

Redefining Patriarchy: Discourses on Womanhood during the Indian National Movement

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ABSTRACT : *This paper seeks to analyze the discourses on ‘womanhood’ during the Indian national movement. The image of self-sacrificing mother was central to the definition of ‘Indian womanhood’. This definition of ‘Indian womanhood’ was an important marker through which the cultural difference with the ‘West’ could be posited. Despite the fact, that the national movement brought women into the public sphere, it did not result into collapse of public-private dichotomy; rather it led to a redefinition of public-private which in the process redefined patriarchy.*

KEYWORDS – *Domesticity, Motherhood, Nationalist, Patriarchy, Womanhood*

I. INTRODUCTION

The importance of the symbolic category of ‘woman’ to the nationalist movement can be understood in relation to nationalist need to claim to be representing a unified India. The image of self-sacrificing mother was central to the definition of ‘Indian womanhood’. This definition of ‘Indian womanhood’ was an important marker through which the cultural difference with the West could be posited. Gail Pearson in her study of nationalist movement in the Bombay region identifies three aspects in which were essential to the nationalist project. First, women provided cohesiveness to the movement because ‘woman’ as a category was undifferentiated in public consciousness and was the sole universal category cutting across all divisions and could mean all things to all persons. Second, the nationalists used the concept of ‘sacred womanhood’ to arouse the nationalist sentiments of the populace at large and to prove the unworthy nature of British rulers. Third, women’s participation was needed for effective forms of resistance such as the boycott, of foreign cloth and the picketing of shops. Pearson points out that these processes were initiated by ‘female intelligentsia’ who took over leadership roles and facilitated the participation of ‘women of the extended female space’, which created in the process an ‘intermediate social space’, between the household and the public world.[1]

Gail Minault has argued that the construct of ‘extended family’ and the nation as family were used to show that the public activities were seen as natural extensions of household roles, thus encouraging women to step out from their homes. She has highlighted the different views held by liberal nationalists and cultural nationalists on the position of women. While the liberals argued for social and educational reforms for women that would help reform the domestic sphere and help women become more enlightened companions to their husband. The cultural nationalists on the other hand did not want any interference in their domestic lives. They gave a call for strengthening of Indian traditions. However, both of these positions were informed by the belief that women act not as individuals .but as members of the families.[2]

Radha Kumar argues that the new agrarian, industrial and social relations engendered by British dominance undermined existing structures of patriarchy which resulted in violent expressions of patriarchal traditions on one hand (like sati and witch hunting) and attempts to reform patriarchy on the other hand. What is interesting to note is that the attempts to reform patriarchy often amounted to reconstituting it in a western mould and in the process eroded some of the women’s traditional rights. [3]

Sharmila Rege points out that Indian nationalists and reformers constituting the emergent middle class attempted to undercut the authority of family elders and create a new patriarchy of more nuclear and exclusive relations with their wives. [4]

II. NATION AS MOTHERLAND

Worship of Kali, Durga and Chandi became imperative for many young nationalists on the grounds that 'mother' would cease the path to nationalist martyrdom. The mother goddess was identified by many with mother India: 'it is your image we worship in the temples'. (Bankim Chandra in Anand Math). In 1907, Kumudini Mitra, started a journal named *Suprabhat* which reiterated the connection between revolution, mother Kali and mother India. In its second issue, it published a poem called 'The Auspicious Time for Worship', which said that the 'mother's hunger' would only be 'appeased' by blood, heads, workers, warriors, heroes, labour, firm vows and bands of followers.[5]

To what extent can the increasing importance of Kali and Durga be seen as also expressing tensions and shifts in the structure of patriarchy? She argues that this rise denoted the growing dominance of complex images of female power, which represented, in fact, an ambiguous and often polarized vision of femaleness. What is interesting to note is that propitiatory offerings to these goddesses are accompanied by punitive actions against women who are seen as failing to perform their ritual function of protecting men by manipulating natural events or fate. Moments of crises become occasions for collective punishment of women: bouts of witch hunting are a prime example.[6]

The association of Durga with 'Mother India' and increasing use of Kali to sanction violence in the struggle for independence from colonial rule can be read as turning the threat contained in these figures away from the self(of the Hindu Male), and directing it against the other of Western colonizer. The harnessing of shakti to nationalism was not only a way of containing it but also a way in which women could find a role for themselves in nationalist struggles. As the rhetoric of Bengali nationalism grew increasingly mother-centred, more and more women get involved in nationalist activities. [7]

