

Women and Culture in India: Countering the Force of Nativity

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Abstract

There has been always an antithetical relationship between culture and modernity in the Indian context, with women being seen as the representative of that which is uniquely Indian in the country's culture. The burden of being the culture-bearers of India, since the nineteenth century, has very often taken its toll on women, who have been reduced to cultural artefacts. There is an incredible charge of nativity in India, which does not allow women to get out of this role to firmly ensure the continuance of age-old forms of repression and subjugation. Like fundamentalism in other parts of the world, Hindu fundamentalism in India has directed its attention mainly at the women, in the name of protecting Indian culture and tradition. Recent attacks on women in pubs and restaurants and incidents of witch-hunting in various parts of the country, provide clear evidences of the ways in which modernity and science have been proposed as the antithesis of culture. Thereby facilitating the continuance of exploitation of women, particularly those who are lesser privileged economically, or belong to the 'lower' rung of the caste ladder of Hindu society.

In the Indian situation, culture is very often proposed as the antithesis of modernity. 'Culture', as understood in India, has grown out of the civilizational notion of India. In Hindi and in many other Indian languages, the term 'sanskriti', which translates as 'culture', refers to a system of representation that calls 'Indian culture' (read Hindu culture) into being. In fact, issues relating to culture constitutes an integral part of the formation of a national(ist) modernity in India. Culture, in the Indian sense, is a close cousin of tradition. And in this sense, cultural nationalists have tried to evoke the image of an Indian culture that is frozen in time and space; they suggest the image of an Indian culture that is 'untainted' by 'outside' influence. Originality has become the focal point of all discussions surrounding the concept of culture; it is like saying that there was a point of origin of Indian culture which has now to be retained in its original shape. Thus it is an irony that while the idea of nation is a gift of modernity (with its origin in the West), the idea of a civilizational (traditional) culture is evoked to counter modernity.

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In other words, it is a paradox that while the concept of nation is a gift of modernity, the idea of a civilizational culture is evoked to counter modernity. In India, as in many other non-Western societies, the burden of protecting and preserving the 'true' and 'original' culture of the country rests on its women. Kumari Jayawardena (1986) argued many years ago that feminism and nationalism in the non-West share a close relationship. In the non-West, the 'culture question' becomes a 'national culture question' with serious consequences for women.

From the discourse on 'sanskriti' in India has evolved critiques of modernity. There is a growing tirade against modernity in India that includes an unreasonable and unjustifiable attack on theories that originated in Europe. There is an influential political movement, led by the Hindu Right in India, which says that Indian Muslims' and Christians are not true Indians because they belong to religions that originated outside India (Ahmad, 1997). By the same logic, as Ahmad says, socialists cannot be Indians as Marxism originated in the West, and secularism should be done away with as it is a Western construct. In the same line, a standard criticism of feminism across India derives from the charge that it is disconnected/ alienated from 'our culture'. The implicit accusation seems to be that feminist demands are modern demands, and that modernisation means the erasure or giving up of Indian culture, and the adoption of Western values and ways of life. There is almost a paranoid fear in many sections of Indian and other South Asian societies regarding the 'modernisation' of women, as they are seen to be the bearers of culture.

The point is not that our culture oppresses women, but rather the need of the hour is to investigate how this idea of culture originated. One of the starting points of such an investigation would be to understand how our cultural nationalism was premised on the assertion of cultural difference from the West, with women often represented as the embodiment of that difference. While on the one hand, the Indian nationalist movement enabled women's political participation, it also created for them a fixed position in national culture. The Gandhian intervention into the Indian national movement was unique, precisely for its mobilisation of women. Partha Chatterjee (1993) has discussed how the discourse of nationalism uses the distinction between the feminised home and the masculinised world, *ghar* and *bahir*, to designate home as the proper domain of its cultural and Gandhian spiritual identity.

Nationalist discourse in India thus produces an antithetical relationship between modernity and culture, at the same time as it aligns women with the cultural and the authentic. In the Indian context, it is the narrative of the nation that stitches together women and tradition, women and national culture, making women emblematic of that which is uniquely Indian (Niranjana, 2007: 212). The nineteenth-century reconstitution of Indian tradition created distinctions between home and world, private and public, inner and outer. With the passage of time, women increasingly took up the burden of maintaining the distinctiveness of Indian culture, while men negotiated the worlds of commerce, higher education, and governance on terms established by colonialists.

