

## ANOTHER DEVELOPMENT WITH WOMEN A VIEW FROM ASIA

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The Asian debate on the women's question has been characterised by three major ideologies – sometimes complementing, often contradicting each other. The women's movements which developed in the colonized countries under the umbrella of national liberation struggles, were influenced by the often simultaneous presence of three competing beliefs – (a) of *liberal democracy* with its implicit acceptance of the western pattern of social development as the answer to problems of women's inequality, subordination or oppression; (b) of *socialism* with its concept of a dichotomy between private (or family-based) and social production, and its offer, of entry into social production on terms of equality with men as the only solution to women's problems; and (c) various shades of *cultural nationalism* with their antipathy to anything western, and faith in the intrinsic justice and purity of indigenous or religious traditions – *if only the accretions from political slavery, economic poverty and cultural degeneration could be eliminated.*

*The last ideology gave birth to a spate of literature that projected the extraordinarily high status enjoyed by women in the ancient civilisation, the prevalence of the mother cult, female deities and ritual rights of women in most Asian religions, and the statements to be found in most scriptures regarding the sanctity of women's lives, dignity and chastity. Current practices that institutionalized women's subordination e.g. child marriage, feet binding, purdah, the ill-treatment of widows etc., and denied them access to education or property rights were uniformly condemned by all three ideologies – but from different motives. While the liberal democrats and socialists sought remedies for the women's situation in the processes of modernisation and secularisation of society, the cultural nationalists argued that improving women's status through education and better acknowledgement of their rights within the family would strengthen the hold of Asian cultural traditions against the onslaught of western values, as women – by instinct and upbringing – were better custodians of cultural values and traditions.*

Another interesting similarity between all the three ideologies was in their agreement that the women's question was *essentially a social and cultural issue*, to be resolved through education, legal reform and long-term developments, not an issue which posed immediate economic or political challenges. *Most national liberation fronts therefore agreed to project the women's question as a non-political, non-party issue, backed up by a consensus of otherwise warring ideologies.*

The question of women's claim to political rights was however settled for somewhat different reasons. The challenge of transforming an urban middle class movement for sharing of power against the colonial or semi-colonial regimes into mass liberation struggles invariably brought in the necessity of involving different constituencies in the struggle, and promising them a stake in the future structure of the nation. Secondly, *the over whelming response of women to the mass movements surprised even many of the national leaders into accepting their demand for equal political rights in the liberated countries. The implications of this right – for the social structure as a whole – with its hierarchy, role and status differences, its extreme inequalities of class, caste, wealth, knowledge and power – were neither realised nor debated. There is little doubt that the influence of the suffragist and socialist movements in the west played a distinctive role in raising and settling this question in the Asian liberation movements as they were contemporary.*

Recent research in a few countries has however opened a new controversy around the recognition of women's political rights in Asian societies. There is a theory that the Soviet Communist Party and Kamal Ataturk used women's political and social emancipation *as a*

strategy to smash the existing power structure in the Soviet Asian territories and Turkey. In the Soviet case - this strategy is supposed to have resulted from initial failure to mobilise the proletariat in these regions, as clan structures proved stronger than class differentiations. Women were therefore adopted as the "surrogate proletariat".<sup>1</sup> In the case of Turkey, Kamal's target for destruction was the Ottoman power structure, which depended heavily on the priests for its legitimacy. An attack on Koranic law and its instruments - of purdah, polygamy and unilateral divorce - that segregated and subordinated women - was a direct challenge to the rule of priests - and analogous to women's role as the surrogate proletariat - remains an interesting interpretation of the political strategy of this nation - builder.<sup>2</sup>

No such analysis has been made of the Indian case, though there is some actual record of an unexplained objective articulated by the greatest ideologue of the Indian National Movement - Mahatma Gandhi. Emphasising that equal political and legal rights for women were to be seen as means not ends in themselves, he expressed, on different occasions, a theory of women's historic role - as vanguards of a non-violent struggle for a just and non-exploitative social order. Disagreeing with the cultural nationalists' glamourised image of women's position in ancient India, he identified women's oppression as historic and virtually universal, manifested through:

- (a) their non-participation in the framing of social laws and rules of morality "in the shaping of which they have had no voice";
- (b) 'man's interested teaching' - based on his 'Lust for Power' - forcing women to accept their role as 'man's playthings';
- (c) women's lack of autonomy in the use of their bodies, and making life choices; and
- (d) their backward consciousness - which made them accept their inferior status in society.

