

**Indian Feminisms Concepts and Issues**  
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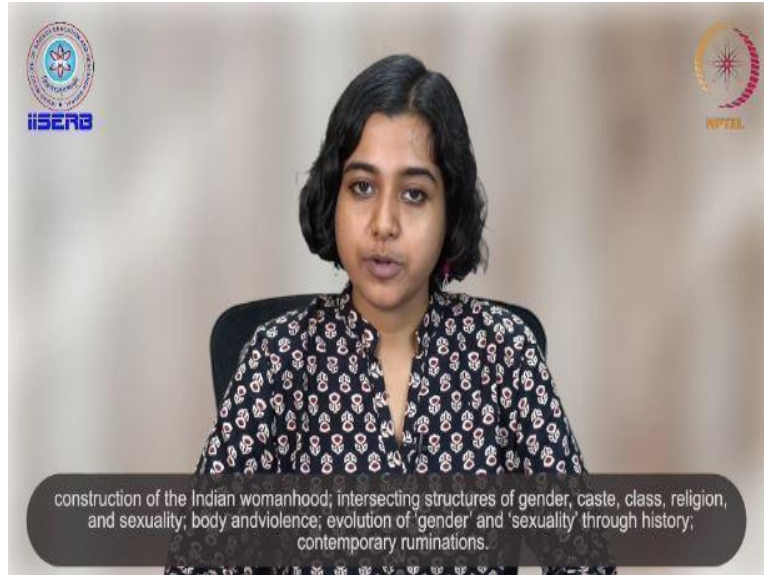
**Lecture-01**  
**What is Feminism**

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Hello everyone. Welcome to the first lecture of the course Indian feminisms: concepts and issues. Let me begin by providing a brief overview about the course objectives. This course aims to engage with the multiple constructions of women through history especially with the intention to enhance the concepts pertaining to gender and sexualities in the Indian context.

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The areas that this course explores are broadly construction of the Indian womanhood; intersecting structures of gender, caste, class, religion and sexuality; body and violence; evolution of gender and sexuality through history and contemporary ruminations. This course intends to identify Indian feminism not as a monolithic homogeneous narrative but as one rooted in different epistemic practices.

As such this course is premised on the notion of particularity rather than universalism. In the process this course will analyze, how the notions of patriarchy as constituted of gender binarism has come to be challenged through the intersectional lenses of caste, class, religion, sexuality and so on. The lectures will incorporate a variety of references ranging from fiction, theoretical texts, films, cases etcetera. At the end of each lecture, you will be provided with a detailed bibliography for your reference.

Before we delve into the contours of feminist thoughts and practices in India and the debates pertaining to gender it is important to unpack the term feminism in very simple words.

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What is feminism? As a researcher of gender studies, we frequently come across what we call the fear of feminism. Noted feminist Sylvia Walby in her book gender transformation mentions how women activists during the first wave feminism in Britain did not call themselves feminists, even though they were actively involved in movements for equal pay.

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She writes if self-identification takes priority, then should they be excluded from the feminist heritage? Or should the social science evaluation of their struggles as being on behalf of women be sufficient to have them included? If self-identification is the key, then do we exclude those who do not opt for the term?

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For example, Sarojini Naidu disowned the term feminism, but her contributions in propelling the women's cause have been remarkable. So, do we call her a feminist or not? Interestingly this fear is present among many people; women, men those in power positions, those outside of it, people from various social cultural, religious and geographical backgrounds. But the question is why this fear? Why are we so afraid of being known as feminists?

When we come across such oppositions to feminism, we cannot help but wonder. Why some people feel the need to condemn an issue that many others take seriously? Well, the answer lies in the polarization of the term. Let me explain how? When we think about the word feminism the assumption is that it is a movement against men. And those who call themselves feminists are necessarily men haters.

So, the implication is that it is not good to be a feminist and those who are feminists are somehow misled or irrelevant. Such assumptions get solidified by stereotypical representations of feminists in media. Much of feminism has depended on popular speculation and stereotypes.