Suruchi Thapar (1993: 48) says that the task before the nationalist leaders was to protect the inherent qualities of the 'spiritual domain' of India. This was because while in the material domain colonisers had 'subjugated' the colonised, it was in the spiritual domain that no encroachments had taken place (Thapar, 1993: 48). Thus there was a perceived need to protect the sanctity of this domain, a domain representing the culture and 'Indianness' of the people. And thus came into being the new role of Indian women as bearers of this 'spiritual domain' and 'Indianness', while "motherhood was resurrected and given a political meaning by the Hindu revivalists and radical political activists" (Thapar, 1993: 48) through the concept of 'Bharat Mata'.

The spiritual role of the new woman of the nineteenth century was not only represented as a mark of the superiority of Hindu as compared to 'alien' culture, but also a sign of women's 'newly acquired freedom' (Chatterjee, 1989: 245). However, in order that the new woman's 'newly acquired freedom' still be contained within the parameters set by the nationalist leaders, the 'common woman' construct was created. The 'common woman', as opposed to the 'new woman', was 'coarse' and 'vulgar' (Thapar, 1993: 83). The common women were the street-vendors, fisherwomen, washerwomen, to cite but a few. Besides lacking the superficial veneer of gentility, these women, due to economic compulsion, were forced to eke out an existence on the streets and they generally belonged to the lower caste. They were believed to be lacking in the attributes of "docility" and "submissiveness" which were ingrained in middle-class women. The creation of the 'common woman' construct set moral limits on women's behaviour and their code of conduct. The choice for a woman was thus limited to being either a 'new woman' or a 'common woman' – a choice imposed by nationalist leaders. It can be argued that there were benefits to be gained by the nationalist movement and its leaders in the creation of these constructs. We would suggest that these came from the way the 'new woman' construct could explain and contain the activities of women (including ensuring that they adhered to non-violent activities during their participation in the Independence movement). The construction of the 'common woman', on the other hand, eliminated any possibility of a public exploration of the differences and conflicts that women, in the course of their political participation, could experience.

Closely associated with the construct of the 'new woman' were the concepts of 'femininity' and 'motherhood'. Lack of 'masculinity' was a central issue around which India's unfitness for self-rule and the need for British rule were justified by the colonial officials. English stoicism was generally portrayed as an attribute of 'civilised men'. Many books including Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* questioned the adequacy of Indian 'masculinity'.

The supposed effeminacy of Indian men led to at times unwarranted emphasis on the idea of *izzat*. *Izzat* is the term for which "honour" is the usual translation. It is a word often heard in men's talk, particularly when the talk is about conflict, rivalry, and struggle. It crops up as a kind of final explanation for motivation, whether for acts of aggression or beneficence. Throughout the Northern regions of India it expresses a salient theme, includes some of the most highly valued purposes of a person's life. Public positions are the province of men, and so the primary referents of *izzat* are men. While a man's *izzat* is assessed by his kith and kin on several scores, the conduct of a family's women is always a cardinal consideration.

Women also bear *izzat*, as when it was remarked in a Himachal Pradesh village that it is bad for women's *izzat* if she does ploughing. In India, as David G. Mandelbaum mentions, women have not only had to carry the load of tradition and culture, they also have had to preserve the cherished ideal of *izzat* (1986: 2001).

Uma Chakravarti (1993: 579) has opined that the general subordination of women assumed a particularly severe form in India, through the powerful instrument of religious traditions which have shaped social practices. A marked feature of Hindu society is its legal sanction for an extreme expression of social stratification in which women and the lower castes have been subjected to humiliating conditions of existence.

Feminism in India needs to guard against the tendency to co-opt the civilizational concept of Indian 'Sanskriti' as 'culture'. The wholesale denunciation of everything Western is a fad that has developed recently and it needs to be seen in the broader context of the growing anti-rationalist critique of modernity in India, which is part of the politics of the Right wing. One must not underestimate the force of nativity in India. Talking about the critiques of modernity that are so fashionable in Indian academic circles today, there is a need to look at the formative aspects of India's project of modernity as it has evolved within a distinctively Indian all-encompassing style of counter-Enlightenment. Meera Nanda says: "In stark contrast to the Enlightenment project of bringing religion within the limits of scientific reason, the Indian counter-Enlightenment has tended to co-opt scientific reason within the spirit-based cosmology and epistemology of "the Vedas" (2004). There is a powerful if subterranean tendency in Indian academic circles which thinks of India as an object *apart* from the world, underplaying its entanglements with other places and cultures. This is an extremely important question for it incorporates within it the question of Indian culture, which can never be divorced from the woman's question in India.

