

The Role of Women in Indian Society

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Abstract

This paper is focus on the Rig Vedic Women in India enjoyed high status in society and their condition was good. Even the women were provided opportunity to attain high intellectual and spiritual standard. Status signifies an overall position of a person in a society by virtue of which the person has certain rights and obligations and enjoys certain privileges. One of the important aspects of the social structure of any social system is the fact that it's members are differentiated and evaluated according to social positions they occupy in the group and any of the subgroups to which they may belong. The institutionalization of such processes of differentiation and evaluation constructs an elaborate system that configures different status for the members of the group. There are certain determinants of status which are generally known as indicators of status. These include income, property, education and training in skills that open up chances of employment, health levels, rights and privileges. In terms of every set of indices of status, relatively women have been found to be at a much lower status than their fellow men. The lower status of women is the result of social evaluation of their biological characteristics. These characteristics are entrenched in social beliefs and values and such value system promotes male as being more important socially, while women to be submissive. The social differentiation of men and women tends to indicate the specific role that women have to play and as such reduces their chances of having equal status with their male counterparts.

Key words: Women Issues, Rights, Social Issues

Introduction

The above mentioned incidents are a pointer to the fact that even today, thousands of years after inception, and more than 50 years since its official abolishment by the Government, caste, religious and gender discrepancy and exploitation continue to be a part and parcel of Indian society. One still hears stories about how Dalits are refused water from a village well,

And the 'punishment' that they are subjected to for daring to break age-old religious and social codes, about how inter-caste marriages are opposed by village panchayats and political parties even make statements that the life of a cow is more precious than that of a Dalits' s. The recent controversies that have seen students out on the streets on the proposal to reserve 27.5% of seats for Other Backward Classes (OBC) in institutes of higher education have also fuelled caste divisions, especially in urban India. People are polarised between the pro-reservationists and the anti-reservationists - there seems to be no middle path. Caste has become a topic of conversation in urban middle class India, which had hitherto maintained a distance from such a volatile issue. On the other hand, the champions of caste-based politics in India are perhaps, not surprisingly, the most reticent when the issue of gender parity is raised. Political parties are quick to raise the issue of reservation in higher education, but one

Does not notice the same action on the Women's' Reservation Bill, while caste and gender are both crucial Issues that dominate the socio-political discussions and debates, the intersections between the two need greater examination. The writings of Mahasweta Devi bring to the fore the complexities of the equations between caste, tribe, class and gender that exist in India today.

In the neo-colonial set-up, these dichotomies only serve to further subjugate and marginalise women and deny them their rightful position in the societal framework. These subjugations are invariably located in history and are part of a continuing tradition of exploitation and oppression. The following sections of this chapter will thus trace the historiography of the caste system and the tribal societies with a special focus on gender issues.

History and Development of the Caste System

The caste system has been a cause of tremendous debate at the intellectual and social level, both in India as well as internationally. Many different definitions of caste have been offered. The common factor in all these definitions is the description of caste as an isolated unit, and not as a group that has relations to the other castes and sub-castes. The advent of the caste system has often been attributed to the arrival of the Aryans in India around 1500 BC/ and it is often believed that the Aryans succeeded in subjugating the indigenous non-Aryan population.

A conspicuous factor in the entire caste discourse discussed so far is the total absence of any mention of women. As in other parts of the world, women in India have been an exploited, subjugated lot. What has made the situation worse is the added caste oppression, in addition

to gender exploitation and subjugation. In this context, a study of the oppression suffered by Dalit women would be amongst the most extreme. Therefore while they have shared biological experiences, their socio-political experiences differ from community to community, region to region, caste to caste and tribe to tribe. Women living in urban middle class India find it difficult to relate to women living in the same city but belonging to a different S•Jeial class. The differences that are clearly apparent

between Sujata and Somu's mother in Mahasweta Devi's Hajaar Churashir Maa example of this disparity, wherein in spite of their shared grief and loss. the two women fail to relate to each other.

