

PANEL IV : GENDER AND SOCIETY

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GENDER AND SOCIETY, CONTEMPORARY THEORETICAL CHALLENGES

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The last two decades have seen a proliferation of literature on issues regarding gender in India. The flowering of discipline popularly known in India as Women's Studies has been associated with the growth of the women's movement on one hand involving women from all walks of lives, groups and regions of the country and on the other by setting up of Women's Studies Centres all over the country. The first such centre was set up in 1974. The above together with the publication in 1975 of the Report on Status of Women by the committee set up by the government spurred the birth and consolidation of information, data, analyses and competing perspectives regarding various issues concerning women in India. The movement, the establishment of Women's Study Centres and the promotion given by various agencies, both national, like the ICSSR, the U.G.C., as well as autonomous research centres and international, like Ford Foundation and others, has pushed this branch of knowledge to expand its repertoire to cover analytically almost all the areas in social sciences and as well extend to the natural sciences and humanities. Initially, if the women's studies was restricted to the area of development studies specially concentrating its focus to the field of economic inquiry, from 1980s onwards, this branch of knowledge has widened its outreach and engulfed the disciplines of political studies, sociology, anthropology and now literature and literary criticism. It is acknowledged by various commentaries that if women studies as a coherent body of knowledge has grown in and through support given by the above mentioned agencies, much of its innovative and incisive contributions have had its origins in a dialogue with interventionist and activist thinking. As Krishnaraj states, it is both a discourse and action. (Krishnaraj, 1988)

It is not the intention of this paper to make a state of art presentation and catalogue the two decades of women's studies in India. This has been already done by competent and renowned authorities in the field. (See for instance, Agarwal, 1986, Dube, 1980, Mazumdar, 1986, Desai and Krishnaraj, 1987, 1990, Desai and Patel, 1989, and Karlekar, 1991). This paper would like to draw attention to the questions posed by Rudra (1989), in his review of the book mentioned

above, written by Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnaraj, entitled *Women and Society in India* (1987). These comments have implications for understanding and evaluating the nature of contemporary theorisations on the relationship between gender and society in India. Rudra's criticisms of the book are directed at two levels. One, that there does not exist a feminist perspective in India of the kind that there is in the west and secondly, that because of this absence, it is impossible to write a text book on women and society in India. According to Rudra, a text book is written "when there exists a considerable body of high level research in a unitary framework". Rudra suggests that we in India have not been able to conceptualise oppression of women qua women as yet theoretically (Rudra, 1989:918). Desai and Krishnaraj disagree with this point of view and in fact suggest that there exists now in India, a coherent theoretical position regarding patriarchy and its operations; its basic ingredients being the control of women's sexuality, reproduction and labour (Desai and Krishnaraj, 1989:1676).

This paper argues that while in the initial stages, women's studies attempted to fit in or add information, either of a compensatory or contributory kind, regarding women, which was not catalogued in various areas of knowledge and research, in the last five to ten years, we are seeing a growth of what can be called a gender perspective based on an understanding of oppression of women. This is not to assert that there exists an acceptance of one common theoretical framework among researchers in understanding gender and its relationship with society. Nor that there exist well developed competing perspectives on how to analyse specific aspects of the relationship between gender and society. But as Desai and Krishnaraj state, research and action has made possible an understanding of the nature of patriarchy in India. This paper would like to underscore the fact that if this understanding has helped in redefining research questions, it has also made possible the reconstitution of existing theoretical positions in various branches of knowledge within social sciences. In some cases, an interrogation from this perspective has had epistemic implications. Certainly, the growth of the gender perspective has posed significant methodological questions in certain areas of knowledge. Among the many interventions made by this perspective in questioning existing theoretical paradigms, this paper will explore three and indicate how gender perspective has enriched the discussion and debates in these areas of inquiry. The first is in the area of political participation and thus within the field of sociology of social movements, the second in the area of family, household and kinship studies and the last relates to the debate regarding tradition and modernity in India.

