

EMERGENCE OF THE WOMEN'S QUESTION IN INDIA AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN'S STUDIES

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I

The women's question, like the untouchability question or the communal question, emerged during the national movement as a political question that had to be solved to give shape to the vision of a free Indian nation. It is my contention that this political aspect of women's equality or inequality has never received adequate attention from historians or other social scientists - a neglect which has helped to perpetuate many ambiguities, mis-conceptions and under-valuation of this issue. The primary role of women's studies in the contemporary period is to rectify this neglect and to generate both empirical data and theoretical perspectives to place the issue in its proper context.

I can only begin the history of the women's question in India from the 19th century, though some contemporary research in undoubtedly suggesting that the debate has a much older history. From the 19th century however, and particularly from the beginnings of the Indian Press, the women's question has formed one of the major issues in social debate - first among social reformers, then among the nationalists and finally, in the contemporary period, among all those who are concerned with problems of development, of growing inequality, poverty and unemployment. This debate, from the second quarter of the 19th century till today, falls into five phases.

In the first phase, the women's question emerged essentially in the context of the identity crisis of the new educated middle class - the first products of the colonial system of education. Many of them, trying to imitate the life styles of the colonial rulers, found the condition of their own women to be a stumbling block. The criticism of many of our traditional customs like the treatment meted out to widows, child marriage, the denial of education to women, were felt to be blots on our society which earned, very rightly, the criticism of western commentators. The first generation of reformers were anxious to remove those blots. There were only a few reformers, who went beyond the need to imitate the west, and began to address some of the other instruments that were used to subjugate and oppress women.

In the second phase, namely in the last quarter of the 19th century, the women's question got increasingly coloured by the rise of cultural nationalism and revivalism as a counter attack to the spread of western influences and values in our society, particularly among the educated youth. The revivalists, interested in conserving indigenous cultural traditions, began to support women's education against the attack by orthodoxy, on the grounds that women's education would help to strengthen the hold of indigenous culture through the institution of the family. The

growing communication gap caused by only men receiving modern education, in their opinion, was eroding the ability of women to influence the men in their family. Educating them would improve their status within the family and introduce a break on the increasing influence of western values and culture over the minds of young men. The cultural nationalists thus introduced a new concept into the women's question - women as the custodians of traditional cultural values.

The voice of dissent was present also during the second phase. Writing around the 1890s Jyotiba Phule, whose primary concern was to break the hegemony of the high castes, referred to 'the subjugation of women as an instrument for maintaining Brahminical dominance in Indian society'. During the same period, B.M. Malabari demonstrated for the first time the role that the Press could play in mounting a social campaign - in the agitation that he promoted for the Age of consent Bill. For the first time, readers of the Times of India read of real life stories of women who had experienced torture and oppression in the hands of their husbands.

In the third phase, the women's question began to get increasingly inter-twined with the trends within the nationalist movement. A handful of women got involved in revolutionary activities and challenged their leaders' refusal to allow them to participate fully in freedom movement. As the movement increasingly took a turn towards mass mobilisation, women's participation in increasing numbers became visible and raised basic questions. I have been amazed that there is so little investigation of the reasons behind the transformation of what was till then an issue of social reform into a political issue of women's rights to equality.

19th century reformers, being primarily concerned with the problems of the newly emerging urban middle class, had concentrated all their concerns for women with the problems experienced by women of this class. The image of the suppressed, subjugated and secluded Indian woman - Hindu or Muslim - that preoccupied the Indian literati and their counter-parts in the west took no note of the millions of Indian women who formed the back-bone of the Indian economy, and who were far greater victims of the colonial transformation of the economy than even the men in their family. Just in the province of Bengal, 30 lakhs of women, who formed 1/5th of the women population of the province earned their livelihood from hand spinning of cotton yarn in late 18th century. By the end of the 19th century, their numbers had dwindled. A similar process hit women in the silk textile industry, and other village industries in different regions of India. As early as 1920, a local women's organisation in Surat was identifying the disappearance of village industries as the basic reason for decline in women's economic and general status. The women who formed nearly 50% of the work force in the jute industry at the turn of the century were rejects from rural society - single women who had to come into town in search of a livelihood. The tribal women who provided the major section of plantation labour and in the coal mines had all been uprooted from agriculture or rural industries. In all the peasant movements that erupted in different parts of the country during the 19th and 20th centuries, women played militant roles. It is surprising that their problems remained outside the concern of most reformers. It is