III. IDEOLOGY OF MOTHERHOOD

Sadhna Arya points out that during nationalist movement, motherhood was used as a concept which distinguished the West from the East. The glorification of motherhood ideal had a far reaching impact on the ideological control over women. The womanhood was glorified only through her reproductive function. This in turn served to keep women out of the privileges like education and profession and when they were made available to them they were wrapped in the ideology of caring and nurturing. It also advanced a picture of economically dependent woman while simultaneously depicting her as spiritually more powerful than man. Chatterjee points out that by conferring a new social responsibility on women, which was intrinsically related to a higher goal of achieving sovereign nationhood, the nationalist ideology bound them to a new, yet entirely legitimate subordination.[8]

In the words of Jasodhra Bagchi, 'it was ultimately a way of reinforcing the social philosophy of deprivation for women.' Vina Mazumdar argues that the identification of culture with patriotism and cultural parochialism prevented any debate on women's equality.[9]

Radha Kumar (1993) argues that despite the fact that the first half of the twentieth century saw the symbolic use of mother as a rallying device, there were significant differences in the conception of motherhood. She makes a distinction between feminist assertion of maternal power by women such as Madam Cama and Sarojini Naidu which contained a darkling threat reflected in Naidu's statement, 'Remember that the hand that rocks the cradle rule the world', from Gandhi's emphasis on the ennobling qualities of motherhood which sought to subdue the most fearsome aspects of motherhood which lie in erotic domain. There was a third conception of motherhood reflected in terrorist invocations of protective and ravaging mother goddess.

Kumar points out that Naidu's statements must have been greeted with considerable enthusiasm, for by 1916, she was speaking for all Indian women: 'it is suitable that I who represent the other sex, that is the mothers of the men whom we wish to make men and not emasculated machines, should raise a voice on behalf of the future mothers of India', in the same year, she asserted that 'women may form a sisterhood more easily because they are bound to every woman in the world by the divine quality of motherhood'. [10]

During early 20th century, women's responsibility for the health of the race was a subject of concern not only for social reformers, but for the government as well. In 1908, the Indian Factory Commission reiterated the need to restrict women's hours of work, saying 'it will protect to some extent all women operatives who have household duties to perform and will thereby tend to promote the general health of the whole body of workers'. Thus, it can be seen that the role of working-class mother was defined as the production of healthy workers. Kumar points out that the debates on the nature of motherhood for the motherland, were restricted to defining the roles of middle class women, and whether they were to be the mothers of the nation or mothers of the British Indian Empire. [11]

IV. IDEOLOGY OF DOMESTICITY

Anupama Roy points out the visibility of women in the public sphere in nationalist period was surrounded by a discourse of 'true womanhood' and 'women's proper place', which, in the course of legitimizing and facilitating women's participation trapped them within an essentialist construction of femininity. She argues that the ideology of 'domesticity' referring to the specificity of the realm of the domestic as the sphere of female activities, distinct from the public (male) sphere relatively inferior and yet complementary to it, also became entrenched in nationalist period.[12] Manuals on domesticity and childrearing in early 20th century outlined the tasks and role of new middle class women and placed them in opposition to the Englishwoman and women of the communities that performed menial tasks. A women writing in 1930's as Miss Kamala described everyday life in a companionate marriage in the following words:

There was ample to eat and drink in these families and that is why the boys of these families become doctors, barristers, some ICS and girls become accomplished women keeping neat and tidy homes, cooking fine food and attaining culinary skill and at they could converse for the need of the moment. [13]

The domestic was not only the sphere in which the nationalists sought to 'resolve' women's question and resist colonial intervention, it was also the sphere where the limits of women's behavior were sought to be drawn and her unequal position within the hierarchised structure of the family, nation, and state affirmed. Roy points that the discourse on freedom was gendered. For men, the freedom was defined as political freedom (swadheenta) grounded in the promise of citizenship for men as equal and self-governed participants in the public-political, on the other hand for women, freedom lay in their continued embedment within the domestic-the family and community(parivar, kula, kutumba). The domestic was a space where her identity was constituted in the various aspects of her relationship with the (public) men, as mother, wife, daughter, each relationship based on her biological specificity, 'natural' predispositions, and emotional incapacities. Education of women was a persisting concern in this period. It is pertinent to note that the justification for women's education itself was derived from their 'visible', 'natural' domestic skills and guided by the aspiration of education to achieve better domestic labour. Education was not to interfere with 'ghar ke kaaj kaam' and was ideally imparted in leisure time.[14]

