

Identity Formation, Nationhood and Women

An Overview of Issues*

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Burqa me Atankvad

We begin this essay with a reference to a television programme on one of the Hindi news channels - titled *Burqa me Atankvad* which was telecast sometime in mid-2005. The programme referred to claimed to expose the new tactics of the 'terrorists' in Kashmir and presumably the ISI to recruit beautiful women in *burqa* to entice the BSF and the Indian security forces in order to penetrate their ranks; further, the programme went on to 'expose' the conspiracy of the 'terrorists' to recruit young Kashmiri Hindu men (Kashmiri Hindu *yuvakon*) into the ranks of the terrorists and militants by deploying these beautiful women in *burqa*. One of the consequences of this, according to the programme, has been the spread of HIV aids among the jawans of the Indian security and paramilitary forces, and figures were produced to substantiate this. The programme went on to show some other women in *burqa* in some other cities in Uttar Pradesh who were allegedly caught by the police. And finally, the programme concluded with some shots of Mata Hari.

Muslim women who, so far were merely seen as victims both of communal riots, backwardness of *mullahs* and, of Muslim men who were trying to keep their women trapped in their backwardness are now being projected as active agents - but in the cause of terrorism, another new identity that the Kashmiri Muslim women have to sport apart from being Kashmiris, and Muslims and women.

The question of identity is crucial for women since they are more often than not considered the repositories of culture and markers of identity. The contradictions and tensions underlying the definitions of self, gender and collectivity are universally relevant since all societies have to deal with three incontrovertible and inescapable truths: birth, life and the reality of the two sexes. Thus gender

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definitions are central to all cultures and their sense of collective identity. (Shaheed, F. 1998:8) Or as others have put it: the production and reproduction of life and labour takes place in patriarchal institutions.

When women attempt to redefine their roles and expand their arena of choices, their perceptions and actions generate reverberations through the entire society necessitating a re-ordering of not only gender roles and arrangements but also of the social and political order affecting the culture and the collectivity and its self-definition and identity. Thus history's oldest oppression and cleavage/faultline is shaken at its very roots.

Identity is also, about subjectivities; yet it is not something that persons don at their will, irrespective of objective situations and processes. Articulations of identity have to be understood as a function of historical, social and material circumstances. (Bilgrami, Akeel 1993: 282)

While feminist theorists have generally highlighted the universality of this dimension of women's situation, it is also necessary to historicise and contextualize this generalization. Patriarchal oppression intermeshes with various social formations in diverse ways in different historical situations and it is this that imparts a specific character and a social groundedness to the concrete historical articulation of patriarchy. For, understanding of this specific and concrete manifestation is necessary in order to work out strategies for dealing with this, since the levers of change are provided by this.

Historical Backdrop

Given that the subcontinent has been home to myriad races and peoples since early historical times, the complex relationship that has evolved over time, between these collectivities, sometimes symbiotic and sometimes conflicting, has constituted an essential ingredient of its history. The necessity of having to deal with such a diversity of peoples, occupying a wide range of ecological and socio-cultural niches has contributed the vitality and resilience to the subcontinental civilization.

And more importantly, this has constituted a vital component of the collective identity of the peoples of the region. Dealing with plurality was comfortable. However, this social and cultural diversity was ranged along a hierarchy with every group having its specific place in the segmented social structure. This hierarchy has

been determined by the caste system and gender divisions have been integral to its logic.

While we do not wish to get into a discussion on the caste system, it is important to note that it was principally a mode of production, which has been termed caste-feudalism; it has been and continues to be a social system and ideology *par excellence*, of social inequality, and charting the life trajectories of individuals and groups. It determined access or non-access to the basic productive assets and resources of society as well as access to knowledge. Over the centuries, the caste-based system exhibited contradictory features of assimilation and rigidity, depending on specific historical conjunctures. The caste-based social organisation and hierarchy of South Asian society was so over-determining that even universalistic religions like Islam and Christianity could not remain unaffected by caste.

The dimension of gender has been integral to the structure and logic of the caste system. The suppression of women was essential to the maintenance of caste hierarchy. The higher the location in the hierarchy, the greater were the controls on women. While patriarchal ideology is strongest in the dominant groups, it holds sway over the entire society with even originally matrilineal and matrifocal groups succumbing to its hegemony. Gender oppression and discrimination has been and continues to be mediated through caste, class, ethnicity and religion.

Thus, identities have been with us in this subcontinent for a long time though the discourse on identities is more recent. While a multiplicity of communities dotted the social landscape, based on caste, occupation, language, religion, region and sect, these criss-crossed and no one aspect constituted the defining principle of community identity (again defined variously at different points of time) for all times and situations. It is generally agreed that the transition of communities from being inchoate groups based on caste, region, language religion and sect with somewhat fluid boundaries to a freezing of all identities and a consolidation of religion-based community occurred sometime in the late nineteenth century. Various factors contributed to the freezing of identities: colonial policy, orientalist perceptions, Indian middle classes' response to the inferiorisation of Indian society, the significant role of the Census as well as language policy, all had a role to play in this. A melange of the above-mentioned factors, skillfully engineered by colonial official policy, contributed to the heightening of the faultlines in Indian society.

These developments also set the tone for political mobilisation along religious lines. Representation on the basis of religious community became important for access to power and access to economic resources and middle class employment in the

administration. And in the context of Hindu political mobilisation, the concern with numbers became an obsession in the writings of many nationalist social reformers. (Datta, P.K. 1993:1305-1317; Pandey. G. 1990: 201-32) Consequently, conversion to Hinduism of untouchables and tribals and former converts to Islam and Christianity became an important ideological and political plank of Hindu nationalism.

Apart from religion, caste and tribe were also important loci of social mobilisation particularly in the 19th.C. But all these categories were not neat watertight compartments at any point of time; they melded together in an untidy manner and, whatever the basis of community, be it language, caste, region, or even occupational categories, during the colonial period, 'community' was the focal point of organising and mobilizing for collective articulation. As one scholar has put it: " .. . modern politics in India began not as an exercise in citizenship, since no one can be a citizen of a colony, but as so many attempts to organise pressure groups that could negotiate with the colonial authority and, inevitably, these pressure groups were organised around the fault lines that existed already in society, so that factors of religion, caste and community were paramount in the organisation of such groups." (Ahmad 2004: 79)

Orientalist constructions of India melded with indigenous Brahmanical perspectives during the colonial period and formed the basis of the discourse which defined India by its supposedly opposing religions - Islam and Hinduism - and thereby created the ideological and social-political basis for colonial administrative policy and colonial sociology. (Pandey, G. 1990) Romila Thapar has dealt lucidly and brilliantly with the manner in which the colonial encounter changed the very framework of the comprehension of the past from what was prevalent prior to colonialism, and the manner in which current political ideologies appropriate such comprehension and its implications for the present (Thapar, R. 2000:68-87).