even more surprising that historians who have applauded women's participation in the freedom movement as one of the achievements of Mahatma Gandhi have never gone beyond his charisma to provide an explanation for women's participation. It is still more surprising that chroniclers of peasant and labour movements of this period have paid so little and sometimes no attention to the role of women in these struggles.

Except for the Gandhian interlude, the first three phases of the women's question had focussed entirely on the issues of women's familial status, their access to education and better legal rights as the instruments of reform. In the fourth phase, after independence, the question was deemed to have been solved, with the adoption of the principle of equality in the Constitution, and throwing open to women the rights to education, the vote and entry into professions, public services and political offices. This phase, which I prefer to describe as the hey-day of the middle class, benefitted a large number of women from this class, breeding in them a complacency and support for the status quo. Women's organisations which had fought militantly for women's rights during the 30s and 40s settled down to perform needed welfare services for the people with grants provided by the Government. For all practical purposes, the women's question disappeared from the public arena for a period of over 20 years. This was reflected in the decline of both research and writings about women during this period.

The fifth and the last phase is really set in the context of the growing crisis in our society, with increasing inequality, poverty and threats to people's rights. The Committee on the Status of Women in India (1971-74) was inexorably forced to the conclusion of an increasing marginalisation of women in the economy and society. This process, according to the data, began long before independence. In spite of the fact that these disturbing trends had been occasionally identified by a few official social scientists (such as a former Census Commissioner), they had failed to attract any attention, either from the experts who guided India's entry into the period of planned development or the community of social scientists who were trying to analyse different aspects of the complex process of transformation going on in our society. The Committee found in the demographic trends of the declining sex ratio, the growing disparity in the life expectancy and death rates of men and women, and in their access to literacy, education and a livelihood, indicators of "regression from the norms developed during the freedom struggle" and an increasing process, which was taking a direction totally opposite to the vision put forward by the Fathers of our Constitution. The instruments of political rights, legal equality and education on which so much reliance had been placed to solve the women's question had remained outside the reach of the overwhelming majority of women who were being marginalised. Among the minority which had enjoyed these benefits also, they seemed to have made very little impact towards weakening the hold of subordination. Patriarchy had not been weakened, but had extended its sway and strengthened its hold on the majority of the population.

While some of the questions were posed in the report of the Committee, the new wave in the women's movement which is really beginning to sharpen people's awareness of these problems should be understood as one of the manifestations of the reassertion by the Indian people of their democratic rights after the experience of the national emergency. The Committee on the Status of Women in India was unaware of the international debate and addressed its task as one of fact finding. None of the members of the Committee, except the Chairman, and one other member, had any previous background of militancy in the women's movement. What turned most of us into activists was exposure to the frightening problems that we had to understand and explain, if possible. Publication of the Committee's report, and promotion by the Indian Council of Social Science Research of continued investigation of the problems of women who had hitherto remained 'invisible' to both policy makers and social scientists provided, for the first time, better information than had been available to earlier participants in the women's movement. The issue which triggered off women's anger across the country from 1977 onwards were crimes against women - rape, murder and other forms of violence. These had not formed an important part of the Committee's evidence, but they can be seen as increasing manifestations of the process of devaluation and marginalisation that the Committee had identified. Spontaneous protests by women's groups and the formation of new organisations, if these are taken as indicators of a movement, began in 1977 and have steadily increased from that date.

The women's question today is, therefore, no longer an issue confined to the position of women within the family or their rights to equality with men in different aspects of social life. It is part of the total, far broader question regarding the direction of change that our society is taking - economic, social, political, and the intellectual perception and analysis of that process. It is in this context that the role of women's studies assumes critical dimensions.

