

Women and Structural Violence

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WOMEN AND STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE IN INDIA

In May-June of this year, when I was writing this paper, the leading newspapers of India reported :

Fifteen women died of burns in this city over a 10 day period between May 24 and June 4 this year. The blaze of deaths aroused public sentiments, but in all but three cases nobody is likely to be punished.¹

Bride burning most prevalent in Delhi.²

Bride burning is not a new phenomenon in Delhi. In 1981, the Union Minister of State for Home Affairs had stated in the Parliament that the reported "women burning incidents" in Delhi stood at 394 in 1980.³

According to official figures 332 cases of "accidental burning" were reported in 1982 as against 305 in 1981. These figures show that nearly one woman is being incinerated everyday in the capital. But according to various women's organisations an equal number of accidental burning cases go unreported. Many times this is on account of the refusal of the police to register the cases.⁴

The dowry witch-hunt has taken its heaviest toll in the middle class urban areas, but the burning of women for more money and domestic goods in the form of dowry is quite widespread in the slums and rural areas.

Investigations have indicated that women burning is prevalent all over the country, it is most acute in Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, the Western Uttar Pradesh and the Saurashtra region in Gujarat. In Uttar Pradesh where I was engaged in a study of the rural women's work participation and sex roles, the maximum 'dowry deaths' were reported from Thakur and Brahmin caste groups. Both Thakurs and Brahmins are the high caste Hindus and have a recorded history of

female infanticide.⁵ Over a decade and a half ago, the Gujarat Suicide Enquiry Committee's report noted 90 per cent of suicide cases to be of women. 867 women committed suicide due to "family tensions" (as against 302 men) and "particularly in the cases of poorer women, the causes of the tension were often related to dowry".⁶

They are more than just a crime statistics. They are a manifestation of political malaise in India and malady in the organisation of our socio-economic system. If we want to understand the nature of structural violence on women in India today, it is necessary to look at women's subordination in the structure of material production. The issue of peace and women in a third world society can be studied only in a historical context. I have been struggling with the problem of a historical perspective on the subject and how the Indian leadership of the Nationalist movement period tried to involve women in the freedom struggle and later in the reconstruction of society. To what extent the family given its present nature in India is responsible for creating and maintaining structures and ideologies of subordination: structures that inherently resist the participation of women in decision-making and ideologies created by a sex/gender system to maintain existing power relations and forms of exploitation?

What is significant to our understanding^{is} that violence runs along lines of power in the sex/gender system. Family with its basic axis of the sexual division of labour is the principal institution that underlies the sex/gender system. The violence of women burning in the privacy of home has to be examined with regard to its systematic relevance. This paper, therefore, intends to include more than just a description of the kinds of violence meted out to women. We need to look at the familial authority relations according to which the dowry violence is organized and of property relations which this authority structure realizes and maintains. The subordination of women in the internal life of families extends beyond families of the specific type to instill a general understanding of women's domestic role. Socio-economic arrangements of sex/gender based disparity eg. lower wages

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for women, their under reporting in the labour force, and the disadvantaged position of women in health and education have been justified on the assumption that women's employment and physical existence is secondary to that of men. There is, therefore, a close connection between the family and the organisation of politico-economic system. In other words, the family approach legitimizes the subordination of women in the policy making and the organization of economy.

The Constitution of India declared the equality of sex as a guiding principle and thereby acknowledged that a family should be a basically equalitarian unit founded on equal rights and willing choice by both the individuals who form a family.⁷ In practice, however, the subordination of women to men and junior to senior pervades family life in all classes and castes in India. The ideology of subordination is required by the material structure of production. Women are subordinate to men (and thereby dependent too) because men may own land and hold tenancies while women by and large cannot. Customary practices preclude women from inheriting land as daughters, except in the absence of male heirs. This is wrongly justified that women receive their share of patrimony at the time of marriage in the form of dowry.

The Hindu Succession Act which has put the daughters on an equal footing with the sons in regard to the succession to the parental property and the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 are not a dead letter by any means but they can be appealed to in certain circumstances - in cases of disputes among families or where land ceiling legal provision makes it expedient for large land holdings to be divided 'on paper' among male and female heirs. In most of the cases, daughters waive their land rights in favour of their brothers. Otherwise, they would be denounced as 'selfish' sisters and would risk alienation or severance of the ties with the natal families. Women's effective exclusion from the possession and control of land is largely the basis of their subordination and dependence on men in the rural India.

