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Research Article

Women In The Indian Nationalist Consciousness

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ABSTRACT

In the nationalist project of constructing the new Indian nation, the nationalist consciousness intersects and interacts with several social axes like the question of ethnicity, caste, religion, language and gender. Despite varied definitions of 'nationalism' and obvious disparities in modern nationalist projects since the nineteenth century nation-building era, a common link that runs through all nationalist projects is the idea that the national state is essentially a masculinist institution (Joanne Nagel) and examined through the purview of gender politics. Indian nationalism, like other modern nationalisms, can also be read as a masculinist project. This paper is an attempt to examine how the socio-cultural revolutions posed against British colonial cultural hegemony in the 19th century Bengal as well as Gandhi's notions regarding women's participation in political life of his times inherently posit a deep-rooted masculinist worldview.

Keywords: nationalism, nineteenth century India, women and nation, sati, colonialism.

In the nationalist project of constructing the new Indian nation, the nationalist consciousness intersects and interacts with several social axes like the question of ethnicity, caste, religion, language and gender. Despite varied definitions of "nationalism" and obvious disparities in modern nationalist projects since the nineteenth century nation-building era (Anthony D Smith, 2001; E.J Hobsbawm, 1990; Renan, 1939), a common link that runs through all nationalist projects is the idea that "the national state is essentially a masculinist institution" (Joanne Nagel) and examined through the purview of gender politics, Indian nationalism like other modern nationalisms, can be read as a masculinist project. This is evidenced from the men's and women's places in the nationalist politics and these assigned 'places' have been built upon through discursive practices. In her influential book, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* (1990), Cynthia Enloe declares that "nationalism has typically sprung from masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation and masculinised hope (45)".

There is a huge corpus of feminist studies that have interrogated power structures in various ways but feminist analyses of nationalism have been lamentably few and far between (Mc Clintock). The masculinist structure of nationhood within the political discourse of the nation and the state therefore requires more attention (Vijayan, 2012). In colonial and anti-colonial discourse, while the colonizer represented the masculine, the symbol of authority, the disempowered colonized is seen as representing the feminized, and the national memory is replete with humiliated masculinity. To understand the relation between masculinity and nationalism is to understand the ways in which politics works itself into gender constructions. George Mosse describes modern masculinity as a centerpiece of all varieties of nationalist movements. (7). The masculine ideals of physique and behavior became institutionalized globally through organizations like Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders, of which we have our own Indian versions. Although the idea of a "Universal Male" is as problematic as the idea of an essential womanhood, we may perhaps speak of a ubiquitous male based on these criteria of performance as pointed out by David Gilmore: ". . . to be a man . . . one must impregnate women, protect dependents from danger, and provision kith and kin . . . We might call this quasi-global personage something like "Man-the-Impregnator-Protector-Provider" (223).

According to Ashis Nandy (1983), the contemporary idea of Indian masculinity arose after 1830 gradually with the internalization of "colonial rule as a manly or husbandly or lordly prerogative": "once the British rulers and the exposed sections of Indians internalized the colonial role definitions and began to speak, with reformist fervour, the language of the homology between sexual and political stratarchies, the battle for the minds of men was to a great extent won by the Raj". From thereon began the psychological identification of the colonised

with the aggressor. Nandy goes on to say that although the Indian populace may not have fully shared the British idea of the martial races—the hyper-masculine, manifestly courageous, superbly loyal Indian castes and subcultures mirroring the British middle-class sexual stereotypes—but they did resurrect the ideology of the martial races latent in the traditional Indian concept of statecraft and gave the idea a new centrality" and gave birth to the idea of "Ksatrivahood" as the new and "nearly exclusive indicator of authentic Indianness, and imbibed in many nineteenth-century Indian movements of social, religious and political reform as well as in many literary and art movements.

Nationalism, being inseparable from the desire for power and prestige (Orwell), builds a narrative that sustains masculinist pride. Masculine cultural themes like honour, patriotism, cowardice, bravery, competitiveness and duty are imbibed within the nationalist rhetoric. Prem Kumar Vijayan, in his doctoral thesis *Making the Pitrubhumi: Masculine Hegemony and the Formation of Hindu Nationalism* (2012) locates the contemporary Indian masculine ideal within the Hindutva discourse: "Hindutva may be understood as a prime discourse and political practice in the conservation and consolidation of masculine power, albeit articulated differentially" and he observes that it is the gendered political gaze of nationalism and the nationalist that has engendered for both "anti-colonial Indian nationalism and the more recent Hindu nationalism as well as their constructions of 'national' masculinities and femininities".