II

Research and writing on women and their situations in society has a very old history in India but most of it has remained unknown to the contemporary world of academic scholarship. We are just beginning to discover a few writings on this theme, going right back to the Buddhist period. The *Therigatha* - songs composed by Buddhist nuns, only a few of which are available in translations, present vivid descriptions of women feeling oppressed by their subordinate position. The Tamil poetry of the Sangam period (Circa 3 century BC), rock inscriptions in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, the writings of women who became great mobilisers of peoples' movements in the medieval period, a long narrative poem by a Palace maid in Mysore - challenging the double standards prescribed by society for men and women - are just a few illustrations of existing material which we have been able to identify after a very cursory search during the last few years. None of these have as yet invited the attention of historians and indologists as fresh material for reexamination of social realities in India's past.

During the earlier phase of the women's question, research and writing on women's problems was primarily taken up by historians and indologists. They emphasised women's familial roles and reflected the particular concerns of the social reform movement by attempting to reinterpret scriptural texts. The rise of cultural nationalism strengthened this perspective and nationalist historians competed with each other to prove how high was the status of women in earlier periods. What appears to have been overlooked by these scholars of that day was that the type of source they used for their interpretation of social life in ancient India, generally confined their understanding to the boundaries of elite groups. Even within these groups, little attention was paid to writings by women which could have indicated women's own perception of their realities. The debate on the women's question was dominated by men. Even the creative writers, poets, journalists, play-wrights of the 19th and early 20th centuries, though concerned and sensitive about women's problems, tended to emphasis the familial, confined and dependent lives of middle class women - whether they were writing about urban or rural society.

A vast body of material undoubtedly exists in regional language literature across the country, which has not been scientifically analysed to identify the images, the attitudes and the concerns for women that they displayed in different periods. The Committee on the Status of Women in India commissioned a few content analysis of leading periodicals in 9 Indian languages, covering the period 1930 to 1970. Most of them indicated a rising concern for the women's question - the problems of equality and inequality - in marriage, in education and in participation in public life - during the earlier period, but from the 50s this concern appeared to decline. In the late 60s there was some evidence of hostility, which had been missing in the earlier writings. The problems addressed were still primarily those of urban middle class women - whether the authors were men or women. In the field of scientific social research, the post-independence period demonstrated a lot of writings on women's education - its need and results, the obsession with the theory of role conflict among working women and a virtual absence of any enquiry into women's role in the political sphere. In the massive expansion that took place in the economics of agriculture and industry, one cannot find any mention of women, who formed a substantial, though steadily declining, section of their work force. A solitary study on women in the Indian work force. A solitary study on women in the Indian work force by Dr. D.R. Gadgil in the mid 60s arrived at the conclusion that women's participation in agriculture was a reflection of regional cultural variations. This amounted to saying it was outside the scope of any enquiry by economists, and it remained so until the early 70s.

The one discipline which from its inception had probed the realities of non-middle class society in India was social anthropology. Women found somewhat greater mention in anthropological research, but the focus and the emphasis still remained on their familial, ritual, kinship roles with some references to customary laws governing marriage, property and the sexual division of labour.

However, the same period also gave birth to some major theories of social change in rural society. Srinivas' theory of *sanskritisation* identified changes in women's roles and status as one of the important indicators of upward mobility. While the theory gained great legitimacy, its implications in terms of the desired direction of social change were not debated. Nor was any attention paid to investigate the familial and social repercussions of downward mobility, though there was ample indication that this trend of mobility was affecting a much larger section of the population.

New compulsions that began to generate renewed interest in women's situation were (a) the concern with the population crisis from the 60s, and (b) the growing crisis of unemployment and poverty from the late 60s. The population area attracted substantial research investment from both government and international donor agencies and a spate of research on family planning emerged. Many of these identified women's status, their education, their employment, and their role in decision making, as determinants of women's access to contraceptive services. But they did not establish any connection between *changes* in women's roles and status with *rising* population trends.

