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GENDER CONSCIOUSNESS, PATRIARCHY
AND THE INDIAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

by

Aparna Thomas

A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
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Aparna Thomas

GENDER CONSCIOUSNESS, PATRIARCHY AND THE INDIAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Aparna Thomas, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 1996

The women's movement has a long history in India. There exists an active women's movement in India today. Furthermore, there also exists a strong legal environment to protect women's rights. However, the social status of the majority of Indian women remains unchanged. In other words, the women's movement has failed to change the social status of Indian women.

This thesis examines the Indian women's movement historically from the nineteenth century to the present to explain why it has not had a greater impact on changing the social status of Indian women.

I argue that the lack of change in the social status of women is mainly due to the lack of gender consciousness among Indian women and the persistence of patriarchal attitudes in Indian society. Based on a historical analysis of the status of Indian women and the women's movement, I argue that the women's movement has not been effectively engaged in raising gender consciousness among women due to which the social status of Indian women remains unchanged.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The women's movement has a long history in India. Women's involvement in social movements dates back hundreds of years and a considerable amount of literature documents it. The most notable contribution of Indian women in social movements was during the national movement in the 1940's. Women played an important role in this movement and were able to mobilize for a common cause: independence from the British. In return for their support, Indian women were guaranteed equal rights after independence.

Although the new Constitution did guarantee women equal rights, Indian women continue to remain oppressed and struggle over everything from survival to resources. There exists in India a strong legal environment and a movement to protect women's rights. In the past fifty years, the number of women's organizations has also increased. However, the social status of the majority of Indian women remains unchanged. While women have made considerable progress in some areas such as education and employment, they continue to be subjected to the influence of the existing patriarchal attitudes in Indian society.

This thesis will examine the Indian women's movement from the nineteenth

century to the present to explain the causes for the lack of a stronger impact it has had on changing the status of Indian women. I argue that despite the fact that there have been political and legal reforms and a sustained women's movement in India today, the social status of women has not changed. Although the women's movement has attempted to change the status of Indian women, it has not had a significant impact on changing the existing cultural attitudes regarding women. Furthermore, I will argue that the lack of change in the social status is mainly due to the lack of gender consciousness among Indian women and the persistence of patriarchal attitudes in Indian society.

I will argue that in order to change the social status of Indian women, the women's movement has to create a gender consciousness among Indian women. A greater level of consciousness raising by the women's movement, should lead to a greater understanding of women's subordinate status. Thus, the greater the level of gender consciousness raising by the women's movement, the greater its impact on changing the social status of women. Furthermore, there also exists a strong connection between patriarchy and the women's movement in India, such that the greater the influence of it, the lesser the impact of the movement on the lives of the women.

The absence of gender consciousness among Indian women is largely due to the fact that the women's movement has been unsuccessful in creating an awareness of women's issues. One of the major reasons for this is due to the fact that there is an absence of unity in the movement. The women's movement is mainly comprised

of many different organizations with different agendas. Moreover, women continue to be heavily influenced by the prevailing patriarchal culture. I argue that the root problem of women's subordination in India is linked with the patriarchal ideology and demonstrate that the women's movement has not successfully addressed this problem.

Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

Social Movements

In order to understand the success or failure of social movements, it is important to define the concept. There are various definitions of social movements in the literature. Most scholars define social movements to include the promotion of social change (Tilly 1978; McCarthy and Zald, 1977). However, there is disagreement on whether social movements consist of a set of beliefs in social change (McCarthy and Zald 1977), collective activity promoting social change (Wilkinson 1971) or the group of individuals who hold those beliefs and engage in collective activity (Tilly 1978). In other words, there is a distinction between social movements in general and the organizations of social movements.

The separation of social movements and social movement organizations is an important one as it affects certain types of movements more than others. Organization plays an important role such movements. Women's movements in particular seem to have been affected by the degree of organization as the research indicates that the majority of the successful movements were largely organized movements. Very little

activity occurred outside of these organizations. This is also an important aspect in the Indian women's movement as it made up of numerous organizations.

Gender Consciousness

There is a considerable amount of literature on gender consciousness and its relationship with various women's movements around the world. There are various definitions of gender consciousness, but as a universal concept, it supports a perception of gender roles combined with political roles that allows women to legitimize themselves (Gurin 1990). In other words, it empowers women with a sense of validity of their world view. Patricia Gurin states that gender consciousness, like other forms of group consciousness, embodies an identification with similar others, positive affect towards them and a feeling of independence within the group's fortunes (Gurin 1990, 14). According to Rinehart (1992), gender consciousness is the recognition that one's relation to the political world is shaped in important ways by the physical fact of one's sex. Furthermore, feminism, regardless of the particular form it may take, is, at its root, a powerful manifestation of gender consciousness. Rinehart also states that gender consciousness supports a perception of the relationship of gender roles to political roles that allows individual women to legitimize themselves (Rinehart 1992).

Other social scientists also provide useful definitions of gender consciousness. According to sociologists Nancy Davis and Robert Robinson, individuals must first perceive that inequality exists, and then decide that this inequality is sufficiently

unfair that some collective action is warranted. The consciousness of inequality includes the self awareness of inequality on the part of those who are not disadvantaged (Davis, Robinson 1991). Thus by arguing that gender consciousness enables people to realize that injustices exist and that some action is needed to eliminate those injustices, the relationship between gender consciousness and the women's movement becomes clear. They are dependent on each other.

Scholars such as D.W. Livingstone and Meg Luxton define gender consciousness by using class analogies. According to them gender consciousness includes the following: (a) gender identities, as our understanding of the normal meanings of femininity and masculinity, and our personal sentiments of affinity with these distinctions; (b) oppositional gender consciousness, as a sense that identities of feminine and masculine have been arbitrary and constraining for both men and women and a recognition that gender relations have involved domination and oppression of women by men; and (c) hegemonic gender consciousness as the willingness to either maintain or create a form of society based on the assumptions that one's own gender interests can be generalized for all (Livingstone, Luxton, 1988). All these definitions suggest that for gender consciousness to exist, there has to first of all be an awareness that inequalities exist. This awareness has to be followed by the desire for some kind of change.

Patricia Gurin identifies four dimensions of group consciousness from social movement theory which are particularly useful in analyzing gender consciousness. These are: collective orientation, discontent, withdrawal of legitimacy and

identification (Gurin 1990). According to her, the first component-collective orientation assumes that the group desires change in power because either it has been subordinated or its dominance is challenged. In her definition of group consciousness, collective orientation leads to collective action (Gurin 1990). In other words, one of the most important components of creating gender consciousness is a collective orientation toward the desirability of change in the status of women.

