

Indian Feminisms Concepts and Issues
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Lecture-24
Gender and Class

Hello everyone, in the previous lecture we learned about some of the ways in which the issue of labour was taken up to analyze women's condition in the pre-independence period. We learned that the impact of industrialization caused a huge setback for women workers especially in the non-agricultural sectors. Moreover, women were forced into the professions that were seen as more fitted towards their domestic roles.

According to Nivedita Menon, this had to do with the sexual division of labour in the production process. In her book gender and politics in India Menon writes, men are considered to be better workers and any skills that women develop such as nimbleness of fingers is actually defined as natural to women and therefore not deserving of the higher wages paid for skilled work. In this lecture we will look at women's participation in movements that were significantly centered on class.

We will explore how women were made part of it whether their concerns were taken up the issues of caste and so on. Now as we have mentioned in the earlier lectures during the pre-independence period gender difference among men and women were accepted as a norm. As a result, all the modifications regarding the women's question as it is popularly known during the nationalist and social reformist periods happened without disturbing the home and the world binary.

Women became a component to these movements as members of the nation seeking Independence. Moreover, Gandhi popularized women's role as mothers of the nation. So, in other words the order of gender and patriarchy were unquestioned. Now the class question has been prevalent in Indian political scenario from the 1930s and 40s through the communist party of India.

And women had been participants in such movements for a very long time; these movements however presented a homogeneous picture of class oppression and ignored the question of gender. The CPI mobilized peasants through Kisan Sabhas which took lead in attempting to change the oppressive traditions and conditions of the rural people. One such movement was the Tebhaga Andolan which happened from 1946 to 47.

Tebhaga meaning sharing by thirds was a movement to reduce landlord's share to one-third. The movement emerged as a result of the Bengal famine of 1943, the sharecroppers had no right to own land and landlords took half the produce without contributing anything to the production costs. Women actually played a major role in taking the movement to a new level. The Nari Bahini which is the women's wing of the party had actually mobilized these women.

They raised several issues regarding class oppression in general and caste oppression specific to women. Such as necessary legal changes in the status of Hindu women and women's rights to finance and property. Now despite their participation and active role in the movement gender disparity persisted both within and outside the movement. When some women activists started raising objections to domestic violence some of the male activists boycotted them.

Moreover, the party did not view these issues as important enough to be taken up. Women's rights in land ownership was not taken up, they did not play any role in decision making. After the movement they were forced to go back to their domestic spaces where the gender relation remained unchanged. These concerns regarding women's ownership of land resurfaced during the Bodhgaya movement in the 1970s.

Where women asked, I quote, please go and ask the government why, when it distributes land, we do not get a title, are we not peasants? If my husband throws me out, what is my security? The quote is from by Bina Agarwal in her article Are we not peasants too? Land rights and women's claims in India. The 1940s also saw CPI's contribution in the Telangana movement against the Nizam's rule.

The movement is also known as the Telangana rebellion or the Telangana people's struggle which happened from 1946 to 51. It was a peasant rebellion organized against landlords that gradually culminated in a rebellion against the Nizam's rule in the land. In the princely state of Hyderabad 40% land was owned by the Nizam and the rest was under the government's land revenue system.

The economic crisis of 1920 to 22 and 1930 to 33 heavily affected the peasants. Due to bad harvest and unfair prices for crops they were unable to pay taxes and had to sell their lands to the feudal landlords, this resulted in increased oppression of farmers by the landlords. Along with this issue, the rebellion also questioned the vetti or forced labour system which ruled that one man from each untouchable family had to do household labour for their landlords.

Hence demands were made by the peasants to put an end to vetti system, illegal extractions and compulsory grain levies and to reoccupy the lands seized earlier by the landlords and desh mukhs. The movement became one for abolishing feudal landlordism and even Nizam rule. The communist party's contribution was seen as crucial in setting the rebellion in motion. As a result of which the party won the 1952 election in Andhra Pradesh.

