

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Context & Concerns

Editor

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Thiruvananthapuram

Women Empowerment: Context and Concerns

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AN ANALYSIS OF A NEED FOR A SOCIOLOGY OF GENDER VIOLENCE IN INDIA

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Introduction

Violence against women is not a new or recent phenomenon. Women have been victims of violence all through the ages, in all social orders and regions and religious communities all over the world. It is indeed ironic that India which had given rise to apostles of peace and non – violence ,women have had to bear the brunt of violence- domestic as well as public, physical as well as emotional and mental.

Violence against women can be viewed in a historical perspective, for it is to a large extent linked to her vulnerable 'status' in the social order. In the Vedic age women were supposed to enjoy a relatively comfortable position in the social hierarchy as we hear about women philosophers like Gargi and Maithreyi and their active participation in social gatherings and sacrifices. This position was very soon diluted and the doors of educational, economic, social, political, cultural and religious opportunities were denied to them and the very birth of a son became an occasion to rejoice ,that of a girl a matter of grief and despair. Commodification of women ensued from this period and fair and dignified treatment meted out to them became a matter of rare occurrence.

Indian society is going through a phase of immense transition, especially where gender regimes, gender transition, gender structures and gender relations are concerned, need to understand and explore why this form of change is concomitantly producing higher degrees of gender violence. The Durkheimian notion of 'Anomie' is very helpful in analysing gender violence. Anomie as Durkheim observes is "disturbance of the collective order". This luminal period then becomes a period or an age of normlessness in which society is temporarily incapable of exercising its regulative function. Today older moral frameworks provided by kinship and marriage systems within which human action and human relationships were patterned are giving way to newer but relatively unclear moral frameworks. Hence individuals are often not sure as to whether what they are doing is right or wrong. Additionally desires are fuelled far beyond the possibilities of their actualization. This too Durkheim pointed out is a facet of an anomic state. At

the same time, there is an unprecedented growth of individualism, a greater sense of the self which has both its positive and negative traits.

We will now make a statistical assessment of the magnitude and extend of gender specific violence in India over a period of time. Between 1998 and 2011 the rate of crime committed against women went up from 7 to 10 % of the total number of crimes. In 2012 as per the records of National Crime Records Bureau the rate had escalated to 10%. The figures showed a rapid increase to 15% in 2018. As most scholars would agree many of the crimes committed against women never get reported and it implies that the actual number would be even more higher. Reporting of kidnapping and crimes within marriage (dowry related crimes and domestic violence) has increased drastically between 1998 and 2018.

The Domestic Violence Act passed in 2005 lists many forms of violence within the so called sacred and dignified precincts of home-“Domestic violence includes the actual abuse or threat of abuse that is physical, sexual, verbal, emotional and economic. Harassment by way of unlawful dowry demands from the woman or her relatives is also covered under this definition. Recently the law related to sexual offences has brought in many other types of offences under its ambit which were previously not included within its purview-stalking, voyeurism, sexual harassment, acid attacks, attempt to disrobe a woman etc. The definition of the term Sexual Harassment has been widened to include

- Physical contact and advances involving unwelcome and explicit sexual overtures
- A demand or request for sexual favours
- Making sexually coloured remarks
- Forcibly showing pornography
- Any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of sexual nature.

Violence against women in India

Most statistics today tell us that rape is most often committed by people known to the victim and takes place very often within the family, extended family, or by a person known to the victim. As social scientists how do we explain this aspect of violence within the family? This supposed to be sanctuary of a woman itself seems to become a hell for her. Female infanticide and sex selective abortions also take place at the hands of the family members. Does this seriously mean that we need to rethink the institution of family and relationships within it in a gendered fashion? Many

Sociologists and social thinkers and even economists like Dr. Amartya Sen (1991) now term the family as a site of cooperative conflicts and point to power relationships within the family as shaped by gender, age, generation and access to resources. In their work on women and property in Kerala, Panda and Agarwal (2006) show that women who own property face less domestic violence than those who do not.

Further, women can be subjected to violence at any stage of their life cycle; pre-birth elimination through sex selection and infanticide that female fetuses and infants face, neglect of young girls can lead to early death, mature women face many kinds of violence, direct and indirect, related to reproduction, sexuality, marriage, and even in old age; some parts of India have been notorious for the very treatment meted out to widows.

Sociologists like Veena Das have attempted to sense and explain different types of violence against women in India (1998). She has assiduously studied the violence women suffered during the partition of the country when they were abducted, raped and tortured. She has also analysed extensively the violence perpetrated against women in Delhi in 1984 in the aftermath of the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi. She locates the explanations of such violence in the relationship of the female body to that of the nation and the community, with the nation or the community being mapped in the body of the woman. As a woman reproduces the nation through her reproductive capacities and through socialising the next generation, warring sides may attempt to control her sexuality as well as her fertility.

Sociologists and others have documented how female body bear the burden of men's honour, family honour and even caste, community and national honour (Menon and Bhasin 1998). When men revenge the honour of any of these units, it is often expressed through violence perpetrated on the female body which at that point of time variously represent the Hindu/Sikh/Muslim body, the Indian or Pakistani or Bangladeshi body, the Dalit body or one belonging to a particular family or caste. India even of recent days witness many similar types and forms of violence which serves the purpose of retribution and ostensibly the very recovery of male honour. As Veena Das puts it "her body was simply there as a symbol in this feud for an exchange of violence and for the very competition of honour" (1990;69)

Conclusion

Sociology as well as other positive sciences should turn their respective attention to documenting gendered violence and seeking its social sources in the family, kinship grouping, class, caste, work place, the state, and in the patriarchal structure that undergird state and society. At the same time, it must pay definite and serious attention to female agency in contesting these structures in the struggle for greater gender equality. Thus the major concern today is to redefine the way we approach gender violence especially in the backdrop of the deeply embedded social structures. Empowerment as stated should rightly begin with active involvement and participation of women. Michel Foucault, argues that hegemonization has crossed all limits and even includes hegemonization of female body and mind.

Unless women throw off the shackles which ignore and indemnify their potential, their skill and spirit, they cannot be empowered. The very process of empowerment has to happen only if the entrenched nature of the gender sensitive violence is abandoned and a gender specific academic discourse fructify in its full bloom. The responsibility of a social science is to convert and to transform a public discourse into an academic discourse.

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