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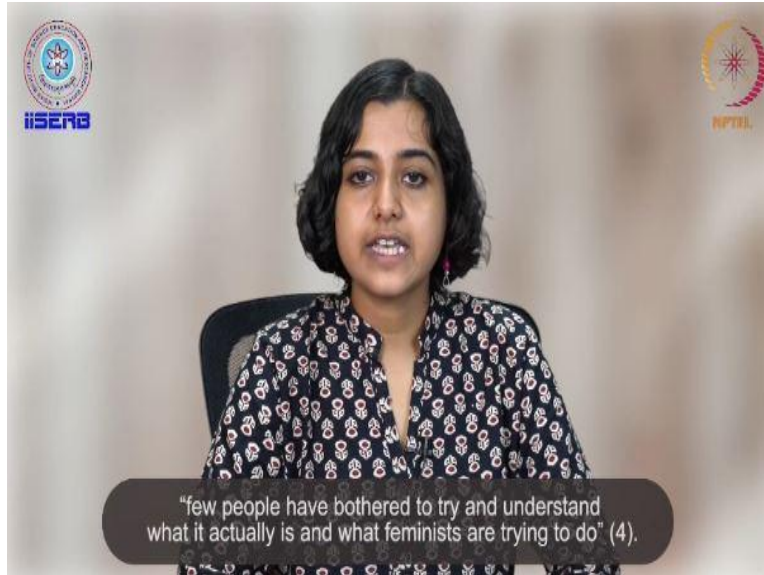
Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan succinctly point this out in their article some questions on feminism and it is relevance in South Asia. They argue that due to the misrepresentation by media.  
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Feminists are considered man-hating, family-destroying women. Such representations imply that emancipation and liberation of women is a threat, even though feminism in South Asia never resembled anything close to the radical methods taken by Western feminism.

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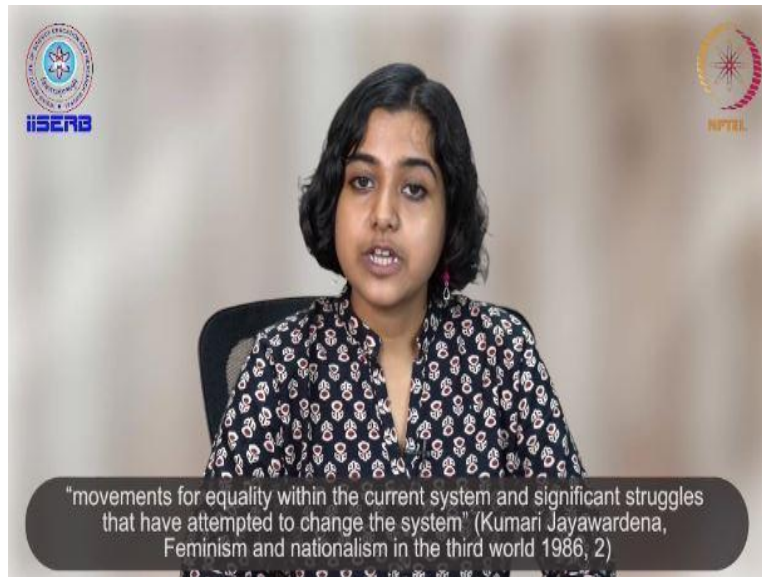
The reason why feminism remains such a closeted term is because, few people have bothered to try and understand what it actually is and what feminists are trying to do. It is also important to remember that we are often scared to identify as feminists due to the social stigma surrounding it. Feminism is understood as a movement against gender discrimination and often experience is perceived as a benchmark to identify such discriminations and determine their degree.

This has led to the assumption that women who call themselves feminists must have become so after facing gender discrimination or any form of sexual harassment. In India, where sexual harassment is often deemed as the woman's fault the stigma surrounding the label feminism functions as a crucial factor in deterring individuals in participating in feminist movements and asserting themselves as feminists.

So, the question remains what is feminism? What does this off spoken highly debated easily found term on social media mean? On the one hand we celebrate the recurring ideas and policies about women empowerment. On the other hand, the social media is also flooded with posts and videos of women's day being a patriarchal ploy to celebrate women for one day and oppress them for the rest 364 days of the year.

These sentiments however run much deeper. To answer this question, we need to remember one thing. The circumstances and context in which these definitions of feminism emerge are ever revolving.

