

Indian Women and Environment : Some Sociological Formulations

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Since the involvement of various agencies like UN, the Women question has acquired the international dimensions. UN has given ample emphasis to highlight the women question. For social scientists there is an opportunity now not only to acquire but also analyse the data collected and gathered in the large data base at UN. It seems necessary not only to understand and assess the current status of women in various countries of the world but also to understand them in relation to various processes of social change. Unfortunately, gender studies entered quite late in sociological analysis. Although the scholars were earlier divided along the Marxist and the Conservative Ideological Camps, but now their convergence on highlighting the issues concerning women can also be noted. According to one such perspective the women, irrespective of their class, religion and nationality are all chained in the man dominated patriarchal society. Women's questions are now required to be examined in relation to their immediate social milieu and environment. There is a need to develop an appropriate perspective in which women's question could be properly examined. It seems necessary as neither the introduction of new technology nor work outside home could so far solve their problems. Mass media has presented the vulgarised image of women for furthering its commercial and entertainment interests. In the process of globalisation of economy this vulgarisation is likely to intensify even further. The women in India additionally suffer from some more problems like dowry-system which seems quite surprising to people in the west. Bride burning and bridegroom purchase are some other problems associated with the dowry-system in India. Additionally, child-marriage and high fertility rate have further aggravated the problems of Indian women. Intellectuals can play a vital role in it whereas social sciences can provide a perspective for it. The same has been examined in the following section.

UN and the Question of Women

UN Human Development Report (1995) refers to various issues related to the question of status of women examined for the period of over two decades. It highlights both positive and negative assessments about the women all over the world with the help of a large data base. Accordingly on the positive side, the status of women has improved two to three times faster than that of man, female life expectancy has increased 20 per cent faster than male life expectancy and

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the fertility rate has fallen 5.4 to 3.6 over the period of 20 years between 1975 to 1990 - 1995. On the negative side the report highlights that women who constitute nearly half of the world's population still have merely 36 per cent of the total available jobs, only one third share in the national income, just one tenth of the total seats in the Parliament or Legislative Assemblies and simply 5.5 per cent share in ministerial or cabinet position worldwide. Still out of 1300 million people living in absolute poverty over 70 per cent of them are women. The Un has been successful in highlighting the status and changing conditions of women but the world has still a long way to go in order to achieve the cherished goals of gender equality. Therefore, the efforts are needed to be stepped up in this direction all over the world.

Women Studies and the Discipline of Sociology

Sociology of Gender deals with issues related to various problems of women and as they are mediated through culture and social structure (Nicholas Abercrombie et al. 1984 : 204). Studies on gender issues have addressed themselves to and argued for establishing gender as an independent dimension of social stratification and that of division of labour in society. Although Kingsley Davis (1949) who had initiated the debate (alongwith Wilbert E. Moore in 1945) on social stratification initially disagreed with the proposition that women (or men) can constitute an independent category of social stratification. He maintained that neither sex nor gender form the sufficient criteria of stratification. It took a long time since then for women studies to get established as an independent, important and valid area of inquiry and research in sociology and other social sciences. For a long time neither in the formulations of functionalists nor in the Marxist formulations on class structure, women's studies could find its rightful place. However, much later some Marxist scholars realised the importance of the women's question and asked whether issues concerning feminism could become compatible with Marxism or not (M. Barrett 1980). From the Marxist point of view the very notion of the domestic division of labour goes against women as she bears a large chunk of burden at home.

The introduction and use of the new technology could also not alter this situation as it often meant transfer of the task from men to women (Nicholas Abercrombie et al 1984; M. Barrett 1980). Nor women's employment outside could change it as they had to work not only outside but as well as at home. Some Marxist scholars have gone upto the extent of saying that in the capitalist society families in fact have become such an institution where present and future needs of the working labour force are being taken care of and that too without any cost (Nicholas Abercrombie 1984; M. Barrett 1980 A. Oakely 1972). However, the oppression, subordination and exploitation of women has been challenged through women's liberation movements and the feminist ideology aiming basically at as well as advocating equal opportunities for men and women. Women's liberation movements originated from as well as propagated basically two types of ideologies namely, the Marxist and the conservative. In some of the Marxist formulations the inter-relationship of women's issues with class questions has been examined. Alternately, in the conservative formulations, particularly, in the U.S.A. and Western Europe the issues of gender discrimination against women highlight as well as expose the chain in which women independent of their class background, status and nationality etc. were caught in. Simon de Beauvoir (1965) particularly represents this view.

