

Monologue Or Dialogue – How Politics Responded To Women – Revisiting A Saga Of Emancipation And Exploitation

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Abstract: My paper is an earnest endeavour to trace a historical sketch of how politics have responded to women's issues since ancient times. I have attempted to show that women's emancipation have time and again been used as a tool to further specific interests, alongside exploitation that has always reigned rampant. Women have been given and accorded prestige but no sooner than they attempted to question male hegemony, silencing them would become a matter of great immediate concern. My paper tries to show the fallacies and paradoxes of the dialogue that has existed between women and the state on issues of Gender and how women have never been allowed their due share in equality in a male – dominated patriarchal society.

Keywords: women, patriarchy, hegemony, politics, gender.

"That country and that nation which did not respect women have never become great nor will ever in future". Swami Vivekananda.

*I am no bird and no net ensnares Me,
I am a free human being with an independent will" -
Charlotte Bronte*

Throughout the ages, human society has been conceived in terms of a binary distinction – a gendered perspective – man and woman. To each of them, separate qualities has been attributed, each being circumscribed within a particular way of living. Never have both ascribed equal status despite women's consistent urge for equality in terms of status and opportunity. Foucault's analysis of the discursive body examines its capacity to be manipulated, moulded, shaped, constructed, and changed and explains the manner in which the body is invested with different and changing forms of power. (Thapan 1997, 5).

India at the very outset has a patriarchal system. Foucault's influence on contemporary feminist work on the women's body is however central to understanding the concern with the nature of the socially constructed

body (Thapan 1997, 6). Initially, patriarchy meant a family system in which the patriarch or the eldest male member of the family was vested with supreme authority. In due course of time, patriarchy evolved to become the indicator of a social system that generated conditions for the subjugation of women. It must be understood, as Simonti Sen points out that domination of women by men does not mean the cruelty of a few men and the consequent subjugation of a few 'unfortunate' women. (Sen 2005, 251). Patriarchy, on the other hand indicates a systematic control on women. (Sen 2005, 251). Juliet Mitchell asserts that in a patriarchal system, the patriarch is vested with certain symbolic powers; these powers create an environment within which women learn to consider themselves as the inferior other.

The Hindu Joint Family with the eldest male member at the helm of affairs presents a classic example of a patriarchal system. It reflects the institutional dimension of patriarchy. So embedded is the system and so ingrained in our daily life that subjugated women accept this as being 'normal' without questioning it. In a way women themselves become the carriers and propagators of patriarchal ideology within the familial structure. Purity and pollution, honour and shame and purdah are cultural

ideologies that play an important role in controlling women's behaviour and the spaces they can occupy. (Viswanath 1997, 314). Specifically, in a capitalist patriarchal system, women's relentless household labour is unpaid, devoid of recognition and is equated with unemployment. (Sen 2005, 352). Further, in a capitalist system, men reaps the benefits of unpaid domestic labour which is shouldered by the women of the house.

In India, women's productivity – economic or biological is controlled by men – if not by a single man, but by the various cultural and social values that women are expected to fulfill in a male – dominated patriarchal hegemonic society. One of the most glaring instances of how patriarchal values are reinforced can be seen in Britain, one of the most advanced capitalist societies.

Indian social structure represents a deeply entrenched patriarchal system. Semonti Sen (2005) asserts that today in most middle class families, although both the boy and the girl child may be given similar access to education, money management continues to have the two – fold objectives – taking care of the son's education and providing for the daughter's marriage expenses.

Looking at India through the ages, the common belief is that the Vedic Age was the golden age when women were given equal status and treated at par with the men. Women were attributed a very high status but with the coming of invaders, especially the Muslims, restrictions began to be imposed on the women. All the social evils of the Hindu society were explained as outcomes of fear for women's chastity, to protect them from the invaders.

It is true that we hear of women sages like Gargi and Maitrayee from the Vedic age who occupied prestigious positions in society. However, feminist scholars contend that such a glorious interpretation of History is a product of the 19th century encounter between colonialism and nationalism. (Menon 2011, 3). When the European colonies attempted to colonise the countries of Asia and Africa, they attempted to legitimise their rule by depicting the barbaric, uncivilized nature of the colonised people and that it was their duty to civilise the 'dark'. The 'White Man's Burden' was used to portray the fact that the Europeans had taken up the responsibility to improve the colonised natives.

