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## Gendered Discourses of Hindutva

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### Abstract:

*This paper seeks to analyze the ways in which women's issues are being articulated within the Hindu Right wing party- BJP. It seeks to analyze the shift in the discourses of womanhood reflected in BJP'S election manifestos and campaigns over the years. The BJP's manifesto of 1998 elections saw a manifold increase in the issues pertaining to women. A full chapter was devoted to women's issues. The chapter was titled as "Nari Shakti". The discourse of womanhood saw a shift from "Matri Shakti" used during early 1990s to "Nari Shakti" since late 1990s. While Matri Shakti contains the element of self-sacrificing mothers, the discourse of Nari Shakti resonates with the image of an empowered woman with active role in the economic sphere. But despite this expansion of women's issues focused by 1998 manifesto envisaging a far greater role for women in public sphere, the embeddedness of women within the structure of family remains firmly entrenched. A separate chapter in the manifesto was titled as "family and society". Despite the fact that the BJP has incorporated all the issues raised by the feminist movement in its election manifestos since 1998, the discourses of revivalism and familialism remain firmly entrenched. These two discourses get clear reflection in BJP Vision document 2004. The increasing importance laid to women's economic role can be seen in NDA's election manifesto for 2004 elections which promised to unveil National Policy on Women's Economic Empowerment before end of 2004.*

**Key words:** Discourse, Familialism, Feminist movement, Hindu Right, Hindutva, Manifesto, Revivalism, Womanhood

### 1. Introduction

Women's Empowerment' or 'Mahila Sahshaktikaran' has become a buzz word for all political parties. Unlike some western countries, there here has been no feminist political party in India, but the issues raised by the feminist movement have been incorporated (or rather co-opted by political parties) in their manifestos. Does that mean that India has reached a phase in whereby the feminist ideas have hegemonised commonsense? Most of the feminists would answer this question in negative.

This paper seeks to analyse the ways in which women's issues are being articulated within the Hindu Right wing party- BJP. It seeks to analyse the shift in the discourses of womanhood reflected in BJP'S election manifestos and campaigns over the years.

Ratna Kapur and Brenda Crossman point out that the women's issues within the Hindu right gets articulated within (a) revivalist discourse that seeks to restore women to the position of honour and respect that they enjoyed in a reconstructed and golden mythical age, and (b) a dominant familial discourse, through which women's identities and roles as wives and mothers within the family are being inscribed. (Kapur and Crossman 1996:248)

The BJP has appropriated many of the issues which were raised by the feminist movement. Women's employment, violence against women, the indecent representation of women- issues that the women's movement has fought long and hard to bring into the public arena, are appropriated in ways that do not challenge the dominant construction of women as wives and mothers. The critique of the family and of the systematic subordination of women within the family (within the feminist movement) gets replaced by a discourse which naturalizes and glorifies women's roles in the family. (Kapur and Crossman 1996:273)

Within Hindutva's gender discourse, a strong Hindu woman becomes essential for a strong nation. The RSS provides physical training of women for this purpose. And BJP policy takes a strong stand against violence against women, including organizing women to defend themselves. (Kapur and Crossman 1993:41). This was one of the key points in BJP'S Election manifesto in 2013 Delhi Assembly Elections. As opposed to the position of Aam Aadmi party whose manifesto had the agenda of constituting task forces of retired personnel for the security of women, BJP's position was that women should be given training for self-defense. Theoretically, BJP's Position attempts to make women self-reliant. But the discursive framework ensures that women's strength does not challenge or undermine their position within the family.