But he noted that women had devised their own methods for dealing with these oppressions. They were the originators of various forms of non-violent non-cooperation. They had developed courage and endurance, a sense of moral strength, and a capacity to put the needs of others before their own. These qualities made them, in Gandhi's view, the "natural leaders" of a non-violent struggle against all forms of social injustice.

Their historic role, therefore was to lead the forces of social revolution against inequalities, exploitation and injustice - not only for women, but for all oppressed groups in society. As victims of a historic oppression women could identify themselves with other oppressed groups more easily than men - hence their historic role. Abolition of legal and political disabilities of women was necessary only to set the stage for the real struggle - when women's influence on the "political deliberations of the nation" would force the pace for abolition of all forms of exploitation based on class, caste, property and power.<sup>3</sup>

Gandhi's critics have called him an utopian and a conservative in his idealisation of women's endurance and "other-regarding" self abnegation as virtues. They have also termed his brand of feminism as 'social feminism' that bases itself on an acceptance of the fundamental division of sex-roles. A more cogent criticism could be of his failure to see the extent to which women identified themselves with the interests of their families, class, caste or community. While it is true that men and women who followed Gandhi played exemplary roles in the struggles for abolition of untouchability, for recognition of workers' and peasants' rights, and in peace movements of various kinds, it is also true that the concept of women's historic role', or Gandhi's views on women in general have received the least intellectual examination by men or women during or after his life. Only one casual analyst<sup>4</sup> has observed that they could have sprung from a desire to 'feminise politics' - or to give a blow to the established power processes.

*A significant fact is that all the three approaches evolved very nearly during the same period - i.e. just after the first world war - when the movement for women's suffrage also reached its climax in the West. The Chinese experiment, which perhaps attempted women's liberation and participation on a far wider scale, developed slightly later, and displayed a similar mixture of ideologies and contradictions.*

The course of history in most Asian countries during the last few decades display certain marked similarities on the women's question - in spite of differences in political systems and differing priorities in patterns of development. The radical visions of new, egalitarian social orders that characterised liberation struggles kept giving way to the demands of economic development with technological and industrial modernisation. Where the expansion of productive forces was combined with a policy for expanding the base of economic and political participation - as under socialist systems, women made some substantial gains. Whether these can withstand the present emphasis on technological modernisation at all costs remains to be seen. Reported evidence of the withdrawal of an attempt to recognise the economic value of house-work, and encouraging women to take up part-time, sideline occupations that carry lower rewards and status are however disturbing signs.<sup>5</sup>

In the non-socialist countries, the extension of capitalism, national and international - has generally accelerated the process of *marginalisation* of women's economic and social roles, with increasing projection of women's image as *consumers* - targets for social welfare services but *not as partners, with equal say, in building a new society*. Accession of a few individual women to positions of enormous political power has not changed or prevented women's marginality in the political process. Similarly, the gains of a minority - through education, wealth and class or professional advance, has generally helped to mask a much more extensive decline for the majority.

The three major instruments for maintaining the present structure of inequality within and between nations are the three monopolies - of economic, political and knowledge power. All are historically tried devices of hierarchic societies, but they have become far more powerful today, because of the tremendous expansion of the base and resources needed for economic activity and knowledge acquisition. This logic also extends to political participation, but for one difference. Development of economic and knowledge bases also helps to reduce isolation between peoples and throws the process of generation, control and utilisation of power open to greater scrutiny, criticism and attack. *In the long run, political power under any system must depend on the consent of numbers of people and efficiency of the system. The monopoly of political power is therefore relatively more insecure and vulnerable.*