The second component of group consciousness is the individuals' discontent with the status of their social group in comparison with others outside their group. In order for gender consciousness to exist, women as individuals have to compare themselves to members of other groups and then become collectively discontented.

The third component is the legitimacy of disparities. Here Gurin suggests that members of the group have to evaluate their disparities and become convinced that these disparities stem from illegitimate sources. In other words, this means members have to undergo an erosion of faith in the traditional justifications given to them regarding their disparities. Relating this to gender consciousness, women have to be convinced that their subordinate status stems from various structural barriers existing in society.

The fourth component-identification reflects a recognition of shared values and interests that turns the concept into action. According to some theorists, identification is a strong motivational concept for members of a group which strengthens recognition of shared deprivation (Tilly 1978). When members share a strong sense of identity, mobilization is more easily achieved. In the women's movement there has

to be a strong sense of sisterhood based on shared values and interests for mobilization to occur.

Patriarchy

The concept of patriarchy is one of the most important categories used to analyze female subordination around the world. In order to understand how patriarchy manifests itself in cultural attitudes and beliefs in societies, it is essential to examine its definition and origins. Kamala Bhasin defines patriarchy as a system in which males have complete power in the economic, social and political arenas, and has designated gender roles which are appropriate to these arrangements (Bhasin 1993, 3). Patriarchy refers to male domination and to the power relationships by which men dominate women. The word patriarchy literally means the rule of the father or the patriarch and was originally used to describe a specific type of male dominated society (Bhasin 1993).

Other important definitions of patriarchy include Sylvia Walby's, who calls it a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women (Walby 1990). Walby's definition is useful because she emphasizes the importance of understanding patriarchy as a system which helps in rejecting the notion of biological determinism- a theory which says that men and women are naturally different because of their biologies and therefore assigned different roles.

Although understanding patriarchy involves defining it, an analysis of its origins and explanation of some theories are also essential. Again, there exists a vast

amount of literature in the social sciences regarding the origins of patriarchy as a system. No single explanation is universally acceptable but the following are some of the more prominent theories.

Marxist Explanation

A very important explanation for the origin of patriarchy was given by Frederick Engels in his book, Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State. According to him, women's subordination began with the development of private property (Engels 1884). He believed that the division of the classes and the subordination of women developed historically. With the formation of private property, came the desire for men to maintain their power and pass it on to their children, and in order for the fathers to establish their rights, the mothers had to be restricted to the private domain and controlled. Engels and other Marxist feminists thus explained women's subordination in economic terms. Because women were confined to the domestic sphere, they became economically dependent on men and this provided the basis for their oppression. According to the Marxist explanation of the origins of patriarchy, once private property was abolished and women joined the labor force, patriarchy would disappear (Lerner 1986). The primary contradiction was between classes. The strategy for women's emancipation was for them to join the labor force and men in their class struggle.

Radical Feminist Explanation

According to radical feminists, patriarchy preceded private property. They believe that the original and basic contradiction is between sexes and not between economic classes (Bhasin 1993). Their analysis of gender differences is explained in terms of the biological and psychological differences between men and women. In other words, they believe that women are oppressed because of their reproductive capabilities which are controlled by men. Some radical feminists say that there are two systems of social classes: the economic class system which is based on relations of production and the sex class system which is based on relations of reproduction (Beechey 1979). It is the second system that is responsible for the subordination of women.

There are also feminists who see patriarchy as connected to male psychology. They believe that it is men's psychological need to compensate for their inability to bear children which made them construct institutions of dominance (Jagger 1993). Thus radical feminists believe that because of either their biology and/or psychology men and women belong to two separate classes.

Social Feminist Explanation

Social feminists basically use the principles of Marxism but go beyond it to include some areas which they believe were neglected by it. They also try to combine both the Marxist and the radical feminist explanations because they feel they are insufficient by themselves (Bhasin 1993). Thus social feminists look at both the

relations of production and reproduction in their analysis. According to them, patriarchy is partly related to the economic system, but is also influenced by other factors such as ideology. There is some difference in the emphasis and focus of concepts among the different social feminist schools of thought. For example, some social feminists emphasize gender, not sex as the basis of women's subordination. According to them, sex is biological and gender is social (Jagger 1993). This school of thought has gained prominence among many feminist scholars and development agencies.

Another view, developed by Heidi Hartmann, looks at the link between patriarchy and capitalism. She argues that patriarchy links men together irrespective of their class and defines patriarchy as a set of relations which has a material base and in which there are hierarchical relations between men and solidarity among them (Hartmann 1981). Maria Mies' view is also important because she emphasizes the need to understand the asymmetric foundations of the relationships between men and women (Mies 1991). Finally, Gerda Lerner's view argues against single cause theories and looking for one single historical moment when patriarchy was established. She argues that it was not one event but a process developing over a period of time and a number of forces and factors that was responsible for the establishment of male supremacy (Lerner 1986).

Theories of Women's Interests

The concept of women's interests is crucial to an understanding and evaluation

of the role and status of women. There are a number of theories which attempt to explain this concept. Maxine Molyneux (1985), argues that there is much controversy regarding women's interests mainly because women are affected by a number of factors such as class, ethnicity and gender which makes it difficult to generalize about the interests of women. She divides women's interests into two broad categories: strategic gender interests and practical gender interests. Molyneux argues that strategic gender interests are derived from an analysis of women's subordination and involve the formulation of strategic objectives to overcome this subordination (such as the abolition of the sexual division of labor, removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination etc). These are the kinds of interests generally associated as "feminist". Practical gender interests arise from concrete conditions of women's positions in society. They are seen as a response to immediate needs of women (such as food, clothing, shelter) and do not entail strategic goals such as women's emancipation or equality (Molyneux 1985, 233).

Such a distinction is useful in the analysis of women's movements because it allows for an examination of the goals of the movement, thus establishing the direction taken by the movement. Molyneux's theory will be analyzed in the context of the Indian women's movement in Chapter V.

Role and Status of Indian Women

There is a considerable amount of literature regarding the role and status of women in Indian society. The question of women's subordination has prompted

extensive research. Some scholars argue that the status of Indian women stems from their socio-economic positions within the family and society. In other words, this body of literature suggests that women's position is intricately tied up with the development of the class to which they belong. Other scholars have linked women's subordination with their caste status. Historically, the caste system in India has resulted in greater constraints placed on upper caste women. Lower caste women have had greater mobility, particularly in the area of employment.

