

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Indian Women's Fate: Never-Ending Oppressions

Himashree Patowary

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Assam University, Assam, India

Abstract:

Women—the half of the sky, born as a human but treated differently because of some distinguished “feminine” qualities which are predominantly given the inferior status due to patriarchal culture. Being inferior in almost every field, except in house hold matters, women are judged only as mother, daughter, wife or sister, having the identity always when she makes relationship with a man, neither get equal footing in the family and nor does she get the same status and position in outside—all make women secondary living being in relation to men. It is the story of all the women over the globe. The plights of Indian women, to find out, is not a very easy task because of the complex nature of the social system (caste and class) as well as the various kinds of patriarchy being working as the force behind the women to be inferior, religious matters, rituals, rites and customs based on religion, various personal laws defining the dos and don'ts for women—all have made the whole environment muddled to liberate women.

Keywords: patriarchy, caste, class, religion and personal laws

1. Introduction

- “By a girl, by a young woman or even by an aged one nothing must be done independently, even in her own house” (as quoted in Rambachan A.:2002 p-19)
- “Women must be honoured and adored by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brother-in-laws who desire (their own) welfare” (ibid).

Starting with such speech of words, as it seems germane, to record the plights and sufferings of women in a patriarchy, where society cherishes androcentric views and insists the value and significance of women only in relation to men. Indian women, being a meagre part of the global women population, are no way different from their counterpart, in terms of status and position. In spite of their numerical strength in India, women occupy a marginalised position due to various socio-cultural constraints being based on patriarchy, women become victims of dowry deaths, rape, child marriage, forced prostitution, polygamy, female infanticide and other severe crimes which are still not uprooted from Indian society but increasing with the time passing by. Indian women have neither adored as human similar to men nor have the equal footing inside or outside the home but instead, become the toys of the hand of men and manmade everything.

So, Uma Chakravarti says:

- We have been aware that while the subordination of women is a visible feature of most stages of recorded history, and is prevalent in large parts of the world, the extent and form of that subordination has been conditioned by the social, economic and cultural environment in which women have been placed (2003 p-25).

The very diversity in India in terms of geography, the varying cultures, behaviours, food habits, rituals, customs on the basis of geographical diversities, on one hand gives a peculiar position in world culture but there raises some problems too in terms of dividing the interests, aspirations and desires on the other, especially it divides the women in to several groups which restrict them to come united against the age old oppressions being faced by them. In India, there exists various categories and sub-categories among men which are been made on the basis of birth, wealth, geography, religion and so on—all these determine the fate of women in India.

Prehistorically, though there is lack of sufficient evidence, what we have just the tools, pottery and the cave shelters of that period, still many of the scholars stick to the point, from gender point of view, that gender stratification cannot be presumed to have existed in those less stratified societies in this subcontinent. Trying to describe the prehistoric condition of women in this Indian subcontinent, Prof. Uma Chakravarti (2003) has penned down the work of Gerda Lerner thus:

- ...we may deduce that there was no rigid sexual division of labour, and that the role of women in the food economy was equal if not more than that of men. Lerner has argued that the most egalitarian societies are found among hunting-gathering groups and are characterised by interdependency. The relative status of men and women can at the most be characterised as ‘separate but equal’(p-40).

Historically, the Rig Vedic¹ society though most of the 19th century Hindu nationalists romanticised this period as congenial to in respects of women's perspective, but there is lack of evidences to prove to be so. According to Kumkum Roy (2002) if one analyses the hymns of rig period it will show the prevalence of strong patriarchal society in that period also. Most of the hymns were written valorising the male heroes while a few were devoted to adore the female deities. Women's sexuality was fully under the control of the patriarchal leadership as warfare was one of the most visible characteristics of that period. The practice of Niyoga² also symbolises the women as being the resource of the men's hand.

So, patriarchy and the customs, cultures, stratifications formed on the base of patriarchy are imbibed in such a manner that no one can think of a life without these, especially in India. Stratifications such as caste and class made on the basis of birth and wealth are two giants which providing fuel to the preservation of patriarchy—make women inferior and secondary. Among patriarchy, caste, class and gender—there is a close relationship towards shaping the life of women in India. Where caste is determined by birth, class is determined by wealth.

2. Indian Caste/Class System and Women

To understand the relationship between caste/class and women it is important to recognise that these hierarchies are operative in Indian society: one according to ritual purity with the Brahmana at the top and the untouchables at the bottom, the other according to the political and economic status with the landlords at the top and the landless at the bottom. The caste/class system has shaped the lives of women of all castes, whether high or low, they are linked with each other through the structure of marriage, sexuality and reproduction.

3. Marriage, Sexuality and Reproduction

In India marriage occupies an important role to carry on the caste system on one hand and to control the women's life on the other. Marriages are made so that man may start his own line or vansa. Practically, women of different vansas or lines are transferred to other or husbands' vansas to make alive a permanent vansa i.e. husbands' line. The incoming of wives maintains all rules of purity and pollution of their husbands' vansas. So, women sexuality is strictly guarded and controlled in India. Based on these concepts, Endogamous marriage (the rule enjoining marriage within a specified group) has been given priority in Indian caste system. This marriage system does not contaminate the castes, particularly the upper castes.