The Dantwala Committee on Unemployment Estimates in 1971, for the first time, pleaded for data disaggregated by sex, age, occupation, and urban/rural residence in order to frame any kind of valid estimates of unemployment. The Bhagawati committee on Unemployment, which followed soon after, admitted that even on the basis of available data, the level of unemployment among women appeared to be much higher than among men. The declining trend in women's economic participation rates had been pointed out both by the West Bengal Census of 1951 and the Indian Census of 1961, but this had failed to attract the attention either of social scientists or of policy makers.

This was the situation when the Committee on the Status of women in India began its investigations. The Committee's terms of reference linked its task to realising the basic principle of equality enshrined in the Constitution. It was to investigate trends in women's status in employment, education, health and society, and suggest "further measures that may be necessary to enable them to play their full and proper role in building up of the nation". Recognising fairly soon that the instruments of law, education and franchise had failed to bring about a meaningful transformation of women's status for the majority of women, the Committee's investigation increasingly focussed on the trends that were visible for this majority. The findings were not only disturbing but frightening. The demographic indicators of declining status for the large majority of women were (a) the declining sex ratio - explainable only by the widening gap in male and female mortality, (b) the declining economic participation rate, (c) the rising migration rate, and (d) the rising number of proportion of women among illiterates.

Discovery of these facts turned a limited enquiry into known and visible facts of women's development into a search for explanations of basic characteristics of the development process. Why had the principle of equality made so little impact?

Why had the value generating institutions - the educational and legal systems and the media failed to develop a culture of equality? Why had trade unions and political parties ignored women's rights and issues. Why had the right of access to political power resulted in such a gap between 'symbolism and actuality'? Above all, why had both policy makers and social analysis neglected to examine the implications of the demographic trends?

The Committee found explanation for this failure in (i) urban middle class bias among planners, academics, political parties, trade unions alike, and their ignorance of the diversity and plurality that characterised women's roles, problems and priorities across classes, communities and regions; (ii) influence of theories of social change and development and intellectual tools borrowed from highly industrialised societies of the west, which were inappropriate for an understanding of a complex society like India's; and (iii) failure of the women's movement to articulate the problems of all classes of women both during its period of militancy and dormancy after the mid 50s.

The Indian Council of Social Science Research, which initiated a sponsored programme of women's studies, to investigate the critical areas of information gap identified by the Committee, therefore, directed its efforts at three target audiences - policy makers, social scientists, and the general public. The programme's objectives were clear - (a) to generate new data and analysis to bring about needed policy change; (b) to reexamine analytical concepts, theories and methodological approaches of the social sciences - to rectify the intellectual marginalisation of women from the field of social enquiry; and (c) to revive the social debate on the women's question. It is not for me to assess the extent to which the programme succeeded in the realisation of its objectives. Since that date in 1976 other forces have begun to affect the growth of women's studies in India. Crimes against women have emerged as a critical problem. They have galvanised women's groups into new forms of protest, and have begun to affect a growing section of public and judicial opinion. The deepening political crisis in the country has also demonstrated dimensions which affect women's status - existing and future - directly. The deepening crisis of values that we in the older generation offer glibly as an explanation for all the maladies of our society also affect women directly - sometimes as victims and sometimes as powerless mothers who wonder what kind of a future faces their children.

Another force which has undoubtedly contributed to the explosion of new information about women's situation and problems is the growing concern displayed by the international community of development analysts. The International Women's Year in 1975 was perhaps a response to the pressure of newly politicised activists of the women's liberation movement in the west. But the intervention of developing countries into that debate and the growth of a new body of literature on women and development, derived from the experience of third world countries, has steadily taken the Decade's direction from an analysis of sex inequality of formal, legal and political systems to an examination of *new* inequalities

generated by the pattern of development in these countries. Linkages have been discovered at national, regional and global levels that provide new perceptions for an understanding of the changing pattern of women's inequalities, roles and problems. International donor agencies, compelled by a mandate to do more for women's development than they had done before, have contributed substantially to investigations of these problems. Even bilateral aid agencies, under the pressure of the women's movements in their own countries, have been compelled to invest more in both research and action for women's development.

While these investments in research on women have brought forth a body of literature that demonstrate extraordinary parallels in the experience of different developing countries, and even between developing and developed countries, they have a negative impact too.