Devaki Jain studies women along caste and class lines. She challenges the notion that Indian women are powerful because of their motherhood and homemaking roles they play. She suggests that in fact Indian women are powerless and that the value given to them as human beings is particularly low (Jain 1975). Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita examine some of the diverse situations Indian women confront today. These scholars are aware that the vast differences which distinguish the lives of Indian women in different parts of the country due to caste and class make it difficult to make generalizations and to put together a comprehensive description of the lives and struggles of Indian women. However, based on their research, they conclude that Indian women struggle mainly to get enough to eat for their families and for themselves. Further, they argue that women have very little control over the conditions and products of their labor (Kishwar and Vanita 1984). It is clear that a relationship between gender and class and caste does exist in Indian society. This relationship needs to be further explored in order to arrive at an understanding of male supremacy and women's subordination in India. However, the literature suggests that

there are also other factors which have contributed to women's subordination such as the lack of opportunities in education.

Kamla Bhasin discusses the problem of illiteracy among women and argues that it is one of the main reasons for their powerless condition today. She shows a clear bias which exists in Indian society (particularly in the rural sector) regarding the importance of education of boys only. There exists a view that educating a girl is a waste of money, as ultimately her role is to get married and raise a family. Bhasin emphasizes the power of the patriarchal culture of Indian society which dictates social norms for women. She suggests that while eradicating illiteracy is part of the solution, the real challenge is to help the poor women not so much to read and understand written language, but to read and control their world (Bhasin 1990).

There also exists a vast amount of literature on the women's movement in India. Scholars such as Radha Kumar (1993) trace the history of the women's movement in India and also discuss some of the problems and constraints facing it. Others such as Shah and Gandhi (1989), have also analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of the women's movement. Most of these works argue that the one of the main reasons for women's subordinate status in India is due to the lack of their economic power. In other words, if women were to become economically self-sufficient, their status would improve.

However, the above literature offers little help in explaining the power and influence that culture has in Indian society. Further, scholars have not adequately analyzed the patriarchal structure of the society, which I believe to be a major

influence in the lives of Indian women as well as an important reason for the lack of greater success of the women's movement. In order to arrive at a better understanding of the role and status of Indian women, I will first provide a review a historical analysis of Indian women and the women's movement. This review in combination with a discussion of theories of gender consciousness and patriarchy will clarify my discussion of gender consciousness and patriarchy in the Indian context. In other words, based on the historical analysis in the next chapters, I will comment on whether or not the literature is adequate in explaining why the role and status of most Indian women remains unchanged. This thesis attempts to contribute to the existing literature on the women's movement in India by analyzing the powerful hold of patriarchy and the lack of a gender consciousness among Indian women as two factors which have limited the impact of the women's movement. The question of patriarchy, in particular has been overlooked by scholars. This thesis will probe the question as to why does patriarchy hold such power over Indian women? This question is crucial to any understanding and analysis of Indian women.

Methodology

In order to understand the current role and position of Indian women and the women's movement, it is necessary to provide a historical background of both. I have chosen a qualitative historical analysis method for two reasons. First, since the lives of Indian women are intertwined with the religious and cultural history of India, it is necessary to provide the reader with the context of Indian women's lives. This is

important because the religious and cultural history of India has had a tremendous impact on Indian women. Thus, in my thesis, I argue that women's subordinate status is mainly the result of the power of the religious and cultural ideology in India. Hindu ideology and its institutions which developed laid the foundation for the development of gender roles which continue to exist. Thus in order to analyze the causes of women's subordination, it is important to describe how this ideology evolved historically.

Second, in order to understand and analyze the Indian women's movement, it is also necessary to provide a historical overview of how it evolved within the greater context of Indian history. The women's movement in India has always had strong links with all the major phases and events in Indian history. In other words, one cannot discuss the women's movement without discussing the environment within which it developed.

A historical analysis seemed to be best suited for the purpose of such a study because it allows for an evaluation of both the historical roles of Indian women and the women's movement simultaneously. The role and status of Indian women to a great extent evolved due to the historical changes that occurred in India. Moreover, the status of Indian women was also affected by the creation and growth of the women's movement. Since the histories of both Indian women and the women's movement are so strongly linked with each other and together are linked with the overall history of India in general, this method is used for the analysis of the causes of women's subordination in India.

This chapter has provided an overview of the plan of the thesis by discussing the problem which motivates this research, and by introducing the reader to a review of the applicable literature. I also discussed the theoretical framework for understanding the status of Indian women and the use of the methodology. The next three chapters provide a historical analysis of the women's movement and the status of Indian women. In Chapter IV, I will develop a theoretical framework for understanding the problems of the Indian women's movement by discussing theories of gender consciousness, patriarchy and social movements in the Indian context. The final chapter will provide overall conclusions concerning the future of the women's movement in India.

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON WOMEN'S ROLES IN INDIA

An assessment of Indian women today involves a brief resume of the cultural background of Indian women through the ages. The Indian woman is part of a culture whose practices are rooted in ancient traditions. If she has a particular conviction or acts in a specific manner it is due to the pattern that has been ingrained in her by the fairly stable social structure which has been developed over a thousand years (Khanna & Varghese 1978, 1). Thus describing the cultural traditions and representations of women in India is a useful avenue for understanding the role of Indian women today. The role, status and position of women in Indian society has been far from static, changing from what was thought to have been a position of considerable authority to one of considerable subservience (Jain 1975). In this chapter, I trace the role of women in ancient India and discuss the impact that culture and religion had in defining the roles of women in traditional society.

The chapter is divided into three sections: In section one, I discuss how Hindu ideology and institutions in ancient India shaped the lives of women. In Section two, I examine the social structure and setting, as a part of the culture which influenced the role of Indian women. In Section three, I discuss the cultural construction of gender in Indian society, which I term as the "traditional construction of gender" in

India. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the impact of patriarchy as a result of both the religious and social/cultural ideals on the lives of women in pre-colonial India.

Women in Ancient India

Women in India have a unique cultural heritage. It is not always easy, however, to trace this history, since the best preserved stories are normally those of the groups who achieved dominance. Before examining the lives of women in ancient India, it is necessary to address the limitations of the sources. Most contemporary scholarship on women in ancient India is based on two sources, both of which date back to colonial times (Desai & Krishnaraj 1987; Mies 1980).

One source is the works of religious scholars, who, in the face of a cultural threat from Western religion and ideas, revised and reinterpreted the classic Hindu texts in order to glorify its past (Desai 83). The other source is the works of the "Orientalists," colonial scholars who sought the "source of civilization" in the ancient cultures of the East but nonetheless examined it through the European cultural and intellectual tradition (Jayawardena 1986).