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According to Kumari Jayawardena, feminism embraces movements from equality within the current system and significant struggles that have attempted to change the system.

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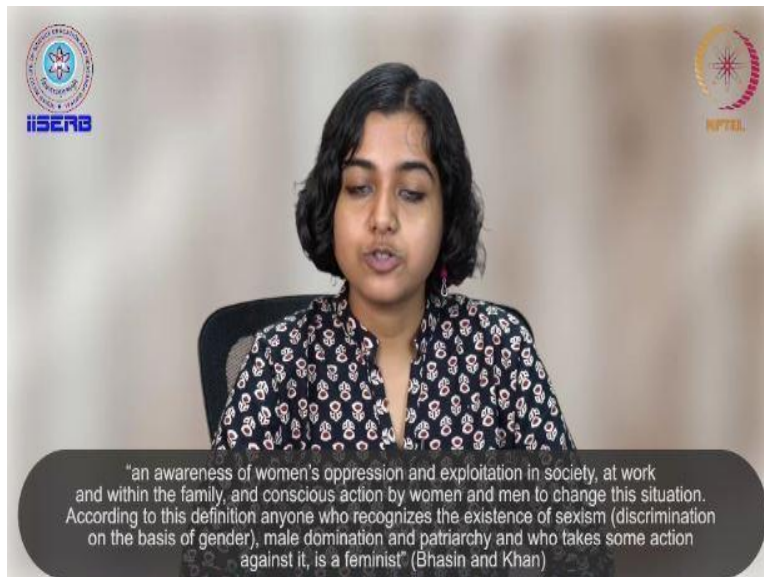
As Maitreyee Chaudhuri knows in her in the introduction to her celebrated and very important book “Feminism in India”. There is no correct or pure way of defining and theorizing feminism.

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She argues that, movements can never be contained within the expressed, stated model that they start out with; much history arises from unintended consequences. More importantly, built into the liberal agenda is the possibility, however limited, of the constant redefinition and extension of rights.

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Bhasin and Khan defined feminism as an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at work within the family and conscious action by women and men to change this situation. According to this definition anyone who recognizes the existence of sexism in the sense discrimination on the basis of gender and male domination and patriarchy and who take some



action against it, is a feminist. Now let me break it down for you. First point is feminism is not man hate, it is about freedom.

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For all those people who think that feminism is only about replacing patriarchy with matriarchy it is a completely wrong idea. Feminism in the West in the early 20th century highlighted women demanding their right to vote. So, the platform on which feminism focused on was equality.

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Lisa Day defines feminism in the following manner. Feminism is an interdisciplinary approach to issues of equality and equity based on gender, gender expression, gender identity, sex and sexuality as understood through social theories and political activism. Historically, feminism has evolved

from the critical examination of inequality between the sexes to a more nuanced focus on the social and performative constructions of gender and sexuality”.

In India feminist movements in the late 19th century evolved through claiming rights to end sexist practices such as Sati and Child marriage. And men have often been seen as active participants in such movements. This is a far cry from claiming superiority. Feminism's idea is not to replace one oppressive system with another, it demands freedom for all.

Point number 2, at first glance feminism may seem only woman-centric, because it incorporates the term the word F of female and feminine within it is terminology but why so? The answer is simple hierarchy.

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In the gendered society men are assumed to reside higher than women and masculinity is always considered superior to femininity. Being manly means being assertive strong and courageous, everything that stands in contrast to the meek, weak and docile womanly nature, which appears so evident in fairy tales.

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Hence, like a girl has become a worldwide derogatory phrase. It is often used against men in the army to child them about their cowardice. We can see how this definition of being feminine includes not just women, who are born of female sex but, also men who are not manly enough and the list goes on. Feminism confronts these stereotypes surrounding femininity rather than being limited only to the identity category woman.

At this point it is important to clarify that my understanding of men is not based on an overarching homogenization. I use it to refer to a constituent unit of patriarchy, the system which exerts control over women, young and old men and also those belonging to other genders or having non-heterosexual preferences. This definition is also rooted in class and caste.

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In Paromita Vohra's documentary unlimited girls which was released in 2002.