When the Committee on the Status of Women in India arrived at the drastic conclusion that the process of development had adversely affected the large majority of women, many of us on that Committee were warned by fellow social scientists that we were risking our professional reputation by offering such wild conclusions on the basis of inference. Today it would not be possible for anyone familiar with the literature on women and development from across the world to say so. On the other hand, we can record that we arrived at this conclusion purely on the basis of facts that we uncovered in our own country, and not on the basis of any theories borrowed from outside.

In September 1979 when the ICSSR Committee on Women's Studies reviewed the results of the programme in the first three years of its existence, it concluded that while the programme had made a distinct impact on policy makers and on the general public, *it had failed to make any substantial impact on the community of social scientists and the major institutions undertaking social science research.* Neither Universities nor the leading research institutes had included women in their major areas of concern. The University system in particular had failed to take note of the growing body of scholarship that challenged many of the established concepts and theories of social change.

It was in this context that a few of us decided to convene the first National Conference on Women's Studies in Bombay in April 1981. The overwhelming response amazed all of us, and the mandate given by that Conference led to the establishment of the Indian Association for Women's Studies in 1982. The Association Membership now includes 10 Universities, 6 colleges and 6 research institutes, apart from 138 individuals, many of whom are from the academic profession. Since the Association came into existence the University Grants commission has drawn the attention of Universities to the need to promote an understanding of women's issues and problems through the teaching and research activities of various disciplines.

The first National Conference at Bombay debated alternative approaches to the development of women's studies in India. Every working group sharply rejected the model developed in some western countries - of having separate courses and programmes for women's studies. The consensus was clear that *in the Indian context what was needed was incorporation of the women's question and its implications in various disciplines*. Marginalised separate programme of women's studies will make no impact on the minds of the larger student community or faculty groups. Nor will they help to overcome the process of intellectual marginalisation of women and their issues, which had pushed the women's question to the background of academic concern in the last few decades. There is a lot of confusion in people's minds about the term women's studies. A few of us, therefore, got together, and defined women's studies as "the pursuit of a more comprehensive, critical and balanced understanding of social reality. Its essential components include (i) women's contribution to the social process, (ii) women's perception of their own lives, the broader social reality and their struggles and aspirations, (iii) roots and structures of inequality that lead to marginalisation, invisibility and exclusion of women from the scope, approaches and conceptual frame-works of most intellectual enquiry and social action. Women's studies should, thus, not be narrowly defined as studies about women or information about women, but be viewed as a critical instrument for social and academic development".

We also defined the objectives of women's studies as (i) to conscientise both men and women by helping them to understand, recognise and acknowledge the multi-dimensional roles played by women in society, (ii) to promote better understanding of the process of social, technological and environmental change, (iii) to contribute to the pursuit of human rights, (iv) to investigate the causes of gender disparities - analysing structural, cultural and attitudinal factors, (v) to empower women in their struggle against inequality and for effective participation in all areas of society and development, (vi) to render invisible women visible - in particular women of the underprivileged strata, and (vii) to help develop alternative concepts, approaches, and strategies for development.

Women's studies today poses a challenge to the education system. If Universities continue to evade the challenge even when the UGC has indicated its willingness to support, then the majority view that the intellectual marginalisation of women reflects a power relationship within the society will gain for greater validity. All our investigations into women's status and the findings of eminent social scientists like Srinivas, Altekar and others point to a consistent alliance between patriarchy and hierarchy in maintaining the existing structure of inequalities in our society. The power relations that help to perpetuate monopolistic control of political power, economic power, and knowledge power by a small minority of our population also help to perpetuate certain role models, myths and mystification about women's social, economic and political roles by keeping them but of the arena of legitimate scientific enquiry. This promotion of an invisibility of women's actual roles, struggles, views and aspirations have provided a major obstacle to the realisation of the vision of equality that took shape during the freedom struggle. Structural

analysis of society that ignores gender relationships, political analysis that ignores gender disparities at all levels of the social process and historical analysis that omits the contribution of a major section of the population - should we accept such analysis as objective social science or should we say that they demonstrate the power of academic institutions to distort and mould people's understanding of their past, present and the future?