
RETHINKING NATIONALISM AND THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN

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Abstract: Every nation needs both spirit and energy to sustain itself from within and protect itself from without. The inner self, the soul, the home are thus to be protected and cherished and have to be kept with integrity and external influence must be resisted. But if the traditions do not allow its people to advance with time, those traditions become more a matter of disgrace than glory. Recent uproar among nationalists and even feminists regarding the picturisation of India in Leslee Udwin's documentary 'India's Daughter' in a certain way showed how these sections are over protective of an idea of India and that an attack, rape and eventual death of a woman is somehow less important than the protection of this idea.

With the advent of Britishers in India, new western ideas started to enquire the Indian mind. Many reformists like Raja ram Mohan Roy, Aurobindo Ghosh, Veer Savarkar, Vidyasagar, Dwarkanath Tagore, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Acharya Vinoba Bhave and others started questioning the very basic traditions of Indian Culture, one of the major concerns among them was regarding the position of women and such practices which rendered women no power over their lives as: sati pratha, devadasi pratha, child marriages and so on. The practices were entirely opposite to the scriptures. But soon these enquiries got lost with the advent of nationalist movements. It is quite surprising how the position of women changed in the first and the second half of the nineteenth century, from breaking the traditional shackles of patriarchy and standing equal with men to just being the bearers of honour and glory who needed protection at every step. The basic idea I want to deal with in this paper is to question whether modernity accelerated nationalism and rendered pace to the reforms and change or was modernity seen as unpatriotic and opposed in all its forms. Whether the enlightenment and reforms were only a reaction to the British presence or was there something else that provoked the society to change from within. Thus, my main focus will be on the anti colonial struggle in India and how the image of women changed around that struggle. While citing recent cases (Nirbhaya case) I also intend to flash light on whether nationalism comes in way of protection of individual rights.

Key Words: modernity, nationalism, reformation, sexual politics.

Introduction:

"A great civilisation is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within" -W. Durant
Nationalism is often interpreted as loyalty, and pride in one's nation and the ability to protect it whenever demanded. Modernity which was the pedestal for the nationalist movements on the other hand is considered anti nationalist. Nationalist movements in India started in the mid nineteenth century, and one of the true incarnations of these movements can be traced back to Bengal renaissance. Bengal during the mid nineteenth century was way ahead regarding the social and political reforms. Questions regarding the position of women aroused great enthusiasm and passion in people. Raja ram mohan Roy's entire campaign was based on abolition of sati pratha, vidyasagar's around his efforts for legalising widow remarriages. In a way the modernist movements which started in early nineteenth century were deeply concerned with the question of women. But with the passage of time, the nationalist upsurge began redirecting the movement. As the nationalist movements were based on the glorification of the past and everything that was traditional was defended, the popular opinion toward the women movement also hardened. Towards the mid and late nineteenth century, the modernist movements

suddenly stopped, the question of women now did not arouse the same passion in people as before. Also, imitation of any idea or practice from the west was considered as anti nationalist and thus was seen with utter disregard and hatred. According to Partha Chatterjee, "All attempts to change customs and lifestyles began to be seen as the aping of western manners and thereby regarded with suspicion; consequently, nationalism fostered a distinctly conservative attitude towards social beliefs and practices". The movement towards modernization was thus stalled by nationalist politics. Since these nationalist movements opposed the western ideas in every sense it was also important for them to glorify their honourable past as well as depict their culture, their civilisation, their women as superior to the west. In a way the feeling of patriotism overwhelmed the people to associate themselves with everything traditional and indigenous. However to consider the western values and way of life as an attack on Indian values is a misnomer because the 'western values' would in some form itself find resonance in the rich, diverse ancient Indian tradition such as gender equality, democracy, freedom of speech and enlightenment.

Notion of Nation, Nationalism and Modernity:
'The whole idea of nationalism is vague, as is the idea

of nation'; Satish C. Aikant in his essay "Reading Tagore: Seductions and Perils of nationalism" identifies nation as 'imagined community' and explains that the idea of the 'nation is a socio-political construction' which is based on "either a unifying cultural signifier or an overarching ideology". Historical evidences also prove that the idea of nationalism and politics revolving around it is created by those who benefit out of this politics. Even Rabindranath Tagore ridiculed the idea of nationalism as "the organized self-interest of a people that is least human and least spiritual". Asish Nandy for instance differentiates between nationalism and patriotism and opines that, "nationalism is not patriotism". He explains that how these two terms need not be used interchangeably and that they are in fact entirely opposite to one another. The essential difference between them being that, "patriotism is not an ideology but a sentiment whereas nationalism is" it involves hatred and resistance to anything and anyone belonging outside one's nation. Patriotism however acknowledges the "existence of communities other than the country and gives them due recognition, sometimes even priority". Rabindranath Tagore for instance said that: "the idea of the Nation is one of the most powerful anaesthetics that man has invented".

Even though it would be a bit hard to say that the entire nationalist project was just a political urge of the elite groups to share power with the British. It certainly can be claimed that they had an upper say in the decision making, they were the ones who decided how the changes were to be brought. And it was in the upper classes that women suffered most. Women were naturally inclined to work together with men in the poor sections of the society in order to meet the daily needs.

One of the arguments given by nationalists in favour of the state imposed ban on "India's Daughter" is that it maligns the image of the country abroad and that it might provoke people to commit such brutality. The nationalists have gotten it wrong because banning a documentary will not help improve India's image abroad because such cases will keep happening anyway. It is time for introspection that where have we gone wrong as a society. Movies or pictures do not induce people to commit crimes; more than representation of media or art people commit crimes because they are pre-disposed to certain beliefs and values that they think are right.