Let us consider the rather alarming situation that can be created, or has been created, by the resurgence of talks and approval of alternative knowledge systems in India. "Witch-hunt" or "witch-slaughter" is obviously one of the cruellest acts ever committed by human beings since the dawn of civilisation, and it has resurfaced in the last few years in certain parts of Assam and West Bengal. Many innocent women are butchered or burnt to death on the charge of witchery.

Several reasons play a role in this inhuman torture and killing: poverty, illiteracy, superstition, and fear are the most talked about reasons as the causes of belief in witchery. However, it is not accidental that most of the women who are butchered on charges of witchery are the sole inheritors of landed property. But the fact that very often goes unnoticed, or is deliberately swept under the carpet, is that the resurgent force of nativity that has resurfaced in the name of 'preservation of culture and tradition' to inflict inhuman torture on women. Tradition has almost become an alibi to inflict torture upon women. There are plenty of incidents of women being subjected to brutalities in our country in the name of tradition.

Do we need science in India? Of course we do. Unlike pre-scientific beliefs which are imposed on those born into them as 'package deals', and are protected from critical scrutiny, the ethos of science makes it imperative that we open the packages, that we "break up what is actually experienced, and turn it into the final court of appeal of theories" (Nanda, 1996: WS-2).

If third world feminists have not entirely lost faith in the 'Western' idea of emancipation with all that it promises: self-determination and personal autonomy, equality in the public and private sphere, we have to combat all relations of patriarchy, whether it western or Indian. We grant that the two are overlaid on one another, each reinforcing the other through a complex and historical complicity between them. As Meera Nanda says, ancestral oppressions do not become any less cruel just because they are 'our own', and alien ideas do not exhaust themselves just because they are 'not ours' (1996: WS-2).

We would like to conclude with an example of the discursive formation surrounding the civilizational idea of Indian culture and tradition. An English news channel recently reported (on 30 September 2009) an incident of ritual flogging of women in a remote district of Tamil Nadu. Like every Dussehra, thousands gathered to pray at a 300-year-old temple in Tamil Nadu's Namakkal district. Two thousand teenagers and children, some as young as 10, were whipped by the temple's priests for five hours. The priests' explanation: this whipping is a cure-all. Some 10-year-olds were lashed for not studying enough. Others were attacked for being slow to attain puberty. And menstruating teens were hit for being impure.

In the debate following this news one of the speakers, a professor from one of the most well known universities of the country, remarked that it was impossible for her to comment on an incident such as this as she is a twenty first century woman living in a metropolitan city, and her reality would be very different from the women of Tamil Nadu. No one wants to be accused of essentialism in this age of postmodernism even if it means maintaining silence over issues of tremendous social relevance. The second speaker belonged to a right wing religious group and he defended the practice in the name of tradition and culture. He stated clearly that there was no violation of fundamental human rights in this case as the women willingly complied. A third speaker argued that when we talk about willing compliance we have to look at the choices available for the women who followed that particular practice, and also look at the factors that ensured the paucity of choices. It is the interpretation of this event by the third speaker that comes nearest to an analysis of culture from the point of view of feminism by raising a very fundamental issue. Who naturalizes what is not natural, and how does it serve the interest of that particular group?

For feminists, the way polarisation between tradition and modernity successfully sidelines all questions of compassion or affection for women has been a bitter realisation. It has been known and said that fundamentalism and upper-caste identity politics centre on women as both their victims and their constituency. The entry of the tradition versus modernity argument in this context delivers a fairly telling weapon into the hands of the fundamentalists. What happened in a pub at Mangalore (where a group of women were

physically abused on the pretext of failing to live up to the expectations of Indian womanhood) a few months back is a telling example of this. The bogey of modernism has been so successfully erected that the use of socio-religious practices to create a 'tradition' is successfully obscured. Tradition is defined so ahistorically that it obscures the fact that these socio-religious practices are being used to create caste and communal identities along 'modernist' lines, with modern methods of campaigning and organising, modern arguments, and modern ends in view such as the reformation of electoral bases and fundamentalist representation within the state.

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