Both these sources in turn, draw primarily on the classic Hindu texts written in Sanskrit which include the four Vedas, the Brahmanas, the Upanishads, the epics Mahabharata, Ramayana, the Puranans and the Tantras. Although these texts reflect the ideals of a small Brahmin elite, they continue to influence the beliefs and practices of women of all castes even today. My analysis is mainly based on these secondary

sources.

Hinduism and Hindu Ideology

Hinduism grew and evolved from a variety of cults and beliefs (Thapar 1966, 132) and is not derived from a historical person or any divine revelation. Some of these beliefs had their origins in the Vedic traditions of the Aryans who came to India from central Asia around 1500 B.C. while others reflect the beliefs of the indigenous people, the Dravidians.

Hinduism is basically monotheistic although it is expressed as a trinity of gods: Brahma, the creator of the universe, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva, the destroyer (Kane 1930). Accordingly, the trinity reflects the natural cycle of birth, life and death which is determined by the doctrine of Karma. Hinduism propounds that a person's Karma or actions in this life determines his/her status in the next life. Further a person's actions have to be good in order to secure a good next life. In other words, they have to be in conformity with Dharma or the sacred law. Good Karma ultimately leads to moksha or liberation from the cycle of birth, life and death. The sacred law details rituals, social obligations and norms which vary according to the caste status. Thus, the inherent inequality and hierarchy of the caste system is justified by the doctrines of karma and dharma (Desai 84).

Hindu ideology presents a dual conception of women. On the one hand, she is fertile and benevolent; on the other, she is aggressive and malevolent (Wadley 1977, 113). Thus the female is shakti or energy and prakriti or nature. According to

Wadley, the female is benevolent only when the control of her sexuality is transferred over to men, otherwise uncontrolled shakti is potentially dangerous (Wadley 1977, 115). Scholars such as Liddle & Joshi 1986) and Wadley (1977) further note that while this conception of women was used to restrict and subordinate upper caste Hindu women, among the lower castes it led to the belief of women as life-givers and strength. However, throughout the Vedic period women were given a status equal to men to participate in rituals and to uphold the dharma. They could fight wars, join in festivals and take part in philosophical discussions (Khanna & Varghese 1978).

In the Hindu culture, several symbols relating to women provide models for values and society itself. Sandra Robinson suggests the following dominant images in Hinduism, which she argues are particularly useful in study of Indian women. The first is the image of the Hindu goddess; and the second relates to the epic heroine (Robinson, cited in Haddad & Finly 1983, 182).

The positions of goddesses in Hinduism are a symbol of the female as powerful but subordinate. On the one hand, goddesses such as Durga symbolize power, yet on the other hand, goddesses such as Laxmi symbolize female subordination to the male.

The second image emerges from the roles of epic heroines. In particular the heroines from the two great Indian epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, serve as role models for most Indian women. The Mahabharata story of Savitri, whose devotion finally resurrected her dead husband, illustrates the concept of women as life givers, whose primary duty is faithful service to their husbands (Robinson, in Haddad

& Finly 1983, 188). Further, Savitri is portrayed as the self-sacrificing woman whose sole purpose in life is to serve her husband.

The heroine Sita, from the epic Ramayana, is also associated with similar attributes. She is portrayed as the ideal wife who continues to remain faithful to her husband, during her long exile when she is abducted by a demon king. Further, after she is rescued, she has to prove her purity to her husband by stepping into a sacrificial fire, from which she emerges unharmed because of her virtuous nature.

While Hindu goddesses do not necessarily continue to serve as role models for women, they do demonstrate certain suppositions about female behaviors, powers, desires and character (Courtwright & Harlan 1995). This raises the obvious question of why, if goddesses are so revered, women are so oppressed? This is not to assume that women are entirely powerless. I raise this question to ask whether this power is sufficient to achieve greater political and social equality and to better understand these dialectical messages women seem to be receiving from society.

With the passage of time there was a gradual deterioration in women's status. During the period from 200 B.C. to 200 A.D., the law maker Manu, completely changed the status of Indian women. His social codes and sanctions have permanently left a mark on the status of Indian women. Based on the need to control women's sexuality, he rationalized his laws by saying that because of their passion for men, their temper and their natural heartlessness, women would become disloyal to their husbands, and thus had to be constantly guarded (cited in Buhler 1964, 327-30). The Laws of Manu, which are the most famous of the ancient Sanskrit laws,

clearly demonstrate this male perception of the female. These laws detailed the rules of conduct, the privileges and obligations of each division of society (castes), and penalties for inappropriate behavior (Mitter 1991, 87).

Manu's laws regarding women were particularly harsh. Marriage was never to be dissolved, divorce was unthinkable and widow remarriage was never permitted to "respectable women". As for adultery- if the man involved was from a lower caste, the women were to be torn apart by dogs (cited in Buhler 1964). Women's nature, then, was used as a justification for restricting upper caste women's mobility, productive roles outside the house, sexuality, property rights and freedom (Desai 1989, 86). Upper caste women were secluded in the home and were prohibited from productive work outside the home. Marriages were arranged for young girls and widows were expected to practice sati; the act of self-immolation on a husband's funeral pyre. The word sati means the virtuous one. By committing sati, women became virtuous. The first incident of sati is said to be reported in 510 A.D. (Thapar 1976). Because widows were not accepted socially and were treated badly, many women might have chosen sati over a life of misery.

Many scholars argue that the subordination of women in India was strongly linked to the development of the caste system (Liddle & Joshi 1986, 50). The caste system in India divides the population into four major groups: the brahmin (priestly caste) at the top, followed by the kshatriya (warrior caste), the vaishya (the artisans and tradesmen), and at the bottom the sudra (laborers). There was a fifth caste even below the sudra caste, known as the untouchables. Liddle and Joshi (1986) argue that

caste is both a structural and a cultural system. According to them, the structure consists of a hierarchy of in-marrying groups, organized into hereditary occupations. Further, the cultural system comprises belief in karma, commitment to the caste occupation and lifestyle and belief in a hierarchy of values.

Although the Government of India prohibits discrimination on the basis of caste, the caste system has survived for almost 2,000 years. Reformers may have succeeded in decreasing the dominance of the upper castes, but the concept of the caste system and the basic structure remains intact and continues to dominate Indian society. Women in particular have been strongly affected by this system as increased control over women is one of the factors that a caste must observe.

