

Equality of the Sexes in Indian Majoritarian Ethos: A Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts a perspective on the position of women in the society seen through socio-economic, socio-cultural locus and status with popular mass behaviour. In South Asian society, kinship determines relationships. Various theorists and philosophers have seen, perceived and expressed femininity through isms, norms, mores, conservatism, moderatism and radicalism. Power politics play a vital role in the division of labour among men and women in society. Naturally two socio-political groups emerged commonly known as patriarchy and matriarchy. The juxtaposition of the concepts of matriarchy and female powerlessness, racism and sexuality, power and status, gender and unregulated sexuality, majoritarianism in society and ochlocracy, popular sovereignty and unicameralism, mass opinion validation and the real struggle of feminism -- conjure up the scenario of the practicing socio-religious majority in India, even with immense multiplicity of strata, the equality of sexes and gender in socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-political sphere, the balance holding the upside down trends – the role-play in controlling societal dominance.

Down the ages in Indian majoritarian society, feminism has faced innumerable challenges to overcome and is still continuing to do so. But ideally, scripturally and among the devout religious elite majority in India, the role of women had been more or less equal to

men. Historically, India bore female rishis or rishikas from the days of the Vedas. The *Surajya Samhita*, defied discriminatory doctrines proposed by *Manusmriti*, and women empowerment continued at its own pace, followed by the sudden increase of women freedom fighters during British rule in India. With examples, the paper intends to show the seeds from time past paving way for the psycho-social transition of women by the society, finding ways to join the weak against the strong.

Equality of the Sexes in Indian Majoritarian Ethos: A Perspective

Most intellectuals like to find ways of joining in the struggle of the weak against the strong. The simplest short analysis of South Asian societies rests not upon a characteristic institution or complex of institutions but rather upon a characteristic process of change. Two institutional complexes are placed on a continuum, one end of which represents a hypothetical and simplified picture of the recent past, while the other end represents the future. Any society in South Asia can be understood by placing it somewhere on this continuum and by showing how and why this society seems to be moving from one end toward the other.

In South Asian society, kinship determines relationships. Position of women in the society can be seen through socio-economic, socio-cultural position and status with popular mass behaviour. Femininity and mass behaviour often tussle between the lines of expressive gender and sexual stereotypes and discrimination. Various theorists and philosophers have seen perceived and expressed femininity through isms, norms, mores, conservatism, moderatism and radicalism.

Data regarding the socio-political, socio-cultural and socio-economic position of women in society have been employed in social theorising in two principal ways: in the construction of hypothetical evolutionary sequences in which society is conceived as having evolved from a primordial state of mother rights; and in an argument which differs in content rather than in methodology, since it continues to associate present day tendencies with desirable end products in social evolution, in the correlation of human progress and in the progressive emancipation of women. Power politics play a vital role in the division of labour among men and women in society. Naturally two socio-political groups emerged commonly known as patriarchy and matriarchy.

Patriarchy on one hand argues and practices totalitarianism and authoritarianism of men. Patriarch may be defined as an extended autocratic authority of the male chief in a family. The definition has been extended to a member of the ruling classroom government of a society controlled by senior men. In recent years many different meanings have been given to the term “patriarchy.” There are definitions of patriarchy which are either too unclear or too precise about causal mechanisms to be of general theoretical use. ‘All forms of women’s oppression by men’, for example, is open to too many interpretations to be explained by straightforward sociological causal analysis. Writers on patriarchy refer to what they want whether the women like it or not. In other words, the discussion of patriarchy is about power, which varies by race and class, in addition to gender. What requires explanation is the frequency and persistence of male hierarchy. In differentiating between power and authority, it has been argued that ‘authority exists not in the person seeking power, but within the social environment’. For some sceptical liberals, there is a

resistance to the ideological implications of grand concepts such as “patriarchy” (or “neoliberalism”), which are seen as oversimplifications of a more complex reality. Only “patriarchy” seems to capture the peculiar elusiveness of gendered power – the idea that it does not reside in any one site or institution, but seems spread throughout the world. Only “patriarchy” seems to express that it is felt in the way individual examples of gender inequality interact, reinforcing each other to create entire edifices of oppression. It is not a stable concept. It has fallen in and out of fashion, flourishing at moments of feminist renewal. This highly speculative account of a matriarchy simultaneously birthed the idea of “patriarchy” as a historically contingent, manmade, societal structure that had eventually superseded matriarchy. If “patriarchy” has returned as an idea in public debate, it is because feminism has returned with renewed vigour, because inequality has not been eradicated.