Even though P. Sundarayya claims that in the struggle against the government all people were forced to work and fight collectively without any distinction of caste and creed and so after this, fighting the evil of untouchability became easier. Dalit activists have criticized the communist party for their erasure of caste question in the Telangana people struggle. Bojja Tharakam writes that even though the Telangana peasant's movement mentioned the vetti system, untouchability did not gain central attention from the communists.

He writes, the party ignored issues related to caste altogether, saying that they would be dealt with after classlessness has been achieved. It is trusting and credulous supporters that is the lower caste people went along with the party convinced that untouchability and caste itself would vanish one the land problem was solved. They came to believe that it was all right to live without dignity and live in the hope that some land would come their way as the struggle intensified.

Now commenting on the need to address caste and class simultaneously in an intersectional manner. Tarakam adds, the abolition of caste is not about ideology alone but also about material transformation. Caste struggle is a mental material revolution while the focus of a class struggle tends to be limited to materialistic considerations. Interestingly, the most deprived groups in these movements were the Dalit women.

As in Tebhaga women participated prominently in the Telangana movements as well but their issues were not recognized. Such erasure became prominent in the book we were making history, life stories of women in the Telangana people struggle by Stree Shakti Sanghathana which was published in 1989 and it documented the experiences of women in the Telangana movement. They emphasize on the little incidents narrated by these women activists which are otherwise deemed too trivial to be incorporated in the dominant historical narratives.

The women activist reminisce how the party dismissed issues of distribution of work among men and women, dowry, etcetera, as insignificant. An activist named Narasamma mentions how women were not allowed to participate in the guerrilla raids because of the assumption that they are physically inferior. And also, women were continuously suspected of destroying the morale of the party by indulging in sexual affairs.

Kamalamma points that the party was also inattentive towards preventing unwanted childbirth. As a result of which they had to often abandon the newborn children under the orders of party leaders. The writers note that while women during the movement were freely allowed to enter the public sphere of production and also political action. The moral code by which they were measured was still the code of the private domain.

The domain of the family, household, domestic labour and reproduction. And this code exemplified the intersection of casteism and sexism. Regalla Acchamamba the activist come doctor in the party was wrongly accused of having an affair. She narrates, how she was blamed as a badmash caste, who never admit their mistakes. These actions reveal how the party also supported casteist sexist assumptions that lower caste women are polluted and sexually promiscuous and publicly humiliated them.

And even though Dalit leaders such as Sundarayya mentioned instances of harassment of women within the party. The discussion is diluted into a moral problem where Sundarayya feels sorry for being unable to save them. This shows how a gender issue is presented trivial because it is seen as an individual moral problem and not a systemic issue. With the nation's Independence at the door these movements also died down.

Independent India began with the constitutional promise of equal opportunity and by adopting directive principles promising among other rights the right to work. The dissolution meant however came soon. As I have mentioned in the previous lectures the towards equality report showed that women's condition has deteriorated since 1911. There was widespread unemployment, ecological degradation, poverty, ineffective political force which caused the decay in the system.

The communist party split into CPI and CPIM in 1964. During this time as Ilina Sen observes women once again entered the political Arena. But unlike earlier it was not about their participation alone, their role as gendered individuals was now a matter of discussion. Ilina Sen gives the example of Jayaprakash Narayan's call for a total revolution in the 1970s Bihar that aimed to transform the entire social fabric.

In this context questions were raised about power structures which included many about women. Questions about family, work distribution and family violence, unequal access to resources enjoyed by men and women, issues of male, female relationship and women's sexuality all these matters were taken up. Under Narayan's leadership the Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini organized poor peasants in the Bodhgaya Math struggle where they raised issues of land ownership patriarchy within the family and so on.

I have also mentioned in an earlier lecture about SEWA or self-employed women's association which was established by Ela Bhatt in 1972. SEWA developed women's cooperatives and credit banks for rural women for their economic empowerment. The organization became hugely popular

and spread across Ahmedabad, Indore, Bhopal, Delhi and other places. In many movements in the 70s women's participation and women's concerns became an affiliated part of the agenda.