A significant tool in this regard in the hands of the British while gaining control over India was the low status accorded to women by Indian society. Colonial historians justified the British Rule in India by stating that the Hindu women required the protection of the colonial state. (Menon 2011, 3). As a reaction to this kind of explanation of Hindu society as crude and immoral, historians like R.C. Dutt, A.S. Altekar and others developed a school of nationalist writing by challenging such an argument by colonial historians. They attributed the existing evils of Indian society to Muslim invasions; the patriarchal features of the Hindu society, nationalist historians upheld were a response to external threats. (Menon 2011, 3)

Uma Chakravarty and Kumkum Roy, however refutes such a nationalist explanation which upheld that Hindu social evils were due to external threats. They uphold, as

Nivedita Menon rightly points out that the evidence used by nationalist historians were drawn from Brahmanical records and was a partial history as such. Further, even if the position of the upper caste women were high, it was at the cost of the natives by subjugating them. (Menon 2011, 3)

Further, Vedic texts focussed on particular geographical areas, the early texts to the North – West areas of the subcontinent, later texts to the east around the mid – Gangetic valley. From these texts, nationalist historians drew up a picture of Vedic India which is incorrect because India as a geographical entity came into being only in the 19th century through interaction with colonialism. (Menon 2011, 3)

Contemporary feminist historians point out that less than one percent of 1000 hymns of the Rig Veda are attributed to women. (Menon 2011, 4). Women like Gargi were great sages with an outstanding knowledge and respected in society. However, the moment they attempted to question male hegemony, they were silenced by their male counterparts. Uma Chakravarty points out that the famous story of the debate between Gargi and Yajnavalkya, celebrated as an example of learning being allowed to women, is also an incident when Gargi is finally silenced and eliminated from the debate by Yajnavalkya, not by her arguments but because Yajnavalkya threatens her –

"Gargi, do not question too much, lest your head fall off

On one hand, Yajnavalkya writes, "*Women are the embodiment of all divine virtues on earth*".

On the other hand, he threatens Gargi and eliminates her from the debate. Further, women were not allowed to own property; rather they were treated as property – the bride being gifted to the groom along with other gifts. (Menon 2011, 4)

Ancient Indian scholars although counterbalanced their arguments by treating women with some dignity, they nevertheless was unprepared to accord freedom to the women.

Manu, for instance says,

"When women are honoured, the Gods are pleased but when they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields any reward".

At the same time, he also upholds,

"A woman has to be under her father during childhood, under her husband during youth and under her son during old age. At no stage shall she deserve freedom".

In the Mahabharata, Bhishma says,

"Husband should regard his wife as an acquisition".

The colonial encounter produced much changes in the social fabric of India. While colonial ideology used women's subjugation as a tool, nationalist discourse sought to contradict it. In the instance of Sati, research suggests that 19th century sati abolition movement created the myth of a widespread practice which was not true. Majority of the incidents of sati were recorded at the height of the Sati abolition movement in the provinces governed by the chief British exponent of Sati – Lord William Bentinck. (Menon 2011, 5). The practice was largely found among

the urban middle class of Calcutta – a city which had the longest encounter with colonialism. (Menon 2011, 5). In other words, it was not necessarily a custom, but an aggressive – defensive reaction to colonial rule. When finally in 1829, Sati was abolished by legislation, there was less protest from the Hindu orthodoxy than was feared. (Menon 2011, 5 – 6). The abolition of Sati carried with it the myth of British modernity and women emancipation.

The notion of *pativrata* or *satitva* aided in domesticating and containing the brutality of sati. (Chowdhury 1998, 72). Chowdhury (1998) further asserts that the colonially inflected notion of heroic masculinity that was emerging around this time included the ability to overcome pettiness and despicable qualities like cunning. Thus, in the traditional Indian discourse, men were to follow the path of *Dharma* and not outwardly material pleasures in contesting the tag of effeminate as branded on them. Thus, in this light, *Sati*, symbolised the supreme sacrifice, she rose above her ‘womanliness’ and merged with the truly ethical concerns of a Hindu’s life. (Chowdhury 1998, 72 – 73).

The Indian Independence Movement gradually became successful in bringing women to its fold. In 1927, the All India Women’s Conference was formed which eventually stressed the political goal of national self – government as the means to achieve women’s aspirations. In the national movement for liberating India from the yoke of British imperialism, women largely took part in politics, from the Gandhian movements to the Rani Jhansi Brigade in the Indian National Army.