Women and their Image in Mass Media

Mass media particularly TV has played a negative role by presenting a vulgarised version of women specially when they are shown alongwith consumer goods in various advertisements. Jurgen Habermas (1979) argued that mass media does not represent the interest of society - and by implication that of women also. Mass media fulfills merely the needs and interests of entertainment and commercial endeavours. According to him the valid knowledge can only emerge from a situation of open, free and uninterrupted dialogue (Jurgen Habermas 1968, Thomas Mc Carthy 1978). In the process of the globalization of capitalist economy the vulgarisation of the images of women is likely to intensify further. However, the leadership concerned with women's question belonging to both ideological camps has developed a critical attitude towards mass media.

Problems of Women in India

In the patriarchal society like India women suffer with a sense of insecurity, feel threatened as well as vulnerable due to various problems concerning crimes against women (Hemlata Swarup and Sarojini Bisaria 1991 and Abha Chauhan 1990). Various problems affect women in India in different ways but dowry related problems among them happen to be most serious one which has no parallel any where in the world except the Indian sub-continent. In the Western society people cannot even think of such a problem and they felt quite surprised when dowry related problems come to their knowledge from various agencies of mass media like newspaper, magazines and television. They are just surprised to know about it and wonder why after all the parents of the bride are supposed to give a huge sum of money to the parents of bridegroom at the time of marriage. But Indians are well aware of and feel concerned about dowry related cases witnessed throughout the country. Although through legal interventions like Hindu Marriage Act (1955) and Anti-Dowry Act (1988) some efforts have been made on the part of the government to safeguard the interests of women but very little could be achieved by it. On the one hand the consciousness among women is rising but on the other hand crime against women are also increasing. Dowry-related problems have already crossed the boundaries of caste, class, religion and province. Women are discriminated world over but in India their subordination is a unique one due to dowry related problems. The striking feature about dowry related problems is that these problems continue throughout her life after the marriage and there is no easy solution of this. Several women succumb to the pressure of this mental torture and thereafter either commit suicide or leave husband's home to take shelter in the parent's house. On the other hand, several cases of bride burning are also reported in various newspapers and police stations. Additionally, women in India have been in vulnerable position also which include lack of education, child marriage, high fertility rate, death during the pregnancy and child birth, problems of widow remarriage, general poverty and above all of them the patriarchal nature of society. Government, various agencies of law and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have so far not been able to solve these problems confronting Indian Women.

Indian Women and Environment

Indian women are generally deprived of the social environment which is conducive for their development. In the male dominated patriarchal society they are suffering from various problems like discrimination against

problems, death during pregnancy and childbirth, problems of being a widow, or problems of the women whose husbands have left them are very common and well known to people in Indian society. Yet not much has been done to create an environment around them which is conducive for their development. Indian women are generally clubbed together with weaker sections of society and a certain percentage of seats is being reserved for them in rural panchayats and urban municipal bodies. Empowerment of women can solve many of the problems which they are facing now. Although the UN, the government of India, various state governments and NGOS are working but even then an environment for the development of women could not be created around them. On the other hand, women in general do not seem convinced that something is really being done for them. At this moment the role of intellectuals in general and that of social scientists in particular becomes very important. A few suggestions could be made here on behalf of the social scientists for creating the conditions of environmentally responsible behaviour towards Indian women. First, there is a need to generate a strong political will cutting across various political parties for solving these problems of women. Second, several cases concerning women's issues pending in the court of law may be settled as early as possible. Third, there is a need to build up an environment which is favourable for their development, here the role of ideology becomes very important. It could be concluded that it is ultimately the role of intellectuals to solve various problems of women and help in creating an environment which is conducive for their development

Note : *This is a revised version of the paper presented earlier at the National Seminar On 'Indian Women and Environmentally Responsible Behaviour' held at Barkatullah University, Bhopal, December 21 – 23, 1995.*

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