Women marry over long distances and move out of their parental homes to the households of their husbands. Young women are advised that once married they should leave the husbands' house only after death and bear all pain and humiliation. In order to adjust in the new family, a daughter-in-law has to be on her best behaviour - submissive and obedient to her in-laws and demonstrating 'selflessness' about her possessions. Her husband's family received cash, jewellery and domestic goods usually made or bought specially for the purpose of dowry. It is incorrect to regard dowry as a kind of premortum inheritance of the daughter who has to leave her natal family to join another family but who has some rights over the former.⁸ There are two important points in this regard, first the dowry is transferred to the bridegrooms family and not transferred directly to the bride.⁹ The parents-in-law have full control over the distribution of dowry. Second, land is never gifted as dowry, as far as I know. In the final analysis, the women is property-less for she is unable to generate any wealth from her the so called property, as a son would be able to do at a man's death. I would argue that the dowry witch-hunt in India stems from women's subordination in the structure of material production, the organisation of marriage and family and the sexual division of labour; these create gender-specific personalities - men tend to value their role as the principal one in the national economy and 'bread winners' and supporters of the family while women are excessively undervalued for their dependence, ignorance of outside world and preoccupation with children and household chores.

It is important to point out at this point that it would be wrong to assume that women in India are passively groaning under an ever increasing oppression within and outside the family. Women have organized to protest the rapes, the sexual harrassments and the burnings or killings of their fellow women. Demonstrations and meetings are organized throughout the country to protest against direct and structural violence on women. For the past few years in Delhi and other major cities in the country, women's organisations

and housewives have had sporadic demonstrations against the husbands, in-laws, lawyers and police officers involved in the cases of women burning or killing by other means. In the early August 1982, thirty women's groups in Delhi jointly organized a protest march against dowry and they were joined by several hundred ordinary women and bystanders spontaneously.

These demonstrations on the one hand have acted as checks on the husbands and in-laws by exposing the real nature of violence or crime (ie., protracted harrasment and battering of the women followed by killing and/or burning her) and thereby disallowing an easy exit through a facade of suicide or accidental death. On the other hand, they have pressed for effective implementation of laws, tightening of the loopholes in the legal procedures and giving due considerations for women's unspoken experiences of harrasment, torture and molestation through proposals for reorganisation of arrangement for police enquiries. Women's organized efforts could no longer be ignored and the government responded by setting up an anti-dowry cell in Delhi, with a woman having the rank of Deputy Commissioner of Police incharge. It is obligatory for the cell to investigate cases of dowry harrasment and any unnatural death of woman within the six years of her marriage. Strangely enough, the woman cop incharge in a recent interview with a journalist said :

"It is very difficult to decide whether a burn case is suicide or murder. In both cases the victim is doused from head to toe in kerosene and severely burnt. We feel that 80 per cent of the cases which are brought to our notice are suicides. The husbands and in-laws are certainly culpable because it is their harrasment which drives the person to this act."¹⁰

Notwithstanding, conscious women activists have made skits, plays, and movies on the oppression and exploitation of women and have launched protests and have set-up women's centres where women in distress could get in touch with and could get help, support and legal aid. Feminist magazines and network bulletins have reported on both the problems of

Historically speaking, during the nationalist period under the leadership of Gandhi, there emerged a distinct approach to the role of women in society. The leadership realized that women were "condemned to domestic slavery" and therefore sought to liberalize the family to expand women's activities in the public sphere within politically acceptable limits.¹⁵ Women were urged to give up purdah and to liberate themselves from their family-centred roles to participate in the struggle for freedom of the country. Gandhi viewed women's oppression as historic and nearly universal. He lamented their non-participation in social, political affairs, women's sexual subjection into their role as 'man's plaything', women's lack of autonomy in the use of their bodies; and their backward consciousness which made them accept their low social position.¹⁶ Women had developed, however, courage, endurance and 'moral strength' to deal with these oppressions. In Gandhi's view, these qualities made women the 'natural leaders' of a non-violent struggle against unjust socio-political system. He wanted to 'feminize politics' because women had the potential to give a blow to established socio-political power structure and could be vanguards of a non-violent struggle for a just and non-exploitative socio-political order.¹⁷