In the last decade investigations of women's participation in politics at the local, district, state and national levels have increased extensively. Working on the assumption that women's involvement and participation in politics would imply not only a presence but also a means to redress the balance of power, researchers concentrated their efforts in documenting women's participation in the political process and perceived it as an indice of empowerment. On one hand, while efforts were made to catalogue turn-out at elections, later on, researchers paid attention to the number of women representatives in the various assemblies and the parliament. An examination of this data suggested that there seems to be a steady decline in women's participation in mainstream politics. Women's turn-out at voting also seems to be erratic making some commentators to conclude that in most cases women are not being influenced by issues of women qua women, but rather by family, caste and community opinions. Most researches have also alluded to the role of the husband or the elderly male of the household in voting. That there is political visibility of women is not disputed. But what seems to have puzzled commentators is the fact it is so little. Why, when there was a history of mass movement among women during the nationalist struggle did participation of women in formal political institutions decline? Why is this participation restricted to elite women? What role does family, caste, class and religion play in the political participation of women? As familial and caste ideology are the means through which control of women is exercised, what role does patriarchy play in women's differential participation in politics? Also, research done on the growth of the contemporary women's movement does show mass involvement of women in issues regarding the common struggles of women, and in some cases this consciousness is reflected in their participation in mainstream politics. How do these two processes square up?

The need to focus on the role of organised parties and specifically ideologies has been reiterated by an examination of another set of questions. These deal with the analysis of the nature of women's participation historically in various movements in India and the growth of women's consciousness in these movements. Commentators had earlier suggested that the social reform movement may be considered the starting point of the women's movement in India. (Mazumdar, 1976). The nationalist struggle expanded this initial intervention and made possible mass involvement of women. (Jayawardave, 1986) but, where is the record of women's involvement and their contribution in this movement? And what about other movements, that of peasants,

tribal, workers and the middle class? Where is the record of women's experience in these movements? And if there is a record, why is this record only in terms of "male voices"? Is "women's voice" different and does this voice highlight different issues of politics than what established researches do?

Women's studies in India and all over the world has always insisted on the priority of personal and of "experience" to understand the oppression of women. Many commentaries of these mass movements have thus highlighted the nature of emotional and political commitment that was given by women in these struggles. They have also shown how received processes like marriage, family life, child nurturing got reorganised or displaced during the struggles and how the movement did not acknowledge nor support the women in the management of problems arising from these processes. (Stree Shakti Sangathan, 1989). And yet, these women continued to support the party and the movement. How does a researcher evaluate this commitment when an examination of the ideological domain does not necessarily indicate that the movement was articulating women's issues?

An evaluation of these movements suggest that participation of women in these mass struggles had not made these struggles women oriented, in the sense of raising issues that concern oppression of women *qua* women. This thus raises the problem of what participation implies. Does women's political participation in a movement imply that it is a women's movement or are there different criteria to judge this dimension? This question had led to a reexamination of both the social reform movement and the nationalist movement (Chatterjee, 1989). The subsequent debate has made some commentators shift their analysis to issue regarding ideologies of political parties and social movements. Questions like this has made researchers raise problems regarding their received theoretical frameworks. Are our existing theoretical frameworks incapable to understand these issues?

Initially, this question was discussed in context of the role Gandhi has played in defining women's issues during the nationalist struggle. (Kishwar, 1987, Patel, 1988). While this discussion did help to generate an examination of criteria that defined the women's question, it also led to critiques asking some fundamental questions regarding what determines a movement's gender orientation. This problem was further explicated when an examination of contemporary women's movement was attempted. It was acknowledged that there were parallel trends in the women's movement today. While a section of the movement was affiliated to party organisations, another section

was autonomous. The question to what extent either of these or all represented the genuine women's movement became significant. This issue has important ramifications as the question of specificity of women's oppression and the inspiration of what is the gender perspective has been derived and defined from the way contemporary women's movement has articulated this question.

The problem gets further complicated when we analyse the participation of women in religious movements that deliberately put women from one community against women from another community. This has occurred during the anti-reservation agitation in Gujarat and now in the movement sponsored by the Hinduva forces on the Ayodhya issue. Also in these agitations both Sadhvi Ritambhara and Uma Bharati have played a significant role in mobilising women in support of these forces. There is now evidence to suggest that ideologies like these have also inspired some women to participate in violence that has recently spread around the country. How do we estimate and evaluate this political participation specially when it is suggested that this too is a women's cause? How do we define what is the women's cause?