Roy points out that the theme of the freedom of the nation was linked with the idea of domesticity in the sense that the domestic was the space where the different meaning of 'freedom' in the Indian tradition made itself evident. The Indian notion of freedom was presented as based on the idea of freedom from ego and the voluntary abnegation and denial of the self and juxtaposed with the western notion of freedom which was based on the idea of possession and selfishness and the idea of an assertive ego. The reformed household and the educating of women in domestic virtues was a expression of this freedom[15].

V. 5. DOMESTICATION OF PUBLIC SPHERE AND POLITICISATION OF DOMESTIC SPHERE

Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert discusses two processes which affected women's lives during the national movement. She terms the first process as 'the domestication of the public sphere', "a process whereby 'ordinary' middle class women were able to enter the public domain without disassociating themselves from the domestic ideology. There were several ways through which the public sphere was domesticated." First, Gandhi's political language led to a reconciliation of domestic and public values. Gandhi insisted that women should come out only after fulfilling after fulfilling their duties at home and women were required to seek approval of their guardians and support of their families. This enabled women to carry over their domestic respectability when they participated in street demonstrations. Second, women's participation in the public domain was tied with familial symbols, household dynamics and nationalist symbolism. Third, household items such as salt and cloth were given nationalist significance. It needs to be noted that when women began to participate in political demonstrations, they maintained features of purdah such as keeping their heads covered or by performing selective nationalist activities in women-only groups, for example by leading prabhat pheris (morning processions).[16]

Thapar points out that it was considered to be more respectable and non-intrusive to identify a woman by her husband's family name rather than giving her name. For example, one of the newspapers of the period, The Leader stated:

About 5000 Indian ladies assembled to participate in a demonstration arranged by the local 'dictator' of the nationalist movement. At the head were two wives of respected citizens of Allahabad, Pandit-Madan Mohan Malviya and Pandit Motilal Nehru (9 July 1930:13).[17]

Going hand in hand with the domestication of public sphere was the parallel process of politicization of domestic sphere. For many women, social constraints did not allow ant public activity, yet events in the public sphere affected women's lives in the domestic sphere. Many women had to manage economic hardships caused by their husbands' commitment to nationalism or provide moral support to women activists and looked after their children when they were away from home. The domestic sphere for many women was a site of political activity. But one needs to note that not all women had political motivations or enthusiasm for participation. Tanika Sarkar has pointed out that political involvement was not an independent choice for many women but was a matter of pressures and pulls within the household.[18]

VI. GANDHI'S MOBILIZATION OF WOMEN

Sadhna Arya points out that while Gandhi advocated a new role for women which was radically different from her traditional roles, this new role was not a departure from the ideology of division of labour between sexes which has been historically an important tool for the oppression and exploitation of women. To quote Kishwar, "It was with a remarkable insight that Gandhi without challenging their traditional role in society could make women an important social base for the movement." She quotes Gandhi, "To look after children, to dress them, is the mother's duty and therefore it is necessary that women should be fired with the spirit of Swadeshi." [19] Gandhi saw an important role for women not in political decision making but in those part of movement which addressed themselves to the task of transforming people's idea and lives, for instant, he encouraged women's participation as satyagrahis, boycott organizers and picketers. This was in line with Gandhi's idealising the image of women as the embodiment of sacrifice and acclaiming the strength that comes from suffering which helped to strengthen the prevailing oppressive stereotype of women as selfless companions and contributors to a social cause defined by men. It is important to note that Gandhi never encouraged women to organise in their own right around their own issues. [20]

Forbes points out that Gandhi constructed a new ideal for Indian women that rewrote passivity and self-sacrificing as strength. [21]

Gandhi's use of religious symbols eased the participation of women in public sphere but led to strengthening of religious values which prevented further emancipation of women. Gandhi's statements were used by the conservative leaders within the Congress to restrain women. For instance, during the Congress jubilee celebrations in 1936, when Sarojini Naidu appealed to women to work for their livelihood, other Congress leaders like Rajendra Prasad and Vallabhbhai Patel employed Gandhian values to argue that women should confine their economic role to home industries. [22]