The latter part of the nineteenth century also witnessed the beginnings of a contestation between two ideas of India and Indian nationhood - a pluralistic and composite one which was inclusive of all identities and another exclusive definition of India as "Hindu". (David Ludden 1996) The latter idea, i.e. India as a land of Hindus alone, was put forward in an organized, political form in the 1920s, expounded in the writings of Savarkar, Golwalkar and others who went into questions of who constitutes a Hindu and what constitutes a Hindu nation. (Pandey, G. 1993). These were the first public, political articulations of the two-nation theory from Indians which echoed the views of certain sections of the colonial administration. The 'naturalisation' and 'nationalisation' of 'Hindu' consciousness

runs so deep that this has been forgotten and Mohammed Ali Jinnah and the Muslim League have been considered the creators of the two-nation theory.

It also needs to be noted that the second decade of the twentieth century also saw very important and powerful social movements of assertion of the lower castes, the most prominent being the non-Brahmin movements of southern and western India and some historians see the rise of Hindu nationalism as a response to threats to upper-caste dominance and as an ideology of reaction (Sarkar, S. 1997:360).

The Women's Question and the National Movement

Women from various sections were directly involved in these events and processes at various conjunctures: both as active participants (as in the case of the professedly anti-colonial movements of the subcontinent or even in the peasant and tribal movements that occurred periodically) and as victims of conflagrations over which they had no control. The subject of 'woman' featured significantly in many of the intense debates in the 19th century, around issues pertaining to the making of modern India. Often women's participation in various mass movements, especially at a pan-Indian level, contributed to breaking down community boundaries and stereotypical gender roles, even as it helped to consolidate a nascent nationalist consciousness.

In the following paragraphs, we briefly explore the complex and turmoil-ridden and tortuous interrelationship between gender, national and other multiple identities. In different contexts and conjunctures, women's gender identity interfaces with the multiple and multivalent identities that women carry within them. Their sense of selfhood is scripted by the other identities as much as by their gender identity.

In the colonial period, women's concerns were central to the reform movements in the 19th century. The issues that dominated the reform movement during this period were the abolition of sati, women's education, rights of widows to remarry, raising the age of marriage and the struggle against polygamy. The position of Indian women and their right to dignity constituted the core of the social reform movement of this period and it was this that laid the basis for the struggle for the right to women's equality in a later period. However, the initiators of these reform movements were mainly men whose endeavours included pioneering efforts at building institutions for women's education. These efforts led to the emergence of a section of educated women who were to be active and even lead the movement for women's equality by the turn of the century. (Mazumdar I. 1999:328 -329)

Scholars writing on *Sati* point out that the debate on *Sati* was not so much about the practice and the horror of it or the manner in which it affected women, but about what constituted authentic cultural tradition. Besides, this reworking of tradition privileged Brahmanical scriptures initiated and propagated by the colonial discourse which reflected the shared understanding of the sections of the indigenous elite and the colonial rulers. (Mani, Lata, 1989: 90).

Another significant feature of the social reform movement of the nineteenth century was its narrow social base, constituting primarily the upper classes and the burgeoning, western-educated Indian middle classes who grew under the aegis of British colonial rule and who were in important ways beneficiaries of British rule. The social contradictions and limitations that the Bengal Renaissance embodied cannot be better captured than by reference to the events of 1857, which saw the reformers and the mass of the exploited and impoverished peasantry along with the erstwhile rulers on opposing sides during the "First War of Indian Independence". On the other hand, Brahminical patriarchal tradition was also challenged seriously in the writings of social reformers and publicists like Jyotiba Phule in the late 19th century and Periyar Ramaswami Naicker in the 1920s and 1930s.

However, it has been argued by some that, in the later phase of the colonial period, i.e. from the mid to late nineteenth century onwards, the women's question had disappeared from the agenda of the nationalists. The decline of interest among the middle classes in social reform has been partly attributed to the dominant role of nationalism in public life which was accompanied by an increase in social conservatism and perhaps provided an easy option out of difficult personal choices (Sarkar, S. 1985:162). Partha Chatterjee has articulated the 'nationalist resolution' of the women's question in terms of the dichotomies of spiritual/material, inner/outer or home and the world. To quote Chatterjee: "The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents our inner spiritual self, our true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interest, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world - and woman is its representation. And so we get an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into *ghar* and *bahir*." (Chatterjee, P. 1989:238-239). Thus a new patriarchy was 'constructed' which was in contradistinction to not only modern, western society but also various forms of indigenous patriarchies. Needless to say these attempts at reform affected only a thin stratum of upper caste, Hindu women.

The relationship of the women's question to the nationalist movement and the variety of responses and articulations on this, specifically the narrow social base of the attempts at reform, which focused on the upper caste Hindu women had its own implications. The extremely interesting and often provocative and certainly different responses of the incipient non-Brahmin movement in western India and later in South India along with the experiences of the rebellions against colonial rule among the tribals of central India were largely marginalized and rendered invisible.

One cannot but mention the Non-Brahmin movement in the early decades of the twentieth century in Tamil Nadu in this context. Its opposition to Congress nationalism and even ambivalence to British rule notwithstanding, the movement encompassing all the oppressed castes and classes also integrated within its vision and programme a radical critique of Brahminical patriarchy. Referring to the Self-Respect movement of Periyar Ramaswamy Naicker, two scholars write: "The Self-respecter more often than not, was a woman, an adi-dravida, a richshaw puller, a weaver, a peasant, a factory worker. ...they comprised the very dregs of society, men and women of no consequence whatsoever." (Geetha and Rajadurai,1998: 515). Another integral and significant dimension of the Non-Brahmin movement was the central role of the Tamil language in the assertion of Dravidian identity. There was an attempt to cleanse Tamil of all sanskritic influences and go back to a 'pure' Tamil uncontaminated by Sanskritic, 'Aryan' and north Indian influences.

Even in the well-known rebellions of central India like the Santhal Rebellion and the *Ulgulan* of Birsa Munda (in the mid-1850s) against British rule, the women's question was obviously more complex than has been generally acknowledged. Even as Adivasi and tribal women participated fully in these movements, the gender question remained subsumed within the movements for the assertion of tribal identity. However, what is significant is that recent writings have revealed that the complicated impact of colonial rule on these societies leading to intense social and political turmoil were also accompanied by an increase in instances of witch-hunting. [†]

The assertion of the subaltern castes/classes in northern India in the twenties and thirties of the nineteenth century followed a different trajectory. Their assertion was intermeshed with the rising Hindu assertion of the time and it has been pointed out

[†]. I would like to thank Shashank Sinha for drawing my attention to this dimension. For a more detailed discussion see Sinha, S. – Adivasis, Gender and the 'Evil Eye' : Construction(s) of Witches in Colonial Chotanagpur)

that the urban labouring poor of Hindu society consisting of the shudra and the untouchable castes played an important role as the militant arm of a supposedly threatened Hinduism. Not all groups of the poor were in the forefront of this. It was principally the growing numbers of the lower caste, shudra groups like the ahirs/yadavs, kurmis, gujars, khatiks, kahars who constituted the army of Hinduism. (Gooptu, N. 2000).