Within this trajectory of masculinist pride, women's position in the nationalist consciousness is determined by patriarchal discourse that posits women within the realm of domesticity. Although many women had actively participated in the nationalist movements of India in varied capacities and played different roles defined by different notions over the course of history, they continued to be perceived as 'docile bodies' who existed only to elevate the position of men. Responding to Gandhi's call, women participated in the freedom struggle in a massive scale. This was followed by the participation of women in a massive scale. However, their most important role was as helpers and motivators. Drawing inspiration from ancient paragons of obedience and passivity like the figure of Sita, Gandhi had an idealized view of women as religious and moral role models that seems to be derived from an unfounded essentialist notion of women as 'inherently' passive, sexually chaste and gentle. For this reason, he thought certain jobs, like picketing of liquor and foreign cloth shops, were especially suited for women because according to him, "who can make a more effective appeal to the heart than women?" (Kishwar). In fact, Gandhi's idea of the feminine role can be best captured in Gandhi's statement that 'Woman is the embodiment of sacrifice and suffering and her advent to public life should therefore result in purifying it, in restraining unbridled ambitions and accumulation of property' (Ibid.). His idea of womanhood was based on the view that women were the embodiment of suffering and sacrifice devoid of ambitions and ownership. This conception of female passivity, in contrast to male activity, may be understood in terms of the Hegelian notion of man-woman dualism represented through an analogy with animals and plants:

The difference between men and women is like that between animals and plants. Men correspond to animals, while women correspond to plants because their development is more placid and the principle that underlies it is the rather vague unity of feeling Women are educated — who knows how? — as it were by breathing in ideas, by living rather than by acquiring knowledge. The status of manhood, on the other hand, is attained only by the stress of thought and much technical exertion (qtd. in Bordo, 17).

And thus, understood within this framework of culturally reinscribed dualism, according to Bordo, only men, and not women, are designed for the "stress" and "technical exertions" of the public domain. The cultural inscription of gender bias in the personal space (home) is often reproduced in the political sphere. The arena of politics in India remained largely men's domain and women's representation in this domain remains insignificant, with 68% of states having less than 10% female representation in state leadership roles and most of the states in Northeast India have no female ministers (IGC, 2021). Therefore, despite the huge participation of women in the struggle for freedom from foreign rule, how far the Indian woman has been able to achieve freedom from her culturally constrained space remains to be answered.

The nineteenth century India, specially the socio-cultural and political capitals, witnessed numerous debates on the necessity of 'modern' education for women and its possible threats towards the moral nature of women. A section of thinkers always feared the possibility of moral degradation of women caused by modern western education, which would gradually result in economic, social, cultural, and hence, national degradation. The nineteenth century Bengal was one of the important spaces for these socio-cultural negotiations. Tanika Sarkar in her book *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* explores how, during the nineteenth century colonial times, a group of thinkers opined that modern educated women would pose threat to both the traditional family system in India as well as to national prosperity. In the eighteenth century and the early parts of the nineteenth century, a large section of the Bengali middle-class merchants had suffered huge economic downfall in the hands of the colonialist capitalist enterprise. The factory-made imported goods and day-to-day necessary tools gradually replaced the locally produced products. (T. Sarkar, 33-35). A good number of literatures produced in Bengal during this period expressed concern over this condition of growing laziness, which was supposed to be as result of western education, and the gradual disappearance of skillful and honest labour and self-sufficiency, which would lead them to enslavement (Ibid. 34-35). Tanika Sarkar observes how, in a large body of literary works and folk art, the modern educated Bengali woman was portrayed as, "a self-indulgent, spoilt and lazy creature who cared nothing for family or national fortune" (35). Sumit Sarkar observes how social and spiritual leaders like Ramakrishna played crucial roles in deeply etching in the 19th century Bengali morality the interrelation among the qualities of *kamini, kanchan, dasatva* – femininity, prosperity, servitude (quoted in

T. Sarkar, 34). The idea of the evil woman, in nineteenth century Bengal, incorporated a new meaning: the evil woman is the one who "inspired by modern education, had exchanged sacred ritual objects (the conch shell bangle, the ritually pure fabric, sindur) for foreign luxury ones" (T. Sarkar 35). Thus, the efforts to define womanhood in terms of roles and virtues in the 19th century Bengal was characterised by a sort of nationalistic zeal which tried to confine women to the ritualized roles allowed by Hindu religious principles.

