

**Indian Feminisms Concepts and Issues**  
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**Lecture-23**  
**Womens Labour in India the 20th Century**

Hello everyone, in the previous lecture we talked about how the gender division of labour informs and impacts the private and the public spheres. The gender division of labour draws on the biological differences between men and women. However, as we have seen such presumptions do not always translate into reality. Women continue to do heavy domestic chores moreover women's labour outside the house is also highly discriminatory in terms of wage distribution.

Women tend to get jobs that are extensions of their domestic roles. Women are also more likely to get selected for unskilled professions and they are paid less compared to men. If you have any questions, you can go back to the previous lecture and clear your doubts. In today's lecture we will look at how class concerns came to be an important aspect in feminist discussions. We will begin by looking at the approach to class and gender in the west.

From there we will go to the Indian context and see the different ways in which the factor has been taken up. Maria Mies, a noted feminist who has worked extensively on gender and labour asks the following questions in her book *The Lacemakers of Narsapur*, Indian Housewives produce for the world market. So, she asked the questions, why is housework not considered work? Why is this work not paid? Why are only men called the 'breadwinners'?

Why do not women get a wage from their work? Why is the making of a car called productive while a woman's work for her family, her husband, her children is only reproductive work as Marx had called it. In this context, we asked why does capitalism need this non-work for it is process of unlimited growth of money. With these questions in mind we will now begin our discussion on how the landscape of labour transformed with respect to gender.

So, let us begin by talking about Industrial revolution in Britain. You have to remember that women of different classes and creeds have participated in agricultural labour for a long time. In Britain the industrial revolution saw widespread participation of women and children in the industrial labour market, primarily in textile industry.

Phyllis Deane and W.A. Cole write that, according to the 1851 population census of Great Britain women and girls in the textile and clothing industries constituted over half of the total manufacturing employment and over one-fifth of the entire non-agricultural workforce of the country. This was published in *British economic growth 1688 to 1954*, second edition. Now according to Marx in the capitalist profit-oriented economy the nimbleness of women's hands and children were much more desirable to ensure larger production at the least amount of wage.

The early 20th century Britain also saw women's participation in service sectors such as wholesale and retail trade, financial and commercial institutions, personal and professional services, transport and communications, public administration and welfare services. As a result, Britain witnessed women migrating from rural to urban sectors in large numbers.

According to Nirmala Banerjee the British pattern is similar to the ways in which the process of development towards a modern industrialized economy in other western countries actually functioned. The scenario in India however was quite different, Nirmala Banerjee writes that unlike Britain where traditional economy was transformed through modernization.

In India it was more of an artificial craft on the body of the traditional economy. Now what do I mean by that? Let us unpack the tops. Banerjee observes that unlike the British model women's economic position actually worsened in Bengal during the late 19th and early 20th centuries for two reasons. First, their traditional roles in the economy slowly become redundant while their gains in the modern sector actually remain negligible.

So, women in Bengal traditionally participated in three kinds of occupations. First, as helpers in cotton textile industry, so they were involved in professions such as spinning, weaving and so on and so forth. Second, in caste specific occupations such as potters, washer women, sweepers,

etcetera. And finally, participation in subsistence crafts, such as animal husbandry, making and selling of milk products like ghee or butter.

Preserving and processing grains and pulses, making simple food products like moori or chire which are puffed and flattened rice, preparing vegetable oil for lighting and collecting and processing and selling forest produce. Now these kinds of professions had the benefit of being homemade, costing less capital and being accessible to women and also locally available cheap material.

Moreover, since such professions were carried out by women it created a space for their collective solidarity. In fact, Nirmala Banerjee observes how such activities came to represent a part of their cultural articulations as well. For example, while weaving together women would often sing about themselves, their lives and so on. Now with large-scale commercialization and the increasing demand for products women faced huge decline in their employment in such sectors machines replace their work.

By 1931 women's employment in these subsystem crafts and trade had fallen by over a third of its level in 1911. Women with their simple tools and minimum capital could not compete in the changing economy. Added to this was the growing caste oriented restriction over women's accessibility to public spaces. You may remember we have discussed the concept of new woman and how the new woman was relegated to the private sphere?

If you have any queries in this regard please go back and visit the earlier lectures. Now Nirmala Banerjee also observes that work in mills was most probably not so stigmatizing in the beginning. However, it was only destitute and lower caste women who joined the mills. The Bengali women workers in Calcutta's jute and cotton mills who gave evidence to the Indian Factory Commission of 1890 were all widows or deserted women without children to support them.

