



## Understanding Past through Gender Perspective

PRERNA GAUTAM

Assistant Professor,

Department of History

Shaheed Bhagat Singh College, University of Delhi

New Delhi (India)

### Abstract:

*India's social and cultural fabric embodies within it a body of thought that seeks to formulate a peculiar social and cultural order, which not only nurtures gender hierarchy but also fortifies it by socially conditioning women to reconcile to such subordination. The whole structure is devised in a manner that it sanctions male dominance over women. Powerful instruments of religious and legal sanctions back the authority of men to dominate them. Therefore, for effective comprehension of true nature and character of evolutionary process of formulation of various social structures and institutions, it becomes imperative to identify such forces at work at various points of time.*

---

**Keywords:** *Gender, Social structures, Social realities*

---

In historical analysis, emphasis is now being made to depart from 'histories of women' to 'histories of gender relations'. This shift aims to impart centrality to the question of women in the process of social development and subsequently contextualize women's accounts with larger structures and societal processes. Unlike the conventional approach, the new perspective has the distinction of envisaging women as a heterogeneous category, resulting in distinguishing elite groups from marginalised categories of women in historical consideration. This approach, therefore, aims at producing a better understanding of women issues against the background of wider social and ideological arrangements.

Conventionally it was believed that distinct characteristics and roles of men and women in a society are determined exclusively by biology and are therefore natural and changeless. However, the idea of gender relations greatly modified this notion and it soon began to be expressed largely as a socio-cultural construct. Therefore, it is the social and cultural 'packaging' which is done for both men and women right from birth onwards makes it imperative to explore gender relations within the structural framework of a society. In other words the nature and basis of the subordination of women should be brought to the centre stage.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the study of gender relations can be used for effective understanding of social realities and conditions.<sup>2</sup> In this context it is pertinent to understand *patriarchy* and its origin in order to grasp the dynamism involved in the relations between men and women in a society.<sup>3</sup> Patriarchy may primarily be expressed as an

---

<sup>1</sup> Kamla Bhasin, Understanding Gender, p.1-2

<sup>2</sup> Uma Chakravarty, Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories: Beyond the Kings and brahmans of 'Ancient India', 2007, P-138.

<sup>3</sup> For details refer to Understanding gender by Kamla Bhasin, p-20. Patriarchy literally means the rule of the father or patriarch and was used originally to describe a specific type of male dominated family which included women, younger men, children, slaves and domestic servants. All were under the rule of the dominant male. Now it is used more generally to refer to power relationships by which men dominate and subordinate women. Patriarchy is not the same everywhere. Its nature may vary in different classes in the same society and also in different periods. The broad principles, however, remains the same, that is, men control most economic resources and all social, economic and political institutions.

ideology or a belief system according to which men are considered as superior to women. Gender grants specific meaning to the fact of sex and contribute to inequalities and hierarchies in society. Gender differences are therefore, an outcome of social and ideological structures, which are founded upon a well-knit and deep-rooted ideology in the form of powerful instruments of religious and legal sanctions, whereby women can be socially conditioned to reconcile to a lower order of existence. Thus, there exists a direct correlation between gender and social and economic structures in place at a particular point of time and therefore the two go hand-in-hand in enriching our understanding of the society.<sup>4</sup>

Based on modern anthropological data on tribal societies, it has been postulated that the most egalitarian societies are to be found among hunting-gathering tribes that are characterized by interdependency. Evidence from cave paintings in Central India suggests that in the hunting gathering stage there was no rigid sexual division of labour. It is likely that women participated in hunting apart from undertaking all the important task of gathering. The role of women in the economy was thus equal to, if not greater than, that of men. Uma Chakravarty depicts the relative status of men and women among these tribal groups as separate but equal. Therefore, in the formative phase of Indian history women's role in both production and reproduction was regarded as valuable. And gradually the female reproductive power and the psychological bond between mother and the child gave way to veneration of the mother-goddess.<sup>5</sup> This also explains the prevalence of veneration of the mother-goddess in Indus valley.