The lives of women in India have been traditionally governed by the historical, political, economic and social factors that have moulded Indian society through the ages. Most of the norms and values that govern them even today have their roots in the past and especially in the scriptures. What makes a generalised perspective on the state of Indian women even more difficult is the total heterogeneity of experiences across regional, religious, ethnic groups and castes.

Women in Post-Independence India

After independence there was a relative calm in feminist activities because of the opening of new opportunities for women. Because of this lull many pre-independent women's organizations like the AIWC reoriented themselves as primarily social organizations providing services like running schools, hostels, etc. Communist women broke away from the AIWC and formed the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) in 1954, which remained a platform for women within the party and in party-led trade unions.

Many political parties maintained token women's fronts such as the Mahila Congress by Congress concerned primarily with mobilizing women for party rallies and vote-catching. However all these bodies were not involved in any struggle oriented activity.

The resumption of the women's movement in post-independence period saw the emergence of many new women's organizations and groups and old ones being revitalized actively engaged to promote women's interests. Although women's organizations (AIWC, WIA) have been a part of the anti-colonial nationalist movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was only in the seventies that women's groups that worked essentially for women's cause were formed. During the late 70s and 80s many urban groups emerged in Calcutta, Bangalore, Pune, and elsewhere. The year, witnessing the development and crushing of the Nav Nirman movement, also witnessed the formation of the first women's group of the contemporary feminist movement in Hyderabad known as POW comprising women from the Maoist movement.

This group recognized the sexual division of labour (the base) and the culture rationalizing it (the superstructure) as the two primary structures of women's oppression. Maharashtra witnessed the sudden development of many feminist activities in 1975 whereby, under the influence of the POW, Maoist women in Pune formed the Purogami Stree Sangathana (progressive women's organization) and Maoist women in Bombay formed the Stree Mukti Sangathana (women's liberation organization). A new group called the Mahila Samta Sainik Dal (League of Women Soldiers for Equality) was also formed by women from the dalit movement. The manifesto of this Dal recognized the sexual oppression of women considering religion as the major agent in the oppression of women as well as dalits and the caste system as the source of inequality in India. Further parallels were drawn between caste oppression and women's oppression, existing in the latter a caste division between men and women, where notions of purity and pollution were used to suppress women. The manifestoes of both POW and MSSD stressed the sexual oppression of all women that earlier social reform or feminist groups had ignored. During the nineties women from the Dalit community also formed organizations such as All India Dalit Women's Forum, and the National Federation of Dalit women and Dalit Solidarity. The declaration of emergency in 1975 caused a break in the on-going feminist movement and the lifting of the same in 1977 renewed the feminist movement, feminist groups coming up all over the country, but mainly in the major cities. The distinguishing feature of the new women's groups was that many of them opted for autonomy, consisting of separate, women-only groups, rejecting any political-party affiliation or conventional organizational structure, despite the fact that most of their members belonged to other political groups of left and far left. The only party-based women's organization to come up in the late seventies was the Mahila Dakshata Samiti (MSD), which was founded by socialist women in the coalition Janata party in 1977. Though

the feminist campaigns in the late seventies and early eighties were dominated by the new city-based groups, similar developments of feminist consciousness had also taken place in certain rural movements. This can be seen in case of Karimnagar district when the Telangana movement in Andhra Pradesh was again renewed after the emergency was lifted. In this district where women had been especially active in the

landless labourers' movement from the sixties on, the new wave of agitation began with a campaign against the kidnapping of a woman called Devamma, and the murder of her husband, by a local landlord.

Subsequently, women demanded the formation of independent women's organizations called the Mahila Sanghams and raised the issues of wife-beating and landlord rape through these Sanghams. There were continuous debates going on over various issues involving these feminist groups which held differing views regarding such issues. Despite ideological differences these groups rapidly built networks among each other. The initial time in the life of these groups was consumed in attempts at self-definition. The two factors of affiliation of most of the members of these groups to the far left and their belonging to the urban educated middle-class influenced the feminist movement of the late seventies and early eighties in fairly complex ways.