Matriarchy argues and practices ‘tsarism and despotism’ of women. It is usually defined as a political system in which women are the dominant political actors, as opposed to patriarchy, in which men are the exclusive or primary heads of families, social groups, or political states. It can also be defined as a hypothetical social system in which the mother or a female elder has absolute authority over the family group; by extension, one or more women (as in a council) exert a similar level of authority over the community as a whole.

It has often been said that matriarchy emerges from an earlier social order called *hetaerism*, characterized by unregulated sexuality and female powerlessness. Sociologists often distinguish

between the two terms, identifying matriarchy as a tribe, clan, or society in which descent is traced matrilineally, that is, through the female line. Matriarchal organization was the rule for all societies at the early stage of the evolution of the society. Matriarchy has historical roots in societies that had clan systems where the men were the primary hunters, gatherers, or warriors. Being a mother in these societies was very significant because men were away for extended periods of time or many times killed in battle. This left women to be the heads of households or societies. Furthermore, for those that had tribal identities there was a need to establish and keep tribal territory. The endurance of the group depended on the number of healthy children that could survive into adulthood. Therefore the strength of the clan depended on the strength of the boys who would become potential hunters and the health of the girls to continue to bear children. Everyone knew who their mother was, but the identity of their father was often unknown. As time passed the nomadic or hunter-gatherer societies began to shift. Societies became more developed and clans began to become larger. Smaller clans developed into stronger tribes and stronger tribes became cities and eventually nations. As society evolved into a more industrious way of living, the need for children became less relevant. Wealth and resources were valued over the need for healthy children. It is nimble and lithe. Its margins of operation always seem to be expanding. Feminists have naturally tended to arrange their battle lines in front of the aspect of oppression that they have regarded as the most pressing. In recent times hammers of meanness have fractured some of the basic tenets of feminism with rising cases of harassment of men by women are on the rise, with one-eyed laws, institutions and commissions are made in favour of women. The real struggle of feminism which eventually called for equality of sexes and gender

in socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-political sphere is seemed to be withering away as the balance is turning upside down.

Racism and sexuality play another role in societal power and status which acts as a medium of instrument for exploitation of progressive creatures. This ignited the movement for rights and codependent relationships gave rise to socio-economic and socio-political instability. Many other socio political groups like Libertarian and Feminazi, emerged with opinionated ideas and demands. Majoritarianism played a vital role in controlling societal dominance. The features of majoritarianism in society include ochlocracy, popular sovereignty, unicameralism, and mass opinion validation. It often leads to societal dictatorship and consent disappears or is forced for removal. In this type of society, idealist theory is practiced in order to keep social stability. Individualism finds no place and the citizens are divided on the basis of gender, class and acquired property. Feminism from down the ages in a majoritarian society have faced innumerable challenges to overcome and is still continuing to do so.

In India we have seen dominant patriarchy, but Indian majoritarian ethos often diverted from their distinct practices and ideology. Thus from an unpopular academic perspective, the unheard, unknown and unexplored field of feminism can be seen through the pillars of history, that is there beneath the hues of scriptural idealism.

In India, both the student-community and the academic-fraternity start acquiring knowledge about religion and feminism through criticisms, insults and isms. Among many religions, Hinduism is portrayed as a religion of negativity with loud patriarchy and a sort of nonsense to be hated and ignored. The intuitions of distortion, elimination and conflict are the keys of confusion and indoctrination. Ignoring other perspectives, a close study revolved only around Manusmriti and Arthashastra, beyond which texts were mostly unexplored.