Gandhi emphasized the self-sacrificing nature of Indian women. But one needs to note that he was not being original in attributing the trait of self-sacrifice to Indian women, both reformers and revivalists had earlier done so. However, Gandhi did transformed attitudes towards it. While reformers saw self-sacrifice for women as ritually enforced and disgraceful, revivalists on the other hand believed that sacrifice prescribed by rituals bestowed glory on Hindu women. But Gandhi untied it from Hindu ritual and defined it as a special quality of Indian womanhood, based on women's existence as mother. [23]

Kumar points out that Gandhi transformed earlier terms of debate on nature and role of motherhood. While revivalists and extremists used the images of the mother as victim (mother India ravaged by rampaging foreign hordes) and the mother as warrior protector (mother Kali); reformists and nationalist feminists used the image of mother as nurturer, socialize and supporter of men; the Gandhian image of mother was a repository of spiritual values and a preceptor for men. [24]

Madhu Kishwar has argued that Gandhi found for women a new dignity in public life and a new confidence and a new self-view for women which turned women from passive objects into active subjects or agents for reform. [25] Kumar points out that Gandhi's views were expressed at a time when women had already begun to find these attributes for themselves, not only in public professional life as doctors, teachers, etc., but also in public political life, in nationalist and reformist campaigns as well as in worker and peasant agitations. Gandhi's definition of women's nature and role was deeply rooted in patriarchy and his inclinations were rather to limit women's movement than to push it forward. It took many years of pressure from nationalist women before Gandhi appealed to women to join public campaigning. For example, he stated that the role of women in the swadeshi movement was a home-based one, mainly to use the charkha. By late 1920s, Gandhi had changed his tunes to calls for women to come out of their homes and join in the civil disobedience movement, but he sought to limit their participation to mass picketing of drink and drug shops as to him, this was an issue ideally suited to women. By the 1930s, there was a remarkable shift in the attitude of Gandhi. He acceded to Kamladevi's request to appeal to women to join in the salt satyagraha. [26]

It becomes important to note that no women who was not chaste in thought, word and deed was to be allowed into Gandhi's movements. Gandhi was hysterical with rage when in 1925, the Bengal Congress Committee organized some women prostitutes under its banner. [27]

VII. CONCLUSION

Arya argues that both the social reform movement and national movement avoided a radical onslaught on patriarchal basis of traditional law and family structure. The focus of women's emancipation centred on weeding out certain barbarous practices and educating women, Thus women's emancipation was sought without changing the hierarchical power structure that prevailed in most families between men and women, young and old. The changes that were brought in legal or otherwise (e.g. increasing opportunities for education and employment) did not actually seek to change the position, image and role of women within the family and society, they rather reinforced the image of women's primary role as wife, mother, daughter. The need for building the image of an ideal Indian woman as chaste, sacrificing, devoted to family and children as opposed to

a modern western type, further strengthened the patriarchal hold on women belittled and sometimes ignored the serious defects and imperfections in our system and . refused to face the problem of social reform. It appears that political leadership at that time was not ready to consider any revolutionary alternatives affecting women's lives.[28]

The chief desire of nationalists, revolutionary terrorist and communists was to divest women of the sexuality associated with them; either through total de-sexualization as preached by Gandhi, or through domestication and subjugation, as for example, in the communists' preference for women activists who were married to male activists. While some feminists asserted that men and women were complementary, others asserted that they were the same.[29]

Women joined the political movement with the approval of their families and not as rebellion against predominant gender ideology. It was clear that most politically active women chose respectability over solidarity with their fallen sisters. [30]

Radha Kumar points out that by the 1940s, on seeing that the independence was on the horizon, the women's movement was absorbed into the struggle for independence in such a way that the issue of women's emancipation was felt to have been resolved. The nationalist woman activist was seen both as a symbol and a bulwark of women's emancipation but the fact that the image of a woman activist which had been constructed in this period was itself limited and restricted women was not questioned.[31]

Despite the fact, that the national movement brought women into the public sphere, it did not result into the collapse of public-private dichotomy; rather it led to a redefinition of public-private which in the process redefined patriarchy.

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