For Partha Chatterjee, nationalist ideology in India which brew as a reaction to Western modernity was developed "around a separation of the domain of culture into two spheres – the material and the spiritual" ('Nationalist' 237). The effects of Western modernity, or in other words Western civilisation, was sturdier in the material domain. By virtue of the formidable advancement in science and technology, innovative methods of commerce, the Europeans, or more specifically, the British in India, could impose supremacy over the non-European parts of the world (Chatterjee 'Nationalist' 237). For the Indians, in order to overcome the colonialist power, it was necessary to cultivate in themselves the modern material techniques of the West. However, as thought by a section of thinkers, such cultivation of Western material techniques and culture should not be acceptable at the cost of self-identity. Self-identity is constructed in the cultural life. So, in order to arrive at an agreement, it was required to "cultivate the material techniques of modern western civilisation while retaining and strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture" (Chatterjee 'Nationalist' 238). Nationalism, thus in opposition to the Western material culture, found its spiritual shelter within the 'Hindu way of life', which was considered as 'inviolate, autonomous' (T. Sarkar 36). The Hindu ritualized traditions seemed to be the space that was still uncontaminated by the effects of Western modernity. A new trend of interest in invoking the ancient Hindu scripts and ritualistic tradition turned out to be an integral aspect of the nationalistic mission.

The binary opposition of the spiritual and the material eventually got translated further into another powerful dichotomy: the internal and the external. When this internal/external dichotomy was situated against the backdrop of the lives of the general Indians, the societal space got divided between the 'home' and the 'world' – *ghar* and *bahir*. The attention got shifted towards the common households or, more specifically, to the Hindu home: "The world is the external domain of the material; the home represents our inner spiritual self, our true identity." (Chatterjee 'Nationalist' 238) Nationalism repositioned itself in allocating the gender roles in the social order. The men got the external domain or the material world while the women were conferred with the responsibility to take care of the internal and spiritual sphere called 'home': "The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities in the material world – and woman is its representation." (Chatterjee 'Nationalist' 238 - 39) The duty of retaining and defending the spiritual and cultural lives as well as national identity has been conferred upon women. Notions like womanhood, the 'ideal woman', motherhood, home became synonymous with the idea of national identity as *Banga Vivaha*, a text on Bengali marriage written by Chandra Kumar Bhattacharya, affirms, "That household is our motherland, that family is our India" (Quoted in T. Sarkar 36).

Within the nationalistic discourse, the idea of home got posited as the central sphere which, by virtue of being the personal space too, served as the space of self-examination, self-rectification, self-protection and self-development which would, in due course, influence what remains as the impersonal or the public or the external. Therefore, home had to provide substitutes for all activities and correlations of the external world which lay outside personal control and knowledge. (T. Sarkar 38) In other words, the home had to become the stage for educating and training men to face the external world. This conception of home got mingled with a novel role of great national importance – the role of 'motherhood'. Home is the space for the women, the mothers, for preparing the male children for the external world.

The custom of *sati* in Bengal can also be fitted within the national narratives. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the practice of *sati* was viewed more and more as a key strategic act of self-assertion and conservation by the speakers of cultural nationalism. In the debates on nationalism, as the Hindu home was conceptualised as the core of spiritual identity, womanhood became symbolic of tradition which was downrightly realised in connection with the ancient Hindu scriptures and ritualistic practices. In her deliberations on the practice of *sati* in Bengal, Lata Mani argues that 'women and Brahmanic scriptures became interlocking grounds' for articulating the status and rights of women in society. She shows how the colonial legislative moves to ban *sati* were challenged by a section of thinkers by taking recourse to the Brahmanic and Hindu religious texts. The colonial (and also Indian) prohibitionists viewed the practice from the material point of view and claimed that *sati*, being brutal in its nature of imposing torture and viciousness, was utilised as a means to obtain and establish material gain. On the other hand, the challengers of prohibition viewed *sati* from the point of cultural tradition (92). However, the chief focus for such debates was not womanhood but the validity of cultural tradition, as Mani observes: "these debates are in some sense not primarily about women but about what constitutes authentic cultural tradition. Brahminic scriptures are increasingly seen to be the locus for such authenticity so that, for example, the legislative prohibition of *sati* becomes the question of scriptural interpretation." (90) In order legitimise *sati*, ancient Hindu religious notions of women's chastity and purity were evoked. Home, being the heart of spiritual integrity, must not be tainted by the probable moral corruption of the widow (who might fall prey to desire and commit adultery). The purity of the home has to be maintained; hence women must have to remain chaste.

