

Question of Gendered Spaces and Visibility: Women's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In the male dominant environment, women considered as secondary citizen as well as 'the second sex'¹. They were also considered as a inferior soul than men. Therefore, they were not enjoyed much more social, political as well as economical right in the society. As a result their roles in public and private domain were fixed. Women's are cutting across all divisions; occupy predetermined space- formally ordained in the private and public domain with corresponding fixed notions of their roles, expectations, self- perceptions and self- worth. In most instance, these notions reflection of the institutionalization of gender differences, are so deeply internalized that women themselves would take up cudgels to protect these prescribed norms. Yet, change has occurred, in both perceptible and imperceptible manners. The need for change has been expressed, at times rather vocally, at various levels, by policy makers and politicians, by intellectuals and social workers, and most importantly by women themselves. This process of challenging the gendered spaces allotted to women and usually accepted by them, though slow at times, has nevertheless been going on. The gradual movement towards visibility of these spaces is very much on the agenda of change in society. This is the purpose of this article.

Key Words : Gender, Women's Perspective, Socio-political, Male dominant environment, Secondary citizen.

INTRODUCTION

Structural dynamics and policy or agenda making have rarely been so closely intertwined as have been since independence, which heralded momentous changes in the life of Indians, especially the oppressed and the subjugated. From the colonial to a national, sovereign republic framework, the passage from being subjects to becoming citizens market sweeping changes in terms of the frame of reference. The colonial social formation had an impact on parameter of power – the general feelings of powerlessness was made to stand on its head in non- political fields: socio – cultural zones constituted the only domain in which power to determine one's future remained in one's hand. The dichotomy between state- the real's of power, and society- the realm of culture

was absolute, the former alien, the other indigenous and tradition bound. Interface between the two was constituted by social process of modernization, westernization² etc.

With independence came change- the right to vote was handed over even to Dalits and women; equality was enshrined in the constitution – the structural constraints posited by colonial social formation were unfrozen. Another change which comes to mind is that before 1947, agenda making in terms of the women's question was more or less outside the domain of the state- the Indian National Congress and the National Movement were only in a peripheral sense instrumental in political agenda making. But, after 1947, the same forces now stood in a power welding position, the issue could hence

1. Simon de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Penguin, translated in Hindi by Prabha Khaitan, Saraswati Prakashan, 1991
2. For an explicatory treatment of these trends see, A.R. Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, Popular Book Depot, Bombay 1959; M.N.Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, Los Angeles 1966; also Y. Singh, *Modernization of Indian Tradition*, Rawat, Jaipur, 1986

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move more forcefully from the public to the state's agenda.

The ideas of the nationalist leaders and the social reformers found fruition in the constitution and its provisions, their normative ideals in touch with reality were subsequently expressed through legislation and acts of parliament and the plans, programmes and executive measures initiated from time to time. These three express and are constitutive of the state's agenda.

The moot question is to consider as to why certain issues related to women are excluded from the political or state's agenda, while others become recognized legitimate matters of public concern. This selectively involved in the process of agenda making is of concern to women activists. But in focusing on how issues become part of the public agenda, it does not follow that formal or even popular recognition of a problem is necessarily an opening or a progressive move towards equality³. It may be as Foucault describes a closing down, domestication or confinement of the problem.⁴ But, if there is to be social change, some political legitimating given to issues previously silenced or uncomforted serves a useful purpose. Becoming part of the public agenda is no guarantee.

In their discussion of models of agenda building, Cobb, Ross and Ross distinguish between two routes to policy formation those that are initiated outside and those initiated inside government⁵. Mary F. Katzenstein opines that such a distinction holds implication for the way in which women's issues have become part of the public agenda because the two routes transport different realm of public concern. She further states that development distinction at a different plan as existing between state driven and movement driven routs of agenda making. The separation as I understand it can only be an analytical one as both routs are overlapping and mutually reinforcing issues arising in one domain can lead to issues and act6ion in the other. Katzenstein further argues that the government initiated route is far more likely to be the

vehicle of economic agenda building than it is likely to be the channel for the politicization of an egalitarian body politics like Rape, dowry deaths, wife beating, sati, etc.⁶

Since the 1950s, four factors have had varying emphasis in mounting pressure for inclusion of issues in the public or political agenda. So closely intertwined are they that it is possible to make only an analytical separation. These factors interwoven into the fabric of the women's agenda reflect the behind the scene machinations, these include the 'liberal' central stream of the women of the middle classes, the left of the centre working women's groups including the socialists and all shades of left leanings, the international women's movement', and the states own imperatives in the discourse of its power.

In the first phase, the issues were informed with a welfare notion, women in the plural sense were the beneficiaries of benevolent welfare policies. Then followed the notion of women's development; women were acknowledged as not only in need of social uplifting but with certain incentives, this could be possible. In the third phase, the slogan was women in development, wherein women formed a spoke in the wheel for the larger process of development. This subsumed gender sensitivity but with the realization that development as a concept itself was argue and innocuous, one entered the final phase, that of empowerment the attempt was to empower women and both personal and community empowerment came on the agenda. Empowerment is a dynamic process encompassing several mutually reinforcing components but begins with and is supported by economic independence which would entail access to and control over resources. It includes a perception of the self, of rights and needs, which would enhance faith in one's own potential. Empowerment is hence a movement from below and within to gain autonomy – the freedom tears one's livelihood along with the right to determine how to go about achieving it.

