

Indian Feminisms Concepts and Issues
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Lecture-09
Nation and the Construction of Woman

Hello everyone. In the previous lecture we mapped a brief history of Indian feminism in its various aspects. Let us begin by briefly summarizing the major points. So, the idea of feminism in the Indian context has undergone many shifts, wherein interpretations prevailed about women in movements and social reforms; women as voicing their concerns and activism specifically focused on issues regarding women.

Radha Kumar maps Indian feminism by broadly dividing it into pre- and post-independence periods, where the experience of colonial rule dominated the former and the experience of democracy characterized the latter. The 3 major themes that dominated the feminist quest, where modernity, development and democracy. Beginning in the 19th century and the early 20th century there was a growing tendency to challenge traditionalism.

The social reform agenda sought to bring a holistic change in Indian social and cultural scenario by making the Hindu Indian woman the subject of their attention. By the 20th century the women's question was running parallel to two strands. Constitution of the new woman and women's role in the nationalist movements especially in the Gandhian dialect. The new woman was created as a corollary to fit the modernist traditions that the upcoming middle- and upper-class bourgeois were fashioning themselves in.

Following the legal abolition of Sati and child marriage new attempts were made to break tradition by educating the new women. According to Partha Chatterjee education of women served the purpose of being suitable companions to their husbands who were becoming the new bhadralok and also to teach their sons. The increasing visibility of women as participants in the National Congress fashioned a new kind of feminine political role, wherein women became the shelterers and the protectors of husbands and sons fighting out there for freedom of the country.

It is interesting how neatly the public and private roles vis-à-vis gender shaped themselves to fit in the trend of the time. The undaunted faith in constitutional freedom as bringing equality to all prevailed in the post-independence era until 1975, when it was proven otherwise, with independence women believed that the major battle was won. The 1974-75 report titled towards equality highlighted that the condition of women has worsened since 1911.

The growing gender disparity had in fact caused relative isolation and discrimination for middle- and lower-class women. New questions were asked on women's education, employment and security. The attention of feminist discourse thus shifted from 'women as mothers to women as daughters and working women. Rather than the duties of woman as a mother or a wife as emphasized in the social reformation period.

Now the emphasis was given on the formation of a woman as a subject and her role in the productive force. The mainstream Indian feminism of the 1970s focused on the construction of new subjectivity for women attained through self-exploration rather than in relation to men. As a result, emphasis was given to bodily violence that deprived women of the right to their bodies.

It is in these contexts that rape both marital, which often followed by dowry death and custodial were interpreted. The construction of new subjectivity explored arenas where women identified themselves not as mothers or wives but outside the context of family. Feminist class consciousness thus brought a revolutionary change in the way women's work and women in the workplace were perceived.

The gender inequality at the workplace, the double burden of labour took front seat in the feminist arguments. Interestingly, the feminists like their predecessors in the social reformist era relied on law to bring justice to women. It was believed that by realizing women's rights in legal terms women will gain the freedom of choice and their quality of life will also increase.

Such, reliance on law as bringing justice equally to all women of India was then challenged with the Shah Bano case and the debate about uniform civil code. Pointing at the communal differences among women they presented a sharp critique to the so far presumed uniformity among women across communities. Behind the mask of constitutional secularism religious and communal majoritarianism prevailed especially in implementing the uniform civil code.

Sanghari's seminal article highlighted that in presenting a feminist challenge to patriarchal oppressive systems we need to recognize the multiple and overlapping patriarchies affecting women of different communities differently. By the 1990s the heterogeneity of the category woman became more prominent, with the rise of Dalit women's organizations, renewed attention to the question of environment, the relation to of the private to the public, led to the understanding that there is no single category called woman.

This is where the importance of recognizing difference and intersectionality lie difference teaches us to look at the specificities of identity. This recognition leads to the idea of how different women are affected differently instead of conflating them into one homogeneous whole. Intersectionality contributes as a methodological tool in this case. The theory of intersectionality is used as a method of looking at how systems function in conjunction with each other.

Such mutuality provides a new lens to look at gender. Now keeping these theoretical premises in mind, we will now take a look at the 19th century nationalist construction of women. The important questions that we need to begin with are why and how did the woman's question become central to the nationalist and the social reformist movements in India?

What impact did it have in shaping the contours of gender as a conceptual framework? With these broad questions in mind let us dive into the new lecture. The social reformist period in India started in a very interesting manner by keeping women's emancipation at the center. But, how far it was an emancipation is something to think about. As I have mentioned in the previous lectures the 19th century saw a huge surge in women's concerns all over the world.

The women suffrage in the west the social reformation in India it seemed as if women's era had started. In Europe, the French Revolution had marked the germination of feminist ideas. Considered to be a trailblazing work of feminism Mary wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Women, highlighted gender discrimination as a systemic problem. She argued that the educational system of a time contributed immensely in rendering women as weak and incapable.