For example, the Chhattisgarh mines Shramik Sangh also known as CMSS which emerged in 1977 in the adivasi belt of Madhya Pradesh fought against the policies of Bhilai steel plant and upheld women's right to equal wages. More organizations in Chhattisgarh like Stree Mukti Sangathana and the Mahila Mukti Morcha gave separate platforms where women's concerns and questions were articulated.

The 1970s also saw the emergence of autonomous women's movements such as the forum against oppression of women also known as FAOW in Bombay which protested against 2 significant incidents, the Mathura rape case and the Maya Tyagi rape case. The 1980s saw a new economic change in the form of liberalization and export promotion. These aspects were highlighted in the industrial policy document.

Now after Independence the first three decades of planning focused on redistribution of incomes and property to create a market for goods and services under the government support. Since 1980s newer tendencies were seen, where it was claimed that development can be achieved in a limited market by number 1, raising salaries and perquisites of selected strata in the services, trade and manufacturing.

Number 2, tax exemptions and reductions and number 3 using public money to provide loans and subsidized interest rates in order to create a market for luxury goods. The new economic policies and structural adjustment program also known as SAP had a tremendous impact in the changing economic scenario in India. Before going into how it impacted the economy it is first necessary to understand what SAP is.

Anibel Comelo mentions SAP or structural adjustment programs where a package of conditions the world bank and the international monetary fund also known as IMF attached to loans to debtor countries with the objective of helping these countries pay off earlier loans by restructuring

national economies. To qualify for the loans, countries had to submit to the economic recipe prescribed by the world bank and IMF.

Typically, the components of SAPs were promotion or introduction a free market, reductions in import restrictions, advancement of exports, privatization of public industries, relaxation of state controls, credit restrictions, wage controls, cutbacks to the public sector particularly health care and education. Now unlike it is claims of economic growth promotion of investments, creating jobs etcetera, SAPs in reality had a disastrous impact.

Most of the countries which implemented SAP saw a sharp decline in wages and increase economic inequality, rise in infant and maternal mortality and also increase in malnutrition. For example, in 1985 when the Bolivian economy collapsed and had to be bailed out by a 50-million-dollar loan from IMF. The economy shrank by 3% in a year, wages fell, one out of every 4 Bolivians had lost their job and there was a massive march of 7000 people in Lopez for life and bread in 1986.

Camilo mentions that in Santiago, Chile the percentage of poor households increased from 28.5% in 1969 to 41.2% in 1989, unemployment rose from 3.1% in 1972 to 41.2% in 1989. Studies carried out by UNICEF show that it was women and children of poorer families who were affected the most by SAP. The structural adjustment shrank women's employment opportunities and restricted them to low paying jobs.

Guy Standing calls it, feminization of labour to argue that when low wage jobs spread, it is women whose employment in them increases. According to some economist, feminization of labour will increase women's participation in work. But other studies show that such workers do not have permanent status or paid less and are also deprived of statutory rights. Moreover, all those SAP recommended privatization to make industry more profitable women's employment rose in public sectors rather than the private sectors.

The privatization of labour therefore had specific consequences for women. So, what should be the remedy to such problems? Shah et al. mentioned that in order to challenge the continued

disparity of women in labour forces merely including them in different kinds of labour formats is not enough. We need to critically examine the discourses that reproduce gender binaries.

Domestic labour still continues to be a major responsibility of women alone, they also emphasize that more training programs should be conducted for women to develop new skills and enhance existing ones. Women's self-employment should be emphasized and banks will have to be pressured to respond to this call. Above all Shah et al. emphasize on the importance of collective action at various levels.

Now let us summarize today's lecture. Today we talked about various movements and governmental strategies through the lens of gender. We saw how women or the question of gender were devalued in the communist party led movements. How women activist actually raised significant questions about gender disparity within these spaces? We also observed the impact of liberalization processes during the 1980s and 90s and the specific impact on women.

The so-called promise of progress came at the cost of devaluing women's labour, increase in their poverty and wage disparity. In the next lectures we will look at the theorization of gender and labour through the Marxist framework. Thank you.

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