

An account of how gender has been problematized as a crucial determining factor in men's and women's lives in the last fifty years has to include a celebration of women's initiatives and struggle, the systematic research that has highlighted women's increasing marginalization in the economy and polity, and the gaps and dilemmas that the women's movement and women's studies have to grapple with.

With independence, it was felt that the 'women's question' was resolved since formal equality for women had been explicitly inscribed in the constitution. While this had resulted in some gains, especially for middle-class women in the fields of education and employment, it was not until the seventies that the discrepancy between the constitutional assurances of equality and a socio-cultural environment that systematically denies women such equality came to be visible as a political issue.

Shattering the post-independence complacency was the groundbreaking report of the Committee on Status of Women in India, *Towards Equality* (1974), which was a stark pointer to the decline in the position of women since the early decades of this century. The report provided impetus for a spate of influential studies that drew attention to the demographic trends of the declining sex ratio, the increasing disparity in the life expectancy and mortality rates of men and women and in their access to education, health care and livelihood.

In the late seventies it was the issue of violence against women, whether in the 'sanctuary' of their homes or outside on the streets, in places of work or in custody of the police, that galvanized the women's movement in the country. Violence against women that had been hidden from public view in the name of private life thus came to the fore as an explicit expression of class and gender-based power thanks to the efforts of the women's movement. These efforts also revealed the systematic and distinctive forms of violence that women from various sections in our society had to face - from caste and class violence, violence by the state, to domestic violence and 'modern' forms of violence like female foeticide through technological innovations such as the amniocentesis test.

The first National Conference on Women's Studies was organized in 1981. These years also saw the

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initiation of research efforts in academic institutions, including the establishment of UGC-sponsored Women's Studies Centres. The purpose of women's studies, according to early researchers, was to critically examine and redefine the conceptual frameworks of disciplines and to act as a catalyst in social transformation. The hitherto middle-class bias gave way to focus on poor, rural women and to women working in the unorganized sector, caste and class linkages that devalue the contribution of women to society, and to the relationship between macroeconomic changes and women's status. It was held that women's studies should not be yet

The significant participation of women in post-independence mass movements aiming for a broad political or social change has been an active area of investigation. Struggles such as the anti-price rise movement in Maharashtra and Gujarat, the students' movement in Bihar and Gujarat in the early 70s, the environment movement of Chipko, and the Naxalite movement in Bengal, Bihar and Andhra are a few examples of people's movements that included a deep involvement of women. The fact that women participated in these larger struggles but nevertheless had not evolved their own platform for focusing their issues till the mid-70s

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one more discipline, but the organized knowledge on women and gender has to be enriched through interaction of theory and field experiences.

In the last twenty years or so, women's scholarship, writing and protest have opened up almost every discipline for critical scrutiny. A number of studies in feminist historiography, for instance, have highlighted how gender ideologies and broad social change which include economic and political change, state policies and social and political movements interact with each other to reproduce patriarchy across the ages. The colonial period has been a fertile area of research. This does not mean that Indian traditions before that period were relatively immutable. It only points to the deep and radical rupture in all domains that colonialism entailed and its implications for Indian modernity and the status of women.

has been pointed out by various scholars. It is also important to recognize that although women in these movements have not striven for an autonomous articulation of women-specific demands, their voicing of such issues exerts a pressure on these movements to take heed of the women in their mass base. Such a cognizance of 'women's issues' has been made possible largely due to the pressure generated by feminism and the questions raised by the women's movement regarding the politicization of personal life. Today, there are heartening signs of issues not being narrowly focused as 'women's issues'. Women have comprised a crucial component of those struggling for land and forest rights, for fishing rights in coastal waters, against the havoc caused by construction of large dams, for recognition as urban unorganized labour, migrant labour and rural

workers. In this sense then, no issue is exclusively a women's issue alone, and all issues are women's issues as well.

