

Women at War: A Study of Cooch Behar Royal Family during Colonial Period

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Abstract: Women's Studies is an academic discipline, which has its own identity and autonomous existence. It has over a period of time developed its own theories based on feminist concepts and evolved its own methodology distinguished from the various precepts and methodology adopted by "mainstream" disciplines. Various theories and approaches have emerged over a period to bring about the advancement of women. The most recent of those has been empowerment approach- that unless the women get the opportunity to make the decisions for themselves and others, their advancement will not come about. But there is limitation of this approach. Gender is not a monolithic construct. Gender can not be seen exclusively as culturally, linguistically or politically constructed. Individual psychological process constructs gender for the individual. Gender is inevitably personal as well as cultural. If the psychological conditioning of the women does not undergo change, empowerment of women in true sense is not going to happen in the society.

Keywords: empowerment, gender, monolithic construct, women studies.

INTRODUCTION

Women are integral part of the social set up and any study of the society, be it social sciences, pure sciences or technical sciences, they should definitely involve a basic component on women and relevant issues that would ruffle the hitherto identified parameters and theories, data, and methodology of the particular sciences. Women's studies, thus, gains in significance and contributes to all aspects of higher education, its objectives, contents and methods.

Women's Studies can be defined as a body of literature that embodies its concern for women's equality and development and seeks to find explanation and remedies for the unequal position of women in society. It is a set of research queries and analyses which enquires into the origin and basis of the discriminatory practices against women. It seeks and exposes the patriarchal roots of socio-cultural and economic practices of family and society that cause suppression. Thus the Women Studies is not a narrow study about women but a critical instrument for analysing the social reality so as to lead to the development of social sciences and bringing about a change in the existing position of women.

Defined thus, Women's Studies is an academic discipline, which has its own identity and autonomous existence. It has over a period of time developed its own theories based on feminist concepts

and evolved its own methodology distinguished from the various precepts and methodology adopted by "mainstream" disciplines. Various theories and approaches have emerged over a period to bring about the advancement of women. The most recent of those has been the approach and strategy of empowerment of women: that unless the women get the opportunity to make the decisions for themselves and others, their advancement will not come about [1]. The Fourth World Conference on women held at Beijing in 1995 clearly placed this as one of the twelve strategies for the world. The Platform for action mentioned "women's equal participation in decision making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but also can be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of Women's perspective at all levels of decision making, the goals of equality, development and peace can not be achieved [1].

Now question comes as to whether the category of "gender" is monolithic construct or not. To get the answer I have followed Nancy J Chodorow's article, "Gender as Personal and Cultural Construction" [2]. She is arguing that recent academic feminist theory seems to have moved away from psychology. She believes that two directions in contemporary feminist thought underlie this move. Her article tries to accommodate one of these directions; it takes issue with

the other. For despite the recent dissatisfaction with psychology, the ongoing development of psychoanalytic feminism as an academic enterprise suggests that some feminists continue to think that the psychology of gender is important. We turned to the psychology of gender in the first place because it seemed directly, experientially important to our lives as women and because we thought that there was something in psychology that helped account for the tenacity of gender relations.

First, contemporary feminism has been rightfully wary of universalizing claims about gender and of accounts that seem to reduce gender to a single defining or characterizing feature. Psychological claims of all sorts have been a special focus of this criticism. Psychoanalytic feminism, feminist psychologies, and feminist psychoanalysis and therapy (the last of these not so much noticed by academic feminists) have not paid sufficient attention to differences and variation among women and to the variety, instability, multiplicity, and contested nature of gender meanings. Psychoanalytic feminism and other feminist psychologies also often claim a single factor or aspect of psychology as most important in defining women or femininity. But Chodorow differs in this point and offers a more clinically and less theoretically or developmentally based way of thinking about psychological gender in order to respond to these feminist criticisms of psychology and psychoanalysis while at the same time retaining insights from psychology that feminism has found useful. Such an approach also provides a corrective to this psychological theorizing itself by more fully describing psychological reality.

Second, the clinically based approach which Chodorow has developed claims that Gender can not be seen as entirely culturally, linguistically, or politically constructed. Rather there are individual psychological processes in addition and in a different register from, culture, language, and power relation that construct gender for the individual. Chodorow suggests that each person's sense of gender-her gender identity or gendered subjectivity is an inextricable fusion or melding of personally created and cultural meaning. Chodorow claims that gender is inevitably personal as well as cultural. By personal meaning, she refers to psychological powers described by psychoanalysis and in particular by emotion or affect and unconscious fantasy. At the same time, it is certainly the case that aspects of gender identity, and interpersonally transmitted emotional responses themselves conveyed by people with their own personal-cultural sense of gender.