Their assertion more often than not involved a redefinition of their caste status as kshatriyas or rajputs and their perceived historical role in defending Hinduism and the Hindu social order against the supposed depredations of the Islamic conquerors. Thus a religious identity was asserted more to contest the dominance of the upper castes whose principal mode of expression of power was religious rather than any intrinsic commitment to religious community. (Gooptu, N. 2000:196)

However, there were other modes of resistance within the framework of religion which were adopted by the untouchable groups; their protest was to reject Brahminical and upper caste Hinduism and to uphold heterodox Hinduism of the Adi Hindu leaders, i.e. the *nirguna bhakti* of the various saints. Theirs was an altogether different version of history. But this form of articulation of protest and resistance was too radical for the shudra groups since it would have invited further marginalisation from caste Hindu society.

There are certain aspects of the Hindu resurgence of this period that need to be particularly noted.

There was a rise of reformist trends amongst Hindu organisations. *Such reformism targeted lower caste groups and Hindu women.* The aggressive articulation of this trend manifested itself in the *shuddhi* and *sangathan* movements launched by the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha on a large scale in 1923.

The communal aspect of these movements have been highlighted; however, it is only recently that the gendered dimension of these processes has received scholarly attention. (Charu Gupta: 2001; Malhotra, A. 2002). In the increasing and intensifying assertions of religious community identity during this period, gender became an important tool in both sharpening Hindu identity and simultaneously sharpening the divisions among and between Hindus and Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs. Thus integral to this new Hindu identity was an othering of both Muslims and Islam. The construction of the new Hindu man and woman was extremely important in the task of consolidating Hindu identity and in militant nationalist struggle. A strong, unified, masculine Hindu community was necessary for the task of nation-building;

but this nation had no place for Muslims. Thus a close relationship was constructed between the Hindu male, the Hindu community and the nation. The Hindu woman had also to be drawn into this aggressive assertion of Hindu identity. The Hindu woman was exhorted to shed her traditionally passive image and role and take on a militant and almost masculine image to defend the honour of the Hindu community against the 'depredations' of the Muslims. While women have generally been markers of community difference, in this charged atmosphere of these decades, the Hindu woman was made an activist in the resurgence of the communalised Hindu community, a role which was charted out by Hindu men. Besides, the attempt at reforming the status of Hindu women, invariably involved 'sanskritisation' of the practices and customs of women from the lower castes and this was an important element for the construction of community.

The formation of the modern Punjabi middle class, its moorings in the caste system and its close linkages with the reformist movements in the Punjab have been analysed in the excellent study by Anshu Malhotra (Malhotra, A. 2002). The reformist movement of the Arya Samaj while reconceptualising caste also had its implications for gender roles. As she points out the project of acquiring an "appropriate modernity" was central to the contest among the elites. While 'communitarian' aspirations were the public face of the indigenous elite, caste persisted even in its modified form. An integral aspect of constructing a self-identity, along with a reworked caste identity was an emphasis on the regulation of the behaviour and conduct of women. (Malhotra, A. 2002:2) As part of the project of the emerging modernity, the ambivalent nature of women's identity vis a vis their location in the caste system had always been a problem; the dilemma for middle class men was that while Hindu upper caste women were reviled for being akin to shudras, these very women were also perceived as the subjects of an emerging modernity. Likewise, women's relationship to religion and religiosity was also a grey area. The process of rescuing women from the seemingly meaningless religious practices and customs and 'reforming' them for their place in modern society was also accompanied by a fracturing of shared experiences and spaces, between 'Hindu' and 'Sikh' women, between high caste women and low caste women and men. (Malhotra, A. 2002: 4-5)

Our delineation of the processes operative in northern and northwestern India that we have referred to in the preceding paragraphs would be incomplete without a reference to the issue of language and the politics of language. The Hindi movement in the United Provinces and Awadh was not merely about the development of Hindi as a standard modern and perceived as a vehicle for the aspirations of the masses; it also became a vehicle for the rising Hindu assertion, apart from also being a channel

for the contestation between the Kayasthas and the Brahmins.(Rai, A. 2000:ix) The major impetus for the Hindi movement was provided by a conservative alliance of upper caste Hindu and mercantile groups with the principal aim being to differentiate Hindi from Urdu. While the language in use was one, the radically different scripts made the issue an easy and important weapon in the construction of a Hindu community and Hindu nationalism. The essence of this nationalism was to deny the cultural assimilation that already existed between traditions associated with Muslim rule and those that may be termed loosely Hindu and to thereby effect a radical break in the composite traditions. In this movement for Hindi, language, script and religion and even nation became fused together. But what is interesting is that the manner in which the entire Hindi-Urdu controversy was gendered in public debates. (King, C. 1994:15) In the Punjab, too, expectably, the language question was embedded in the wider social and political matrix. The divisions over the use of language, i.e. Punjabi, Hindi or Urdu and script (Gurmukhi, Devnagri and Urdu) contributed to congealing communal identities. (Malhotra, A. 2002: 7)

Movements for reform in the nineteenth century, where the women's question was central and the focus of heated public debates was viewed as merely a social issue, affecting the life of the community and that too the domestic domain but having no repercussions on the public, political realm. What is significant, as mentioned earlier, is that these notions of reform found a fertile soil among the burgeoning middle-classes; the processes of individuation that were at work among these middle classes had a social basis and were not merely a matter of imposition of western values. And even western values were being very selectively appropriated by the middle class reformers. Thus while the women's question became important, caste-based inequalities did not get the same attention. It is only recently being recognized that these various attempts at social reform were crucial for the ideological and political construction and consolidation of the community. While there were similar processes at work in the consolidation of community amongst both Hindus and Muslims, much more work has been done on the former than on the latter. It is only recently that works on the construction of gender in the formation of Muslim identity have started appearing and that too largely done by western scholars. The few works by Indians have been done mainly by Muslims. One wonders whether a kind of exclusion, a remnant of past exclusion is still operative. The women's question was an agonizing and ambivalent one for both the Hindu and Muslim reformers, faced as they were with the traumatizing impact of the British colonial encounter. Women symbolized everything that was wrong with their culture and simultaneously also the hope of enduring and overcoming the colonial onslaught. (Gail Minault 1998: 7-9) Studies by scholars highlighting the significance of the women's question and issues of social reform and its significance

in the consolidation of Muslim identity in North India have also pointed to the similarities and differences among the Muslim and Hindu social reformers (Minault, 1998, Papanek and Minault, 1982, Metcalfe among others). Minault suggests that even while portraying the invisibility of Muslim women, it is necessary to recognize the prevalence of religious stereotypes which continue into the present. The Muslims in India have never been a monolithic community nor were responses to British rule uniform and that undifferentiated categories based on religion are inapplicable (Minault, 1998:3).

What is historically significant is that the women's question was posed in different ways and with different perspectives in the course of the national movement. The three major women's organizations set up in the early twenties, the Women's India Association (WIA) in 1917, the National Council of Indian Women (NCIW) in 1925 and the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) set up in 1927, worked within the framework of the 'separate worlds' idea while seeking to gently expand and enlarge women's world. They have been described as propounding a "social feminism". (Geraldine Forbes 1982).