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The protagonist fearless embarks on a journey to find out what it means by feminism and what it means to be a feminist. Fearless is self-exploration as a feminist begins by gathering knowledge.

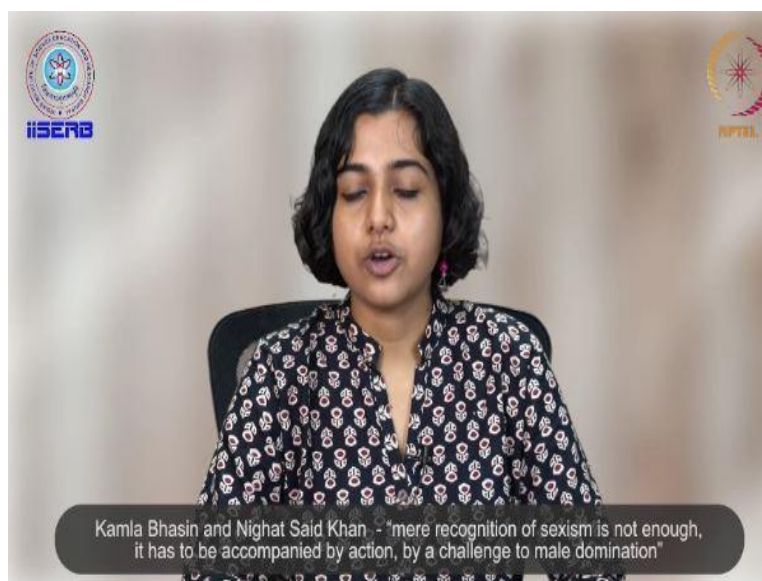


Since, knowledge is associated to wisdom and experience, fearless thoughts of her journey by interviewing 3 groups of people. Practitioners of feminism, Proclaimers of not a feminist but I like to be independent and Skeptic.

The first category includes old and young activists and academicians proclaiming themselves to be feminists. The second group comprises of city dweller women who do not believe in feminism, because they hate activism. But, at the same time like to enjoy its benefits. And the third category includes fearless herself. In her journey, the question that looms large is what is feminism?

Feminism then is not just about women; it is not about erasing men. It is about freedom and equality for all. Some claim that women owe their freedom to those ancestors who began the feminist movements. Some say, that movements are merely ways to capture the focus and the actual awareness it should come from the inside, while others question whether all women are truly benefiting from these discussions or not?

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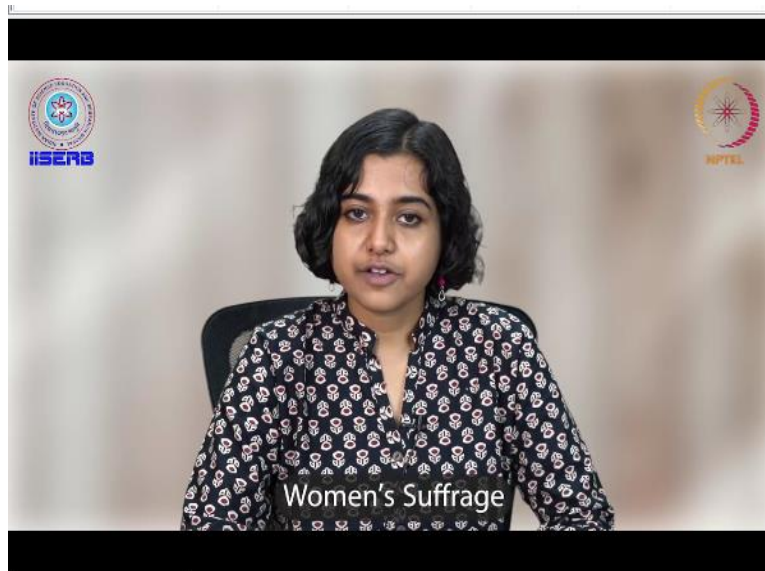
Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan mentioned that mere recognition of sexism is not enough; it has to be accompanied by action, by a challenge to male domination. Therefore, one does not need to be a woman or a man hater to be a feminist it is not an ontological category where by being born as a woman one automatically becomes a feminist. Being a feminist means, the ability to critically



recognize how gender biases exist at multiple levels and how these biases created different situations for different groups.

