International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)
ISSN: 2319-7064
SJIF (2022): 7.942

Historical Contexts which Impacted Gender Issues in Colonial India

Dr Vidya M Joseph[1], Siri Lucille Chenni[2]

[1]Associate Professor of English, GFGC, Birur, Karnataka, India

The trajectory of Indian history during the colonial period is at once complex and contradictory-simultaneously recording the articulation of women's experiences and perspective and the various attempts to erase the women's voices. This necessitates a careful, objective analysis of the contradictions shaped by the historical and political processes of the period. In this paper, an attempt is made to describe the historical contexts which impacted gender issues by drawing upon some significant instances of women's expression.

While it is accepted that the erasure of women's voices is an essential feature of patriarchy across nations and societies, any objective analysis has to address itself to the specific and particular aspects of the context in which the analysis takes place. In the case of Indian women in the colonial phase there was a specific conjuncture shaped by political, historical and cultural factors. These have been enumerated in the following ways

(i) The impact of colonial modernity which focused on the question of Indian women owing to the attempt made through colonial discourses to project the condition of Indian women as the major instantiation of gender inequality in Indian civilization and society as well as by the attempt by the Christian missionary groups to support proselytization by pointing to the condition of Indian women in Indian religion and society.

(ii) The other significant factor was that colonialism was itself a hyper masculinist project based on a fundamental contradiction. At 'home' that is in England the conservative groups strongly resisted any reforms leading to gender equality and justice. At the same time the same forces which supported British imperialism foregrounded the 'Woman Question' in India to legitimize the presence of British imperialism in India as a project of ameliorating the condition of Indian women. As historians such as GayatriSpivak, Tanika Sarkar and Partha Chatterjee have pointed out this project was wrought with many contradictions. Many of them had to do with the debates at 'home' on social reform and the gender question. These impacted the formulation of the policies of the imperial government of India.

(iii) At the same time, since colonial modernity was a double faced project it also initiated significant changes in conceptualizing gender question in ways very different from the traditional frameworks. There were also concrete changes introduced by the imperial regime in relation to the education of women, legal protection of their rights etc. This was of course a part of the construction of the colonial modernity in India in the upper caste, upper class sections under the impact of the new education and the civil society debates. However, the central question to be raised is did these historical phenomena create a space for the articulation of the woman's voice, her autonomy or whether under this camouflage of addressing women's question a shadow battle was being fought between the colonial regime and the Indian elite class.

Two instances can be taken up in the context of the preceding arguments. One is the case of abolition of sati which gained extraordinary attention precisely because of its contradictions.

After a long period of a policy of non-interference with social and cultural aspects of Indian society and because of the pressure of utilitarian reformers in England and Christian groups, the imperial regime half-heartedly decided to enter into the legal issues relating to the condition of Indian women. The most publicized issue was the burning of widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands known as *Sati*. Though this practice was never prevalent in all regions and section of Indian society at any point of time, a narrative was constructed that this was '*the'* representative example of the ultimate injustice to Indian women. With the extensive available research and analysis by Gayatri Spivak ('Can the Subaltern Speak') and Lata Mani, (Contentious Traditions), there may not be any need to elaborate on the contradictions in the process of the abolition of *sati*. The entire debate was by male participants-both British and Indian-and at no stage was the woman's voice on what concerned her life and death ever taken into consideration.

The imperial regime resorted to a *shastric* and textualist argument only trying to find out whether the *shastras* supported the *sati* system. Despite descriptions of the horrors of widow burning recorded by British men, the regime persisted only to seek *shastric* sanction for abolishing *sati*. The Indian elite including the social reformers shifted the entire ground of argument by asserting that any change of custom has to be by the Indians themselves and any attempt by the imperial "outsiders" would interfere with Indian traditions. Therefore, there was absolutely no space at all for Indian women to articulate their perception and experience of a custom which threatened their existence itself.