On the one hand, considerable debate was going on the class basis of women's oppression, the road to women's liberation and the role feminists could play in this; on the other hand, the awareness of their basically middle-class background led many feminists to feel that their own needs were minor and different compared to the needs of vast majority of women in India from the working and labouring classes. The Marxist affiliations of most of the feminists resulted in a broad agreement that a materialistic framework was necessary for the analysis of women's oppression, although there were wide differences over what this meant. Debates were also going on regarding the things whether family should be considered as a homogenous structure of oppression for women, or differentiated according to class. Underlying these debates was the argument that how far and in which ways commonality of women's experience can be sought and if it could cut across class, and to a lesser extent caste and community boundaries. The experience of the Maoist insurgency of the late sixties and its repression and disintegration in the early seventies, had led many to believe that a revolutionary transformation of society was possible if different oppressed groups (tribals, subordinate castes and women) were organized and represented separately, and then brought together to fight their common enemies. Therefore, in the late seventies the question before the women's groups was of how women could be organized and represented and different arguments were provided to conclude that this was not the task of feminist groups. The ideological heterogeneity of feminists (most of them belonged to diverse sections of the far left) led to constant argument and disagreement within and between feminist groups and the sectarianism of the far left further exacerbated the problem. But in the late seventies the feminists were overwhelmed with fear that to recognize sectarianism within their ranks would make anti-feminists to recognize and declare the incapability of women to work together.

Thus, the need was felt for suppression of recognition of sectarianism and it was most often treated as a personal problem between individuals rather than as a source of conflict of ideas and attitudes. Some saw in this lack of ideological homogeneity examples of the potential pluralism of feminism which could provide a ground for women with different ideas to work together and thus, the idea of achieving homogeneity through expelling dissidents was rejected. While there was some sort of feminist critique of party politics, the terms of criticism varied widely. The liberal reformist school although being critical of the existing

practice of political parties believed that reform was possible and could fulfill feminist aims; the left school, although being critical of the traditional and entrenched political parties, provided that genuine representative political parties could be created; libertarian school argued that political parties were so structured that they would never fulfill feminist, or indeed socialist aims. Regional variation was also witnessed in the terms of the argument. Delhi, where feminism and party-affiliation were mutually opposed, witnessed the development of two major feminist groups of the late seventies (Samta and Stri Sangharsh) out of university-based feminist discussion groups in Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University and were not having any members who were party-affiliated. On the other hand, the first feminist groups in Bombay were neither university-based nor composed mainly of students. Most of their members had some experience of organizing, campaigning and negotiating, both as members of political groups or organizations, and in joint party and non-party fronts. Most of the members were from the far left, from civil liberties' organizations, revolutionary groups, independent trade unions etc. The importance of this difference between Delhi and Bombay based groups became clear at the first national conference of socialist-feminists in India organized by women in Bombay in 1978. It was in this conference that need was felt that a distinction had to be made between activists and the general body of women. Moreover, a distinction was also made between conscious-raising and theory generation. It was out of such distinctions that a three-tiered hierarchy developed, consisting of theory generators (the most articulate ones), activists (conscious-raisers), and the subjects of their attention. The influence of feminist ideas was beginning to grow.

Conclusion

It can be seen that in the Indian context the position of women within society has been considerably complex from pre-Vedic times to the present day. Highly educated women have existed alongside those who never had the opportunity to learn, bound as they were by the pressures of patriarchal societal structures. One has to remember that while during colonisation, the colonisers attempted to locate all the colonised population as 'effeminate' or 'female', Indian men attempted to reassert their authority vis-a-vis Indian women by reclaiming and reconstructing history that glorified them.

Indian women too have not remained silent spectators of history as has widely been reported. Recent recovery of documents and the rewriting of history from the subaltern perspective have brought to the fore the long neglected role of women in Indian society, whether in pre-Vedic times, during the Bhakti movement, during the freedom movement or in the post-Independence period. The historiographical account of the position and status of women in Indian society, and more particularly in Dalit and tribal society bring to the fore the various contradictions that are perhaps the root cause of the lack of women's development. Veneration and an idealisation as 'Mother India' co-exist with attempts by the power structures to further repress and subjugate the woman and deny her rights in society. Quite naturally, these contradictions have been reflected in a lot of the literature written by women.

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