Among the Muslims, the Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e- Islam was formed in 1914, the central concern of which was to promote women's education in the Muslim community. The core ideas of the Anjuman was similar to that of the nineteenth century Hindu social reform movement. (Maithreyi Chaudhary 1993). Around the same time, the Tamil country was resounding with the radical ideas of the Self-Respect movement of Periyar which fundamentally challenged the assumptions of the Brahmanical patriarchal world-view and called on women along with other oppressed groups to appropriate the millennium.

The women's question resurfaced in a directly political manner when the question of women's reservation was posed in the 1920s. The dominant opinion among the women's organizations was one of opposition to the idea of separate political reservation for women since it deflected from the demand of universal adult franchise and to stand for elections on the same terms as men.

In 1932, a Joint Memorandum on the Status of Indian Women from the all-India women's organisations to the Franchise Committee set up at the end of the Second Round Table Conference expressed their demand for universal adult franchise 'irrespective of any property or literacy qualification, with no expedients such as nomination or reservation of seats.' The women's organisations also endorsed the declaration of the Fundamental Rights to Citizenship in India made by the Karachi session of the Indian National Congress, 1931 which called for equality before the

law, irrespective of religion, caste, creed or sex, universal adult franchise and women's right to vote, represent and hold public office. (Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 1999: 129-133)

The opposition to the idea of reservation also extended to the “ Communal Award” and the idea of separate electorates and reserved seats. The rationale behind such opposition was that divisions along the lines of religion, caste and sect would weaken the struggle against colonial rule and that legislatures must be filled by those who would rise above personal or communal considerations and think of the country's best interests. There were dissenting voices: Begum Sakina Mayuzada felt that desiring the good of one's community need not be at the cost of inflicting harm on others; and K.B. Firozuddin felt that the comparative educational backwardness of Muslim women might put them at a disadvantage in joint electorates. A separate resolution calling for the abolition of untouchability was adopted. (John, Mary, 2000: 4).

What is relevant to our present discussion on the issue of women's reservation is that a certain definition of nationalism came to prevail which claimed to be above the sectarian pulls of caste and religious community and which was quite different from that which prevailed till the early twentieth century when in fact discrete religious communities were not seen as inconsistent with an overarching national identity. (Pandey, G.1990: 210). The very word "communalism" acquired a religious connotation and synonymous with the British policy of divide and rule since the 1920s. The inclusive nationalism which gave legitimate space to different identities gave way to a homogenising nationalism where identities based on caste, creed etc. were seen as obstacles in the development of an Indian nationalist identity.

The Conflation of Religion, Culture and the Nation

In recent years, scholars and historians have revisited the history of the nationalist movement and highlighted an important dimension which was glossed over earlier, namely, that a core element in the development of Hindu nationalism has been the conflation of religion and culture as well as culture and the nation. (Ludden, D. 1996: 6-7; Sarkar, S. 1997) This has been a grey area even in the writings of liberal scholars.

Studies of communalism in India in the years immediately after independence tended to emphasise the political dimensions of communalism and the divide and rule policies of the British and of course Muslim separatism. As one review of the question poses it: “The major political conflicts of modern India have centred round two related questions: the share of power to be enjoyed by different religious

communities and the constitution of an appropriate structure of government to make this sharing of power effective". (Gopal Krishna, 1971 :367). But what is striking about even much liberal writing on the theme is that while dealing with the question of religion in politics, particularly about the pre independence period, communalism just does not seem to exist or merges into nationalism. Thus in an informative article about the role of religion in politics, Gopal Krishna explains the emphasis on Muslim communal politics in the following words:"even studies of communal politics in general nevertheless concentrate on the phenomenon of Muslim communalism. This is understandable because *in the pre-independence period politics was dominated by the claims of nationalism and the counter-claims of Muslim communalism. Hindu communal politics was never very vigorous and commanded little political support*". (Gopal Krishna, 1971 :378 emphasis ours).

Saxena writing in the eighties while referring to the value framework within which Hindu-Muslim relations have been examined makes a plea for a redefinition of communalism and suggests some value-free definitions of communalism wherein all expressions of religious identity need not necessarily be seen as inimical to the larger social and national interest. In this connection he notes the fundamental differences in the approach of the majority and minorities on the question of communalism. While the majority community would like to define an ideal society as one in which all citizens participate freely in all forms of social interaction with no concern for ethnic or other forms of particularistic affiliation and the State's responsibility being to ensure 'a minimum preservation' of cultural diversity without concerning itself with the preservation of ethnic identities. Such a homogenizing approach would be viewed as tyrannical and fundamentally anti-democratic. Even during the heyday of Hindu-Muslim cooperation, this difference in approach of the Hindu leadership of the Congress and those of the Muslims even in the Congress was evident. While the Congress emphasized fusion and obliteration of communal identity, the Muslim leadership visualized unity as a federation in which group identity was not destroyed (Saxena, N.C., 1981: 316). However, standard histories of the nationalist movement have generally not given due attention to the fears of the Muslim minority of being dominated by an unsympathetic if not hostile Hindu majority and consequently its demand for constitutional safeguards.

An analogous point has been made by Sumit Sarkar regarding the hegemonising thrust of secular Indian nationalism wherein ideological sustenance was derived from certain idealized notions of subcontinental, civilisational integration which was seen as the basis for a composite Indian nationalism. More significantly, the slide from such a notion to assuming that such unity and integration was essentially

Hindu (and upper-caste, North Indian) was almost logical. Such a vision was compounded by the fact that the leading elements in both nationalist and even the left movement were primarily from Hindu upper caste backgrounds (Sarkar, S., 1997:363)

In such an ideological and political climate, any attempts at upholding notions of separate identity was perceived as divisive or subscribing to the two-nation theory. Others have written about the influence of essentially Hindu culture and values and the impact it had on the Muslims during the national movement. However, the recognition of the differences among the Hindus and Muslims does not necessarily entail subscribing to a teleological position on the question of Partition (Ahmad, I, 1969:1137-1158). *But noting the flaws that characterized the secular nationalist movement cannot undermine the significance of the fact that it has been a historic attempt at building a plural, composite and secular society.*

Besides, what is also significant historically is that the consensus within the nationalist movement was based on the notion of equal citizenship for women, a goal western bourgeois societies were yet to implement in their societies.

The Post-Independence Period

We referred to the contestation between the two ideas of India that characterized the discourse in the nationalist period. While the Indian nation-state that emerged in 1947 was committed to the idea of secularism as a guiding principle of state policy, (secularism being defined as equal treatment of all religions and not as separation of religion and state) However, certain caveats need to be entered here. The conflation of religion, culture and the nation persisted at a subterranean level even though the Indian state and the Constitution were committed to the principle of the secular state. Moreover, while the State was committed to and endorsed the notion of a democratic society and was against discrimination, the society itself was a deeply hierarchical one, where older caste-class hierarchies intertwined with newly-created modern ones with the dominant caste-classes running the Indian state.

The post-colonial state in the first three decades after independence was still guided by the consensus of the national liberation struggle and continued to an extent, to function as an arbiter between different classes even though in actual operation this consensus was flawed, particularly when it came to the struggles of workers and peasants or challenges to the state.