*Majority of women in Asia do not share in any one of these monopolies. The modernisation and formalisation of economic and knowledge systems - unless they change or go along with destruction of existing structures of hierarchy of property, production and distribution relations - from the community down to the family, appears to have an effect of widening the gap between men and women's access to and control over knowledge, information resources, rewards and power. Social, economic and cultural factors are combined in maintaining a network of constraints which make women's contributions and needs invisible - in building and perpetuating the myth of women's dependence and in reducing the value of women's traditional areas of knowledge, skills and occupation - which helped to shape their identity, self-image and sense of self-worth.*

This process of marginalisation and widening inequality is most pronounced in rural areas, where it should have been the least. *Despite social science theories that culture determines the boundaries of women's lives more than any other factor, most of the multicultural agrarian societies of Asia, like those of Africa and Latin America, display one predominant pattern, the overwhelming involvement of women in agriculture, traditional industries (textiles, handicrafts) and informal markets. Yet, the myth of women's traditional non-participation in economic activity continues to dominate thinking of policy-makers, social analysts and educational systems<sup>6</sup>.* Poor households in all societies, in rural or urban areas, depend heavily, if not solely, on the earnings and the labour of women, but the elite model - of women depending on male bread winners - erected into a value by hierarchic societies, strengthened by the impact of colonialism and cultural nationalism has been further blessed by social analysis and data collection concepts derived from the highly industrialised societies of the West - where the process of reduction of women's roles - from producers and managers to consumers and dependents was far more advanced<sup>7</sup>. The results - again similar in most countries - are lower rewards for harder labour, concentration in low paid,

low skilled work, lack of access to technology or other resources, and displacement from traditionally protected occupations with the advance of economic modernisation.

The invisibility, undervaluation and non-valuation of women's contribution to the economy is inter-linked with their lower social status. *Upward economic mobility, instead of solving the problem of oppression of poverty, begins the oppression of prosperity, and the entry of some form of social seclusion, withdrawal from public economic activity, and relative loss of individual freedom and status within the family. It has to be noted that matrilineal forms of descent and property rights which survived the onslaughts of patriarchal religions like Islam and Christianity, have succumbed to the processes of economic modernisation and growing class differentiation.*<sup>8</sup>

The new civil or political rights conceded to women in most countries have proved inadequate to break the reinforced strength of these social institutions, or structural inequalities that incorporate, and thrive on sexual inequality.<sup>9</sup>

Well-intentioned policies for women's equality which depended primarily on access to education, better legal rights and suffrage have invariably foundered on the inbuilt denial of rights in hierarchical social structures that feed on exploitation of various sections of people. Rights to property education and equality before the law mean nothing to the masses of people whose poverty deprives them of any access to these rights. *Among the poor women and children are the poorest, the most illiterate, the least healthy and the most exploited. The household economy of the poor, subjected to increasing tension in the context of economic modernisation and growing marginalisation, subsists by extorting a surplus - through depriving women and children of some basic needs - leisure, nutrition, education and health care.*<sup>10</sup>

Any attempt at structural change in the direction of a more equitable distribution of resources and power has to incorporate measures to counter this generally crude, but sometimes subtle form of inequality and oppression. Whether one accepts Gandhi's concept of women's historic role or not, the question remains, can any structure based on inequality and exploitation be upset without upsetting this basic inequality that is a feature of all classes, including the poorest?

*The socialist experiment, while removing many aspects of women's inequality, failed to adequately solve the problem of the 'double-burden' and non-valuation or undervaluation of house-work. Whether the gains will stand the pressures of technological modernisation and need for demographic control remains to be seen. At the ideological level - the women's question seems to have receded into the background with little information coming on the next phase of women's development.*

*For the non-socialist countries, all the tried strategies for women's equality have been "top-down" approaches. Right to property, where real, has basically affected the upper classes, undoubtedly strengthening their monopolistic hold on economic power. It has also enabled families in these classes to evade the State's attempts to reduce inequality through fiscal policies and property ceilings. A few women in these classes may have obtained entry into the world of economic power, but most of them are controlled by male authority, and often provide a screen for manipulations by the latter. The institution of joint ownership by husband and wife prevalent in Philippines and Indonesia requires careful investigation - of its role in promoting women's equality.*

