

Indian Feminisms Concepts and Issues
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Lecture-22
Gender and Labour

Hello everyone, in the previous lectures we explored how nationalism was constructed by keeping the women's question at the center. The nationalistic approach upheld two aspects while discussing women's progress. First one is tradition and the second one is celebration. According to Sumi Krishna the bridge between these two aspects was built by Gandhi through his valorization of Indian womanhood together with a belief in women's place being in the home in normal times as opposed to the abnormal conditions of the freedom struggle.

The Gandhian ideology was premised on the spirit of endurance and suffering embodied in the mother. Moreover, his many experiments with women and desire emphasized on the ennobling qualities of motherhood that sought explicitly to curb or subdue the most fearsome aspects of femininity, which lie in erotic or tactile domains. This week we are going to talk about gender and labour.

We will explore the myriad forms of women's work and their relation to women's identity. The lectures will cover the following themes and issues in the module. First equality, this section will look at 2 major issues regarding labour. Productive labour and reproductive labour and the class question, it will delve into the feminist analysis of the sexual division of labour, the distinct contributions and challenges of productive and reproductive labour for women and the problem of visible and invisible work.

The second aspect that we will look at is accessibility; while labour has remained central in Indian feminist analysis another central aspect that remains largely invisible is the role of identity in impacting and restricting women's access to labour. This section will delve into caste and also heteronormativity in understanding how they shape the contours of gender and labour.

It will elaborate the points with reference to Bhanwari Devi case, the laws regarding sexual harassment in workspace and the problematic of sex work. The final theme we will look at is agency, this section will also explore how work seen as agential through its proclamation of financial independence may in turn reproduce the casteist and classist stereotypes. It will elucidate on the matter highlighting the problematic of victimhood versus agency, choice and complicit agency.

Now you have to remember that these aspects are often interlinked and overlapping. Therefore, during the course of the lectures I will often refer to incidents, texts, cases in various points and draw similarities and differences between them. Now before going into the various aspects of labour and gender in the Indian context, we first need to understand how gender and labour are related.

Let us begin by a very comprehensive idea or definition which is provided by Kamla Bhasin in her book understanding gender. Bhasin writes gender division of labour or sexual division of labour, refers to the allocation of different roles, responsibilities and tasks to women and men based on societal ideas of what men and women should do and are capable of doing. Different tasks and responsibilities are assigned to girls and boys, women and men according to their sex gender roles and not necessarily according to their individual preferences or capabilities.

In other words, work or labour is dependent on the ideals of gender therefore it is assigned as per the social expectations from men and women. In fact, all kinds of work or activities can be understood in terms of productive and also reproductive labour. Productive labour refers primarily to the external or material form of production that activity where goods are produced for consumption and trade.

It is mostly intended for use and profit, the location of this productive work is the public sphere, factories, farms, offices, fields and so on. These activities are considered economic and are included in the gross national product of the countries. So, what is gross national product? Gross national product or GNP as it is known is an indicator of the level of a nation's economic activity.

To define simply GNP refers to the total value of all goods and services produced by the citizens of a country in a given financial year.

The citizen can be located anywhere in the world but it has to be a citizen. In other words, GNP analyzes how a country's people contribute to its economy. Now coming to reproductive labour, this kind of labour has two variations. First biological, in the sense of giving birth an activity that only women can perform. There is also the idea of social reproduction that includes caring and nurturing activities.

Since biological reproduction is associated to women, responsibilities pertaining to social reproduction are also traditionally associated to women. For example, caring for children, cooking, feeding, washing, etcetera, and it extends to the entire household and its members. These kinds of work are not paid and are seen as women's inherent duty. Nowadays you will notice that these assumptions have extended in the sphere of paid work as well.

For example, nursing and teaching are mostly female professions, this is considered as feminization of labour. Because it is viewed as an extension of the nurturing work women do within their household. According to Nivedita Menon who writes in her book seeing like a feminist, such demarcations of labour are quite ironical. She argues that the reason behind gender hierarchy in labour is not because of biological difference but because of ideological assumptions which are rooted in patriarchy.

She writes, "On the one hand women are supposed to be physically weak and unfit for heavy manual labour but both in home and outside they do the heaviest work. Carrying heavy loads of water and firewood, grinding corn, transplanting paddy, carrying head loads in mining and construction work. But at the same time when the manual work that women do is mechanized, making it both lighter and also better paid.