However, with the advent of agriculture as the principal means of livelihood, the idea of private possession of land gradually began to crystallise. Consequently the fundamental principles of an unequal social order began to take shape. The principal idea in the given scenario was to construct a closed structure to preserve land, women and purity of caste. And since they are all structurally linked, therefore, rigorous organization of female sexuality was stressed. Indeed neither land nor purity of caste can be ensured without closely guarding women, who formed the pivot of the entire social structure. The honor and respectability of men came to be preserved through their women.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it emerges as a period, which was marked by an attempt to formulate and restructure the conventional social and functional fabric of the society.

Gradually as agriculture became the dominant mode of production in the post-vedic period, a sharp distinction began to emerge between motherhood and female sexuality, with the latter being channelized only into legitimate motherhood that ensured caste purity and patrilineal succession. And female sexuality had therefore, to be managed for which the innate nature of women was represented as sinful. This projection of the fear of women's uncontrolled sexuality provided the backdrop to the obsession with creating an effective system of control and need to guard them constantly. Thus, the conflict between the inherent nature of women and their dharma was distinctively brought out. Women's essential nature was shown to be in conflict with '*stridhama of fidelity*' to the husband. And their *strisvabhava* was constantly enticing them away from their *stridhama*. Such references suggest that the original attitude of prehistoric societies towards the reproductive power of women, where their sexuality was accepted as an inherent part of their being and posed no problem, gave way to a system requiring stringent controls. However in agricultural society, women's sexuality and their maternal power had to be organized and ordered by paternal power in the emerging class-based societies, to serve the new social and political arrangements organized by men of the dominated classes.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Uma Chakravarty, *Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories: Beyond the kings and brahmins of 'Ancient India'*, p.-138.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.-141.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.-139.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.-144-147. Reproductive power was one power that women still held in the new structure of relations in which they were subordinated and one way of dealing with it was to simultaneously exaggerate and treat as terribly

Accordingly, marriage marked the formal setting up of the household. Marriage was viewed, as an institution marking an occasion for constructing not only gender relations but also maintaining an ideal Varna structure. This was so because the formation of varna identities rest on controlling female sexuality and reproduction, as entry into varna categories is supposed to be determined by birth. Also in most of the marriages it was the bride's father who had to pay to the groom's party. It was only in 'asura' form of marriage that payment was made to the bride herself. In the 'Brahma', 'Dalva' and 'Arsha' forms, it was the bride's father who had to give wealth, ornaments or other gifts according to his ability. In the 'Brahma' form of marriage, a well-attired and bejeweled girl was given and in the 'arsha' marriage, the bride was given after an oxen and a cow were given to the groom. Apparently the current social distaste for the practice is expressed in the name 'asura'. Clearly society disapproved of the bride's father accepting money from the groom. Manu says that a father should not take bride price or 'kanyasulka' because by doing so, he becomes the seller of his offspring. However, there is no text forbidding the groom's father from accepting the dowry.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the subordination of women was an ideological construct, which was explicitly rooted in socio-economic necessities of a class-based society.

Another noteworthy feature is the differential treatment envisaged for men and women. While, both could perform most of the rituals and no religious ceremony could bear fruit without her participation, however, the mantras, which lent an aura of sanctity to the proceedings, were reserved exclusively for men. Women were also excluded from prestigious rituals as the *upanayana*, which constituted a gateway into the world of 'vedic learning'. They were also reluctantly accommodated within the framework of ritual offerings to deceased ancestors.<sup>9</sup> Nowhere in the scriptures is there a prayer for the long life of the bride. Instead the prayers were aimed at preventing the birth of daughters, so that only a son is born. Vedic texts show society's pronounced preference for a male child. However, there seems to be some awareness of the pregnant women's need for food, since she figures in the list of names of those who need to be fed even before a guest.<sup>10</sup> This is embedded in the fact that women, by virtue of being the epitome of biological process of reproduction, constituted a vital means of preserving important institutions of marriage and caste structure. As a mother and a wife she certainly enjoyed a respectable place in the society.