Land reform, and transfer of ownership of agricultural land to the tiller, is advocated as the most powerful instrument for structural change in agrarian societies, taking a 'bottom up' approach. Rural women constitute the single largest group engaged in agriculture and the production of food. *Yet very few of them control the basic asset - land. A truly bottom up approach should recognise women's claim to own agricultural land in their own right when they are the tillers.*<sup>11</sup> *In landless families, this will undoubtedly begin a re-adjustment of power balances within the family and the community, as these women are far more articulate and conscious of the real contribution they make to the family's survival, and the prosperity of the community.*

Women in agriculture attach the highest priority to food crops - as they are responsible for feeding their families. Greater influence by women on agricultural decisions could help to arrest the trend towards reduction of areas under food crops. *Some Asian traditions claim that women discovered agriculture*<sup>12</sup>. In those parts of the world where agriculture today is ruled by modern technology, women have virtually disappeared from agriculture. *Detachment from this primary production sector has perhaps been one of the important factors responsible for women's rapid transition to 'consumer' and 'non-skilled' status in these industrialised countries. But rural Asian women relate to agriculture as a source of their identity, roots and skills.* Some of the specific skills that Asian women can have, with adequate input of modern scientific knowledge and technology, raise productivity relatively faster without displacing women.<sup>13</sup> Livestock rearing, pisci-culture, sericulture, apiculture, dairying, horticulture - all traditionally women's occupations - could only benefit them if they controlled the basic assets, and their own labour processes. Current attempts at "social" forestry, in spite of stated objectives to the contrary, mostly tend to promote plantation of trees which mainly benefit large industries. The needs of rural households - for food, fodder, fuel, and a livelihood - that could be met by the forest with planned management, are generally ignored. Forest policies, forest sciences, and forest management are invariably in the hands of men, whose eyes are set on the revenue and the high income/profit offered by large industry. *Planned attempts at afforestation - on forest fringes, along sides of highways and village roads, on waste land, including 'social forestry projects' supported by international aid, seem to be becoming a monopoly for eucalyptus and similar plants, which offer nothing to women, while depriving them of sources of food, fodder, fuel etc.*

*Irrigation - major or minor - get high priority in most plans for rural development, but supply of water for drinking and washing receives scant attention. As admitted recently by a top Indian planner - "If men had to fetch drinking water, then 230,000 villages would not have remained without provision of drinking water after 30 years of planned development."*<sup>14</sup>

Suffrage had not really enabled women to "affect the political deliberations of the nation" as Gandhi had visualised. The constraints of family, class, illiteracy and all the purdahs and attitudes that prevent women's ability to influence these vital development decisions, cannot be challenged individually. Overthrowing the 'subordination syndrome' requires collective organisation, and the confidence that is generated by solidarity.

*But what forms should such organisations take? Asian women have a long history of active participation in peasant and workers' movements for better rights and working conditions, in social movements against rigid hierarchic structures, against imperialism, colonialism and external aggressors. Yet the histories of these struggles seldom record the character and aftermath of women's role in these movements. Most modern political organisations - reactionary or progressive in ideology - include women, but their organisational structures tend to reproduce the subordination syndrome of traditional social units - household, family, kinship and communal groups. Women do participate, actively, in the labour process - or the mobilisation drives in the case of political organisations, but seldom in the decision making processes. Few women who become visible in the latter are there as individuals - qualified by age, personality, family, kinship with other leaders or individual merit - but not as representatives of other women.*

Many countries have thrown up large national women's organisations, and women's wings of political parties. Most of them are concentrated in urban areas, dominated by women from elite groups, with little understanding of development processes or their impact on poor rural and urban women.