The Indian majoritarian ethos, namely Hinduism, has encouraged the highest freedom to its followers. As per *Rig Veda* shloka 6.61.2 it says “O scholarly woman, the way a river breaks away mightiest of hills and rocks, the scholarly woman destroys myths and hypes through her intellect alone. May we bow to women through our polite words and noble actions.” It means that the intellectual power by a scholarly woman should be respected as she has the power to destroy myths, hypes, superstitions at any cost like the way a river breaks a rock solid mountain to flow smoothly. In *Atharva Veda* shloka 14.1.64 says “O woman! Utilise your Vedic intellect in all directions of our home!” It is interesting to note that a woman has been asked to use all its intellect for the prosperity of home. The word home not only denotes her own home, rather it directs to serving her own motherland and making it prosper to its ultimate heights. In *Yajur Veda* shloka 12.15, says “If you desire brilliance, approach the mother. With her blessing, be the scholar of all subjects. Do not aggrieve the mother. Enlighten yourself with the pure blessings of the noble mother.” Through this shloka, the highest position of women, especially mother, portrays her entitled authority of giving all knowledge to her sibling. So it has warned the children not to ignore or neglect her mother at all. There has been a mention of men and women

regarding authority and position in society in *Sama Veda*, where equality among genders or sexes are mentioned as the key to socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political prosperity. Interestingly in *Manusmriti* shloka 3.55-59 it picturizes “Where women are worshipped, there the gods dwell” or “where the women are happy, there will be prosperity.”

Historically, female rishis or rishikas existed in the Vedas. Some names of women in these periods are Vishwavara, Apala, Ghosha, Indrani, Surya Savitri, Shashvati, Lopamudra, Arundhati, Maitreyi, Gargi, etc. When Mandana Mishra and Adi Shankaracharya had a debate, the mediator was Mishra’s wife Bharati. In the *Draupadi-Satyabhama-Samvada* parva of the *Vana Parva* of the *Mahabharata* (10th century BCE.), there is an interesting conversation between Satyabhama and Draupadi during the exile of the Pandavas. Satyabhama, the wife of Krishna, with love and curiosity enquires how Draupadi manages to keep the Pandavas devoted to her. She asks whether Draupadi has been successful through vows, or incantations, or beauty, or any specific medicaments. Draupadi, a woman of high self-esteem, reacted with anger at Satyabhama’s enquiry. She elaborated on her daily activities that she performed with utmost devotion and care. This conversation beautifully brings out the multidimensionality of the activities that Draupadi performed. Her role was not just limited to stereotypical household activities, but combined complex activities of the kingdom. This shows her superior physical, emotional and cognitive capabilities. The term “Maha Bharatee” is the epitome of Indian woman. The five women of Mahabharata – Satyavati, Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, and Rukmini depict the true power of Indian women. Draupadi refused to step into the court of Dhritarashtra, being summoned by Duryodhan after the defeat of the Pandavas in the Dice game. Draupadi

dared to argue with justification and strong will against the male community of that time. The story of Gargi engaging in a philosophical debate with King Yajnavalkya is given as an indisputable example of how women had access to education.

The majoritarian misinterpretation is somewhat different from that of the educated or the scholarly ones. With the passage of time, non-illuminated extracts and misconceptions have played a major role in misinterpreting the concept of womanhood. For example, let us take the expression “dowry” : the role of dowry was meant to be different from what the masses perceived. Rig Veda shloka 10.85.7, states “Parents should give their daughter intellectuality and power of knowledge when she leaves for the husband’s home. They should give her a dowry of knowledge.” Here the concept of dowry focuses on knowledge, but people perceived it as materialism. This key misconception proved to be disastrous till date, as we are witnessing infanticides and foeticides in plentitude even today. Foeticide and infanticide in the later years were totally based on vox populi and superstitious stereotypes.

The *Surajya Samhita*, a compilation of ideal administrative dictates from the Vedic period to 647 A.D., defied discriminatory doctrines proposed by *Manusmriti*, and women empowerment continued at its own pace. Devi Dhruvaswamini or Dhruvadevi in Gupta regime (early 4th to the late 6th century ce) acted boldly choosing her own husband and clearly said that if a lady does not have any right to choose her own husband and denies her freedom, then the scriptures, rules, norms or mores should be re-written. Then a solution was found interestingly. *Arthashastra* was taken into consideration where Vishnugupta Chanakya wrote that a woman has a right to choose