In other words, feminism does not rely on the ontological certitude of being a woman. It is important to remember that feminism is a dynamic movement. In other words what feminism meant in the 17th century is not the same in the 20th century. Feminism as we know it has undergone a series of transition both in the West and in India.

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The earliest feminist movement also known as women's suffrage was conceived as a struggle for the democratic rights of women. Some of the issues that were taken up during this time were the right to vote, equal access to education and employment and right to enter the parliament, the right to own property and so on. So, the earlier form of feminist struggles or demand for legal reforms and equality through law, in other words, the domain of these struggles was the public sphere outside the home and the family.

These movements were demanding women's equal participation in the public sphere. It was not looking at patriarchy as a system, which perpetuates women's lives and women's subordination within the household. The definition of feminism can therefore change, because it is based on historical and material lived realities perceptions and actions.

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Nivedita Menon in seeing like a feminist, contemplates that feminism should continually question the multiple aspects of domination. It does not have to reach any particular alternative model because that would mean an inversion of the present dominant system. Rather, the act of questioning would enable feminism to adopt a subversive attitude towards the patriarchal modes and bring out the gaps and fissures, which invest in gender domination by using those modes.

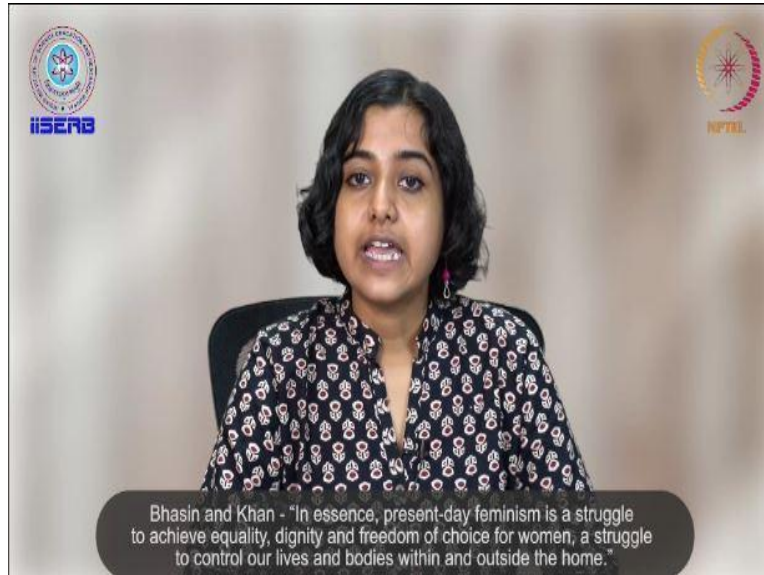
It is in this awareness Menon argues that feminism's immediacy relevance and necessity lie. Feminism today has gone beyond demanding mere legal reforms to end discrimination for women. Today feminism aims towards the emancipation of women; it includes issues such as public and private as gendered spaces. How women are subordinated within homes, the double burden of reproductive and productive labor, wage gap, the workplace as a hierarchical space and so on.

At a score feminism, challenges biological determinism the ascription of femininity and masculinity fixity of identity etcetera. Moreover, the constituency of feminist movement and thought has also undergone a drastic transformation. The participants and beneficiaries of feminism are no longer women alone. It includes LGBTQIA, non-binary, non-ableist and various other anti-hegemonic groups as well.

In fact, this is where the idea of gender as an intersectional category becomes important. We will take up these concerns in later lectures and define what is intersectionality? What we need to

remember is that when we talk about feminism, we need to see it not just as a resistance against discrimination but as a movement that simultaneously includes emancipation and liberation from all forms of oppression.

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It is in this way that feminism aims for a holistic change. As Bhasin and Khan write in essence, present-day feminism is a struggle to achieve equality, dignity and freedom of choice for women, a struggle to control our lives and bodies within and outside the home. You must also remember that this equality is not a very simple concept. For example, if we say that a Dalit woman should be equal to a Dalit man who is himself oppressed and exploited by society it does not really take us far.

Therefore, feminism must fight for not just equality but, an equitable society for all. Feminism also needs to be understood as a critical awareness that requires solidarity. Feminism is about practicing equality while recognizing differences within.