*New forms of grassroot level organisation need to be studied, not only women's organisations, but peasant and workers groups, local pressure and power groups of various kinds, with or without a stated political affiliation. Structural, procedural and attitudinal characteristics of these organisations need to be analysed, to identify which contain features that assist women to participate more effectively in all processes.*

Along with this is needed a new approach to the study of social organisations which have defied time - families and households. Women's work in maintaining these structures has received the least examination, strengthening the myths about its "marginality, supplementality and dispendability."<sup>15</sup>

Women and men need to reassess women's roles in history - with more objective data and minus the biases that reflected implicit acceptance of subordination. Such reappraisal can help to create conditions more favourable to structural change, without developing the characteristics of a war between the sexes. *To most Asian women, the latter is unreal, impracticable and has little future. The society of the future has to be based on mutual respect and dignity. Equality is a state of the mind - and rests more on self-perception, less on the perception of others. Better knowledge about women - their past and present - can do far more to change these perceptions.*

## References

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- <sup>1</sup> Gregory Marshall, the *Surrogate Proletariat* : Soviet Policy Towards Women in Central Asia 1919-29 Princeton University Press.
- <sup>2</sup> Symposium on Position of Women in Turkey, May 1978. (unpublished) The author was a participant.
- <sup>3</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *To Women*, Navajeevan Press, Ahmedabad. See also *Towards Equality* - Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Chapter 7, Govt. of India, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare 1975, and Vina Mazumdar, *Social Reform Movement From Ranade to Nehru in Indian Women from Purdha to Modernity*, Vikas, Delhi, 1976.
- <sup>4</sup> Sugata Dasgupta, *Emancipation of Women in India* (unpublished) prepared for the Committee on the Status of Women in India.
- <sup>5</sup> This was reported by a China specialist at an ILO workshop on Women in Asia held at Turin in November 1961.
- <sup>6</sup> *Towards Equality*, op cit. chapters 6 and 8; and Report of the National Conference on Women's Studies 1981, SNDT Women's University, Bombay. Also Unesco Expert meeting on Women's Studies and Social Sciences in Asia, Delhi, October 1982, Also *Rural Women and Development*, Report of an International Seminar, ICSSR, 1977.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid. See also Asok Mitra, *Status of Women: Shifts in Occupational Pattern 1961—71* Introduction, Abhinav, Delhi, 1979
- <sup>8</sup> This had been commented on by Indian researchers and was noted by the Committee on the Status of Women in India. Similar trends were reported at the Unesco sponsored meeting mentioned above, with a demand for comparative studies on these dying forms of social organisation. A critical case study of the impact of changing land relations on women of a matrilineal community is by K. Saradmoni. See Saradmoni, K. *Matriliney Transformed : Family Law and Ideology in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Travancore*, New Delhi, Sage, 1999.
- <sup>9</sup> Vina Mazumdar (Ed.) *Symbols of Power*, ICSSR, SNDT Women's University, and Allied Publishers, 1979.
- <sup>10</sup> Asok Mitra, National Population Policy and National Development, *Population and Development Review*, March, 1979. Also by the same author - *India's Population : Aspects of Quality and Control*, Abhinav Delhi, 1978.
- <sup>11</sup> First demanded by Muslim peasant women from landless families in West Bengal in 1978; incorporated in the joint memorandum on *Indian Women in the Eighties : Development Imperatives*, submitted to the Government of India by 8 National Women's Organisations in 1980; and in the Report of the National Committee reviewing the *Role and Participation of Women in Agriculture and Rural Development*, Government of India, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 1980. India's Sixth Five Year Plan (1980—85) acknowledges women's role in agriculture and assures "that in cases of transferred assets such as agricultural or homestead land, government shall endeavour to provide joint titles to husband and wife. See also Report of ILO Tripartite Asian Regional Workshop on *Rural Women and Development*, ILO, Geneva, 1982,
- <sup>12</sup> Temple murals in parts of north-eastern India inhabited by tribal communities (some of whom are still engaged in slash and burn agriculture, some still follow matrilineal descent systems, though control is shifting to male hands) portray Women as the first domesticators of plants.
- <sup>13</sup> M.S Swaminathan (formerly Secretary, Agriculture; Director-General, Indian Council of Agricultural Research; and Member, Planning Commission; Also Director-General, International Rice Research Institute, Manila) — JP. Naik Mernorial Lecture on *Rural Women and Development*, Centre for Women's Development Studies September 1982.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Asok Mitra, *Status of Women*, op cit.,