However, it emerges that unmarried daughters enjoyed a better social and economic standing than the married ones. Manu lays down that brothers should separately give their shares to unmarried sisters, failing to do so brings doom upon them. Gautam says that unmarried daughters not well settled in life shall inherit the property of their deceased father. However women in general were not entitled to a share in the family property.<sup>11</sup> Girls were sometimes given some educational instructions, though Vedic learning as such was denied to them. However, *Bharadvaja Griha Sutra* names four inducements for marrying a girl namely wealth, beauty, family and also intelligence, which hints towards encouraging learning among women. *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* lays down a rite for obtaining a learned daughter. Such texts explain the appearance of Gargi, Sulabha and other learned women. Yet we have no way of knowing whether they could earn by teaching. Only a very late tantric text says, 'a householder should instruct the daughter equally as his sons.'<sup>12</sup>

---

dangerous the women's 'innate' nature. Their sexuality was perceived as posing a threat, and the literature of ancient India is full of references to the wickedness of women.

<sup>8</sup> Sukumari Bhattacharji, Economic rights of ancient Indian Women, p.507

<sup>9</sup> Kumkum Roy, The power of gender and the gender of power: Explorations in early medieval history, Oxford university press, 2010, p.204-205.

<sup>10</sup> Sukumari Bhattacharji, Motherhood in ancient India, p.50.

<sup>11</sup> Sukumari Bhattacharji, Economic rights of ancient Indian women p.507

<sup>12</sup> Ibid,508.

One of the significant developments during this period was the growth of temples as ritual centres. Interestingly this development disentangles various threads of intricacies on the issue under discussion. Temples were maintained by donations made by the devotees. These donations were recorded in inscriptions and the name of the donor was mentioned explicitly. Interestingly, women used a variety of means of identification in this context. Some of them identified themselves as temple women, others used Varna identities, while women connected with royal family, mentioned these ties. Gifts to the temple were not simply gestures of piety. They were often an attempt to claim a right to certain functions within the temple, and probably to win the support of the temples authorities. In other words, gifts to the temples were a means of acquiring status. However, it appears that while women may have participated in a range of occupations like agricultural laborers, pastoralists and in a variety of crafts, women donors rarely mention their occupations. Thus, it appears that while women may have participated in a range of productive processes, this was generally considered as insignificant. Most prestigious occupations such as those of banker and merchant in charge of a caravan were generally exclusive male preserves. Kumkum Roy in this regard has suggested that access to resources was differential as far as men and women were concerned. Households were in all likelihood internally differentiated, with men being in control of the production, distribution, and consumption of resources. Therefore, for women donations to temples served as a significant mechanism of modifying the question of differential access to material resources.<sup>13</sup>

India's social and cultural fabric embodies within it a body of thought that seeks to formulate a peculiar social and cultural order, which not only nurtures gender hierarchy but also fortifies it by socially conditioning women to reconcile to such subordination. The whole structure is devised in a manner that it sanctions male dominance over women. Powerful instruments of religious and legal sanctions back the authority of men to dominate them. Therefore, for effective comprehension of true nature and character of evolutionary process of formulation of various social structures and institutions, it becomes imperative to identify such forces at work at various points of time.

## References

1. Agarwal, Bina (2009). 'The Gender And Environment Debate: Lessons from India', Environmental Issues in India; A Reader, Pearson.
2. Bennett, J.M. (2000). Medieval Women through modern perspective (Women's and gender history in gender perspective), American History Association.
3. Bhasin, Kamla (1999). Understanding Gender, Kali for Women.
4. Bhattacharji Sukumari (1990). 'Motherhood in ancient India' Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XXV, No. 42-43, October.1990.
5. Bhattacharji, Sukumari, (1991). 'Economic Rights Of Ancient Indian Women' Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XXVI, No.9-10, March, 1991.
6. Chakravarti, Uma (2006). Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories: Beyond the Kings and Brahmins of 'Ancient' India, Tulika Books, 2006.
7. Jha, D.N. (2004). Early India: A Concise History, Manohar.
8. Roy, Kumkum (2010). The power of gender and the gender of power: Explorations in early medieval history, Oxford University press.
9. Scott, Joan Wallach (1999). Gender and the Politics of History, Columbia University Press.
10. Sen, Amartya, (2005). 'Men and Women', the Argumentative Indian, Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity, Penguin Books India.

<sup>13</sup> Kumkum Roy, p.200 and 203.