- Caste as a system of discrete units within a larger system of production makes endogamy a crucial element of the caste system and this in turn affects gender. The purity of Caste cannot be produced and maintained without endogamy and it is for this reason that endogamy is regarded as a tool for the manifestation and perpetuation of caste and gender subordination. It is endogamy that enables also the expansion of a certain kind of production relation and provides it with flexibility to incorporate other pre-caste communities, maintaining the cultural discreteness of each new community that becomes a part of the caste system.

With marriage there is maintained a sacred custom of "Kanyadaan" (to gift one's daughter to husband) in an Indian Hindu family according to which a father has to gift her daughter to the husband with an adequate bride price which include money, jewellery, furniture, tv, freeze etc. In other words, it may appear strange for one, but through kanyadaan a father not only gift the daughter, but her qualities, her femaleness, her procreative powers too—all these make a girl leave her own gotra and vansa they born into for entering into another line, which designates them as receptacles and transmitters or carriers of the male line not her fathers.

4. Indian Family System

The social structure in the Vedic period set up predominantly on Joint family system. As it patriarchal in nature tended to keep women subordinate to men giving the special property rights for men which reinforces the male dominance, male centeredness and male identification. Besides, in this particular period women denied the education, right to remarriage, the right to social mobility and so on—women became the birds without wings. The status of Indian women in their family is well stated in the following:

- "Men in our families are like the sun, they have a light of their own, (they own resources, are mobile, have the freedom to take decisions). Women on the other hand are like satellites, without any light of their own. They shine, if and only if, when the sun's light touches them. This is why women have to constantly compete with each other for a bigger share of sunlight, because without this light there is no life" (Poonam: 2008).

5. Strisvabhava and Stridharma

In the name of caste, there are certain constraints and restrictions are imposed on women who cannot go out of these if one does wish so but men set free. Pativrata dharm³, stridharma, strisvabhava have been delineated by the Dharamashastras⁴ written by Manu, the first law giver of Hindus, to tame the women for only in the house, not for outer world. Most of the Hindu religious scriptures delineate women's nature thus:

¹Historians have divided the Vedic age into two: The Early Vedic or k g Vedic age which begins from 1500 B.C. and the post-Vedic age which extends from 1000 B.C. to 500 B.C.

²It was prevalent in that particular period which was meant for women. According to this a woman can marry her brother-in-law whose husband is dead.

³The duties of a chaste woman who fulfils the wishes of her husband without questioning.

⁴Law Books of Hinduism.

- “According to Mahabharata women have been sinful from very beginning when the creator first made the five gross elements, and he gave shape to men and women.”
- “Satapatha Brahmana held that a woman, a sudra, and a crow are the embodiments of untruth, sin and darkness.”

Manu says,

- “In childhood a female must be subject to her family, in youth to her husband, when lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent.”
- “Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife.”

In this regard the Ramayana is the most ideologically coherent of normative texts which created role models for men and women. The pativrata dharma was shown by the character of Sita where Sita worshipped her Husband Rama as god, pativrata, dutiful, long-suffering, patient, chaste, loving and faithful. With this it was established that the wife like Sita are good and such type of wives are sinless and pure. So, it is rightly said:

- The rules prescribed for "pativrata" prevented her from eating even with her husband. This custom prevails even now in many parts of India. Almost a master-slave relationship began to develop between the husband and the wife. She was in fact trapped in the "Pativrata image" and she continues to be trapped in this miasma (R. Latha: 1980 p-43)

In the same way the dharmashastras also tell us what happens to the errant women who are not capable of sustaining their devotion to their husbands, as Manu dictate, to be beaten by their husbands.

In this way the whole women folk had gone under the control of the males and the patriarchal caste/class system had begun to affect the women's sexuality, social structure, relation between the production and reproduction and other institutions of the society.

Regarding this R. Latha writes:

- This gradually destroyed her self-confidence and in turn destroyed her self-concept. The roles began to get stereotyped. She began to suppress her real feelings and it became difficult for her to untangle her true self from the existing social roles. There arose a firm-rooted belief among the majority of women that they were only capable of producing children and managing the household affairs (ibid).

In post vedic period Indian women had been given a symbolised personhood in terms of men with her nature of silence, suppressed feelings, and the occlusion of her sufferings. And gradually she became the property of a man's home which led the way to oppressions for women in forms of sati, rape, battering, dowry deaths, women infanticide, child marriage etc.