The implications of this research and the questions that it has raised has had a significant bearing on the theoretical paradigms in use today in the sociology of social movements. Firstly, this perspective has helped shift the emphasis and concern of analysis of movements from its internal structure and organisation and from an evaluation of the relationship between the leadership and the masses. Also, research in this area of study has moved away from using dichotomous categories, such as, old versus new movements, given the recognition that almost all contemporary movements are multi-group movements, though they may define their ideology in terms of one group. All movements incorporate varied stratas present in society who participate with equal zest but whose interests are not necessarily represented in the ideology of the movement. Thus the farmer's movement is as much a multi-group movement as is the dalit movement. Both these movements do not articulate the internal differentiation that exists within them, whether of class, caste and sub-caste, or of gender. Secondly, the focus of the research seems to be now on how emancipatory ideologies get constructed within the context of state-society dynamics within the nation-state. And more significantly, the analysis seems to concentrate on the way the discourse has been able to intermix various group interests in the construction of the ideological map of the movement. Specifically it focus is on the nature of the ideological structure and the way it represents the presence and absence of internal group

differentiations. This has led to an entire new way of perceiving ideologies basing itself on the theoretical interventions of Gramsci and Foucault and their later proponents. The idea is to comprehend the ideological map, and thereby move away from the category of "experience", but yet not completely. For, now "experience" is seen as the identification with a subjectivity which depending on its association with certain discourses and the way ideological representations are constituted, sometimes represents or sometimes does not represent the women's cause. (Tharu and Lalitha, 1991:29)

To some extent these issues have been raised in the analysis of the worker's movement. The distinction between the consciousness, movement, party and state has a long history. However the workers' movement was not supposed to be divided and fragmented internally in as many groups as researchers studying women are finding. Thus women are acting not only as women but also as members of a family, caste, class and religious community. These differences are as significant as their identity as women. And these get differentially structured depending on the ideological form and content of mobilization. Thus a movement can call itself a women's movement and still define its ideological map in terms of patriarchal principles. It could mobilise women on some issues concerning women and yet practice in its organisational and decision making structure a patriarchal political philosophy.

Gender perspective has thus opened up the field of sociology of movements to consider all ideological aspects of organisation and management of the movement in addition to evaluating the content of the movement. It has also demanded that we as researchers interrogate the categories of caste and class as also tribe and religion and ethnicity to understand how they as discourses incorporate the categories of caste and class as also tribe and religion and ethnicity to understand how they as discourses incorporate gender bias. If one has to note the singular implication of gender perspective on contemporary sociological imagination, it is the acceptance of the proposition that if class and caste are embedded in structures of production and distribution of power, they are also embedded as discourses that legitimise gender inequalities, this being specifically true of caste. Discourses of most movements incorporate such cognitive propositions. And these work to subtly reorganise the acceptance of patriarchal structures or in some cases, if at all, provide a paradigm to question it. Thus by unmasking the "personal" and suggesting that "personal is also political", gender perspective has opened up the sociology of power to all forms subtle cooption that legitimise control. This includes cognitive systems that exists within discourses of social movements.

II

This perspective, sometimes called the constructionist approach has had an enormous impact on the reorganisation of family, household and kinship studies in India. Literature in anthropology have conceived of the household as a basic unit of society which involves, production, reproduction, consumption and socialisation. It is now acknowledged that the kinship system organises both the type and function of the household and influences the formation of the family as well as the sexual division of labour. All three are designated the "private" sphere which because it connotes intimacy were hardly ever interrogated by anthropologists. Research on the composition and organisation of the kinship system, the household and the family is significant because all three have direct impact on women's lives and their ability to gain access to physical, material and cultural resources, labour and income, health care and education.

Initial intervention in this area of study has interrogated the assumption that the household as also the family and kinship systems are "natural" institutions. Behind this assumption, lie a belief that households are headed by males and controlled by men and that women play a minor role, if at all in formulating family strategies in the household. Also, contemporary research has suggested that the household cannot be seen in isolation. What is of importance is the inter or extra-household relations, for the household is defined by the social, economic and ideological relationships outside the unit. In the modern context, it is law as well as the various policies and programmes of the state that play an important role in its definition. And as the state takes up an increasingly interventionist role in devising economic, demographic and now even cultural and religious policies, its role in defining the opportunities and constraints that determine womanhood become significant (Agarwal, 1988). Simultaneously, because kinship systems were mainly seen as classificatory systems restricted to two domains, the domestic and the political-judicial it was not recognised that there are ideological constructs. The state had an important role to play in the construction and maintenance of these classificatory systems by way of generating official statistics. In most cases these statistics have mystified differences between individuals of both sexes, intum legitimising unequal access and control of resources. (Saradamoni, 1992)