The notion of Gender identity and vulnerability of women got nakedly exposed with the Partition of India in 1947. The story of partition, the uprooting and dislocation of people, was accompanied by the story of rape, abduction and widowhood of thousands of women on both sides of the newly formed borders. (Butalia, 1997, 93). On both sides of the newly formed borders, the problems of ‘abducted’ women posed a serious challenge to the newly born twins – India and Pakistan. Several complaints about ‘missing’ women had been filed on both sides; but even after, thanks to the joint initiatives to recover these women, they actually were brought back to their native homeland, they were refused to be accepted by their families because living for many days with men of other communities put a question mark on their identity. As a result, there were cases of abducted women who refused to return to their own homes and preferred to stay on with their abductors. (Butalia 2006, 143). Thousands of women had been widowed and many women’s marriage age had passed by the time they could settle down in the new homeland. The refugees who have been surviving in the camps of West Bengal for the past five decades and have not been rehabilitated are, in a sense, prisoners of the past. (Raychaudhuri 2006, 158). The partition is the glaring example of how a woman’s body and her dignity can be tacitly used and explicitly violated to perpetuate male domination in terms of power.

Feminists believe that although there are similarities between religious patriarchies, there are differences at the same time. The religious communities are governed by

their Personal laws all of which discriminate against women. Any endeavour to change the status of women is perceived as a direct assault on the community – the Personal Laws are defined as part of the ancient religious tradition, although they were codified into their present forms in the colonial period. (Menon 2011, 10).

From the 1980s, Indian politics underwent changes, religion invading the sphere of women’s politics. The patriarchal character of the Indian state got reinforced with the Shah Bano case and the non – implementation of the Uniform Civil Code by successive governments in power.

By this time, communal organisations were drawing in women in large numbers, using the slogans of the Left and Women’s Movements; several women were in the forefront of the communal mobilizing prior to the demolition of the Babri Masjid on the disputed site of Ayodhya and the violence that ensued. (Menon 2011, 10). Tanika Sarkar recounts how the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad have made enormous efforts to bring in women, train them in yoga, martial arts and give them a role in political campaigns. This was however done while reaffirming the patriarchal family ideology – these organisations projected themselves as extensions of the Family. (Menon 2011, 10). They mobilised women, not for their emancipation, but draw them into politics without disturbing the community ties and the familial set up – the twin reinforcers of the patriarchal ideology.

Nivedita Menon (2011) asserts that the patriarchal character of the Indian state is reinforced by Protective Legislation under Capitalism – restricting women’s employment in hazardous work, maternity benefits etc - have been used by male workers to reduce competition for them. Feminist politics according to Menon (2011) attempt to negotiate in the terrain of the state; the relationship of women’s organisations with the state is often contradictory – on the one hand, the state is seen as the prime agent perpetuating oppression against women while on the other hand, the state is treated as the agent of change and potential protector of the powerless sections of society.

In modern India, with instances of female infanticide, physical violence, dowry issues, widow burnings, devadasi system, violence by the upper castes against Dalit women etc, the feminist agenda is taking a more aggressive turn. The politicisation of women has not been successful; from Parliament to Panchayat, the number of women’s representatives has not been impressive. The issue of women’s reservation in Parliament met with vehement criticisms because 33 % women would mean 33 % less men in the highest law – making body of the country.

Modern India is seeing both a drastic increase in the instances of violence against women and at the same time an upheaval in feminist politics.

Civilisation begins with women. Without her, the human world would fail to perpetuate itself. Stricter legislations, increasing literacy among women, pro – women laws and a pro – active government can go a long way in ensuring for women a safer society.

My hope is that in 2047 when India celebrates her 100 years of independence, she presents to her citizens,

especially women, a safer place for women, where women enjoy their rights and India sends out the message to the entire world that she has risen above all gender bias and has fulfilled the dreams and achieved the goals of our Constitution – makers. As a woman, I would like to pay a tribute to Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar for his untiring endeavour to introduce female education which is the key to empowerment of women.

I would conclude with a hope that there is a revival of Bengali Renaissance epitomised by Shri Ramakrishna Paramhansa in his worship of 'Nari Shakti'; Vivekananda gave a call to women to come out of their seclusion. Let the teachings of these great social reformers be a beacon light to guide India in her fight against all social evils and achieve the goal of achieving a safer place for women.

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