Gradually, in the medieval period women's position declined with the coming of Muslim rule. The Islamic custom of Purdah (veiling of women) forced the public world to be separated from the private world, with women confined to the latter. Following its subjugation by the Muslims, and fearing adverse outcomes for its women, a large part of the Hindu India accepted the practice of veiling. Through this privatization, Indian women were forced to trade their mobility for safety. Repeated invasions by the Muslims further pushed the Indian women towards inhuman "traditions" such as child marriage, the dowry system, purdah and sati (the immolation of the widow on the dead husband's pyre). The challenge of Islamic aggression also made Hindu India defensive and introverted causing a desperate return to orthodox Hindu beliefs and practices and further constraining the status of Indian women.

However, in British India several reformers from elite upper caste came forward to reform the inhuman situation of Indian women. But these nineteenth century social reformers were primarily concerned with issues that affected urban, upper caste, middle class women such as purdah, sati, education, age of marriage and widow remarriage. These reformers did not work outside the purview of caste, Brahmanism or Brahmanical Patriarchy. They argued that uplift of women was necessary because women are the mothers of future generations. While women were urged to come out and work for the nation, there was no questioning of the traditional role of mother and wife. In fact, it was stressed that if they were educated they would become better wives and mothers. In other words, these reformers worked to uplift women reconsolidating Brahmanical patriarchy and traditional caste hierarchy.

Regarding the 19th century social reform, Uma Chakravarti commented, although the women's question dominated 19th century social reform in India, only two major critiques of dominant class ideologies on gender in the 19th century. Both these critiques originated in western India and focussed their attention on the structure of Brahmanical Patriarchy which was identified as the locus of gender oppression. One came from Jyotiba Phule, the non-Brahman leader from Maharashtra and the other from Pandita Ramabai. In this context names of Sarala Devi Choudhrani, Savitri Bai Phule, B.R. Ambedkar should be taken for their literary works and activities towards the upliftment of women. Though, these social reformers were not successful in getting widespread support for these reforms. But their efforts established various prerequisite conditions necessary for the development of the Indian women's movement. In modern period Uma Chakravarti, Madhu Kishwar, Kamala Das, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy just to name a few, who hold their stepping in the women's world.

After independence Indian Government being paternalistic towards women took some measures but could not meet the aims of empowerment of women changing the prevailing secondary status of women. But despite the constitutional guarantees of equality, the democratic framework, various constitutional provisions, different state legislations if we see the Indian social realities, there is not so much change or improvement in the status of women. The awakening of certain sections of Indian women, the influence of feminist movements in the West—all made Indian women to initiate women's liberation movements in India. All theoretical indicators of equal rights and high social status such as policy declaration, constitutional guarantees and prohibitive protective measures exist only on papers and the life of average Indian women is still governed by customs, habit, prejudices and unwritten code of conduct. Besides, there are personal laws which have made Indian women's life miserable attributing illogical restrictions on women. In these laws there are several discriminatory laws which limit the chances to be equal for women. In "Status of Women in India" Poonam (2008, p-2) describing about personal laws writes:

There are certain features common in all personal laws, including the reformed Hindu personal laws, which perpetuate inequality between women and men:

[1] Under all the personal laws it is the man who is the head of the family in all circumstances (however, now mother's name can also be mentioned in school's admission form).

[2] The line of succession is through the male line.

[3] The woman, normally, has to live wherever the man decides after marriage.

[4] The right to divorce is far more lenient with the man under Christian and Muslim laws but in interpreting the law Hindu women also face the same difficulties.

[5] Women often do not get equal right to property.

Thus, the combination of legal complexities and social realities create the life of average Indian women insecure and miserable—which is never going to be an end without the awakening on the part of both men and women.

6. References

- i. Altekhar A.S (1938) Position of women in Hindu Civilisation New Delhi: Motilal Banarassidass.
- ii. Buhlar G. (1886) Trans., The Laws Of Manu London: Oxford University Press.
- iii. Chakravarti Uma (2003) Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens New Delhi:stree.
- iv. Ganesh Kamala (1993) Boundary Walls: Caste and Women in a Tamil Community New Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporations.
- v. Hutton J.H (1946) Caste in India Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- vi. Jha D.N (1981) Ancient India: An Introductory Outline New Delhi: People's Publishing House.
- vii. Joshi P.S (1978) Cultural History of ancient India New Delhi:S.Chand.
- viii. Lipner Julius (1994) Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices London: Routledge.
- ix. Narasimhan Sakuntala (1994) India: From Sati to Sex Determination Tests in Women and Violence, Miranda Daves (ed.) London:Zed Books.
- x. Omvedt Gail (1982) Caste, Class and Land in India: An Introductory Essay. In Land, Caste and Politics in Indian States (ed.) New Delhi: Author's Guild Publications.
- xi. Rambachan A. (1991) Accomplishing the Accomplished: The Vedas as a Source of Valid Knowledge of Sakara Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- xii. Ray Choudhuri (1978) Social Cultural and Economic History of ancient India New Delhi: Surjeet Publications.
- xiii. Roy Kukkum (2002) Goddess in Rig Veda: An Enquiry in Invoking the Goddess: Gender Politics in Indian Religion (ed.) New Delhi: Shakti Books.