Kinship guarantees women some rights and entitlement but, these are rarely ever perceived as created and claimed to legitimate certain social relations. These rights and entitlement are organised

through systems of marriage, residence, descent and inheritance, all of which, whether through different variants of patrilineal or even matrilineal control, give access to and control of resources and as well as other aspects of life. While initial studies in this area attempted to distinguish between differences between various forms of patrilineal and matrilineal systems in India, contemporary gender oriented research tries to understand why the patrilineal-patrilocal system has gained and is gaining a near universal status in India. The spaces available to women in matrilineal system in existence, are decreasing (Dube, 1993) and this affects their access to resources. What extent has this development due to contemporary economic developments and institutionalisation of patriarchal features within the state structure? This is a critical question as recent research indicates that the necessity for a woman to obtain wages is increasing without the lessening of her household duties. Even tasks such as cooking, childcare and other activities covering what is known as household chores, can be critical in determining women's involvement in the "productive" sphere. Help with cooking will make a substantial difference where it involves assistance with collecting fire wood. Women all over the world have to perform domestic labour tasks in addition to work "outside the home", sometimes, the latter is acknowledged and the women gets a remuneration-not necessarily equal to that which obtained by males and other times this work is not acknowledged, rather it is classified as family labour. Women are heavily dependent on extra-obligations, in some cases these networks even help make possible survival of the household. Additionally, these relationships have affected the women within the household and family. Evidence suggests that health status is worse than men as seen from such indices as that of sex-ratio, life expectancy, levels of mortality, morbidity and malnutrition.

One of the significant issues discussed by recent studies has been the existence and now the increase of female-headed households. Not only are these households different from matrilineal variants, but they have originated in context to changes initiated by contemporary economic developments. While evidence on this issue is complex, it is still possible to state that female headed households are common in situation of urban poverty, where there is high level of male migration and where there is general insecurity and vulnerability. There is also some evidence that increasing socio-economic differentiation within agriculture based communities has also generated this phenomenon. When this has occurred with concomitant breakdowns of the kin networks and relationships, it has made many poor women loose support structures.

Kinship systems are considered the organising principles that govern the formation of families and households as well as the recruitment and placement of individuals into groups with well defined rights and responsibilities, as well as distribution of resources and the nature of conjugality. Thus family is not merely a function of demography. It reflects the rules of marital recruitment and residence and the normative as well as the actual patterns of rearrangement of family structure in the replacement of one generation by the other. Research on family studies in India has by and large concentrated on understanding joint family structures in the context of industrialization and urbanisation. By accepting assumptions that families are harmonious units, that almost all of these are joint families and that urban India had more nuclear families, studies of families had not recognised that the fact that most lower caste and class families in India were of nucleated structure and that joint families have a relationship with property and that because of housing problems, in urban India, there is a more possibility of there being joining families even in the lower classes. (Ganesh, 1988)

If work and property are crucially linked, both are ordered by kinship relations which constitute the productive and reproductive domains of women's lives. In an analysis of women's relationship to property, it is necessary to recognise the fact that kinship governs women's access to property, and it also makes women a type of property. Women and men bring different things to a marriage and acquire different things through marriage. In patrilineal societies, the husband and his kin will acquire rights in the children born to the marriage. It has been suggested that dowry could be perceived as a right acquired by women to inherit a share of patrimonial property. However the nature of violence that is associated with it suggests that it implies the use of "kinship morality" against women, for not only does she has no access to this resources directly, it also implies a legitimization of the bias against the women that is conceptualised in the kinship system.

Anthropologists and sociologists have accepted the fact that caste was an extended kindred. If caste was empirically examined in terms of inter caste relations in a village, it was also perceived as subcaste or as kin spread over a region. Gender perspective has highlighted the fact that the phenomena of "boundary maintenance as a characteristic of caste society places special responsibility on women". (Dube, 1993:51). Within each of the castes there exists an hierarchy based on gender. This hierarchy is maintained by ritual and concerns of purity and pollution. The issue of ritual purity determines both the

nature of restrictions imposed on the women in terms of her inheritance and resource distribution, food intake, bodily processes, mobility, sexuality. As Das states, the close regulation of marriage and the rigidity of subcaste endogamy, makes women "literary... gateways to the caste system" (Das, 1976:135). The gender perspective has suggested that women has to bear the burden of maintaining the purity status of the caste, and therefore, the higher the caste and greater its level of purity, the more vulnerable it is to pollution and hence the more critical is the need to control the sexually of its female members.