This seemed a radical stance but the kernel of women's oppression - the sexual division of labour and thereby her subordination in the structure of material production were neither fundamentally questioned nor altered. The "natural division of spheres of work" between men and women was maintained for a woman has the duties of motherhood and house-keeping. "She is essentially mistress of the house. He is the bread-winner, she is the keeper and distributor of the bread."¹⁸ Gandhi observed in Sevagram that peasant "men and women work on the fields, the heaviest work being done by the males. The women keep and manage the homes. They supplement the meagre resources of the family, but man remains the bread-winner."¹⁹

The Glorification of women's role as guardian of Hindu morality and spirituality and their self-sacrifice and endurance and central to the concept of non-violence advocated by Gandhi, while he has frequently referred to women in their domestic roles. One must admit though that there simply has not been enough research to do justice to Gandhi's view on women's historic role. The dominant trend is, however, the ambivalence on women's role. Gandhi was against the excessive subordination of women to the men but not to the fact of women generally playing a socially subordinate role. This contradiction is related to the entire Gandhian worldview and idealism of "mutual cooperation and profound outlook for the development of all", including the powerful class of the rich and landlords and the social structure of hierarchic, patriarchal family.

In the thirties and forties, there was an uneasy alliance between feminism and nationalism.²⁰ While women's organisations accepted a subordinate and complementary role in politics they repeatedly came in conflict with the Congress when it threatened women's issues and alienated women members. At the initial exclusion of women from the Dandi March in 1930, the Women's Indian Association protested against the Congress leadership: "This division of sexes in a non-violent campaign seems to us unnatural and against all the awakened consciousness of modern women." The Association demanded, that "no demonstration organised for the welfare of India should prohibit women from a share in them."²¹ The women's Organisations thus admonished the Congress Party leadership and showed that political participation has a restricted meaning in a stratified, patriarchal society where women merely endorse the decisions made for them and do not determine their own actions, roles, institutions and socio-economic environment.

In the following years, the three basic components of the strategy of planning in India i.e., land reforms, co-operative farming and Community development in the fifties and sixties were ridden with class, caste and gender relations. Women's equality and develop-

ment formed a feature of constitutional guarantees in the post-independence India. Women were brought into development planning, the legal barriers to the advancement of women were removed and individual women could rise to new positions. Women were formally given equal salaries for equal jobs, equal rights to property and equal rights to control the means of production. However, while a number of legislative measures were adopted to guarantee legal equality to women, in practice there was hardly any opportunity provided for women to learn their new roles; the process of revolutionary transformation in the social position of women came to an end by being submitted to an anti-participatory, elitist bureaucratic structure of exclusion and manipulation. Women's movement succumbed to an anti-participatory tendencies of economic growth and modernization in nation-building efforts.

The urban-centred development strategy in India aggravated urban-rural differences, while making only a slight change in the role of middle class women. Women's household role was reinforced by the confluence of a family policy and development strategy that largely, precluded mobilization of rural women through non-availability of education and lack of skill acquisition. Women, like the lower castes, in India's stratified society were treated as recipients (not as participants) of development plans and programmes. There was hardly any government policy or programme carried out to organize rural women (who constitute 80 per cent of female labour force) and to make them conscious of the benefits intended for them.

It is evident from the study of documents available on Etawah Pilot Development Project that planners and policy makers showed resistance to women's interests initially.²² Later when they introduced the women's component in the rural development programme, it was designed after the American Home Science Extension programme.²³ The integration of women into rural development through Mahila Mandal (Rural Women's Organisations) - most of them were paper organizations - was a scheme with a middle class bias using American text books and

equipment for demonstrating home science techniques. Rural women were given training in crafts, sewing, kitchen-gardening, jam and jelly making. Its objective, as stated by the Director of Women's Programmes, was to help the rural women become "a good wife, a wise mother, competent housewife and a responsible member of the village community."²⁴ Protagonists totally disregarded women's work in the rural economy, specifically their contribution to agriculture and side-line production eg. cattle-rearing, fishing, weaving etc. Most of these wife, mother improvement programmes have proved a failure because they are irrelevant to the needs of women in subsistence agriculture and are unable to augment women's income in any way.