One important element of this consensus was the notion of a secular republic, a state committed to equality for all citizens regardless of caste, creed and gender and the modern notion of citizenship of a modern, territorial nation-state. The Indian Constitution is the result of this consensus, a consensus which was bitterly contested, formulated as it was in the immediate aftermath of the Partition of the country and compounded by the presence of diverse and conflicting interest groups and world views. The consequence of this was a situation wherein while the state itself was committed to democratic values and secularism, existing social structures were riven with contradictions based on caste and class, region, religion, gender, etc. These contradictions have been sharply captured by B.R. Ambedkar in 1949 on the eve of the adoption of the Constitution of India:

"We must begin by acknowledging the fact that there is complete absence of two things in Indian society. One of these is equality. On the social plane, we have in India a society based on the principles of graded inequality which means elevation of some and degradation of others. On the economic plane, we have a society in which there are some who have immense wealth as against many who live in abject poverty. On the 26th January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will be recognizing the principle of one man one vote, and one vote one value. In our social life, we shall by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value. How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life?" (B.R. Ambedkar, in the last days of the Constituent Assembly, in 1949)

Development policies only partially addressed this chasm between constitutionally mandated social objectives and the reality of a deeply hierarchical and segmented society. In fact, if anything, development policies at times only exacerbated those very contradictions they were supposed to resolve. And so substantive equality remained a mirage for the vast majority of Indian citizens, particularly those who were at the lower rungs of the traditional social hierarchy. A scholar analysing the post-independence state writes: "The Nehruvian high-mindedness and the powerful sense of moral legitimacy that it engendered was an important factor, rendering invisible the unequal benefits that development brought to different classes, castes and regional groups." (Deshpande 2003: 145)

In this post-colonial consensus evolved among the ruling classes and elites, economic development was to play a central role in consolidating the nation and binding the diversities based on caste, region, language and even class together. Needless to say, there were many flaws in this consensus since the consensus itself

was an amalgam of conflicting interests and ideologies, some of which had their origins in the anti-colonial struggle.

The resurgence of the women's question and the women's movement in the 1970s was an integral part of the political struggles of the period, the basic thrust of the women's movement being to demand equality and to resist discrimination in the society and state policy. The dominant streams of the various movements of the period had an inclusive perspective where the sources of women's oppression and marginalisation were to be addressed within a framework of equal participation as citizens in the building of society. However, given the context of India's complex and diverse social structure, there have also been movements when women participated in movements on the basis of political demands of specific groups and/or peoples for autonomy and even independence. Such mobilizations where women have been active participants have also in some cases divided women and made the struggle for gender equality much more difficult. The cases of the movements in the northeastern part of the country, the Assam movement, the Naga movement and the Kashmiri struggle are examples of these. Apart from the 'peripheral regions', historically, the movements articulating regional aspirations also have had diverse manifestations with the intermeshing of specific caste, class, language and cultural configurations.

The women's movement since the seventies has been relatively successful in highlighting gender identity in ways which have been inclusive by focusing on the vast majority of marginalized and under-privileged women. Experiences of various kinds of movements of women under the most trying conditions have taught very valuable lessons, the most important being that struggles for gender equality and gender justice are inextricably intertwined with struggles for equality and justice at a wider societal level and that gender identity is so closely intermeshed with other identities that it is difficult to address gender issues in isolation.

The Women's Question and the Uniform Civil Code ‡

The women's question and its complex relationship with questions of religious and community identity and the nation resurfaced in the eighties with the Shah Bano case and related to it also the contentious question of the Uniform Civil Code. This generated a lot of heated public debate both among women's organizations and the

‡. The arguments in the following section draw substantially on my article – The Women's Question in Contemporary Indian Politics.

Muslim community. Some of the crucial issues which have been highlighted can be summarized as follows: the nature of the relationship between the state and communities, the relationship between communities and the individual and the complicated and tortuous nature of the relationship between women and community identity.

Referring to the well-known Supreme Court judgement on the case of Shah Bano, Veena Das identifies certain conceptual issues raised by the judgement: 1) Whether the constitutional rights guarantees to the minorities as well as international instruments of the UN (such as the Human Rights Convention) include the right to their own civil law and marriage laws and related to this, do conflicting ideologies of marriage and family in itself pose a threat to the sovereignty of the state; 2) if legal pluralism is acceptable and even legitimate in civil matters (such as in cases of customary and personal law), what are the safeguards for the individual vis-a-vis the power of the community; related to this is the question of heterogeneity within the community; 3) How would the conflicts posed by the desire to preserve culture by a filiative community (such as an ethnic or a religious minority) and a similar but affiliative community (such as the community of women) which wishes to reinterpret that culture according to a different set of principles be addressed?(Das, V. 1998: 461). According to Das it was "The semiotic excess of the judgement as well as the manner in which orthodox reactions were characterised by 'progressive' opinion that converted the issue of women's rights into secularism versus communalism." (Das, V. 1998: 463)

The issue of the Uniform Civil Code is interesting and significant precisely because it illustrates the complex nature of the problem as well as the dilemmas of the women's movement. The Committee for the Status of Women in India (CSWI) in its report had held that: "The absence of a UCC in the last quarter of the twentieth century, twenty-seven years after independence, is an incongruity that cannot be justified with all the emphasis placed on secularism, science and modernism. The continuance of various personal laws which accept discrimination between men and women violates the fundamental rights... It is also against the spirit of national integration and secularism." (Government of India, 1974: 42). The assumption that a uniform civil code was necessary to bring about gender justice was part of the post-independence and post-partition legacy wherein secularism could be ensured (as also national integration) only by a uniform set of laws for all communities. However, given the background of the partition, the whole question of the rights of minorities was an equally important issue. A perusal of the debates and discussions in the Constituent Assembly reveals how the safeguards for minorities which included separate representation were abandoned and the Constitution of India

made a distinction between the *cultural rights* of minorities and *political group rights* of communities like the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. The political discourse on the nation-building project has tended to veer between two divergent viewpoints, one which advocated a uniform set of laws in the interest of national integration and a desire for an abstract notion of equality of the citizen and one which advocated the recognition of plurality and rights of minorities as an essential prerequisite of a democratic polity. There has always been an uneasy and unresolved tension between the two view-points. The existence of a plethora of personal laws was seen (and continues to be seen) as an important obstacle not only in achieving gender justice but also as a kind of pure nationalism, uncontaminated by particularisms. The discomfort with the idea of plurality/diversity and difference among the dominant streams of the women's movement has to be seen in this context.

The Shah Bano judgement saw the entire mainstream of the women's movement speak in one voice demanding a uniform civil code, though from different vantage points. However, by 1996 there were wide differences of opinion on the question of a common set of laws for all women. The opposition to the uniform civil code came not merely from women's groups but also from all political parties except the BJP and the Shiv Sena. The shifts in positions were due to the attempts of various groups and organisations at coming to terms with the changed political scenario, characterised by the dominance of Hindu right wing forces. The most notable change has occurred in the position of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) which voiced its opposition to the 'fundamentalist' demand for a uniform civil code in the mid-nineties. What is significant about AIDWA's position is the recognition that gender justice and the fulfilment of constitutional guarantees of equality need not necessarily be linked to an umbrella legislation and that in fact such legislation might actually be counter-productive. (Karat, B., 1995).