Although it is clear that Hinduism had the most profound impact on Indian culture and society in general, the other religions, such as Buddhism and Islam, also contributed to the construction of various ideologies regarding the roles of women. During the period when Buddhism flourished in India, although women were still regarded as inferior to men, they were also assigned an honored place in social life (Asthana 1974). They were free to travel and be educated and even to remain unmarried.

The situation worsened with the advent of the Muslim invasion in the eleventh century. Women were forcibly taken away to be slaves or to be married into Muslim homes. Hindus were compelled by these circumstances to further curtail the freedom of their women and also to deny them education. Some scholars also argue that the system of early marriage also owes its origins to this development as Hindu girls

could be placed under the protection of their husbands at an early age (Asthana 1974). Some of the other consequences were the practice of polygamy and infanticide among girls because they began to be considered a burden on parents.

During the Mughal period, the birth of a female child was unwelcome both in Hindu and Muslim families and the practice of female infanticide was prevalent in some sections of society. Muslims also adopted the systems of early marriage and dowry, but these created some complications because of the system of polygamy, especially in a family where widows had children by former husbands. Hindus, except those of the ruling classes were monogamous. During this time, two Mughal emperors, Humayun and his son Akbar, tried to prohibit the practice of sati, but were unsuccessful.

As I have argued, women's positions deteriorated steadily in the following years. The disruption of the Mughal invasion in the eighteenth century and the consequent political confusion throughout the country further added to the deterioration of women's status, and as a result, when the British period started, the position of Indian women was the worst in the history of the country.

Child marriage was the general rule for all respectable Hindus, and the custom had even spread to some sections of the Muslim population. Sati was widely prevalent and even the Sikhs practiced it, although it was forbidden by their Gurus (Thomas 1964, 285). Purdah (veiling) was strictly enforced on Muslim women and on some Hindu women. Literacy for women was seen as a threat and polygamy was widely practiced.

This was roughly the position when the British took over the country. The subsequent 200 years of colonization by the British were to have a significant impact on Indian society in general and on women in particular. The most important difference between British colonialism and previous foreign rule was that the British remained aliens, whereas every former ruling group had become Indianised and had integrated itself into India's existing social and economic structure. The result was that the economic benefits accruing to the ruling group were no longer kept within Indian boundaries but were exported, the wealth draining from the soil of India into British coffers (Nehru 1946, 302).

The British systematically destroyed both Indian agricultural self-sufficiency and its indigenous industry. The rural wealth was drained out of India through the land revenue. The British concept of private property changed the structure of rural land ownership by allowing the zamindars (revenue collectors) to evict the farmers whereas previously they had only held revenue collection rights. Further, they also destroyed the Indian textile industry. In 1813, Britain imposed a duty of 78% on Indian muslin imported into England, whereas the duty on English cotton imported into India was only 3% (Liddle and Joshi 1986, 24). Thus, the commercial success of the East India Company led to eventual political dominance and the British became the rulers of a large empire.

As I will further demonstrate in the next chapter, the British had a tremendous impact on the status of Indian women. We need to differentiate between official governmental policies and laws regarding women, and the efforts of individuals and

organizations, the fact remains that the colonial experience was to forever change the lives and future of Indians.

The Social Structure

In India, there have been infinite variations on the status of women diverging according to cultural norms, family structure, class and caste. As mentioned in the previous section, religion served as the primary paradigm for social values and norms for women in this period. Further, it is important to note that these paradigms provided the definition of female and the consequent roles for women in Indian society for generations to come. The women's question in the 19th and 20th centuries mainly revolved around issues such as child and widow marriage, sati, purdah and divorce.

Marriage as an institution has existed in every form of society since time immemorial. It is said to cater to the very basic needs of men and women by providing security, companionship and stability, thus forming the nucleus of family life. It is no wonder then that marriage is given such an important place in Indian society. In short, marriage is a must for most Indian women. The traditional, religious, and sociological aspects of marriage have contributed largely to the definition and role of the Indian woman. Although the Indian concept of marriage gives ample scope to the husband and wife to fulfil their duties to the home, family and community, it is argued that the patriarchal traditions of Hindu culture naturally gave the husband greater authority and power as the bread earner, with the wife

becoming the nucleus of the home (Khanna & Varghese 1978).

The ideology of "pativrata", which literally means the "virtuous wife", has dominated the lives of women in Indian society throughout history. It has also sustained the patriarchal structure which gave rise to this ideology in the first place. This ideology provides all the rules and references regarding gender roles in Indian society. It is based on certain assumptions and beliefs regarding the nature of men and women and their interactions. Most central to these beliefs is the assumption that men are ritually pure, physically strong and emotionally mature; women, on the other hand, are ritually impure, physically and emotionally weak and lack strong will power (Dhruvarajan 1989).

The most important content of pativrata is the concept of the woman's unfailing devotion to her husband. A true pativrata should be happy to die for her husband, never expect anything from him, and should be his true helpmate in every aspect of his life. Further, she is expected to be completely obedient to him (Dhruvarajan 1989). These beliefs not only influenced the roles of women for years to come, but also legitimized women's dependent position on men in Indian society as they were advocated by religious and philosophical leaders. This ideology also manipulated the structure of society to ensure that women would accept their positions as inferior to men. Most importantly, however, it reinforced the patriarchal structure of Indian society. Other customs associated with marriage such as the woman having to give up her natal family and life, literally and figuratively, after marriage also contributed to the concept of women as subordinates. Indian girls are taught at a

young age to play the role of wife and mother. According to one scholar, the main ambition of even an educated woman is to finish her studies and settle in marriage (Khanna & Varghese 1978, 12). Thus, one can generalize that for most Indian women, marriage is considered to be the most satisfying and fulfilling aspect of their lives.

In Indian society although the wife wielded less economic and material power, she was the major force behind the domestic security of the home. Furthermore, because India was an agricultural society, women had less access to the economic community outside the home. This particular aspect of marriage can be argued to be the most influential in the construction of gender roles in Indian society, in which the women were confined to the domestic or private world while the men took care of the outside or public world. This confinement of women to a private or domestic sphere is generally seen as controlling and further channeling power towards men.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of women's removal from the economic sphere was the system of dowry which although it had its origins in the ancient Hindu tradition, did not become institutionalized until the modern period. The institution of dowry further reinforced the notion of women as liabilities and strengthened male dominance. The practice of dowry continues to affect Indian society even today as I will demonstrate later.

