

ADDRESSING GENDER IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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In a country that is known for its linguistic, religious and cultural diversity, it's highly problematic to have a unique solution for an issue which concerns the traditions of diverse religions and cultures. Each culture or religion has its own cultural and religious norms, customs and tradition when it comes to the issue of gender. It's high time that we as an informed community dissect some of the issues and think on the strategies to address them. Could it be that our tradition, however, carries or as we feel supposedly is rooted in great history of civilization and culture, is now grappling with the social changes and gender issues? This certainly appears to be the reasonable question when it comes to the influence of social and cultural norms on women's life.

This essay attempts to formulate a conceptual framework that places the issues of gender in the everyday lives of people within an understanding of a larger dynamic. This dynamic presupposes a gendered world, where men exercise the so called patriarchal power over women's lives irrespective of class, caste, culture, and religion. This power play by men is also mediated by the state, civil society and social structure. One such instance is explored in this essay: the decision of Muslim organizations in Kerala to approach the Supreme Court in order to contest the law of prescribing a minimum marital age for women in India.

To begin with, I would like to draw a response of Amina Wadud about the issue of recent controversy happened in Kerala regarding marital age,

...nine prominent Muslim (sic) organizations have decided to approach the Supreme Court to exclude Muslim women from the law prescribing a minimum marital age. According to them, the present Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, which prescribes 18 as women's legal age and 21 for men, violates Muslims' fundamental right to practice their religion (Wadud, 2013).

To sit back and contemplate on such a move from the Muslim organizations of Kerala will facilitate us with an insight to the intricacies and entanglements of power in the society. Here, the postulated reason behind such a move is the religious freedom, but what actually is aimed at achieving is the permanency of women being in the subservient position to that of men in the society. To dissect the claim of Muslim organisations in their move against Supreme Court order on fixing a minimum marital age for women in India has to be seen in terms of the relations of power in the Muslim society. Two things have to be noted in this regard, (i) all these organizations are headed and are run by men. (ii) The voice of women in this issue is completely ignored or to put it more clearly, by speaking authoritatively on women's issue in such a way

that deprives women of their agency is a form of control over women which eventually contribute to the hegemonic control of men in a patriarchal society. Approaching this in terms of what Gayathri Spivak theorizes in her treatise on subaltern and their representation, would make us able to unveil a patriarchal strategy that of dumping women permanently in the position of subaltern. I'll come to this point later in the essay.

Despite varied roles, the social reality for all Indian women, religious or non-religious, is that they live in patriarchal society which limits their access to the benefits of a democratic social set up. Though it's a secular democratic state with powerful system of laws, recent incidents like Delhi gang rape proves that India somehow fails, despite the rhetoric of safety nets across the country, to provide proper security for women who constitute a significant section of its citizens.

For far too long, women in India irrespective of their caste and creed have been discriminated against and treated as second citizens which in a way allayed the gender based violence, abuse and marginalization. It also needs to be recognized that, in the discourse on women's rights, lives and status there is always a concept of chastity and morality attached to it. Women are always considered the bearers of culture and when a woman gets 'spoilt', the entire community is affected or she is considered as someone who brings shame on an entire community. "In the gendered politics of culture, women more frequently retain 'traditional' clothes than men in the process of national integration and development" (Crain 1996; De la Cadena 1995). Dressing style, being one of the markers of any culture, is a key factor in analyzing gender. In most of the societies, not just in India, but across the world, women are always supposed to observe the dressing styles that are unique in any particular culture. To talk about the dressing style of Indian woman, the immediate picture that comes to anyone's mind would be a woman clad in Sari. So, there is already a construction of the image of Indian woman, overlooking or ignoring the diversity in India, the mainstream social culture projects Indian woman as someone who is in sari. Such control over women's bodies and lifestyles unveil certain power games that are played out by the patriarchal society.