She posited women beyond their reproductive roles to the productive domain of professional labour. Most importantly, she sought to women's empowerment through implementation of

rules and political change. In India the emergence of women's question as a central political and agenda of social reformation took its root in the colonial context. Radha Kumar credits the centralization of British colonial power in Bengal and Maharashtra for early consciousness of women's problems.

She points out that this consciousness grew out of both social and economic reasons. The British colonial administration created scope for the birth of the middle class or bourgeois society. The purpose of this class was to differentiate themselves from the local masses. This purpose was achieved in 2 ways. First, by reforming the so-called 'bad' traditions that existed in the society; and second, by infusing some traits of the colonizers to show that they are also capable of being civilized according to the western standards.

As Radha Kumar put said it this new class sought to reform itself, initiating campaigns against caste, polytheism, idolatry, animism, purdah, child marriage, sati and more, seeing them as elements of a 'pre-modern' or primitive identity. Now one thing you must remember that not all issues of social reform were caused or impacted by the British encounter alone. The 18th century was a transition period in India from Mughal rule to the changing geographies of disruption and assertion.

For example, the anti-caste movement which developed in the 19th century Maharashtra had a long history of precedents and it grew partly out of the crumbling of Brahminic hegemony with the disintegration of the Peshwa rule around the turn of the century, even though the brahmans later on reformed as a dominant group under the British. Similarly in Bengal Ram Mohan Roy was influenced by English rationalism and sought to change the bad aspects of Indian tradition such as sati or widow immolation etcetera.

An important aspect you must remember is that this transition period was heavily impacted by two strands of thoughts, Revivalism and Nationalism. These 2 strands often impacted each other. Thomas Babington Macaulay in the 1835 minutes on education rights, how through English education the colonizers attempted to create a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in taste in opinions in morals and in intellect.

In other words, this would be a group who would listen to the British colonizers follow their behaviors and norms and stand out from other fellow Indians. In his book the intimate enemy

Ashish Nandy argues how the Victorian ideals influence the definitions of masculinity among the colonized Indians. Nandy describes this cultural cooperation as identification with the aggressor.

Many Indians saw British rule as an agent of progress and wanted to become more like the British. Nandy argues that colonial subject would clearly defined purusatva or the essence of masculinity and naritva or the essence of femininity in clear binary terms. This took place especially through the revival of texts. In her article whatever happened to the Vedic Dasi? Uma chakravarti writes how the European historians rediscovered India's glorious past by recovering and translating ancient texts.

Orientalists such as William Jones and H.T Colebrook contributed to the creation of what we call a golden age by exploring a wide range of themes in sanskrit literature, history and philosophy. The purpose of such recreation was twofold. Number 1: By presenting India's ancient past as the glorious past, the orientalist were trying to show the decay caused by the Mughal rule.

The British colonizers presented themselves as the saviors of India's past glory. This tendency was also visible among the revivalists who viewed Muslims as invaders who caused the downfall of the great Hinduism. Now number 2: By creating this history the colonizers were also proving their epistemological supremacy. In some the Europeans who had successfully constituted their own true history were now engaged in giving to Indians the great gift of all, a history.

What you should also remember is that the indigenous intelligentsia, where active agents in constructing and accepting such a past. In such construction or rather we should call it reconstruction, women became the central feature. As Uma Chakravarti mentions the emerging Indian intelligentsia in the first half of the 19th century were involved in a dual encounter with colonial ideology.

Awareness of the past through orientalist scholarship was countered by an equally strong negative perception of the present, which missionaries' administrators, travelers and others were engaged in writing about. So, the orientalist construction of the glorious past revealed the

downfall of such glory in the present times. And now it was the task of the reformers to get it back to its past glory. This desire was there for 2 reasons.

Firstly, to show that India was and is truly capable of reviving its golden age and secondly to show that at least in the spiritual sphere India was greater than the British colonizers. Now you have to remember that the British colonizers had already proven their supremacy in the material sphere through industrialization, railway and so on. Now this is the precise duality that Uma Chakravarti is referring to.

The project of social reformation therefore began with women because women's oppression was the most obvious most seeable thing. For example, Mill describes that Hindu women were in a state of dependence more strict and humiliating than that which ordained for the weaker sex. Nothing can exceed the habitual contempt which Hindus entertain for their women.

They are held in extreme degradation excluded from the sacred books, deprived of education and of a share in the paternal property. The remarkable barbarity the wife held unworthy to eat with her husband is prevalent in Hindustan. It is important to note that Mill did not blame the Islamic rule as the cause of Hindu women's downfall. In fact, saw it as the failure of the Hindu social structure.

Such perceptions however, presented Indian culture as intrinsically barbaric. And it was this imposed barbarism that the social reformers were trying to eradicate by centralizing on the women's question. In the next lecture we will learn about how the social reformation began with women and the role of Ram Mohan Roy, Vidyasagar and other social reformers in such movement. Thank you.

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