The practice of *sati* was constantly associated with a sense of divinity and honour. Lata Mani explains how the victims of *sati* were represented either as 'pathetic' or as 'heroic' (97). The pathetic women were those who had to be pulled into the pyre and the heroic women were those who embraced the raging fire selflessly without thinking about pain and death. The latter women were considered sacred, superhuman, and divine, and hence, ought to be revered. The attribution of respect, purity and divinity to the idea of *sati* can be viewed as a strategically developed means, through tradition, to compete against not only the material dominion brought in by British colonialism but also the socio-cultural changes in Bengal prompted by Western modernity. Ashis Nandy thus explains:

> ... The rite (*Sati*) became popular in groups made psychologically marginal by their exposure to western impact. These groups felt the pressure to demonstrate, to others as well as to themselves, their ritual purity and allegiance to traditional high culture. To many, *sati* became an important proof to conformity to older norms at a time when these norms have become shaky within. (7)

Bestowing divinity and honour on the *sati* was a strategy to attain a psychological boost over the western influences. Scriptural commendations were re-interpreted and some of their meanings were even manipulated to infuse this sense of value into being a *sati*.

Ancient and Hindu religious scriptures were the digging grounds for both supporters and abolitionists of *sati*. The religious scriptures, written by scholars in different contexts at different times, often displayed the lack of heterogeneity over the idea of *sati* and the notion of the ideal woman. Raja Rammohun Roy, one of the pioneering abolitionists of *sati*, used the scriptures in refuting the promoters of *sati*. He developed his arguments around the central question, "whether or not the practice of burning widows alive on the pile with the corpse of their husbands, is imperatively enjoined by the Hindu religion?" (Mani 103) Rammohun claimed that such a dreadful and violent act would be opposed by every religious preacher. He grounds his stand by mentioning Manu: "Manu in plain terms enjoins a widow to *continue till death* forgiving all injuries, performing austere duties, avoiding every sensual pleasure, and cheerfully practicing the incomparable rules of virtue which have been followed such women as were devoted to only one husband." (emphasis in original) (Quoted in Mani 103) This is how the ancient Hindu religious texts gradually became central to the re-articulation of women's roles and status in society.

Conjugality in the Hindu family, of which *sati* was the supreme and extreme expression, was another central field of discussion within the nationalistic debate. We have already seen how the spiritual and the internal feature of the Hindu home is posed as the opponent to the mechanical, external and utilitarian world. As the home became the training space for facing the world outside, the relationships within the home or the family have to became parallel with the mechanical, political relations in the outside world. It was necessary to realise these seemingly mechanical relations in the emotional terms; and "Hindu marriage needed to be written as love story with happy ending." (T. Sarkar 41). The Hindu notion of conjugality, which is based on the seeming absolutism of one partner (the man) over the total submission of the other (the woman), was re-articulated to replicate colonial relations. The only difference is in the nature of the relations; while colonial relations are based on material domination, conjugality is based on emotional connections. Conjugality, which is supposed to be based on deep emotional love, did have the possibilities of overriding the colonial arrangements which were developed on utilitarian and mechanical grounds. Being the foundation of spirituality within home, the wife has to be chaste. Her love for her husband must have to be 'pure' and 'unconditional', 'extending beyond the death of her husband'. The husband-wife relation is a 'complete spiritual union' being perfected through 'divine love'. (T. Sarkar 38-42) Thus, conjugality, understood in terms of the wife's complete devotion and total submission to the husband, consummating in the 'complete spiritual union', was increasingly used in the rhetoric nationalism in colonial Bengal.