### 2. Mass Movement phase of BJP and the mobilization of women

There are a number of women's organizations within the Sangh Parivar- the BJP's Mahila Morcha, the VHP Maitri Mandal and Durga Vahini with their different regional versions. The BJP affiliated women's organization, the Mahila Morcha, is responsible for electoral campaigns, while the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti, which is affiliated with the RSS, and the Durga Vahini, which is

affiliated with the VHP, refrain from direct involvement in party politics. These organizations work for educating girls and women in the principle of Hindu Nationalism.(Basu 2010:171) Tanika Sarkar points out that around 1989-90, there was a dramatic upsurge in the activities of the Sangh Parivar and this was also the time when the Sangh began to flaunt its women for the first time in its history, in public places and roles. It was a very special moment, a moment of spectacular growth and spread, a phase of mass mobilisation and movement all of which were new and heady departures for the Sangh and its women. Tanika Sarkar conducted fieldwork in early 1990s at the Samiti office, office-bearers told her of an internal struggle that had preceded the Samiti's decision to allow and train women as karsevikas. They said that it had been the young members who forced the hands of the Samiti.(Sarkar 1999:2159) The objective was of developing a strong, wide-ranging and dynamic female cadre-base for the Sangh that would enjoy a powerful public identity and political function, and that would also claim equality in political work, without overtly claiming social equality.(Ibid. :2160)

Sarkar observed at that time that the Samiti had come a long way from the parameters laid down by Golwalkar about pure domesticity. The women of the Sangh came from conservative, domesticated urban, middle class and upper caste backgrounds. They were now beginning to enter the public sphere for education, jobs and political work for the first time. The Samiti trained women for their newly-gained public roles and identities. Though the primary focus remained on women within the home but for a new generation of more active women, it did impart self-confidence and competence.. The Samiti was based on what Sarkar calls a "loose and flexible version of brahmanical patriarchy that allowed and encouraged education, employment and a more informed and activist politicisation only on the basis of communal violence and commitment to an extremely inegalitarian social perspective". Male discrimination could be questioned, if at all in public spaces and in the workplace, rather than at home.(Ibid.)

Women have played an extremely important role in Hindu Nationalism. They have been among the movement's most extraordinary orators. (Basu 2010:170) The anti-Sati campaign in 1987 after the immolation of Roop Kanwar on her husband's pyre was met with a backlash as BJP leaders and women who had been mobilized as traditional Hindu woman made attempts towards legitimizing this anti-women practice by appropriating the language of rights by asking for rights as Hindu women to practice, commit and glorify Sati. Feminists who were opposing this practice and ideology of Sati were projected as modern, western, urban elite women who could not represent the rural traditional women of India. (Kumar 1993:172-181)

Vijayaraje, Scindia, Uma Bharati, and Sadhvi Ritambhara were in Ayodhya in December 1992, goading mobs to destroy the mosque. The association of women with violence was not confined to the leadership level. Thousands of 'ordinary' women were associated with these violent Hindu Nationalist campaigns. The Durga Vahini, the women's organization affiliated with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, and the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti, the women wing of the RSS, give training to women to use rifles and weild lathis. According to a PUDR report these women's organizations have played an important role in many riots that have taken place since the early 1990s. The members of these organizations have directed Hindu Mobs towards Muslim localities, prevented the police from aiding Muslim families, and engaged in post-riot looting of homes and shops.(Ibid. :171)

Tanika Sarkar has pointed out that the RSS and VHP have made enormous efforts to bring women, train them in yoga and martial arts and give them a role in political campaigns. However, all this was done while reaffirming patriarchal ideology, and interestingly these organizations project themselves as extensions of the family.(Sarkar 1991:2057)

Nivedita Menon points out that it is to be acknowledged that 'family' is the source of continuing emotional and material support to which women's organizations have been unable to provide for women in struggle. This is where Hindu right-wing organizations have been extremely successful because they have politicized the women without disturbing the family system.(Menon 1999:12) A new kind of woman activist was thus being created who consciously wished to distance herself from the feminist activist. This new kind of women activists have been described as being not home-breakers but as torch-bearers of the Hindu tradition. Their activism in most cases has not involved or permitted any challenges to traditional family structures and practices. Women's roles are accepted as given and immutable. These women activists of the Hindu Right clearly show that women could come together and even be engaged in politics without necessarily challenging patriarchy. On the contrary, the way they come together and their manner of working wins approval from patriarchal structures.

