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INDIAN WOMEN: THE FORGOTTEN GENDER IN HISTORY

Dr Sahabuddin Ahmed

Associate Professor, Deptt. of History, Karimganj College,

Karimganj, Assam, 788710

Abstract

'Women', particularly Indian women, have always been misinterpreted and misled in the arena of History. They are the 'forgotten-gender in history'. She has always been found hidden behind a mist of illusions. The false notions that-'man for the world and woman for the man' has grasped the Indian Society. Even the methods and concepts developed in the writings of history remained a male bastion. The patriarchal domination is so pervasive that the women came to be socialized with the male values and the writings of history were done from the male perspective and then women were totally forgotten and relegated and even remained as the 'forgotten gender' in history, though their contributions to history was equally and sometimes even more important than that of men.

In this paper, it has been discussed and shown many reasons why history has remained a partial history. It has also been shown that woman should not be perceived merely in items of their labour or a child producing machinery but also in terms of their relationship both within and outside the family, their relations to men, children, society, economy and politics in shaping not only woman in history but even history itself. In this paper, it has also been shown that to integrate gender in history, what is really needed is a new consciousness and sensitivity against patriarchal domination which also requires gender neutral language, which will be freed from male biasness-because this is an aspect which has been neglected for centuries by the historians.

The very word 'woman' is a symbol of eternal mystery and enchantment, as if it is not enough that she is flesh and blood, but that she must be something higher than what she is. And so she is never asked to take part in the incessant activity of this workaday world. Women, it seems, was created to make the world more beautiful and man more ardent in his appreciation of beauty. Women have always been misled by imposed ideal of womanhood. Be it her gentle manners and natural tenderness, or her lack of physical strength, she has always found herself hidden behind a mist of illusions, fenced in on all sides and

forced a way from the real world into the seclusion of a helpless and dispossessed life. It is the unfair system that fostered the absurd notion – that she has no place in the world of work outside her home. Man is the maker of that world and women's duty is to make him a home. The inherited notions, values, traditions and false ideology that – 'man for the world and woman for the man'. And so our society remains absolutely in the control of men. In this ancient land of ours, 'dowry' is still a widely circulated word. It looks as if only a woman needs to get married, and

the groom's party must somehow be persuaded to accept her, with a fat dowry.

But is it only the outer world? Do the women of the new generation neglect their homes on the pretext of working outside like men? Are they quite as self – centered and office – oriented as men? Definitely not at all. A woman's home is still her life and soul. She makes her home beautiful, bears all responsibilities of her family and meets the demands of social life, balancing her own workload all the time with domestic duties.

For a long time a lot has changed in the writing of history in connection with gender in to studies of society and economy. The historians have been able to rally back and save the discipline from being pushed out of the main stream of knowledge. The methods and concepts have developed in the writings of history. Yet, one basic character of history remained constant – the writing of history remained by and large, a male bastion. It was almost forgotten that the society consisted of the entire human society, that is, both men and women. Most social scientists felt that the world belong to man and woman may be assigned a place in it, or it has been believed that history has made by men. But this is not a reality because if history is the progress and advancement of civilization, then it is absolutely impossible that progress could have been achieved without the equal participation of the women who form about half of the society. The women were written out of history by the men. And written history can be dated to the times when the mother right was defeated and society came to be a patriarchal one. The patriarchal domination was so all pervasive that not only did men dominated social, political and economic life of the society, but the values also come to be male oriented values and every one in the society, including the women came to be socialized in these male values and thus histories of societies came to be written from the male perspective and the women

were totally forgotten and relegated and remained as the “forgotten gender” in history though their contributions to history was equally and sometimes even more important than that of men. And for that, most histories that have been written till today are incomplete histories because these have not been able to analyses the development of the whole society.

There are many reasons why history has remained partial history. One of the reasons is that the types of sources which historians have traditionally used do not reflect the lives of the subjugated and subordinated masses of the society. Historians have always used records behind by formal institutions and organizations in the society and since these institutions have been male dominated; the life of the women has obviously been wiped out of history. The importance of the subjugated classes and more particularly the development of a methodology to study them were made available to the historians by Karl Marx when he developed the idea of Historical Materialism to analyses human progress. But even historians using historical materialism as tool of analysis only, because a methodology along can not remove the weight of male orientation.