Modernity on the other hand in India came with the arrival of British in the early nineteenth century. Indians were influenced by the rationality and liberal ideas prevailing in west. Ghulam Murshid in his essay accepts that the early reform movements were impelled by the ideas imported from Europe (6). According to Sumit Sarkar, the renaissance reformers

were quite selective in their choice of reforms which they sought to make (7). If India would have adopted the western traditions, rejecting its own traditions, it would have westernised immediately. But westernisation was never the aim of the modernists. Reformists wanted modernity on Indian terms. One reason behind is, as also agreed by many historians that spiritually east was superior to west and that changes only in material and technological aspects were to be made.

An analysis of the Bhakti movement shows that reforms in Indian society did not occur all of a sudden with the coming of the western ideas, but were always integral to it. It can be said that only external influence could not have initiated changes even though it surely was a stimulus to the coming changes in society. Thus there must be a strong urge from within the society which compelled reforms to occur. One explanation is that when Indians were introduced to the western ideas and when they compared it to their own culture they realised that their culture was not the "barbaric or inferior" to the west in any sense (in theory). And thus the urge to prove their culture and traditions to be superior to the west started.

A very interesting phase that needs to be brought in here is the changing position and roles associated to women. Women have always been the change bearers. Women were seen as the emblem of culture and identity which needs to be protected at all costs, and any imitation of the western practices were thus looked down upon.

Changing roles of women: *"The figure of woman often acts as a sign in discursive formations, standing for concepts or entities that have little to do with women in actuality"* - Partha Chatterjee

Kate Millet while explaining sexual politics, defines politics as: "methods or tactics involved in managing a state or government", and suggests that the system of patriarchy functions by similarly managing females. The social construction is such that both male and female are assigned specific characteristics according to the more powerful group, which are the males. Kate Millet, in her essay explains that, "In terms of activity, sex role assigns domestic service and attendance upon infants to the female, the rest of human achievement, interest, and ambition to the male" (8). The situation becomes more precarious in nations fighting against colonialism or nations engaged in war, where culture becomes the tool to defend national identity. As women are often perceived as the epitome or symbol of their glorious culture and tradition and thus signify the national identity which must be protected at all costs. According to C.S. Lakshmi, "A notion of a defined, unalterable, definite essence operates strongly in constructing women's lives and in women

constructing themselves; Attempts are made to write this notion of unbroken tradition on the body of the woman so as to perceive women as carriers of authentic cultural or national identity and guarantors of its purity" (9).

In India during the early nineteenth century, some of the most barbarous practices were carried out as: the sathi pratha, the devadasi pratha against women. Movements to abolish such inhuman practices and support for widow remarriages were initiated. A change in social structure could not have been possible without bringing a change in the domestic condition where the initial socialisation of a person takes place. Women played a very important role in this process. It was accepted that, "no country could make significant progress in civilization whose females were sunk in ignorance" (10). But soon as the nationalist movements captured pace on the forefront, these movements and the support for these movements were taken aback. Changing social and domestic situations had a deep impact on the psyche of both men and women. In words of Partha Chaterjee, "all attempts to change customs and life styles began to be seen as the aping of western manners and thereby regarded with suspicion. Consequently, nationalism fostered a distinctly conservative attitude towards social beliefs and practices. The movement towards modernization was stalled by nationalist politics"(11). Another view of historians as: Sumit Sarkar, regarding the failure of the socialist movements in bringing about any change was the non-functioning of women themselves to change their positions. But according to Lata Mani, the reforms in the nineteenth century were not as much a concern for the position of women as they were about the political tussle and challenge between the colonisers and the colonised (12). Thus the debate surrounding women issues were more a matter of identification rather than actual implication. As Suruchi Thapar has also mentioned, "It is pertinent to note that the nationalist leaders benefited the most from the manipulations of representations of women. The benefits to women for participation in the nationalist movement by contrast, were always limited by their responsibilities for 'women's work' in the home"(13). A vast literature is available on the fears of western influence on Indian tradition. Women who tried to imitate western women and tried to become '*memsahib*' were

ridiculed by the society. It not only ask women to hold on to the old customs but tried to reform these old customs in order to give the Indian women and their tradition a higher or superior position than the western women. And in order to do so, Indian women were overloaded with innumerable responsibilities and the ideal identification. A woman was goddess, she was a mother, she was a wife and she was a symbol of purity and chastity but at the same time she was not far from the vulnerabilities of the weaker sex. She was expected to be educated, acceptable even to the westerners, and at the same time she should be able to do all the household chores, basically the male female relationship never changed, leaving the men, the material aspect to dominate the women, the spiritual aspect which anyway should always be protected. Her role could be moulded in whatever role pleased the society. Her emotions and the roles she wanted to play which could be against the common ideal were not at all entertained. But even then this so called new image of women was way different from the earlier one.

It has appeared to me that nationalism in a way accelerated the much awaited reforms in the Indian society. The modernist movements which were necessary to be amalgamated into the Indian tradition paved way for not only political changes but also social and cultural traditions. In all societies modernisation and nationalism both occur not simultaneously but one occurs because of the other. Modernity is responsible for the changing identities of nations. Whenever threats concerning national identity occur, the love, respect and protection for one's cultural identities becomes irresistible. Secondly, nationalism has not been the obstacle in the reforms for women but has accelerated them. In Indian case, it was quite obvious that Indians had to borrow from west in material aspects, and then the only way to fight them back was by protecting the inner self or the spiritual aspect, which west could never dominate. This prompted them to picturize their culture, their traditions, their practices as the purest. The most feasible way to do so was by projecting their women as the epitome of their glory and honour. What is needed thus is greater discourse on whether the reforms changed the position of women for better or worse. I am compelled to say that the reformists forgot the individual identity of women while creating the idea of women.

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