Then it is men who receive the training to use the new machinery and women are edged out. According to a time use survey done by OECD or the organization for economic co-operation and development women in India currently spend 352 minutes per day doing unpaid work compared

to men who spend only 52 minutes per day on the same. You will find the statistics in the following link.

The statistic shows that women spend 577% more time doing unpaid work than men. And all this unpaid work includes domestic chores, child care and so on and so forth. This is actually the precise problem with traditional and celebratory approaches to labour. It sees the sexual division of labour as essential and universal. Children from early on learn to master skills that are appropriate to their gender roles.

Maria Mies in her path-breaking book *Women: The Last Colony* writes we should no longer look at the sexual division of labour as a problem related to the family but rather as a structural problem of a whole society. The hierarchical division of labour between men and women and its dynamics forms an integral part of the dominant production relations. That is, class relations of a particular epoch and society and of the broader national and international divisions of labour.

In identifying the relation of gender and labour at different levels, feminists have focused on paid and unpaid labour; the public versus domestic divide has also been focused on. Moreover, they have talked about production versus reproduction, accessibility to labour, different categories of women engaged in different kinds of labour and you have to remember that this difference runs across caste, religions, urban and rural locations etcetera.

Feminists have also talked about the naturalization of certain kinds of labour. Ashna Kapur Mehta quotes Maithreyi Krishnaraj who identifies 7 categories of work performed by women in rural and urban India. These are, number 1, wage and salaried employment, number 2 self-employment outside the household for profit, number 3 self-employment in cultivation and household industry for profit, number 4 self-employment in cultivation for own consumption. Number 5, other subsistence activities in allied sectors like dairying, livestock rearing such as poultry, goats, pigs, etcetera, and fishing, hunting, cultivation of fruit and vegetable gardens and so on. Number 6, activities related to domestic work such as fetching fuel, fodder, water, forest produce, repair of dwellings, making cow dung cakes, food preservation etcetera and finally, domestic work such as cooking, cleaning, care of the children, the aged and the sick.

This I have taken from Manushi, the journal. the link is provided below. One interesting intervention can be seen in the way technological developments. Especially in the reproductive science have refined and redefined the experiences of motherhood. Nivedita Menon, in seeing like a feminist writes that there are 3 types of mothering. Number 1, mothering providing genetic material or the egg donor.

Number 2, gestating the foetus for 9 months or the surrogate and number 3, rearing the child or social mothering. Now in older times 3 functions were actually fused within one woman, with technological progress however with methods such as in-vitro fertilization also known as IVF these are often performed by 3 distinct women. That means that the limits and definitions of childbirth, care, family are gradually getting challenged.

The womb can now be separated from the social experience of a mother. This gives rise to new reproductive and productive labour. The surrogate mother or the sperm donor gets paid, so birthing becomes a paid task. Such redefinitions are showing how biological relationships are also socially constructed. Now let us summarize today's lesson, the gender or sexual division of labour primarily draws upon the biological factors of one being a male or a female.

This biological reasoning however is not always correct. For example, women are considered to be physically weak and in fact they end up doing much heavier works. Such as lifting heavy weights, heavy buckets, working in fields, mines and so on and such kind of work women do on a regular basis. These ideas therefore are necessarily rooted in the social gendering process. Apart from the classification of labour as specifically gendered women who try to enter the labour force face additional problem of inaccessibility to certain types of work, unequal wages and so on.

The most obvious pattern in such a division of labour is the fact that women either do unpaid domestic work and even in instances where women work as housemate in other people's houses, it is lesser paid. Also, they can be seen as confined within the labour force such as unpaid or less paid food production sectors. We are now at a time where the family relations have vastly changed.

From joint family structures we have now nuclear families and in these families for economic or other reasons both men and women can often be seen to work. This however does not mean a complete transformation in patriarchal ideals about how labour would be divided amongst men and women. In fact, women often carry the double burden of labour, they do both domestic work and they also work outside the house.

In many cases women employ other women of lower classes as house helps for a cheaper wage. Such approach once again creates class disparity amongst women. The change is therefore or rather the challenges lie in adequately addressing these disparities. In the next lecture we will look into the various dimensions of labour and gender, important events, key legal and historical situations to understand these contours in further detail. Thank you.

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References:

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