Studies on economic policies and changes and their impact on women have revealed that the post-colonial model of development being pursued in our country has in fact pushed women further out of the production process. Capital accumulation and inducing dual structures of organized and unorganized sectors have had a displacing effect, especially on women as seen in the decline in employment opportunities or being pushed into the unorganized sector wherein they get mostly intermittent employment and low wages and are not covered by labour laws. Also the access to new skills and technologies that have been part of the modernization process is restricted for women partly because the special responsibilities for child and family care rest exclusively on women and because of the inability of the State and industry to take the burden of some of these functions through the provision of child care facilities and so on.

Although the work-participation rate for women appears to have risen in the last few years, it could be because structural adjustment policies have changed the nature of the work force. Studies have shown that women are paid at least 25 per cent less than a regular employed male worker and female casual workers earn 50 per cent less. A large number of women have been brought into economic production under highly exploitative conditions, sometimes to replace men and sometimes as contract or home-based labour. Therefore, even if more women have joined the work force the overall situation of the family has not improved.

The politics of health has been another vital area of activism where women's groups have opposed invasive reproductive and family planning technologies. The campaign against amniocentesis - female foeticide through modern technology - is an example of protest against new forms of systematic abuse that have emerged as ghastly accompaniments to modernization.

Engagement with law as a critical instrument to change the situation of women has been a major concern of the women's movement and feminist legal studies. Although legal reform of laws relevant to women has been central to the

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colonial transition. She sees the Brahmanical imperial alliance in the early phase of the colonial era as a virtual black hole in women's spiritual history. However, the search for spiritual self-expression continued. Indian movement of independence and the anti-colonial stances that emerged in different parts of fourteenth century restored the patriarchal mores of subjugating women. Thus within the Virasaiva tradition the voices of women do not transgress patriarchy, they adhere to it both in terms of worship and in the use of spiritual idiom. The Siva Linga continues to be the supreme symbol of Virasaivism. However, Ramaswamy points out that despite their use of the spiritual idiom in the patriarchal format, the Virasaiva women did succeed in partially overturning patriarchy within the secular/worldly realm. Thus women like Akka Mahadevi and Akka Nagamma used the familiar symbolic language of patriarchy to overturn it. By their vocabulary which turned God into 'husband', they treated all men and women of the world as wives, thus shattering the social constructs of patriarchy at least for some time. These powerful female voices were finally integrated into the general patriarchal mould through the canonization of these women in religion and society.

The last regional movements studied by Ramaswamy is that of the Warkaris and the Ramdas. They are those people who undertake their annual Wari to the resting place (*samadhi*) of saints like Jnanesvara, Tukarama, Muktabai and Eknath. Her survey of the place of women within the Warkari panth stretches over a long historical span beginning with the Mahanuhbavas and ending with the Ramadas. It gives the impression of ambiguity in the status of spiritual women. Women within these movements were both vocal and visible, and yet the sacred spaces they occupied were the ones that had been conceded to them by men and not those that women had carved out for themselves.

One finds a consistent pattern in Ramaswamy's exposition of the saga of spiritual women in South India. Each time a heterodox faith arose, it provided a sacred space for women to express themselves but it gradually got confined and finally sucked into the larger Brahmanical pantheon. Ramaswamy sees Brahmanism as the principal

manifestation of the ideology of patriarchy and thus inimical to the freedom and autonomy of women. The factors that actually led to the reiteration of these Brahmanical values are not analysed in detail by Ramaswamy. One major reason noted by her is the economic factor. In the Sangam period it was the rise of an agrarian economy which led to the affirmation of patriarchy. Similarly, she attributes the decline of Buddhism and Jainism also to economic forces. She sees these sporadic expressions of women's spirituality as manifestations of a counter-culture which is cathartic in nature. They are short-lived because they are all swallowed by the monster of patriarchy. One feels a little dissatisfied with this kind of oversimplification in the analysis of the causes of emergence and decline of feminine narratives, especially because it is not in the style of Ramaswamy to give this kind of summary treatment. Her exposition of the various religious movements and women's participation in them is both systematic and vivid, which is why one expects a more sensitive treatment of the factors that first originated and then silenced this discourse. A detailed discussion of the reasons that led to the silencing of these female voices in different generations may help us in our efforts in the empowerment of women in our times.