Other women's groups have felt the need to distance themselves from the UCC and its national integrationist thrust and yet uphold the goal of gender justice along with a commitment to diversity and plurality. The Working Group on Women's Rights attempted to "extract the discussion on the UCC from the framework of comparative rights of communities - between each other and between communities and the nation and to recast this discussion in terms of the rights women as citizens occupying the public sphere, with rights to work, to equal wages, to equality within the family in a way which does not compartmentalise the public and the private" (Working Group on Women's Rights, 1996: 1181-1182). The option that the Group proposed was a comprehensive set of laws which would collapse the distinction between the public and the private domains and delink personal laws from religion.

The major problem with this was that religion and personal laws were seen as occupying separate compartments whereas the intertwining of religion, culture and personal laws is so complex and historically rooted and determined that the disentangling of these strands is a difficult task which cannot be determined by administrative or legal fiat but only by a comprehensive social movement which engages politically and practically with these questions. (For a more detailed discussion on this, see Raman, 2001)

Dalit Identity - A Stigmatised Identity

While the preservation of religio-cultural community identity was an important concern for the religious minorities in post -1947 India, the question of caste identity was more complex, and this is more so among those groups that have historically occupied the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy, i.e. the scheduled castes. Here was one group that wanted to obliterate the identity ascribed to and inscribed on them by the Brahminical social order. On the other hand, there have been many instances of the Shudra caste groupings through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which have asserted their caste identity either through independent socio-religious reform movements or nascent caste assertions; these have, by and large, been coopted in the Hindu revivalist movements. The dominant trend among the movements of Shudra assertion has been to seek a higher place in the Brahminical Hindu social order, particularly in northern India. (The Sri Narayana Guru movement among the Ezhavas in Kerala followed a different trajectory in this regard). The struggle against caste-based inequality as manifested specifically in untouchability had been an important plank of the Congress-led anti-colonial movement; however the geographical dispersion of the scheduled castes and the varied regional articulations of the caste question contributed to the unevenness in the development of caste-based identity. But the material basis of caste-feudalism and oppression would have to be addressed through concrete measures. However, the reality even today is that the overwhelming majority of the scheduled castes are landless agricultural labourers. The pervasive discrimination that is systemic and the contradictions of a democratic and secular constitution resting on a deeply hierarchical, caste-feudal society were inadequately addressed by the path of economic development and persist in a variety of modified forms. The movements for caste assertion in the post-independence period have been marked by new dilemmas and anxieties largely due to the fact that the context is radically different; it is no longer within the framework of Indian subject versus colonial master. The later movements have been centred around issues of demanding a share of the social cake. While affirmative action, specifically reservation has been constitutionally

mandated as a means to right historical wrongs, the implementation of this has been stymied by an administration that has been insensitive to the aspirations of those sections at the lower rungs of the caste-hierarchy. The reports of the Commissioner of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes over the years unfailingly records the significant backlogs in the fulfilment of the quotas for the SCs and STs in both jobs and education. Besides, the unevenness and diversity of such assertions along with issues of power and leadership have complicated the overall issue of caste-based discrimination and the struggle for equality.

Attempts to escape the hated identity of being the 'untouchables' and the 'unseeables' in the Hindu social order by conversion to Islam and Christianity have, in recent times exacerbated and compounded their agonizing dilemmas.

The dalit woman's existential dilemma cannot be better expressed than by a fact highlighted by an Amnesty International Report some years ago, that the majority of rape victims were dalits. The stark reality of a stigmatized identity in the lives of the 'untouchable' castes is poignantly delineated by Kumud Pawde's attempts to outgrow caste and caste socialization: 'The result is that although I try to forget my caste, it is impossible to forget. And then I remember an expression I heard somewhere; "What comes by birth, but can't be cast off by dying --- that is caste."' (Pawde 1998: 87).

Modes of oppression, exclusion and exploitation characteristic of the caste-based order have combined with more modern and bourgeois modes of exploitation in the most contorted manner to exacerbate the existential dilemma of the dalit woman.

Regional Identity

The post-independent political system has always been ambivalent regarding the place that the diverse regional identities ought to be given in the Indian nation. Thus the tension between the centripetal and the centrifugal tendencies has always existed and this has been acknowledged in the quasi-federal political structure. The manner in which the repressive and homogenizing logic of the nation-state has operated in the 'peripheral' regions of the country, particularly in the northeast and Kashmir, has often intensified regional contradictions, fuelled intra-regional conflicts and cynically manipulated group identities within these regions. Most significant in recent times has been the communalization of regional identities; the case of Punjab and Kashmir are the most illustrative in this regard. But the less visible and more dangerous case is the communalization of the migration question

in the northeast part of the country, particularly in Assam, where Hindu right wing forces made the insidious distinction between 'refugees' (referring to Hindus) and infiltrators (referring to Muslims). Needless to say questions of women's identity is necessarily linked to these questions of regional assertion and autonomy. The Kashmiri or the Naga woman's relationship to the larger pan-Indian identity is extremely problematic.

The Question of Language

The question of linguistic identity has been a vexatious one in post-independence India as well. The communalization of the Hindi-Urdu question left its scars on the post-independence period. Besides, it has also been inextricably tied up with the issue of federalism. The crucial issue of a National Language in a multilingual society was debated intensely in the Constituent Assembly. The claims of English could obviously not be considered since it was inextricably tied up with India's colonial history. While Hindi (of whatever variant) could and did claim that status, it was opposed by the southern states on the ground that it smacked too much of northern domination and Hindi chauvinism. Moreover, the claims of Hindi had been poorly served by its inability to imbibe the rich cultural and historical streams represented by Braj, Awadhi and Bhojpuri etc. (Rai, A. 2001) The matter remained unresolved.

The formation of states on the basis of language as per the recommendations of the States Reorganisation Commission in the late 1950s, while acknowledging and legitimizing the aspirations of the masses and the middle classes of the different states left some issues unresolved. The rights of linguistic minorities within many states came to be articulated later in the form of movements for right to instruction in the mother tongue.

The most important and unstated and unaddressed issue that continues to bedevil the country is the insidious domination of English in our social life. That it is a language of privilege is undeniable and it is an important axis of cleavage in the society. But as with other questions, this is enmeshed in the wider matrix of society and politics. While English continues to be definitely the language of the highest echelons of the elite, it has also become a vehicle for upward mobility for a large section of people in the towns and cities. Recent policies have only further strengthened the rationale for the continued use of English in our social life. These have exacerbated the polarization inherent in our system with the metropolitan

centres constituting enclaves of English, while the rest of small town India being “vernacular”.

The purpose in discussing the above issues was to highlight the complexity of the women's question in the contemporary period in India's political history. Critical issues relate to the complex inter-relationship between the women's question and other social and political questions, the complicated nature of identities, the understanding of patriarchy and its intermeshing with a complex, highly segmented social structure, the impact of the neo-liberal paradigm and finally and importantly the crucial question of democracy itself.