One of the most informative texts in the theorization between gender and nation in the Indian context is Partha Chatterjee's analysis of the women's question and the nationalist resolution in his book *The Nation and its Fragments*. Chatterjee begins by remarking at the sudden disappearance of the women's question from central focus in the twentieth century public debates whereas it was the dominant subject in much of early and mid-nineteenth century Bengal. Rejecting Ghulam Murshid's suggestion that the relative absence of the women's question after the mid-nineteeth century was because "the nationalist politics" had censored out the women's question in its "glorification of India's past" which required defending "everything traditional" , Chatterjee argues that the reason lies not in the nationalist glorification of India's past but rather, in the refusal of nationalism to make the women's question an issue of political negotiation with the colonial state and this was possible because it has succeeded in situating the "women's question in an inner domain of sovereignty, far removed from the arena of political contest with the colonial state" (117). It was necessary for the new nation to claim a domain of superiority and that was located in its spiritual culture by dividing the domain of culture into the material and the spiritual. While men represent the material, it becomes women's responsibility to preserve the spiritual and so in this *ghar/bahir* dichotomy, norms for organizing the society and rules for women's right conduct in matters of dress, manners, food and so on began to be prescribed, drawing from a "reconstructed classical tradition" (Ibid.,126). Reconstructing and classicizing the Indian tradition was necessary to not only claim its native cultural identity but to defend itself against charges of barbarism and irrationality, which had been the colonial accusation of Indian customs (Ibid.,118-119). Thus, as Chatterjeee argues, "The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honor of a new social

responsibility, and by associating the task of female emancipation with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination" (*Nation* 130).

In the nationalist consciousness, patriotic honour is often tied with women's sexual respectability. While female fecundity is valued and elevated, unruly female sexuality threatens to discredit the nation. In the 19th century nationalist interaction with colonialism, a central element in the ideological debate was the question of the women's position in the religious tradition of Indian society. While the colonial justification was in projecting imperialism as a civilizing mission which seeks to save, borrowing Gayatri Spivak's phrase "brown women from brown men" (101), the nationalist discourse sought to reclaim its distinct (and superior) native cultural identity by re-positioning women as "goddess" or "mother". The image of woman as goddess or mother served, according to Chatterjee, to erase her sexuality in the world outside her home.

There are, however, several implications on the basis of caste, class, ethnicity or sexuality that challenge Partha Chatterjee's theorization of the nationalist resolution of the women's question. In the postcolonial context, the very idea of a homogenous "Indian women's question" may be highly contested on grounds of multiple women's experiences and realities, despite being part of the same political construct of the nation-state.

Although the masculinist notions located within the discourse of Indian nationalism had its roots in the colonial encounter, it gains different dynamics after independence. The national masculine ideal, which is not to be assumed to remain static but adapts to new definitions of masculinity and femininity according to regional n political demands, is created through persistent gender discourses promoted through vernacularising 'print capitalism' (borrowing the term from Benedict Anderson), popular media and perfected in the 21st century through what Shoshana Zuboff calls 'surveillance capitalism' which was pioneered by Google and brought to a new level by Facebook and Amazon. In popular discourse, the Indian masculine ideal is internalised through social media platforms. Bollywood movies like *Krantiveer, Purab aur Paschim, Kranti, Holiday, Baby, Border, The Legend of Bhagat Singh, Mother India, Sarfarosh, Bharat* and *Dabang* are tales of men with heightened masculinity and their patriotic endurance for their Motherland; women are usually relegated to minor roles or as icons of nationhood, to be elevated and defended or as spoils of war, to be disgraced. These patriotic films are usually embodied with caricatures or stereotypical heroes who exhibit exaggerated "manly virtues" which can be described as normative masculinity: will power, courage, honour, discipline, stoicism, strength, competitiveness and so on. These masculine ideals are sometimes associated with specific characteristics drawn from the ancient Indian mythologies and the villains, representing the 'other' are made to appear monstrous, hideous and repulsive.

In conclusion, it may be reiterated that masculinity and nationalism are intimately linked, sometimes in complex ways, integrally related to larger hegemonic formations and that every dominant idea of a nation, including that of India, necessarily works through one or several dominant or hegemonic ideas of masculinity.

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