Furthermore, despite recognizing the ultimate nature of spirituality in terms of transcendence, Ramaswamy does include in her concept of spirituality cases of possession, clairvoyance and clairaudience. She sees all these levels of spirituality as modes of empowerment of women. But while the empowerment of women in terms of possession temporarily elevates their social status, transcendental spirituality does not empower them in the same manner. For transcendental spirituality goes beyond any concern for mundane empowerment. She concedes that at this stage the person becomes genderless, but she does not recognize that power in the worldly sense has no relevance for a spiritually evolved person.

These minor problems apart, the book makes fascinating reading. There is a wealth of material on women's poetry from different periods of South Indian literature.

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women's movement in recent years, feminist analysis of the role of law has exposed the patriarchal nature of legal formulations. Women's groups have not only actively campaigned for legal reform, they have also focused on the ways in which law is implicated in women's oppression. For instance, a number of legislative measures have been introduced in recent years to deal with violent crimes against women like rape and dowry deaths. Studies have shown that there has been a low conviction rate, especially in cases of dowry deaths, reasons for which range from the delays and inadequacies of police investigation to conservative attitude of the judiciary favouring a pro-statusquoist bias.

Undoubtedly, an impressive amount of innovative research has been done in feminist historiography, social anthropology, legal studies, the impact of economic policies on women and so on which have not only challenged the dominant frameworks and assumptions of the discipline but have shown revealing insights on gender relations. Despite such work, however, mainstream research and teaching have largely remained unaffected by these attempts. The gulf between academic research and activism that has widened over the years also threatens to dilute the original objective of introducing women's studies and its potential for being a critical discipline.

While the gap between the movement and women's studies has led to a depoliticized women's studies devoid of academic rigour and its potential for resistance, issues such as *sati*, the Muslim Women's Bill, the discussion on Uniform Civil Code in the last few years has led to debates on 'tradition', 'culture', 'caste', 'nationality', and 'modernization' within the women's movement, posing greater and newer challenges for women's studies. On the one hand, there is a demand for legislation that will assure justice in common for all women in our country; on the other, there is the argument that laws that unproblematically embody familiar notions of gender justice will exacerbate divisions among women and between women and other oppressed groups.

The rhetoric of equality itself has become problematic. The oppression shared by all women appears to overwhelm differences that exist between them. At the same time, however, the diversity among women due to caste, class, ethnicity

and religion, and the differences in their experience of oppression have made it problematic for all the layers of oppression to be subsumed under the category of Woman. The interplay between the women's question and the class and caste questions has been fraught with theoretical and organizational dilemmas. A recent example is the debate on the women's reservation bill (the proposed 81st Amendment Bill, 1997) that appears to position the issue as that of a perceived polarization between caste and gender.

As demands for increased political participation and rights and for a reconfiguration of gender roles are being articulated with increasing frequency, both the women's movement and women's studies have had to adopt an agenda emphasizing the cultural diversity and pluralism of Indian society in contrast with the earlier homogenizing concepts of certain nationalist and development perspectives. The threats of economic liberalization on the one hand, and of fundamentalism on the other, have unleashed forces that are aimed at eroding women's claims to equality, freedom and dignity as individuals. Increasingly women are being projected as consumers and reproductive beings rather than as producers; and as members of one community or another which seeks to establish its political identity by right of birth, religion or culture. The response to fundamentalism has brought in ideological cleavages within the women's movement that had always identified itself with a broad left activism.

Despite such a grim picture, what is heartening today is that there is an articulation of opposition and visibility of the struggle itself that women are waging for freedom and dignity. The new forms of self-expression and self-definition that women in our society today are seeking are evident not only in their grass-roots organizing around issues like environment, health care, anti-liquor campaign and so on, but also in their creative writings as well. These forms open up exciting possibilities for restructuring gender relations as well as for women to create a basis of worthiness other than that bestowed by the dominant culture.

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