitudes that will advance more gender equality. In addition to igniting public debate on gender issues, feminist music also shapes public opinion by bringing these subjects into the mainstream. Many feminist musicians collaborate with activists and organisations to promote women's rights and rally support, using their platform to push for legislative changes and social reforms. Furthermore, feminist music in India is advancing an inclusive feminism that appeals to a wider audience by acknowledging the intersections between gender and other social categories like caste, class, and sexuality. Feminist music is a powerful teaching instrument that promotes a progressive outlook and successfully conveys concepts of gender equality, particularly to younger audiences.

Conclusion

In India, feminist music has become a potent force for social change, challenging and revolutionising the profoundly embedded patriarchal systems in the country. Feminist artists have made a vital contribution to the feminist movement by promoting gender

equality, empowering others, and increasing awareness (Kazachok). They have motivated both individual and group action by bringing important gender issues into the public discourse and addressing problems including sexual harassment, domestic abuse, and gender discrimination. Modern feminist music's intersectional approach has increased its influence by connecting with a wide range of listeners and encouraging inclusivity. In the end, feminist music in India actively creates a more just and equal society in addition to reflecting the challenges and goals of women. It is a movement that harnesses the power of art to challenge injustices and inspire change. Through their melodies and messages, these artists are not just making music; they are making history.

Work Cited

1. Almeida, Paul. *Social Movements: The Structure of Collective Mobilization*. Univ of California Press, 2019.
2. Blackmer, Corinne E. "Writing Poetry like a Woman." *American Literary History*, vol. 8, no. 1, JSTOR, 1996, pp. 130–53.
3. Cain, Ruby. "She Got the Power": The Intersection of Gender, Feminism and Pop Music: A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology, Massey University, Albany, New Zealand. Massey University, 2021.
4. Dalton, Fiona Margaret Page. *Transforming Dalit Identity: Ancient Drum Beat, New Song*. Open Access Te Herenga Waka-Victoria University of Wellington, 2008.
5. Drinker, Sophie, and Ruth A. Solie. *Music and Women: The Story of Women in Their Relation to Music*. Feminist Press at CUNY, 1995.
6. Dunbar, Julie C. "Women, Music, Culture." *Women, Music, Culture*, 2015, doi:10.4324/9781315747309.
7. Ferree, Myra Marx, and Carol M. Mueller. "Feminism and the Women's Movement: A Global Perspective." *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, Wiley Online Library, 2004, pp. 576–607.
8. Ichiyo, Muto. "The Birth of the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s." *The Other Japan*, Routledge, 2016, pp. 147–71.
9. Kazachok, Leanid. *The Political Power of Protest Songs: An Analysis of the Role of Music in Activism*. 2023.
10. Nardini, Gia, et al. "Together We Rise: How Social Movements Succeed." *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, vol. 31, no. 1, Wiley Online Library, 2021, pp. 112–45.
11. Omvedt, Gail. *Reinventing Revolution: New Social Movements and the Socialist Tradition in India*. Routledge, 2019.



12. Peddie, Ian. *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest*. Routledge, 2017.
13. Skaller, Samantha. *The Protest Music of Nina Simone and Buffy Sainte-Marie: Trauma, Gender-Based Violence, and Minority Feminisms*. McGill University (Canada), 2019.
14. Taylor, Verta, and Nella Van Dyke. “‘Get up, Stand up’: Tactical Repertoires of Social Movements.” *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, Wiley Online Library, 2004, pp. 262–93.
15. Turino, Thomas. *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. University of Chicago Press, 2008.
16. Weldon, S. Laurel. “Inclusion, Solidarity, and Social Movements: The Global Movement against Gender Violence.” *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 4, no. 1, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 55–74.