With the enshrinement of the principal of equality in

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3. Mary Fainsod Katzenstein. 'Getting Women's Issue into the public Agenda: Body Politics in India', *Samya Shakti*, Vol. VI, 1991-92, p.3
 4. See, Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol.1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Huxley, New York. Vintage, 1980
 5. Roger Cobb, Jennie Keith Ross and M.H. Ross, 'Agenda Building as a Comparative Political Process', *American Political Science Review*, 70;pp 126-138, 1976. Roger Cobb and Charles D. Elder, *Participation in American Politics: The Dynamics of Agenda Building*, Baltimore, John Hopkins Press, 1975
 6. Mary F. Katzenstein, 1991-92, *op.cit.* p.3

the constitution and the free access of women to education, the vote, professions, public services and political offices, the urgency in the women's question was deemed to be almost over. With the adoption of such estimable rights in the constitution, their implementation and actual functioning was not viewed as problematic and would follow. The women's Organization which had been so vocal in the 30s and 40s and had valiantly led the struggle turned co placement and status quoits. No doubt, the clue to such an attitude lay in the benefit they, especially those belonging to the middle class had derived in the first years of independence. The women's question almost disappeared from the agenda, reflected in the decline of both scholarly research and writing about women.

The driving spirit and values behind the movement for independence saw its flowering in the most important document of our times the constitutions of independence India. Its preamble promises to secure to all its citizens justice, social, economic and political; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship, equality of status and opportunity and to promote among them all fraternity, assuring the dignity of the individuals and the unity of nation".

The Indian constitution is more than a prescription of rights; it is a social document embodying the objectives of a social revolution to be attained by making deliberate departures from the inherited political and social systems⁷.

To attain its esteemed objectives, the constitution guarantees certain fundamental rights. Indian women are the beneficiaries of these rights in the same manner as Indian men. Art. 14 ensures, "equality before the law" and Art. 15 prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex. Art. 16 (1) guarantees equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state. Art. 526 stresses that elections to the Lok Shabha and to the state Assemblies are to be strictly on the basis of adult franchise". These four articles together with the omnibus provision of Art. 38 which in brief, directs the state to an sure a just, social, political and economic order, directly provides for equality, certain other articles, such as Arts. 39 (b) (e) (f) relating to ownership of material resources, Art. 41– rights to employment, work and public assistance, Art. 43- provision for work, a living wage etc; Art.44 – a uniform Civil Code, Art.45 – free and compulsory education for

all children up to the age of 14, Art. 47 raising the standard of nutrition, standard of living and public health- provide and cover the equality of women indirectly or by implication. Besides, there are some other articles which have been described by constitutional commentators as 'women specific'. These include, Art. 16 (2) which 'forbids discrimination in respect to any employment of office under the state' on grounds only of religion, race caste, sex descent, place of birth , residence or any of them', Art. 39 (1) which promises "the right to an adequate means of livelihood in Men and women equality, Art. 39 (d) "equal pay for equal work" for both sexes, Art. 39 (c) protection of the health and strength of workers - men, women and children from abuse and entry into vocations unsuited to their age and strength", Art. 42 "just and human conditions of work and maternity relief", Art. 325 which says that "no special electoral rules can be made on the grounds of religion, race, caste and sex" and, above all. Art. 15 (3) which in fact provides for protective discrimination by empowering the state to make" any special provisions for women and children".

In short, the constitutional imperative is for non-discrimination in both civil rights and economic opportunity. Of course, these goals are far from being met and the optimism they generate is belied. Only those provisions falling within the heading of fundamental rights are justifiable and recognized as such by the courts.

These constitutional provisions have been backed by legislation. Much of this legislation was initially instituted in response to the reforms movement of the nineteenth century, but has subsequently been revised to meet the constitutional commitments.

The obvious gender inequality with women being paid unequal wages for some work being done was sought to be removed by the Equal Remuneration Act (1976).

Both legal and executive measures reflect approaches from above, a distinction has to be maintained between the potential and actual change. In most cases, the potentialities for actual change cannot manage to keep pace with the actual rate of change. Change in the desired direction towards the equality of sex cannot be a task of the government alone; the responsibility for change must be shared by the community. The need to mobilized public opinion to change traditional mind sets and oppressive social institutions to educate women as to their rights is

7. An Interpreted by Towards Equality', p.3. the CSWI Report 'Towards Equality', p.3.

equal if not greater to government action. A state of enlightened consciousness would make it easier to implement the measures from above and at the same time there would be greater pressure to move the political system in response to women's needs, perception and attitudes, both the women as well as of men and of both, as in a community have to change, before any long lasting changes can be made.

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