The Chinese development experience suggests that the nature of state is different in a socialist society. The political system in China puts forward the possibility of a transformation of the state into a "community of proletariat citizens who exercise their own control over the conditions of their existence."²⁵ They participate as individuals in social development largely characterized by class and sex neutrality. The party leadership repeatedly expressed concern for women's participation in social production and paid special attention to the problems of women and the family, to demolishing the Confusian, patriarchal hierarchical family structure in their socialist reconstruction.

The Chinese Communists learned from the inadequacies of the early fifties when they followed the Soviet plan of development and maintained hierarchical division of labour. In the years following the Great Leap Forward in 1958, the Chinese revolutionists attached great importance to the integration of economic development with the creation of culture and ideology of anti-authoritarian social relations. "The different character of Chinese economic policy in these periods has accented the issue of women's liberation and is one reason for the relatively deeper and more thorough-going transformation of the family in the course of the Chinese Revolution."²⁶

As pointed out in my earlier studies on comparative analysis of Indian and Chinese experience, participation of women in social production and increased political consciousness regarding the means with which to achieve the goal of a socialist society, were fundamental to the women's movement in China. Mao Zedong believed that the key to toppling the feudal, hierarchical system and Confucian ideology lay in the overthrow of the landlords who formed the backbone of all rural authority. Once the peasants succeeded in seizing power from the landlords, the other authoritarian-feudal systems would crumble. At the same time, Mao felt that special hardships suffered by women in the traditional social order of China had provided them with great revolutionary potential. The party leadership urged the cadres to 'pay special attention to the forces of women' and help women to organize themselves into associations intended to draw them into revolutionary movement and productive activities.²⁷ The women's associations took up the matter of maltreatment of wives by husbands and in-laws. Although the men at first exercised strong resistance, the increased confidence, support and earning powers which women gained through these associations gradually helped to allay their complaints.

In the present day China, the family has received attention both from the party leadership and All-China Women's Federation. The major task of the recently established Marriage and Family Research Institute is to study the problems related to marriage and family and to help formulate policies to bring in socialist ethics.²⁸ While feminist literature and women writers in China did not make any direct attack on the family and institution of marriage, a suggestion was made, however, for the radical transformation in relationships in the family, in the attitudes of 'bad' husbands with the help of political education and legal measures.

Unlike in China, the state serves the interests of ruling class and gender in India. Work opportunities and participation of women has been declining over the last several decades. Green Revolution technology on the one hand denies women employment opportunities

otherwise available to them, on the other hand stereotypes all those jobs which pay less and require less skill, forcing women to take up jobs which come to be regarded as purely female tasks. As a consequence, the invisibility of women as producers of economy is enhanced and they increasingly lose ground in the traditional economic and decision-making roles. There was no attempt to redefine the roles of women; perhaps most important, the division of labour within the family retained all its force.

However, technological relationships and development planning are by no means the only impediments confronting women in India. Unless there is a significant change in the hierarchical and authoritarian structure of family to effect women's socio-economic equality through their inclusion in the possession and control of land and other property, the extent to women's independence and freedom from structural violence would be limited. The problem of structural violence is to be seen as the problem of the process of mobilising and empowering women to overcome their inability of the past and to acquire ability to redefine their roles in the sex/gender system and in the organisation of economy. With regard to the specific programmes for women's development, the task of planning and policy-making is to be seen as to reorganise and transform the relationships within the organisation of marriage and family and to effect equality to powerless, dependent and dispossessed masses of women in the structure of material production and the distribution of property rights.