It would seem that there is a subterranean assumption about the universality of women's identity, as though gender identity lies outside of other identities and is in a sense, prior to and more privileged than other identities of caste, religion, ethnicity, class etc. in the construction of the identity of woman and her very sense of personhood. Such assumptions about the universality of women's identity has often led to stigmatising different and diverse articulations of dalit or Muslim or tribal women's identity which were not consonant with mainstream feminism.

This leads us to the complicated nature of community identity, the relationship between communities and the individual and, of course, the nature of the relationship between the state and communities. It is now an accepted fact that community identities are not static and that they have been historically constituted. The fact that the colonial state played an important role in congealing identities should not lead us to a position where the colonial state was the principal source of identity formation or that the state conjured up identities where none existed. The major contours of identity formation during the colonial period fell into shape in the second decade of the twentieth century with the move towards some form of representative government and politics. However, having said this we are still left with the fact that identities (caste, religious, tribal, ethnic regional, linguistic and gender) are a reality in post-colonial Indian politics. The important point to our mind is to be able to unravel the workings of these, their intermeshing with the power structure, and the political articulation of identities either in favour of enhancing democratisation or in the attempts to shore up the status quo. This would willy nilly involve differentiating between subaltern and subordinated identities and dominant ones, and assessing the impact of changes that have occurred between dominant and subaltern groups and analysing the nature of the shift from 'primordial' to more 'universalist' identities or even vice versa. The question of gender identity would have to be situated in this matrix.

Attempts to analyse 'multiple patriarchies' often fail to make a distinction between dominant and subaltern patriarchies and the fact that the one most often determines and structures gender relations in the others. Besides, it would be erroneous to assume that the principal site of patriarchal oppression is the family. The nature of the state, its symbiotic relationship with the dominant groups, the manner in which the state machinery functions in general and the biases that characterise its day to day operations would be extremely important in determining the very parameters of the operation of patriarchy both among dominant, and subordinated groups. The very articulation of gender identity would vary. Thus the way a Muslim woman would perceive her identity in a situation where the identity of the community is endangered would perhaps mean that the articulation' of her gender identity is more ambivalent. Such a differentiated impact would also lead to varied notions of gender justice, which would even challenge accepted dominant, mainstream notions. Indeed the roots of oppression of a dalit woman, a Muslim woman, a tribal woman and an upper caste woman would be very different and the strategies for tackling this would also vary. Tharu has described the poignancy of a Muslim woman's situation, "... the Muslim woman is caught in zero-zero game. Either way she loses. She cannot really be woman any more than she can be Indian. As woman and Indian, she cannot really be Muslim." (Tharu, Susie, 1996:252)

The Decade of the Nineties

The decade of the 90s has been crucial for the country. This decade saw the convergence of many significant events and processes. The 1980s and 1990s marked a departure from the political consensus of the post-independent years. A complex set of reasons account for the Indian government's decision to drastically alter the paradigm of development, popularly known as the Nehruvian paradigm and undertake the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP); the altered balance of forces at the international level leading to a vastly changed political situation provided the constitutive backdrop, which in turn led to a change in the internal balance of forces with an attendant polarization, both at the economic level and the social level. There has been an intense debate about pluralism and diversity in the face of the homogenizing thrust of globalization and that of the Hindu right wing. (The parties of the Left, while opposing the adoption of the neo-liberal paradigm by the Congress, supported a Congress-led government in order to oust the Hindu right wing forces from state and government.) Three significant developments marked the period -- the decision to take the first World Bank-IMF loan, the Ayodhya issue which marked the shift to the centre stage of Indian politics of the forces of Hindutva (the ideology of Hindu nationhood) and the decision to implement the

recommendations of the Mandal Commission. These developments have had a far-reaching influence on Indian politics. The World Bank-IMF loan marked the beginning of India's full integration into the world capitalist system, with no holds barred. The reign of the so-called free market in the economy was accompanied by the beginning of an overt communalisation of the state and simultaneously the inauguration of what has been termed 'identity politics'.

Certain features mark this phase:

- a) The ideology of Hindutva resurfaced once again and the whole contestation between two visions of India — the pluralistic, composite one which embraced all identities and an exclusivist one of a Hindu nation — has been thrown open;
- b) It is not accidental that the prominence of the forces of Hindutva have been accompanied by an accentuated thrust towards globalization, the adoption of structural adjustment policies and the neo-liberal paradigm. While there is no uni-dimensional relationship between the forces of globalised capitalism and those of Hindutva, one can hazard a hypothesis, namely that given the complex, segmented, heterogenous and pluralistic nature of Indian society wherein marginalisation of the oppressed and subaltern groups have more or less proceeded along the lines of traditional social hierarchies, the forces of Hindutva represent status quoist forces, thus leading to a convergence of agendas.
- c) Another significant feature, the othering and demonisation of Islam (not merely of Muslims) -- has to be analysed in the Indian context but also in the context of ideological barrage from the West, with Huntington's thesis of the "the clash of civilisations" providing the latest 'historical' ammunition.
- d) This phase has also witnessed the heightened mobilisation of women by the forces of Hindutva. While Hindu women were and are being mobilized for the creation of a Hindu state, corresponding to this and in a sense very much a part of this, is the othering of Muslim women, by denying them subjecthood and agency and portraying them as weak and passive victims requiring them to be rescued from the Muslim community, particularly Muslim men.

The introduction of the structural adjustment programmes since the nineties has meant drastic changes in the overall development paradigm. Politically, the most significant factor has been the jettisoning of the State as a major actor in socio-

economic development and as an important agent mandated by the Constitution responsible for the welfare of the citizens. The simultaneous jettisoning of the paradigm of the Welfare State and the adoption of the neo-liberal paradigm has serious implications for the lives of the majority of Indian citizens. The abdication by the state of its responsibilities in the social sector, specifically health, education and provision of food security, compounded by economic policies which have exacerbated unemployment in the formal sector, increased insecurity of employment even in the informal sector, the collapse of traditional subsistence agriculture and intensified commercialisation of agriculture, the precarious situation of artisans, particularly weavers, the predatory commercialisation of coastal fishing affecting the lives of millions of fisherfolk leading to increased insecurity for the people -- has intensified polarisation and exacerbated further the existing faultlines in Indian society. What is grave is that the divisions based on class, caste, region, religion and gender have intensified. In short, the whole project of building a welfare state and a development paradigm with the state playing a major role in it has been abandoned and a whole new regime of the neo-liberal paradigm with its relentless logic has been put in place. For the mass of Indians, their whole world is changing for the worse with the old certitudes gone.

If the decades of the nineties was a significant watershed in the life of the nation, then what happened in Gujarat 2002 epitomised the fruition of all the processes set in motion during the previous two decades. There are certain features of the Gujarat situation that need to be focussed on and reiterated so that the situation of women and their responses to it can be contextualised.

A lot has been written about what transpired in Gujarat in 2002, but some significant aspects can be highlighted. The economic developments of the last two decades and more, when lakhs of textile workers have been rendered jobless with the closure of the mills, the pauperization that ensued, accompanied by the collapse of the social infrastructure and heightened insecurities among those affected all contributed to the making of Gujarat 2002 . But what contributed the spark, if one can call it that, was the planned manner in which the Hindutva forces engaged in "social engineering" towards the creation of Hindu Rashtra.