The practice of sati also originated from the ideologies of Hinduism regarding the role of women as only wives and mothers. The image of a woman willingly throwing herself on her husband's funeral pyre goes against the universal right of self-

preservation. Paul Courtwright suggests two conclusions which might be drawn from the act of sati. Either the woman is not human or she is not acting on her own will (Harlan & Courtwright 1995, 184). Nevertheless, the powerful ideology behind the practice of sati of the woman being completely dependent on the man and thus having no use for her life after his death, is one which has attracted more attention and cause for analysis than the actual physical act of it. Its various interpretations stress the issues of gender and power and connect it to religion and violence in compelling ways. Further, the issue of sati has emerged as an important part of the discourse of feminist criticism of Hindu culture's patriarchal structure. Hindu priests glorified sati to such an extent that it became prevalent not only among the Rajputs but also among the Jats and Sikhs as well as among the Brahmins in Bengal (Asthana 1974). However, not all widows burnt themselves during this time. Those who chose to remain alive were destined to face society's anger.

Widows were regarded as inauspicious and were ostracized from society. Again, it is important to note that many of the widows I refer to were young girls, who were married to older men whose marriage may have never been consummated. Remarriage was not acceptable, especially among the upper castes, but it was often practiced among women of lower castes. It is no surprise then that many of the young widows became prostitutes in order to survive. The rigidity of the social system left them few options.

The practice of female infanticide seems to have arisen during the middle period of Indian history (Robinson cited in Haddad & Findly 1983, 192). It took a

variety of forms ranging from killing newborn infants by methods such as strangling with the umbilical cord to drowning the baby in a river. Although this was not common to every region, it is important to mention its existence because of the re-occurrence of this practice in the modern day period. These mothers preferred to kill their baby girls rather than subject them to a harsh life. However, in most cases in the modern period as well, the societal pressures of bearing a son were so intense that women were often left with no choice but to kill female babies. The principles behind practices again, find their roots in the value or in this case, the devaluation of women in Indian society.

Thus, in the early 19th and 20th centuries women's lives were governed mainly by blind faith, ritualism and traditionalism. The status of Indian women was determined by the verdicts of law givers and jurists (Asthana 1974, 10). The ideologies of pativrata and the laws of Manu were particularly influential in shaping the roles and positions of women for years to come.

Traditional Construction of Gender

The definition and understanding of gender is not universal in its form. It is specific to particular historic periods, cultural backgrounds, and positions within the hierarchies of class and nationality (Mies 1980). In this chapter I have argued that religion and culture had a strong impact on constructing and defining the role of women in ancient India, and that they continue to remain among the major paradigms for the construction of gender in Indian society today. In other words, the religious

ideology (Hindu) and the social structure have been the strongest influences in the creation and development of gender roles in India. Further, I argue that these in turn have reinforced the patriarchal structure of the society, to which women remain confined even today. Indian society has all along been a male dominated one, where the woman's place has been primarily confined to the home, her role limited to procreation, the upbringing of children, and catering for the needs of men (Jain 1975). This has led to an obvious submissiveness of women to men's needs and dependence on them.

The concept of gender in India is specific to its class, cultural and national context. Liddle and Joshi (1989) argue that the class, or in the Indian case, the caste has a definite relationship with the subordination of women. They suggest that women's subordination in India needs to be understood in terms of controlling their sexuality, which was essential in the development of a patriarchal structure.

Further, since the issues of that time period such as sati and child marriage mostly affected only the upper castes, control over a woman's sexuality helped the development of a patriarchal caste hierarchy as well. A universal ideology of patriarchy is the belief that women are more sexual than men and that this sexuality is sinful and needs to be controlled.

Patriarchy in the Indian context is defined as the system in which males have complete power in the economic, social, and political arenas, and has designated gender roles which are appropriate to these arrangements. In addressing the issue of patriarchy's meaning for Indian women, Heidi Hartmann's definition is particularly

useful. She identifies the material basis for men's power over women as resting on their control over two major features: women's access to economic resources and women's sexuality (Hartmann 1981).

In the early 19th and 20th centuries, women's sexuality was controlled by early arranged marriages with or without her consent, and by the ban on widow remarriage. Women's access to economic resources was controlled by forbidding them to work outside the home. This was further reinforced by law and custom permitting only males to inherit immovable property, ensuring women's economic dependence on them (Liddle & Joshi 1989).

The traditional construction of gender is embedded in the interlocking of the religious, economic and social kinship structures which define the social domains of males and females (World Bank Country Study 1991). These domains are characterized in terms of the public/private or the inside/outside dichotomy. These domains associate women with reproduction and the family, putting them in the private sphere, while men interact with the government and markets in the public sphere. Thus an extremely significant part of the Indian culture's definition of a female is her association with the inside- the home. For every individual and every family there is a "map" of the appropriate domains of women and men. The definition of the "inside" and the precise boundaries of where a woman can operate vary greatly according to the economic status of the household, caste hierarchy, and social norms prevailing in her community or region. In the Indian context, although the practice of "purdah" (veiling) was only practiced by certain wealthier

communities, withdrawal of women from the work place was one of the most important symbols of high socio-economic status (World Bank Report 1991).

In this chapter, I first showed how in ancient India Hindu ideology and institutions restricted the lives of women (mainly upper caste women) and further reinforced their subordination to and dependence on men. At the same time, lower caste women enjoyed greater social freedoms but were economically exploited by the upper castes. Further, I argued that the social structure existing in ancient India enhanced the creation and the development of gender roles which continue to exist today. The women's question of the early eighteenth and nineteenth centuries revolving around issues of marriage and infanticide remains, at best, only partially solved. The impact of the patriarchal structure which developed as a result of both the ideology and the social structure has had significant consequences on the roles and positions of Indian women.

CHAPTER III

COLONIALISM, REFORM AND THE EARLY WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Inevitably, the British approach to the women's question set the stage for the women's movement. The ambiguity of the British colonial regime towards the issue of women's rights influenced the early phase of the women's movement and defined the direction of the movement. The question is important because it affected whom the women defined as the main enemy, which in turn affected the analysis of how liberation could be achieved (Liddle & Joshi 1989). Thus in order to understand the early phase of the Indian women's movement, it is necessary to discuss the women's question in India from the middle of the nineteenth century until the independence of India in 1947. Several factors contributed to the change in women's status during the British period such as the direct influence of the British, along with the influence of Western ideas. However, the most important factor during this time period was the political struggle for independence, which was a tremendous force in the creation of the women's movement in India. An analysis of the critical encounter of the women's movement with colonialism and the nationalist movement is essential because of its implications for the position and status of Indian women today.