Chodorow also tells that Feminist theory is right that gender can not be seen apart from culture. But these theoretical approaches, because they do not

consider individual personal emotional and fantasy meaning, do not fully capture the meaning of gender for the subject. They miss the important component of experienced gendered meaning and of gendered subjectivity. That each person's gradual subjectivity is an individual creation addresses an aspect of the question of difference. Each person personally inflects and creates her own gender, and they are many individual masculinities and femininities.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, an attempt has been made to see the things through the lenses of Chodorow's understanding of gender. My observation seemed to characterise the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship, prevalent patterns in female and male constructions of self and gender of micro level study of Princely State of Cooch Behar. The problem I have selected to speak on is the domain of power where I have tried to situate two women figure of two different generations covering the period of 1878-1925. My account described how *saas-bahu* (Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law) constructed their unconscious, inner-self object world, their unconscious sense of self – boundaries and their sense of gender.

The so called *saas-bahu* conflict started with the marriage of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan to Sunity Devi [3], the daughter of Keshab Candra Sen, one of the most important exponents of the Brahmo Samaj. The marriage was settled after a long debates, disputes and disagreements. The King's mother and grandmother were very keen about this marriage as Sunity Devi came from a staunch Brahmo family and in those days a marital tie between these two opposite poles was unthinkable.

Though the marriage was conducted at last with the interference of Lord Dalton, the then Governor of Bengal, yet there was a total rejection from the royal family to consider Sunity Devi as the Maharani of Cooch Behar. The situation however changed with the birth of her first male child-Rajendra Narayan. This pleasant incidence also gave birth to a good rapport between the cultural and social life of the Cooch Behar State and Brahmo society of Calcutta.

The most surprisingly the religious belief of the royal family suddenly changed after Sunity Devi started to reside in Cooch Behar. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan adopted Brahmoism as his religion and thereby became a member of New Dispensation Church of the Brahmo Samaj. All the domestic ceremonies in his family such as *Namkarana*, *Diksha*, marriages were regulated by tenets of that particular creed. Not only that during Nripendra Narayan's reign most of the administrative posts were given to Bengali intelligentsia mostly coming from Calcutta [4].

The happiness was however short-lived. A new wind blew over Cooch Behar with the marriage of the next ruler Jitendra Narayan, the second son of Nripendra Narayan and Suniti Devi, with Indira Devi, the only daughter of the Maharaja of Baroda [4]. In spite of her background of Western education, she readily accepted here responsibilities both in the administration of the state and in the royal household. As she came from a pious Hindu family, all religious ceremonies of the state changed their character again. Jitendra Narayan embraced Hinduism as his religion. Festivals like Durga Puja, Kali Puja and Diwali once again won royal patronage.

After her ascendancy to the position of the Maharani of Cooch Behar, Indira Devi took two policy decisions – first, she sought to arrest the flood of Brahmanisation and second, she initiated a move to nativise the administration. Indira Devi's Marathi-Hindu upbringing presumably could not have brought her to negotiate with the Brahmoism of her mother-in-law, Suniti Devi. Her antipathy towards her mother-in-law who did not belong to any royal family also seemed to affect her policies at a subconscious level.

Her policy of nativization of administration had started off with gradual thinning of the officials, being replaced by non-Bengali officials. She also sought to phase out the Bengali 'babus' by inducting quite a few officials from and other parts of India and appointing them as Dewans, Secretaries of the state. The one plausible reason which could induce her to do so was the concealed resistance to the Brahmo Bengali officials to her policy of Hindu revivalism. Not only in state affairs, but also in royal household one type of undercurrent of conflict was going on. It was seen that after the marriage of Sunity Devi, side by side with the Bengali cook, the English cook was appointed to serve the English dish. Again after the marriage of Indira Devi, she brought Maratha cook to taste her favourite dishes.

Sunity Devi being a Brahmo woman, did a lot for emancipation of women not only in the state but also outside the state. But she did not attempt to put an end to "Purdah" in Cooch Behar State. But Indira Devi after getting married when arrived in Cooch Behar State with an open car, 'purdah' immediately ended.

Both of them were very fashionable ladies, modern in outlook. Sunity Devi started a new style of the wing saree in Bombay style by pinning a brooch to keep the shoulder drape in place. She wore a small triangular piece of cloth on her head to give the saree a dash of western glamour. On the other hand Indira Devi was considered one of the best dressed women in India. She had started wearing saris made of chiffon for the first time in India.

There are however many loose ends in this tale of a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflict. It is true that Sunity Devi went on to write an autobiography in English language-"Autobiography of an Indian Princess". But Sunity Devi's memoir hardly makes any comment on her daughter-in-law except one line, "Indira is very clever and very pretty". On the other hand Indira Devi had chosen the weapon of silence against her mother-in-law, Sunity Devi.

CONCLUSION

So from the above narrative what we can infer is that there was a power conflict between Sunity Devi and Indira Devi. But both of them were very much empowered in political, social and economic terms. In spite of their socio-economic empowerment the two women constantly were engaged in power struggle. Thus we may assume that psychology controlled their role as women. Sometimes they played the role as a representative of patriarchy, sometimes as a man, sometime as a woman, there was a power struggle between Princess and the Queen, and sometimes they fight over the most important man in their lives. So if the psychological conditioning of the women does not undergo change, empowerment of women in true sense is not going to happen in the society.

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