The much touted economic development of the state has really meant jobless growth. Jan Breman refers to the close linkages between what has happened in Gujarat and the resurgence of social Darwinism. The changing political economy, the altered balance of social forces with the traditional working classes seriously eroded numerically and reduced to pauperised informal sector workers and

alongside, the rise of a wealthy middle class which constitutes the base of Hindutva contributed to Gujarat 2002.

As one writer has put it: ' The key elements in the recent atrocities is the new role of the prosperous, educated middle class. In the past, the middle class has halted communal violence, as members of state bureaucracy, police and business community. Now it organizes communal cleansing with the efficiency of a business project" (Choudhury 2003: 259-364:)

Gujarat has rather ironically demonstrated the success of 'agency' and 'empowerment' of Hindu women under the banner of Hindutva in rather macabre ways. The women of Gujarat were divided into Hindu women who were the agents and the Muslim women who were the vulnerable victims. Needless to say there have been not a few courageous men and women from among the Hindus, many courageous Adivasis and Dalits who risked their lives and sometimes paid with their lives for saving Muslims. But their attempts could not withstand the tornado of hatred that had been carefully nurtured over the last few decades. Then there were the examples of large numbers of well-to-do, middle class Hindu Gujarati women who were active participants in large scale looting of Muslim shops and godowns apart from showing a callous disregard for the thousands of Muslim women who were raped and children who were burnt and killed in the most barbarous manner. The active acquiescence and in many cases participation of women in the Hindutva project and the victimization of the large masses of Muslim women are two sides of the same coin. (Raman, V. 2004.)

The Neo-Liberal Paradigm, Women and the Nation

It is our contention that certain critical issues which affected the course of our history in the three decades before independence and partition have revisited us in the closing decades of twentieth century; only the context has dramatically changed.

A paradigmatic shift has occurred over the last couple of decades of the 20th century with the onset of globalisation strategies, with the compliance of the dominant sections of the social and political classes. It is important to situate the above mentioned shift in the context of the worldwide shift of the balance of forces. The jettisoning of the nation-building project among the ruling classes and elites of the country has been crucial in restricting their options to pursue the agenda of nation-building.

A necessary aspect of this present phase of capitalist/imperialist globalisation has been the conscious cultivation of specificity and an assertion of particularistic identities based on ethnicity, religion, language etc. which have been the outcome of the traumas and anxieties of globalisation. Many facets of the globalisation process have been subjected to scholarly scrutiny; but there is one dimension that needs to be emphasized - the retreat of democratic forces and the forces of social transformation on a world-scale that has occasioned the rise of the forces which now speak the language of exclusionary identities. Samir Amin draws attention to an important aspect of capitalist globalisation: "Capitalist globalisation does not homogenize the world but, on the contrary organizes it on the basis of ever stronger and more pronounced hierarchies. The peoples which are its victims are thereby deprived of active and equal participation in the shaping of the world. By encouraging culturalist responses, globalisation strategies make as much use as they can of diversity inherited from the past. At the same time, however, capitalist globalisation imposes on the dominated some of the 'specificities' that characterize its dominant centres"(Amin 2004: 191).

One of the features of the present situation has been the increasing prevalence and dominance of politicised religion, also often referred to as fundamentalism or specifically' in the Indian context, cultural nationalism/Hindu nationalism and even Hindutva fascism. While all forms of politicized religion have diverse manifestations, there are certain common features: For one, it is always constructed around the notion of purity and impurity, in which "other" religious and ethnic communities are targeted and hence must be eliminated. For another, fundamentalism naturalises the patriarchal family and gender relations, and by doing so it closes the options for women in various spheres. Essentially, fundamentalism is basically a political phenomenon which uses religion as a tool to either gain power or consolidate power and social domination.

While all forms of politicized religion victimize women in various ways, they also are exclusionary and draw boundaries against the 'other' while eliding over the conflicts and contradictions within the group. So by definition, the agenda of such forces tends to be anti-democratic. What is of significance today is that this resurgence of irrational and backward-looking ideologies finds a particularly fertile soil in this region at a time when neo-liberal policies - - rising unemployment, collapsing livelihoods, increasing pauperization and an overall increase in insecurity -- have rendered the mass of people extremely vulnerable. What is worse is that integral to the new paradigm is the resurgence of a particularly aggressive form of social Darwinism. While the marginalized often fall victim to various forms of millenarian ideologies and dreams, with very tragic consequences, those who

benefit from the new dispensation hawk new dreams of a "golden past" to bolster their hegemony. However, it is important to distinguish in the Indian context between the manifestations of politicized religion in the majority and minority groups. This distinction is crucial in a situation when politically there is an attempt to elide the distinction between religion, culture and the nation; and even more importantly at a time when the forces of Hindu chauvinism projecting itself as nationalism appeared on the centre stage of Indian politics and even held power at the centre for a brief period.

The general elections of May 2004 have given a verdict which was certainly a decisive verdict against both the impact of the new policies and the communalisation of social and political processes. While the Bharatiya Janata Party and the National Democratic Front, led by it has been defeated and the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance has come to power at the Centre, the basic structures and processes which constitute the base undergirding the marginalization of the vast majority of Indians has not fundamentally altered. But the change of regime has opened up avenues for the assertion of people's movements to attempt a change of course and alter the balance of forces.

Women's predicament in this situation is double-edged. While the mass of them are the victims of the new economic strategies, they are also targeted by the cultural nationalists and the fundamentalists. In this situation, while there is great stress and hardship both economic and psychological, yet there is also a great potentiality for steering the struggle towards democracy and development in the society and for peace in the region as well. The challenge for the women and the people of the country is to work for what Samir Amin has called a 'future-oriented diversity' which can also ensure the rights of equality of individuals and communities. Sharing the experiences of women across the country will help to develop common strategies to face the challenges of the present century. Such common strategies are no longer just a matter of an alternative but an objective necessity in the struggle for justice and equality for the people of the region.

In this context, it is important to note that the concept of gender is an extremely malleable one and the discourse on gender is being promoted by international agencies in a decontextualised manner to conceal the growing inequities both internationally and nationally. The neo-liberal paradigm has sidelined the emancipatory agendas that marked the twentieth century. In a discursive sense, the holistic social vision has been displaced by a fragmentation and fracturing of discourses. The agenda of women's emancipation which was seen as part of a wider project of social transformation has given way to a quick succession of acronyms.

Ironically, while the greater and deeper penetration of capitalist processes has proceeded apace across the globe, leading to greater integration of the economy and society leaving almost no sphere of social life untouched, this has been accompanied by a fracturing and atomization of social and political discourse, the focus of the latter being on seemingly isolated units of social reality.

We are left with the question of the fate of nationhood and the nation-state at a time when the reigning themes are global citizenship, a borderless world and diasporic identities. With identities in such a state of flux, and with inequalities and polarization inherent in the neo-liberal paradigm, it would seem that despite the dominant discourse which undermines the nation-state, historically and politically the nation-state is still the only terrain left for marginalized peoples to resist the hegemonic thrust of the neo-liberal paradigm.

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