Flavia Agnes has pointed out that in the context of growing communalism from the mid-80s, the lines between the women's movement and communal groups became smugged. Agnes points out that the communal forces usurped external usages popularized by the feminist movement such as protest marches and road blocks and also the image of modern Durga. This is ironical because the communal parties were able to mobilize women far more easily using the image of the modern Durga than the movement which had popularized these forms in the first place. The women's movement found that the new found strength- the shakti of the modern Durga was not directed against violence within the home and community but was directed externally towards Muslims both men and women. This led to challenging of the myth that all women are equal and can be mobilized around a common issue on a common platform. The validity of slogans such as 'Sisterhood is powerful' or 'Hum Sab Ek Hain' was severely threatened. But what was even more disturbing was that women from communal organizations mouthed slogans coined by the women's movement 'Hum Bharat ki Nari Hain, Phool Nahi Chingari Hain while leading demonstrations during the riots or while Babri Masjid was being torn down.(Agnes 1994:68)

The merging of lines between the communal forces and women's organisations did not stop at the level of symbols and slogans but also found reflection through some of the more concrete demands raised by the movement. Obscenity was one such issue. Women's groups had taken up campaigns against obscenity in media to protest against using women's bodies as sex objects or potraying women in derogatory roles. This issue became very popular with the communal parties. In Bombay, the women's wings of the Shiv Sena and BJP organized demonstrations and stormed the Doordarshan studio to protest against the late night screening of classic films on television including movies which potrayed women in assertive roles. (Ibid.)

Obscenity and the Indecent Representation of women have been taken up as issues by the Hindu Right. BJP Election manifesto for mid-term polls in 1991 states:

“BJP recognizes the great role of cinema in entertainment, education and integration. BJP will have 50 percent women on Film Censor Board- to keep violence and vulgarity out of films.”(Kapur and Crossman 1996:253)

Both the manifestos and actions of BJP’s ministers during 1990s clearly reflect their concerns with condemnation of obscenity and vulgarity which is followed by a call for stricter censorship. One of the first actions of Pramod Navalkar, Minister for Cultural Affairs of the Shiv Sena- BJP government was a call to clean up culture. In an interview for the women’s magazine Savvy,(Sep 1995), Navalkar elaborated on his understanding of vulgarity, which he defined as ‘whatever cannot be enjoyed in the company of children’. In his view then, the problem with vulgarity in the media in magazines and bill-boards is that ‘it is a family media which I can not avoid reaching my family’.(Ibid. :254)

During the BJP’s early stint in power in 1996, the Information and Broadcasting Minister, Sushma Swaraj, launched a series of attacks on what she supposed as sexualized representations in the media. These ranged from advertisements on contraception, which she directed were not to be aired during times when young children might view television to Swaraj’s reported comments that Doordarshan announcers should refrain from wearing revealing clothes during newscasts. Leela Fernandes argues that these incidents exemplify the manner in which the BJP has displaced the resistance to the new economic policies of liberalization from the realm of concrete economic policy to a confrontation with a gendered cultural politics of globalization. Nationalist resistance in the form of BJP’s swadeshi platform was concentrated on the supposed contamination of the purity of ‘Indian culture’ which was embodied in this context by the potential threat to the purity of women’s sexuality.(Fernandes 2000:624)

The sexist representation of women in mass culture has long been an issue of concern within the feminist movement. Despite the apparent similarity between the feminist movement and BJP in condemning obscenity, there are substantial differences in the understanding of the underlying problem of obscene representations. The feminist movement has framed the issue as one of women’s rights- the right to equality, the right to be free from sexual harassment. Indecent representation, according to feminist view is connected directly or indirectly to violence against women. The Hindu Right frames this issue very differently. Indecent representations were seen to be violation of women as matri shakti, of women’s roles as wives and mothers and of the respect of women in these roles. The attack on vulgarity in the media finds justification on the basis of family values, of women’s roles in the family to protect and foster tradition and culture.(Kapur and Crossman 1996:254)