her own husband. Naiki Devi (12th century CE), who was the warrior queen of Goa and Gujarat defeated Muhammad Ghori in 1173 and the latter never ever dared to attack Saurashtra region again. Onake Obavva, was not a princess, but the wife of a guard at Chitradurga Fort. Down in southern India, Haider Ali, Sultan and de facto ruler of the Kingdom of Mysore, was trying to conquer Chitradurga but found no success even after numerous attempts. One day, the Sultan noticed a woman trying to enter the fort through a hole. Seeing this, he ordered his men to use the same way to enter and conquer the fort. Obavva noticed the activity and since her husband was away for lunch, she decided to take matters into her own hands. She guarded the crevice, making sure that no one entered the fort. By the end of it all, Obavva had killed almost 100 men. Keladi Chennamma after marrying King Somashekhara Nayak, became the queen of Keladi (Karnataka). Once when Shivaji's second son Rajaram was on a run from the Mughals, Chennamma gave him shelter. Upon learning that she took Rajaram under her wing, Aurangzeb sent his men to fight her. She fought bravely and defeated the Mughal Emperor's army. At the end of the war, a treaty was signed between Keladi and the Mughals, through which the Emperor recognised Keladi as a separate kingdom.

During British rule in India, there was a sudden increase of women freedom fighters as most of the men were forcibly taken by the Portuguese, French and Britishers to work as beggars. This was first witnessed during the decline of the Maratha Empire who gave a tough fight to the colonial aggressors. Rani Lakhshmi Bai, the queen of Maratha was the first freedom fighter of India who fought in the Independence Movement of 1857. She is always remembered for her bravery and valour as a warrior. She fought against British rule till the end and was considered a

symbol of resistance. Jhalkari Bai was a courageous woman and a fighter. With her fighting tactics, she killed tigers in the jungle and forced dacoits to retreat. She played a crucial role in the battle of Jhansi. Her close resemblance to Rani Laxmi Bai enabled her to take command of the army during the battle allowing the queen to escape. Kittur Rani Chennamma belonged to the Lingayat community, hailed from a small village in Karnataka. She was a valiant freedom fighter, well versed in sword fighting, archery and horse-riding. She ruled over her kingdom and rebelled against British rule in India. Rani Gaidinliu, Rani from Manipur, a daughter of the hills, is known for her resistance to British rule. She started at a young age joining the movement for the revival of the Naga Tribe which led to her arrest by the British when she was 17 years of age. She was imprisoned for 14 years. On completion of her jail term, she got engaged in a rebellion against the British in Cachar Hills and Hangrum Village. She fought for freedom with an indomitable spirit. Uda Devi, along with other Dalit ladies were known as Dalit *Veeranganas* of the Indian Independence struggle of 1857. She was a bold and resolute woman. Under Uda Devi's command, they fought bravely against the British. She is said to have shot dead British soldiers from a pipal tree. Known as Birbala, Kanaklata Barua was a freedom fighter from Assam. She actively participated in the Quit India movement in 1942. She protested against the British by waving the Indian flag and shouting slogans. She was shot dead by the police at the age of 18. Pritilata Waddedar was a revolutionary from Bengal who, after a brief stint as a school teacher, joined nationalist Surya Sen's group to fight against the British. She along with other fifteen revolutionaries attacked the Pahartali European Club, which had a sign board that read "Dogs and Indians not allowed". The revolutionaries set the club on fire and were later caught by the British police. To avoid being arrested, Pritilata committed suicide by consuming cyanide.

Captain Lakxmi Sehgal was a doctor as well as a social activist. She was the first lady in India to lead an all-women regiment, the Rani Jhansi Regiment of INA formed by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. She worked with her heart looking after untouchables and patients till she died. She was awarded the Padma Bhushan for her dedication to society.

Down the ages, ideally, scripturally and among the devout religious elite majority in India, the role of women had been more or less equal to men. The practicing socio-religious majority in India, even with immense multiplicity of stratas of Hinduism, is far from anti-feminist and anti-modern. In the public sector, armed forces, education, civil services, media and in the private sectors, this socio-religious majority is playing the just role at par with global levels of efficiency and prowess. The 21st century *Bharatvarsh* has unhesitatingly embraced the psycho-social transition of women, as they are comparatively more valued than men as the former are assured with various schemes, better facilities, services, education, jobs, entrepreneurship, rights and privileges.

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