This chapter is organized around women's encounter with colonialism, the various reforms which emerged as a direct or indirect result of it and the rise of the

early women's movement. Particular attention will be given to the legal and social reforms initiated by the British as well as Indian reformers. I will begin by examining the impact of colonialism on women, specifically the economic impact and the impact on social freedoms. Secondly I will discuss some of the reforms initiated by the British regarding the issues of sati, widow remarriage and matriliney. Thirdly I will discuss the contributions of the leading Indian reformers and their impact on women. And finally, I will examine the rise of the early Indian women's movement and its link with the freedom movement.

Impact of Colonial Rule on Women

The British had a significant impact on the role and status of Indian women, both as a result of laws and policies created and due to the work of individuals and groups. However, this impact was uneven because it varied based on class and caste. Poor women, belonging to the lower castes and tribes, suffered a dual loss as a result of colonization. Materially, their economic position was eroded due to the policies of the British, which included a destruction of the Indian system of industry and agriculture. Further, women also lost their social freedoms as they came under the restrictive Hindu norms which were now universally applied by the British (Desai 1989). However, the reforms initiated by the British had a different effect on upper caste women and it is important to differentiate the impact of the reforms on these two different groups of women.

Economic Effects on Women

The transition from subsistence to market economy based on the introduction of new cash crops, new land revenue systems and the introduction of manufactured goods all led to a decline in women's economic status. In agriculture, the introduction of cash crops such as cotton, jute and indigo, reduced the production of food-crops, pushed women out of subsistence cultivation and destroyed village level self-sufficiency. To further the production of cash crops the British encouraged the movement of Hindu farmers into tribal areas which destroyed the tribal subsistence economy as well (Calman 1985).

According to the new systems of land revenue, each individual cultivator was required to pay rent in cash. Prior to colonization the cultivators in each village paid a collective rent in kind. The introduction of cash payments for land taxes forced small peasants to grow cash crops so that they could pay the required rent in cash. Less food was grown for village consumption and, more and more raw materials, such as cotton, jute, and indigo were grown to feed the hungry manufacturing industry in Britain (Sen 1982).

The main loss for women, however, came in the form of deindustrialization, whereby indigenous industries were destroyed by the introduction of machine made goods from Britain. Before colonization, women were actively engaged in various industries that included textile, spinning and weaving, production of handicrafts, silk manufacture, embroidery, quilt making and selling of milk and produce (Desai 1989,

96). Colonization affected women's economic self sufficiency by destroying these industries.

Impact on Women's Social, Legal and Political Freedoms

Ideologically, the British colonization resulted in the loss of women's social freedom. In 1772, William Hastings, the governor-general of Bengal, declared Hindu texts as the sole source of legal authority, thus imposing upper caste Hindu norms on lower caste women (Everett 1979). However, these laws were somewhat flexible and the interpretation was based on local customs and practices. But by equating Hindu laws with parliamentary laws, all Indian women were required to follow the moral and social constraints of those laws. It is important to note that only in the area of personal laws- dealing with marriage, divorce and inheritance, did the British use the Hindu laws. In all other legal areas, the British parliamentary law became the law of the land.

The matrilineal system that was existent in the South and Northeast, the freedom that castes and tribal groups enjoyed were more than Hindu women; especially in matters of marriage, divorce and property rights which were now subjected to the more restrictive Hindu norms (Everett 1979). This was particularly felt in the area of land ownership. Upper caste Hindu women had no land rights, but tribal women had rights to the communal property. In the matrilineal South, the concept of private property gave the females the property rights (Desai 1989).

Impact on Upper Caste Women

The impact of colonization on upper caste Hindu women was totally different. The changes in the status of the upper caste Hindu women were a result of the social reform movement initiated by Indian middle class educated men influenced by Western ideas, and to a certain extent, by the British. The social reform movement to improve the status of Indian women represents the first attempt at solving the "women's question". This was partly because the Western educated elite men, who were exposed to Western ideas, wanted to improve the status of Indian women. However, since considerable attention had been drawn towards the practices of sati, child marriage and widow remarriage by the British, the Indian reformers were determined to address and solve the women's question without British involvement. Thus it can be argued that solving the women's question was another attempt by Indian reformers to prove their capacity for self government to the British.

British Reforms

Although official British policy was not to interfere in personal law, between 1772 and 1947 the British introduced nine major laws liberalizing women's legal position in British India, including those forbidding female infanticide, sati and child marriage (Liddle & Joshi 1989). All these reforms were supported by Indian reformers.

Sati

Sati was widespread among the upper castes when the British established themselves in India in the 18th century. This was particularly true among the kshatriya caste (warriors), where the number of women burned on the funeral pyre was often considered as a measure of prestige. In 1812, 1815 and 1817, the British passed laws which prohibited forcing a woman to the pyre or intoxicating her, but still did not outlaw the sati itself. In 1818, the Governor of Bengal, William Bentinck, prohibited sati in his province (Mirchandani 1970).

It was only after the campaign of the Indian reformer, Ram Mohan Roy, that sati was made illegal by Governor Bentinck, who was then the governor-general of India. There was some opposition by the priests and several protests took place. However, this reaction was quite mild compared to the anticipated outbreak of social riots and instability. The main advocates of sati claimed that the institution was voluntary and that it was cruel of the British to deprive a Hindu wife of her marital rights. These arguments, however did not succeed, and on December 4, 1829, a resolution was passed which made sati a crime punishable by fines or imprisonment (Thomas 1964, 296). The British proclaimed the suppression of sati as the first progressive action in the liberation of women. The law made sati illegal throughout India, did not completely stop the practice.

Widow Remarriage Act of 1856

With the abolition of sati by law, the persecution of widows increased among certain castes and communities. The death of her husband was taken as a proof of the widow's sins and in many regions of India, widows were routinely tortured. The fact that the widow lived in the house of her mother-in-law made her life even more miserable and as a result, many widows killed themselves or became prostitutes (Thomas 1964). Widow remarriage seemed to be the natural consequence of the abolition of sati, but the British were determined to treat it as a social issue which was to be decided by the Hindu scholars. Ram Mohan Roy and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar were two Indian reformers who championed the cause of widow remarriage. Although the British met with severe opposition when they decided to legislate in favor of widow remarriage, the measure was passed and made into law on July 25, 1856. However, this act was not effective, as the reformers could not physically arrange marriages for widows. The act was more of a symbolic victory for the Indian reformers.

Matriliny

The Nayars of Malabar in Kerala maintained a matrilineal form of family structure until the British imposed legal restrictions in the 19th century. A Nayar family consisted of a woman, her sisters and brothers and her children (Liddle & Joshi 1989). At puberty, the woman married a man of a different lineage. They lived

together for three days, after which they separated. Neither partner received any rights or duties towards the other, however the woman received the right to sexual activity. The husband lived in his mother's house and could visit his wife only in the evening. Moreover, the man had no responsibilities over his children.