The other instance refers to the memoirs and autobiographies of Indian women which creates a counter discourse to both the imperialist and indigenous elite constructions. It has to be admitted that writing and writing an autobiography were definitely a consequence of colonial modernity accompanied by the possibilities of expression created by literacy, print culture and a reading public. These autobiographies and memoirs are a powerful articulation of

all those actualities in the life of Indian women which were constantly erased by patriarchal hegemony and an ingrained violent and aggressive orthodoxy which saw any expression by women as subversive and transgressive. For example, the autobiography *The Memoirs of Haimabati Sen* as analysed by Indrani Sen is an extremely disturbing record of the many forms of extreme violence within the domestic sphere of the Indian society which can shock contemporary readers too. It deals with one of the horrifying erasures in human history in which the physical violence, humiliation suffered by girl children who went through child marriages. Most of the marriages were between girls below ten years of age and adult men of the '*kuleen'* communities. After puberty these girl children were victimised brutally by the adult husbands. As Haimabati records, conjugal, sexual relationship was a brutal, violent, constant rape. She also records how she witnessed her husband performing perverted sex with a prostitute. These traumatic and devastating experiences could not be articulated because the hegemonic institution of Hindu *kuleen* marriage made any criticism virtually a cardinal sin. Worse was the widowhood Haimabati suffered. As she says, she was accused of 'devouring' her husband and that everybody's 'lamentations were for that old drunkard and whore-monger'. Haimabati's case is neither unique nor isolated. The terrible violence destroying the minds and bodies of child wives and widows was ubiquitous. Interestingly, the text *Mother India* written by Katherine Mayo (1927) which was denounced by Mahatma Gandhi as a drain inspector's report has excruciating details matching word by word with Haimabati's own experiences.

The author describes how a young child-woman sexually assaulted by her husband, comes crawling to a hospital maintained by Christian sisters. The author also records the highly rhetorical debates she herself witnessed by Indian political leaders who absolutely refused to acknowledge such facts.

Partha Chatterjee in his essay 'Resolution of the Woman Question' offers a very different perspective on the career of the woman's question in the late 19th century. His arguments are based on the premise that colonial discourses created a divide between the domestic and the public domains. Actually this was a re-articulation of the traditional Indian division between the 'Home' and the 'World'. During the colonial phase this ideological division was employed to argue that while the west (imperial Britain) dominated the world or the public sphere, the domestic sphere supervised by the Indian woman remained practically unaffected. In the domestic space Indian women practised and exemplified tradition which was in fact a construct by elite Indian men to resist western modernity. Most of the time this construction of the domestic space and the Indian woman was employed by Indian men to monitor and control the women from the possible corruption of western modernity. However, in the colonial period the birth of the nationalist movement complicated the situation. As Partha Chatterjee points out Indian nationalism prioritized cultural nationalism which in turn was conceptualized in traditional Hindu discursive terms. Colonial modernity had also motivated social and religious reforms, many of which directly addressed the woman's question. Some genuine attempts were indeed made to initiate the reforms. However, a major shift took place when it was resolved that social/cultural reforms could be postponed until the attainment of independence. It was clear that this resolution had its basis in conservatism, especially with regard to gender issues which marked the Indian nationalist discourse.

The erasure of women's voices is indeed a complex phenomenon during the colonial period. There are stark contradictions at all levels of articulation. Many of the arguments of the social reformers apparently sympathetic to women are grounded in patriarchal frameworks. Many of the arguments of religious reforms reiterate the stereotypical image of the Indian woman as the upholder of Indian civilizational values within her own pure domestic sphere. Modernity is suspected of disturbing the great traditional Indian social institutions and values. It is in this unimaginably constricted context, Indian women expressed the unarticulated and the un-acknowledged trauma and pain in the memoirs-many of which faced great difficulties in publication and circulation. One has to consciously deconstruct official histories, hegemonic discourses and reconstruct, to the extent possible, the erased voices of Indian women.

References

[1] Chatterjee, Partha, and Nivedita Menon. *Empire and Nation: Selected Essays*. Columbia University Press, 2016.
[2] Morris, Rosalind C. *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*. Columbia University Press, 2010.
[3] Mani, Lata. *Contentious traditions: The debate on Sati in colonial India*, University of California Press, Berkely, CA 2007
[4] Mayo, Catherine. *Mother India*, Franklin Classics, an imprint of Creative Media Partners, 2018
[5] Sen, Haimabati, et al. *The Memoirs of Dr. Haimabati Sen: From Child Widow to Lady Doctor*. Roli Books, 2000.