Shatrughan Sinha in one of interviews said “Girls are appearing on magazine covers their bodies painted naked. They argue that it is their freedom, their bodies...They can do what they want but they should not raise a hue and cry if men react on such explicit pictures...all that we are saying is that ‘mandir ka apman na karo, aurat ka apman na karo’.”(Ibid. :255)

The way in which the problem of obscenity is framed deflects responsibility for sexual violence away from men. Obscenity is said to cause sexual violence so men cannot be held responsible for sexual violence. No mention is made about obscene representations of men. Unlike those in the women’s movement who argue that obscenity is violation of women’s equality, the Hindu Right’s is concerned about traditional sexual morality and women’s rightful place within this morality.(Ibid.)

### 3 . Normalization of the party and its implications for its position on women’s issues

When Tanika Sarkar conducted fieldwork during 1999 in Samiti offices, she observed that the women are, with some exceptions being pulled back into homes.(Sarkar 1999:2164) She observed that the role of Samiti was reduced from political to ritual role. Activities on Samiti calendar mentioned nothing apart from ritual events. There was retreat to older female functions and roles where women gossip about things that they have not seen themselves but have heard from their men.(Ibid. :2165) These women are the custodian of essential Sangh values and of its authentic ideology, that the other fronts have somewhat diluted and imperiled in the current war game on electoral politics.(Ibid. :2166)

Despite the fact that the public-political role for women within the Sangh was reduced, the BJP’S Manifesto of 1998 election saw a manifold increase in the issues pertaining to women. A full chapter was devoted to women’s issues. The chapter was titled as “Nari Shakti”. Thus the discourse of womanhood saw a shift from “Matri Shakti” used during early 1990s to “Nari Shakti”. While Matri Shakti contains the element of self-sacrificing mothers, the discourse of Nari Shakti resonates with the image of an empowered woman with active role in the economic sphere. But despite this expansion of women’s issues focused by 1998 manifesto envisaging a far greater role for women in public sphere, the embeddedness of women within the structure of family remains firmly entrenched. A separate chapter in the manifesto was titled as “family and society”.

Despite the fact that the BJP has incorporated all the issues raised by the feminist movement in its election manifestos since 1998, the discourses of revivalism and familialism remain firmly entrenched. These two discourses get clear reflection in BJP Vision document 2004. “The BJP considers India’s priceless cultural and spiritual heritage to be our intangible national wealth. It has protected our family system, sustained our national life over the millennia and given India her unique identity in the world”.<sup>1</sup> BJP firmly believes in the stability of family. This concern is reflected in BJP Vision Document 2004 which stated “The BJP believes that economic progress should not be at the cost of family values. The family constitutes the social unit of stability, welfare, and continuity of cultural traditions. Its importance can never be undermined. Integral Humanism teaches us that our nation too is a family and that India itself is a part of the larger human family. The BJP believes that every able-bodied woman should have at least some source of livelihood, so that she can enjoy economic independence within the framework of a harmonious family.”(BJP Vision Document 2004) The document further claimed- “. Our Party is committed to providing women an enabling environment free from injustice and violence in the public as well as the private sphere, which would pave the way for women to contribute to every walk of life. We would develop strategies to enable women in balancing work and family by introducing a national childcare plan, decent wages, workplace flexibility, and greater career opportunities”.(Ibid.)

The balancing of work with family instead of challenging patriarchy reaffirms the patriarchal family structure.