FOOTNOTES

1. Indian Express, 19 June 1983.
2. Ibid, 20 May 1983
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Police Department document to Inspector General of Police NWP and Oudh, from Secretary to Government of NWP and Oudh, dated 15 October 1892. File No. 1544/VIII 661 A-4 of 1892, State Archives, Lucknow.
6. Kalpana Ram, "Women's Liberation in India", unpublished paper, June 1980.
7. For a discussion on the Constitutional definition of the family and confusion about the concept, see A.R. Desai, Urban Family and Family Planning in India, Bombay, Popular Prakashan 1980, Chapter I and II.
8. I disagree with Goody in regarding dowry as a means by which daughters inherit in Eurasian societies. J. Goody, Production and Reproduction : A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain, Cambridge University Press, 1976.
9. "During the drafting of Hindu Code, Dr. Ambedkar had suggested a clear provision laying down that whatever was given as dowry should belong to the daughter. However, this was not pressed or pursued with the result that giving or rather demand for dowry grow so rapidly that even communities which never had this practice started following this." Latika Sarkar, "Legal Aspects of Dowry" in How, Vol. 6 No. 3, March 1983.
10. Patriot, New Delhi, June 24, 1983.
11. Towards Equality, Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Government of India, Department of Social Welfare, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, 1974.
12. William J. Goode, "Why Men Resist" in Rethinking the Family. Some Feminist Questions, edited by Barrie Thorne and Marilyn Yalom, (Orient Longman, 1982) p. 132. He compares the position of men with that of other dominant groups and to the complex dialectic of men's control and women's efforts to combat and circumbent it, especially within the relationships of intimacy and mutual dependence in the family.

13. Dharendra Narain ed., Explorations in the Family and other Essays, Bombay, Thacker & Co., 1975. See Chapters I and II, also see, M.G. Kulkarni, "Family Research in India", in P.K.B. Nayar, Ed., Sociology in India, Restrospect and Prospect, Delhi, B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1982.
14. For a detailed analysis, see Elizabeth Wilson, Women and Welfare State, London, Tavistock Publications, 1979.
15. M.K. Gandhi, Young India, 26 February, 1918.
16. Vina Mazumdar, "Another Development with Women : A View from Asia", in Development Dialogue, the Dag Hammarskjold Foundation, Uppsala, 1982 : 1-2, pp. 67-68.
17. Sugata Dasgupta, 'Emancipation of Women in India', (Unpublished paper prepared for the Committee on the Status of Women in India).
18. M.K. Gandhi, Women and Social Injustice: Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1947, p. 27.
19. Ibid.
20. Geraldine Forbes, "The Indian Women's Movement : Struggle for Women's Rights or National Liberation" in The Extended Family, Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan Ed. by Gail Minault (Delhi, Chanakya Publications, 1981).
21. R.K. Sharma, Nationalism, Social Reform and Indian Women, New Delhi, Janaki Prakashan, 1981, p. 65.
22. Pilot Development Project in Etawah was precursor of Community Development Programme in India. For a detailed study, see Govind Kelkar. The Impact of Green Revolution of Women's Work Participation and Sex Roles, Geneva, ILO, 1981.
23. Rekha Mehra and K. Saradmoni, Women and Rural Transformation, New Delhi, Concept, 1983, pp. 721.
24. Parimal Das, "Women Under India's Community Development Programme" in International Labour Review, No. 80, July 1959, pp. 26-45.
25. Karl Marx, The German Ideology, pp. 116-117.
26. Eli Zaretsky, Capitalism, The Family and Personal Life, Pluto Press, 1980. p. 102.

27. Govind Kelkar, "Women in Post Liberation Societies: A Comparative Analysis of Indian and Chinese Experiences" in National Liberation and Women's Liberation, eds. Maria Mies and Rhoda Reddock, (The Hague, Institute of Social Studies, 1982); also Govind Kelkar, China after Mao, A Report on Socialist Development, (Usha Publications, 1979), Chapter 9.
28. Govind Kelkar, "Women's Studies in the People's Republic of China" Sanya Shakti, A Journal of Women's Studies, New Delhi, Centre for Women's Development Studies, Vol. I No. 1, July 1983, pp. 53-58.

The Centre for Women's Development Studies is a group of professionals striving to work for the realisation of women's equality and development in all spheres of social life. It visualises its main role as that of a catalyst, in assisting women to realise their full potential and exercise their active influence on society and its transformation. The goals of national policy which support fuller and equal participation of women in all aspects and spheres of national life and development can be promoted if the ideas and institutions that marginalise women's role and contribution in society are weakened or eliminated.

The main objective of the Centre, therefore, is to help in the promotion, development, and dissemination of knowledge regarding evolution of women's roles in society and trends in social and economic organisation which impinge on their lives and status, with a view to :

- i. enhancing women's effective participation in the development process;
- ii. assisting in the framing and implementation of measures for realising women's equality; and
- iii. changing social attitudes regarding women.