They all claimed that no Bengali woman would work in the factories unless she was truly unfortunate. With the increasing mechanization of labour most of the types of work were now accessible to men. Because the moment a work becomes skilled it is usually preserved for men.

Women's participation in non-agricultural sectors in Bengal faced a huge setback. Radha Kumar in her book notes that such labour relations were rooted in the notions of family as a space that promotes sexual division of labour.

Women's work outside the house was seen as an addition or an extension of their duties as wife, mother, etcetera. As a result, women used to get employment only in sectors that were associated to their domestic roles. Such as, as I have already mentioned food industry, textile industry and so on. Moreover, women's work was always either unpaid or less paid, there were two reasons for this.

Male workers were paid higher because they were considered to be the breadwinners of the family. And secondly, for women wage work was considered a secondary work, their primary roles were still that of a wife, mother, etcetera. Kumar points out how such notions were naturalized even in policy making processes. She writes that the family assumed vital importance for administrators, planners and employers in the 1920s and 30s.

It was at this time that the family budget surveys were sponsored and investigations conducted into infant and maternal welfare and charitable institutions supported. At the center of all these activities stood the concept of woman as mother of the second-generation proletarian. She shows how the female workforce in the cotton textile industry in Bombay saw a steady decline from 1929 reaching 14.9% in 1939 as compared to 22.9% in 1926.

According to Kumar passing of the maternity benefit and the prohibition of night work acts and the mechanization of the industry are the possible reasons for such decline. These events contributed in solidifying the motherhood as women's primary duty. Moreover, the mechanization of the industry meant that skilled labour became male oriented. If you remember in the previous lecture, we mentioned how labour when it becomes skill based and less physically demanding is considered to be a male domain.

Same is the case here; Kumar also mentions that even though men's wage was considered to be the primary wage. In reality women workers in Bombay cotton mills actually use their wage for

self-sustenance or helping the family. She mentions almost 40% of them were widows and another 30% supported their husbands and children. Such studies by Mies, Kumar and Banerjee are not only showing the condition of working women.

They are actually also addressing an important lacuna in the scholarship about labour and gender. According to Samita Sen who writes in her book *women and labour in late colonial India: The Bengal jute industry labour history in India* has predominantly been analyzed by naturalizing men as laborers. Gender did not influence such analysis because they focused their arguments about class by identifying organized industrial workers as laborers.

We have already discussed through the examples provided by Nirmla Banerjee how the influence of industrialization in Bengal destroyed women's non-agricultural forms of labour? Samita Sen observes that the biggest issue with Indian labor history is that it takes for granted that industrial workers are primarily men. It has not even been asked why or how the industrial working class became overwhelmingly male.

This lacuna has 2 impacts; first, such analysis does not question how the labour processes themselves are gendered. For example, in the earlier lecture we have seen how production and reproduction are both gendered. If you have any questions about it, you can go back to the earlier lecture and take a look. Now the second point is when the analysis does not consider how labour processes are gendered, it also does not ask the question why certain sectors of labour are more populated by men or women.

In other words, it normalizes the definition of labourer in the industrial sector as necessarily a male counterpart. Now such definitions have had tremendous negative impact when women workers tried to organize themselves. Ella Bhatt mentions that when she tried to open bank accounts for the working-class women none of the banks were actually ready to do so. Because they were not part of any labour union and the work they were doing was not recognized as organized labour or as worthy to be part of the union.

As a result of which SEWA was born. Samita Sen gives example of jute industry in Bengal in the pre-independence period. To talk about women who came to be excluded from the workforce as a result of mechanization of labour. She writes, at the turn of the century, women constituted about 20% of total workers, the highest recorded proportion. For most of the period between 1890 and 1940, women were about 12 to 17% of the workforce.

While the industry began to draw on an increasingly wider variety of castes, communities and regions they drew more and more on men. As wages and working conditions improved through the collective political struggle of the jute workers unionized male workers also contributed to a more rigid exclusion of women. What Samita sen's observation makes us realize is that such gap in understanding is there not only at the level of participation in labour but also in the sphere of scholarship on class.

Now let us summarize today's lecture. Today we talked about the role of women as labourers in various sectors especially in the pre-independence period. Through the analysis of the various labour sectors, we understand that women's participation in productive labour in non-agricultural sectors faced a huge setback due to industrialization. Unlike the British model industrialization in India did not follow a holistic change.

As a result, women became the immediate victims of such transformation. Moreover, both in terms of organized labour and scholarship on it, it was homogenized labour as necessarily a male realm. Feminists have tried to challenge this by redefining labour as gendered. In the next lecture we will talk about gender and class relations in more detail and how analysis of class through gender can contribute to the existing scholarship on labour. Thank you.

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