The increasing importance laid to women's economic role can be seen in NDA's election manifesto for 2004 elections which promised to unveil National Policy on Women's Economic Empowerment before end of 2004 with the stated aim of ensuring that every woman has some means of livelihood and, additionally, at enhancing the incomes of all categories of working women. The policy was to propose strategies to enable women in balancing work and family by introducing a national childcare plan, workplace flexibility, greater career opportunities, hostels for working women in every town, and removal of gender disparities in education, wages, and property rights. (NDA Manifesto 2004)

Amrita Basu points out that there were striking similarities between the 2004 Election manifestos of the Congress party and the BJP. though the Congress manifesto devoted more attention on women's issues, the BJP would have supported all of its provisions in principle. Infact, the BJP incorporated many of these issues in its 2009 Election manifesto, pertaining to decentralization and complete legal equality for women. This included giving women equal share in matrimonial property and equal rights of ownership over assets. (Basu 2010:171)

The BJP's election manifesto 2009 again saw the demand for Uniform Civil Code which was earlier dropped due to compulsions of alliance politics. It stated, "There cannot be real gender equality till such time India adopts a Uniform Civil Code which protects the rights of all women. The BJP, as a first step towards this constitutionally mandated direction, will set up a Commission to draft a Uniform Civil Code, drawing upon the best traditions and harmonising them with the modern times. The Commission will also study reforms towards gender equality in other countries, including Islamic countries." (BJP Manifesto 2009) The BJP's election manifesto 2014 reiterates the demand for Uniform Civil Code and its need to establish complete gender equality. It is interesting to note that feminists were strong supporters of Uniform Civil Code till mid-80s. The appropriation of this issue by the BJP has led to a rethinking on the issue of Uniform Civil Code and most of the feminists now favour either reform in personal laws or an optional gender just code.

It is interesting to note that the BJP's election manifesto 2014 does not explicitly mention the words such as cultural nationalism and family integrity. But these discourses are implicit in the Preface of 2014 Election Manifesto which talks about the greatness of ancient Indian civilization which is similar to the theory of golden vedic age which was circulated during the anti-colonial struggle. The golden vedic age is considered to be based on complete gender equality, but this interpretation of history has been challenged by feminist historians such as Uma Chakravarty. What is interesting to note is that within the Hindu Right Discourse no mention is made of the historical disadvantages and deprivations experienced by women in India.

#### **4. A Comparative Analysis of Nationalist Discourse and Hindu Right Discourse**

The symbolic association of women with nation in gendered discourse of Hindutva finds interesting parallels with the nationalist discourse. But since all discourses function within a specific context, there are significant differences between these two discourses. The emphasis laid on economic empowerment of women in Hindutva discourse was absent from the nationalist discourse. The nationalist discourse focused on education of women for the purpose of producing better wives and mothers and not for their economic independence. Despite the fact that the nationalist movement brought a large number of women within the public sphere, the public-private distinction remained unchallenged. Anupama Roy has argued 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. (Roy 2010:411) Ratna Kapur and Brenda Crossman have pointed out that in the contemporary Hindutva discourse, women's identity includes their roles in the labour market. While these new roles continues to be framed within the discourses of tradition and familialism but at the same time women's identity is moving beyond the private sphere of the family, and into the public sphere of work. This emphasis on the need for women to attain economic empowerment has led to a new emphasis within the rhetoric of the Hindu Right on meeting the challenge of modernization. This challenge is dealt with by making a distinction between westernization and modernization. The women should become modern, but they should not become western. This was clearly articulated by Uma Bharati at the All India Women's Sammelan in New Delhi in May 1994. (Kapur and Crossman 1996:267)

"Modernization does not mean Westernization. Our women should become doctors, scientists and engineers, but this modernization need not take away Indian Culture and values from our women." (Organiser, 22 May, 1994)

The Mahila Morcha writes, for example:

"We conceptually differ from what is termed as the women's liberation in the west. We require a sort of readjustment in social and economic set up. No fundamental change in values is desirable. Women in India ever had a pride of place in the household, and the society. That has only to be re-established and re-affirmed." (Kapur and Crossman 1996:268)

Manohar Joshi at the Fourth World's Conference in Beijing criticized the dominance of Western feminism and its emphasis on free sex, physical relationships with men, unmindful of marital status, the growth of lesbianism and in this situation artificial pregnancy'. He admonished Indian feminists for imitating the western women libbers' and 'aping the failure of their western sisters'. (Ibid.)