While addressing gender issues in contemporary India, what I would suggest as one of the key problems to be addressed is that of child marriage. As per the statistics and various studies, India is considered one of the prominent countries in the world, with a population of over 1 billion out of which 22% are still under poverty line. It ranks as the 55th worst country with regard to its maternal mortality rate and has almost a similar infant mortality rate also. Now, like Amina wadud argues, both these factors have a direct 'corollary to child marriage': poverty, maternal mortality and, infant mortality is directly related to the national age of marriage. Rather than talking about this an economic problem, I would like to read it as a gender issue which is subtle inside the entanglements of power in society.

The Child Marriage Act which was passed in 2006 states, "This legislation is armed with enabling provisions to prohibit child marriages, protect and provide relief to victims and enhance punishment for those who abet, promote and solemnize such marriages". It has to be noted that the statistical reports prove that since the inception of this law the maternal and infant mortality rates have been declined.

Taking these insights as a point of departure, in what follows I wish to subject to critical scrutiny what I call the strategies of subordination. I would argue that imposing certain things or manners on women or prescribing the ways in which women should live (a prescription by the patriarchal power centres) is a strategy to put and maintain women in a subservient position compared to that of men. For a further elaboration on this, now let me turn to what I mentioned earlier regarding the Muslim organisations move against the fixing of marital age in India.

Surprisingly enough the prominent Muslim organizations in Kerala have decided to approach the Supreme Court in order to get Muslims exempted from the law claiming it “violates the fundamental right to practice their religion”, but providing no evidence that child marriage is “fundamental” to Islam in any sense!!! In Muslims’ case in India, it’s taken for granted that there is a religious sanction on their prescription of laws for their women which is not the case in real. In fact, for Muslims, the question of gender justice often becomes a struggle to be fought at two levels: against the forces of conservatism in society and against its anti-democratic effects on the political structure of the country. There is growing tension between gender justice and religious conservatism. Fundamentalist forces try to impose greater control over women, even though this approach hardly has anything to do with religion.

Let me draw a simple example of my mother’s marriage. She was just 15 when she and my father were married, and this was just around 25 years ago. Though my mother acknowledges that this did happen and she did not have any serious physical problems as such, she does not want the same to happen for my sisters. She understands that this is not a model which has to be continued. Since she was married while she was a high school girl, she could not carry forward her studies which eventually put her in a situation of unfit for any decent jobs. This made her completely dependent on my father for any of her financial needs. What I point to here is not just the evidences we discussed above, proving that child marriage is harmful, potentially fatal, and thus to be banned, but the kind of skewed logic that advocates this must continue to happen. We need to focus more on the consequences of such acts rather than just the incidents. It’s not just an issue of Muslims in India, but other community women also face the same kind of issues of getting married even before they are independent to stand on their own.

In situations of child marriage, what Amina wadud satirically calls “babies having babies”, the basic problem regarding women’s lives lies in the fact of women’s ability to be independent. When a girl gets married in her childhood itself, she is deprived of two important things: (i) education and (ii) economic independence. She is permanently destined to be dependent on her husband, which normally puts husband in a more advantageous position than wife. Theorizing this would bring more clarity into my argument; when someone is deprived of proper education, he/she cannot find any decent job in the contemporary society which would eventually puts him/her in financial crisis that in turn makes him/her unable to be financially independent.

Finally, it requires mention that studying gender issues in India cannot be done monolithically and there is no consentaneous trend of women’s struggle for gender justice anywhere in the world. It varies with the cultural setting, the political structure of the state and the location of the community. Though there is always the necessity of using theoretical concepts that are relevant to the practices and assumptions of different cultures and different religions in order to find and solve issues related to each cultures, in an Indian scenario, we need to challenge any kinds of social norms that create discrimination and perpetuate prejudices and oppression against women and to develop a certain kind of socio-cultural situation which promotes gender justice and women empowerment through addressing the underlying structural causes of gender inequality. Women should be given opportunities in leadership, recognition and participation in decisions that affect their lives. They should also be given increased economic participation and empowerment by ensuring their access to decent work with equitable pay and good working conditions, as well as to land and other assets. There should be proper measures, if laws are not enough, to end all forms of violence against women and to ensure their access to justice and their right to become fully participating citizens.

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