The rapid changes have been taken place in feminist theory and feminist movements which changed the situation of women in the society. However, it is possible to point out four major strains in the feminist movements. These strains can be identified as the (a) liberal Feminist strain, (b) The Traditional Marxist strain, (c) The Radical Feminist strain and (d) The Socialist Feminist strain.

The Liberal Feminist strain sought the apply of liberal principles to women as well as to men – that should not grant to women fewer rights than that a men and liberal feminists have fought against laws to do this. In the 20th century they have opposed laws to those that give more rights to husbands than wives on marriage.

The Traditional Marxist Strain of feminism is governed naturally by its allegiance to the method of his materialism. It is necessary therefore to study and understand women in their specific historical conditions, because it is true that if men have changed over time women have also changed. But how and to what extent can be analyzed only with the collection of empirical information about how women have existed in different historical situations. A lot of empirical information on men is available, but there is a dearth of knowledge about women.

The Radical Feminism was generated by the women liberation movement of the late 1960's. It was sparked off by a small group of predominantly white, middle class, college – educated American women. The Radical Feminist spoke in very general terms about the relations between men and women because they tried to emphasize the fact that women had always been subordinated in all societies.

The Socialist Feminists were committed to the basic Marxist conceptions but shared with Radical Feminist the belief that older, established, political theories are not capable of giving an adequate account of women's oppression and in order to do so it is necessary to develop new political and economic categories.

These strains of Feminism have had their own political implications and have appeared differently in different historical circumstances. Accordingly, there have been several feminists' approaches to history, just as there are several approaches to the questions of women's movements. Each feminist approach to history was produced by a particular phase of feminist thought.

Thus the writing of history came to be question time and again by Women from various perspectives, depending upon the dominant character of the women's movement at a particular point of time, and on the waxing or waning of the movement. For instance, the women's

movements of the 1960s and 1970s have raised a lot of popular enthusiasm about women's history. The radical strain of this enthusiasm seeks to reverse the whole of existing, written history and say that history belongs only to the oppressed groups. These radical groups in their enthusiasm face the danger of not giving enough time to do research to unravel the truth of the past. The more moderate strain goes to the other extreme of doing too much research and converting women's history to merely an academic subject. Again there is an assumption which has been gaining currently amongst feminist groups is that women's history has to be written by women alone and must be only about women. Such assumptions trivialize the entire purpose of writing women back into history, because a history written with these feminist postulates would bring in another type of gender bias into history. One must also remember that a women historian need not necessarily be a believer in the women's cause because "it is possible to find women who are anti-feminists". So, what is of importance therefore is not who is writing history, but the perspective from which it is written and the kind of research that has been done to unravel the developments in the past, and finally the attempts made to present a total history with as little of gender bias as possible. In fact, if a historian wishes to focus on the role of women in social production. The huge amount of the hidden labour of women will come to light and also the fact that if the women did not perform their share of labour in the household and outside it the entire system of social production would have been thrown off gear. Again it has to be remembered that women have to be perceived not merely in terms of their labour but also in terms of their relationship both within and outside the family. Their relations to men, children and also other women have gone a long way in shaping not only women in history but even history itself. Thus the task of

writing women back into history has to begin with the recognition that women have existed under different material condition which have differed under distinct system of production and according to diverse class positions of the women.

However, in order to integrating gender into the study of society and economy, what is really needed is a new consciousness, sensitivity about the great injustice which has been done to almost one half of the society by the patriarchal values of the society. So if the writing of male oriented history has been primarily an academic exercise, the writing of the reverse type of history requires far more than an academic exercise. It requires the acceptance of a methodology of history which can study subordinated groups. It requires the development of sensitivity. It requires a struggle against patriarchal domination and the rousing of a new consciousness, it also requires a new gender neutral language, because the language in which history has been written so far has been a very male oriented

language and finally it requires a new perspective to the study of history and familiarization with women's movements and their various strains. Such an approach would focus on women in history not with the intention of writing men out of history, but in order to bring about the writing of a complete history of our society. The women factor however needs to be stressed because this is an aspect which has been neglected for centuries by historians.

It is also important to remember that the struggle is against injustice and inequality, not against the male sex. If we have to proceed towards a better society it will not do for the two sexes to behave as if they were perpetually on a battle ground. Only a clear understanding of goals can contribute to the making of a better society. Equal rights can be ensured only when men and women have attained the same level of consciousness. Men must be made to see that this world is not their exclusive possession, it belongs to both sexes.

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