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In La Guera Cherrie Moraga speaks of self-reflexivity and solidarity. She writes we women need each other. because, my or your solitary, self-asserting go-for-the-throat-of-fear power is not enough. The real power, as you and I well know, is collective. Feminism is about the privileged understanding their privilege and the marginalized challenging their margins. It is about a collective movement.

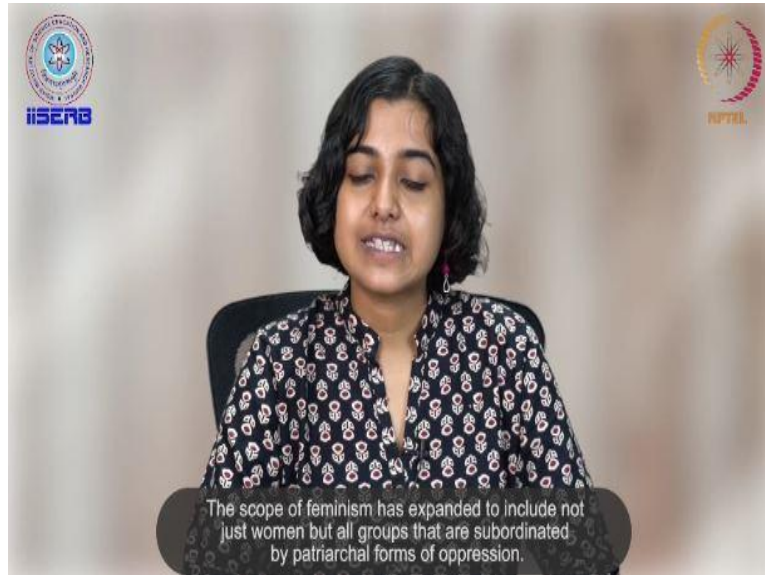
The movement we understand that perhaps, we will move towards a better future. A future where we will not be scared to say out loud that yes, I am a feminist. Now let us take a look at the important points to remember.

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Point number 1: Feminism promotes equality.

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Point number 2: The scope of feminism has expanded to include not just women but all groups that are subordinated by patriarchal forms of oppression.

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Point number 3: Feminism is based on historical and material lived realities, perceptions and actions.

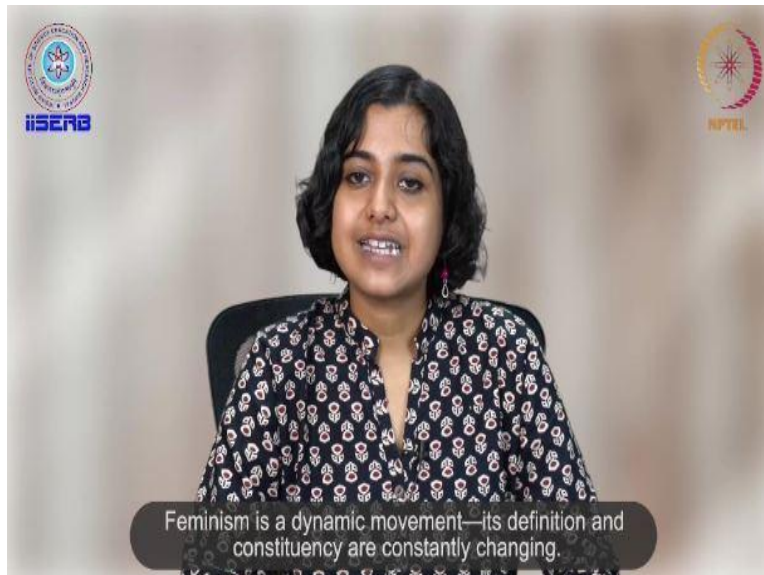
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Point number 4: Feminism is not an ontological category. In other words, one does not automatically become a feminist just by being born as a woman. It is an achieved awareness one gains by consciously recognizing gender disparity and hierarchies.

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Point number 5: Feminism is a dynamic movement. its definition and constituency are constantly changing. However, the purpose that is equality and emancipation remain the same. I hope you all have understood today's lecture. In the next class we will talk about the history of feminism in India. Thank you.

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