The contribution of this perspective is now steadily changing the framework and perspectives utilised in the examination of family, kin and household (See Srinivas, 1983) and has had an impact in raising some interesting questions in stratification studies (Beteille, 1991). It is unfortunate that mainstream sociology and anthropology has not integrated these questions and issues in its discourse in a cohesive manner.

III

Roop Kanwar committed sati on September 4, 1987 at Deorala in Rajasthan. This event sparked off a major debate regarding the utilisation of the concept and discharge of tradition which mainstream sociology needs to note. This discussion on tradition, custom, practises and law was introduced earlier in context to the controversy on the Shah Bano's petition on maintenance. (23 April 1985). The debate on Shah Bano, then Roop Kanwar and now the roles Uma Bharati and Sadhvi Rithambhara are playing in a different way, has introduced new dimensions on the conceptualisation of modernity and tradition in India.

The first set of arguments reason out the problem in the following fashion. Is modernity not destroying our culture? Can one separate the modern from the indigenous suggesting that the act of committing sati was symbolising the latter? Is it therefore possible to argue that because modernity and its upholders are destroying indigenous forms of expression and cognition, it remains an alien discourse? Also, therefore, the act suggests the resilience of tradition? In this context where do we search for the roots of our tradition? When does the modern period start? Does modernity start with the onset of colonialism and has colonialism distorted traditional practices? Is the fight against modernity a fight against all those who uphold the colonial discourse with its acceptance of the argument that sati is forced suicide? (Nandy, 1987).

The second set of arguments start with completely different premises. Is the act of committing sati separate from the commentaries

that it evoked which justified the act in the name of tradition? If so how do we analyse tradition and modernity? Are they opposite processes? How do we relate and understand the fact that Roop Kanwar came from an educated family (her father was a teacher), that sati temples have been very consciously financed by the Marwari petty and big trading groups in Rajasthan, (Vaid, 1988), that there are organised groups propagating this ideology, that newspapers and commentaries also justified this act in the name of tradition? Why is it that tradition is evoked so consciously to legitimise an act of murder appearing as suicide?

Much of the arguments on this question accept that tradition has to be interrogated as a discourse, that there is no duality in social processes by which one can identify empirically what is tradition and what is modernity. Both are constructs being used politically in the context of a questioning that is occurring on the women's question in India which has, as it is shown above, ideologically inscribed a definite place for women; the women who is circumscribed in the household.

This debate has however opened up the discussion to an interesting sets of questions. If the emerging gender perspective suggests that there is a reconstitution of tradition in the modern context where can we historically locate the roots? For instance the issue of Shah Bano and her fight to obtain maintenance. Is it related to the way the colonial state interpreted laws, reorganised customs, legitimised certain constructs regarding womanhood as against other received ones which had given more space and more manoeuvre to women? Is it that changes that were initiated during the colonial period wherein issues of family, inheritance, adoption, marriage, divorce were legislated together with economic changes initiated by capitalism in agriculture and industry made possible a reorganisation of a patriarchal ideology? Was this ideology associated with colonial state and its political processes? What is the relationship with this ideology and the nationalist movement? (Sangari and Vaid, 1989 and Tharu and Lalita, 1991). Does the post-independent state continue to hold this ideology? Are there regional variations to this ideology and can we think of various kinds of patriarchal ideologies in use?

IV

In this paper, I have initiated a discussion on how questions raised by the gender perspective has reorganised and have attempted to reconstitute the discourse on sociology. This is not an exhaustive survey. Infact twenty years of research on the relationship between gender and society in India has initiated a repertoire of research material

which a short paper like this would find it even difficult to mention, leave alone analyse. There is a lot that is missing from this paper. Yet, I attempted to document and give a glimpse of the range and richness of work in this area because I am convinced that a dialogue with this perspective will enrich the sociological imagination in India.

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