#### **5. Conclusion**

Amrita Basu points out that BJP's relatively liberal position on women's rights are to some extent a product of electoral exigencies. During the early period of its ascent in the 1980s, BJP was keen to distinguish itself from the Congress party. Its support for the UCC in the 1990s was a response to Rajiv Gandhi's handling of the Shah Bano issue. It signaled that unlike Congress, which was swayed by religious fundamentalists, the BJP was committed to real secularism. She points out that it is difficult to identify a single one of the vital issues before the women's movement- dowry, sati, female foeticide- on which the BJP Mahila Morcha holds a unified position. (Basu 2010:171)

Basu argues that the contradictions between the BJP's various positions are best explained by its combined party and movement identities. Though as a political party, the BJP is guided by electoral logic that has required extending its base from upper-caste, upper-class men to include women and lower caste groups but through its connection with the RSS and the VHP, the BJP also seeks legitimacy on the basis of militant movement identity.(Ibid.)

Feminists who have been arguing for the primacy of women's identity and solidarity have been presented with a dilemma with the rise of women's militancy in the Hindu Right. Manisha Sethi through an exploration of the role of the Sevika Samiti and the Durga Vahini in creating the militant cadre of women, argues that gender identity does not exist as primordially but is invented, created, resisted and subverted at the fulcrum of multiple identities. The entire corpus of practice, both discursive and material - the imagery of Bharat mata, the valiant historical figures and subservient mythical wives - all allow women to become avenging angels in moments of crisis. When these moments ebb away, they return to the mode of nurturing mothers and obedient wives.(Sethi 2002)

Some recent remarks made by BJP leaders reflect their views on women. In the aftermath of Delhi-gang rape in December 2012, Sushma Swaraj referred to the victim while she was still alive as a 'zinda laash' (living corpse) and demanded the death penalty for the rapists, while the feminist activists raised an objection to death penalty .Swaraj repeated her demand for the death penalty in the aftermath of the Shakti Mills gang-rape in Bombay (August 2013) and this was when the survivor was very much alive and had expressed her determination to continue working as a photo-journalist. Since not all murders attract the death penalty according to Indian Penal Code, it is clearly the belief that not only is the life of the survivor over once she has been raped, but that the honour of her family and community have been assaulted that underline Sushma Swaraj's demand for death penalty.(<http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/india-united-against-fascism/india-bjp-rape-and-status-of-women>)

There is a considerable shift in the discourses of womanhood reflected in BJP's position on women's issues since its formation. During the mass movement phase of BJP from mid 1980'S till mid 1990's when the Hindutva campaign at its peak, the image of women that BJP espoused was of 'Matri Shakti'. The BJP's position on gender equality rested on the assumption of complementarity between men and women rather than sameness. The image of an empowered man that BJP espoused during this period was a reversal of a feminist woman. This woman is not a home-breaker but rather a torch-bearer of Hindu tradition. This was clearly evident in the speeches of BJP leaders in which they made a distinction between their positions on women's issues and the position occupied by feminists, which they believed were derived from western ideals and inappropriate for Indian woman. The discourse was centred on modernization without westernization.

During late 1990's when the party was witnessing its normalization, the discourse saw a shift from 'Matri Shakti' to 'Nari Shakti'. While Matri Shakti contains the element of self-sacrificing mothers, the discourse of Nari Shakti resonates with the image of an empowered woman with active role in the economic sphere. Despite the fact that the BJP has incorporated all the issues raised by the feminist movement in its election manifestos since 1998, the discourses of revivalism and familialism remained firmly entrenched. But interestingly the BJP Manifesto for 2014 elections does not make any explicit mention of Hindutva/Cultural Nationalism and family integrity. Instead it talks about laws to deal with family violence and women's right to matrimonial property. These steps can make women self-reliant and make their independent existence outside family possible. Only on two of the issue raised by feminist movement i.e. wages for household work and alternative sexuality does the BJP's Manifesto 2014 maintains silence.

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