While this system by no means represented matriarchy, it did provide a greater degree of freedom for women compared with the patrilineal system (Liddle & Joshi 1989). The Nayers represent a form of family system which is in complete opposition to the patriarchal structure of the rest of Indian society. The difference is particularly visible in the case of property rights, as women in the patriarchal system had practically no right to property. This system also provided women control over their sexuality, a concept which almost never existed in the patriarchal system.

The British introduced a number of legal changes on marriage and inheritance which undermined the Nayar family structure. In 1868 the British passed a law that a man had to provide for his wife and children. Furthermore, in 1896, the Madras Marriage Act made the marriage a monogamous relationship under which the wife and children were given the right to maintenance by the husband. The Nayar father thus gained the right to the property of his wife's family.

Although the British position regarding the women's question might appear favorable, the two examples of sati and matriliney show that the policy was at best contradictory. While the British outlawed sati, they also imposed constraints on the matrilineal groups by removing their sexual and economic rights. As I will demonstrate, the British laws regarding family and marriage seriously undermined the

family structure and position of women in Indian society.

Indian Reformers

Ironically, in India it was the men and not women who initially took up the cause of women. Reformers who had been influenced by Western ideas launched a vigorous campaign against the social evils affecting Indian women (Asthana 1974, 24). These men called for the restoration of women's lost prestige, glory and rightful place in society. They firmly believed that with the improvement of women's positions, general progress and development of society would follow. Central to the various reform movements were three issues: status of upper-caste Hindu widows, sati and widow remarriage, and the education of women. Related to the issue of education was the creation of a new middle class culture with new codes of morality, new formation of the home as the private sphere and new customary laws (Chaudhuri 1993, 10).

Scholars have attributed the cause for this reform movement to both the liberal ideas of the Western educated elite and the cultural revival efforts of Hindu scholars who were threatened by influence from the West (Asthana 1974; Everett 1979). The Western educated elite further had a dual purpose for initiating reform. Although they were primarily concerned with changing the status of women, they also used their initiatives to prove their capabilities of self-government to the British. Hindu scholars viewed reform as a means of preserving Hindu culture from the Western as well as the Islamic threat.

Various male reformers championed the women's cause in India. Among them the most notable was Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who single handedly convinced the British government to outlaw sati. His organization, the Brahmo Samaj, was among the most utilitarian and liberal during the reform era. Several other reformers, such as Dayananda Saraswati, Govind Ranade, Keshav Karve, Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Gandhi contributed to the women's cause by influencing legislation. Almost all of these reformers devoted their full attention to the problems facing Indian women, and although they differed in their views regarding the nature and scope of their work, they agreed that improving women's status in India was vital.

Among the reformers, some believed that national progress could not proceed without achieving economic and social equality. They first tried to create public opinion in favor of social reforms and then strived to remove the influence of religion and tradition on society. It can be argued that a model for women's reform had been constituted in the social reform movement. While the desire to revive the past was always present, these reformers were also eager to apply Western ideas of liberalism (Chaudhuri 1993). The religious reformers such as Dayananda Saraswati and Ram Mohan Roy, on the other hand, tried to revive and incorporate Hinduism into their reforms. There were also a number of political reformers such as Gandhi, Gokhale and Karve who believed that women's liberation was possible only through complete political participation in the nationalist struggle. Opinions differ on which of the two influences was greater on the different reforms which took place. Nevertheless, all

the social reformers had a considerable impact on the early women's movement arising at the turn of the century.

Role of Women Reformers

Although men were the first to take up the cause of Indian women, there were also a number of women who came up closely behind and organized themselves for their upliftment (Asthana 1974). Some of these outstanding women struggled against all odds to pursue the concept of women's liberation. While most of them were also influenced by Western ideas, they were also a product of the Indian tradition, and thus the reforms they sought reflected the unique combination of these two influences. These women essentially, laid the foundation for the women's movement in India. Women reformers such as Pandita Ramabai, Anandibai Joshi, Ramabai Ranade and Francina Sorabjee were particularly influential in the early phases of the social reform movement and often worked with the male reformers.

Early Women's Movement

Rise of Women's Organizations and Participation in Politics

The early years of the twentieth century marked two important landmarks in the history of the women's movement: the birth of women's organizations and women's participation in the national movement. Both of these landmarks were strongly influenced by historical events in the country, the reforms of the previous

century and to a certain extent by the British. Susan Maclay (1969), in her dissertation, "Women's Organizations in India", provides a valuable insight into the origins of the women's movement in India. She states that the Western educated elite men were instrumental in the emergence of the women's movement, a conclusion showed by many other scholars. However, as I will demonstrate in this section, the women's movement was more influenced by the nationalist movement and relied on the alliance with men to implement the reforms initiated in the last century.

The emergence of the women's movement in India can be seen in the formation of women's associations over a period of 50 years from roughly 1880 to 1930 (Everett 1979, 44). The participants came mainly from urban educated families and represented all of the major religious communities, although the upper caste Hindus appeared to be dominant. According to Jana Everett (1979), an examination into the lives of 50 leaders reveals that the majority of the women came from families in which the men actively participated in social, religious or political associations. In addition, most of the women leaders were also actively involved in the various movements associated with the nationalist struggle such as the Swadeshi, the Quit India and the Non-Cooperation movements.

The turning point in India's co-operation with the British came after World War I, when instead of being rewarded for their efforts in helping the British, martial law continued to be practiced, which finally convinced Indians that the British would not give up India without a fight. The year 1927 marks the beginning of the concerted effort by the Indian Congress in the fight for independence. The event

which did more than any other factor to speed the process of women's rights was the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930-31. According to Percival Spear:

Feeling was then so strong that those women already in public life joined Congress committees and took to organizing pickets for liquor and cloth shops, processions and demonstrations in addition to the usual Congress activities while many thousands came out of conditions of privacy and semi-seclusion to support the cause (Spear 1970, 213).

The involvement of elite women in the nationalist movement finally led to the formation of the early women's movement in India. Their involvement in the national independence movement provided resources for organization, enabling them to articulate their grievances and link their own freedom to that of the country (Everett 1979).

Various autonomous organizations were also formed in the early part of the 20th century to work for women's issues. In 1904, Ranade, a leader of the nationalist movement, formed the first such women's organization, called the Indian Women's Conference. It was part of the national social reform organization, the National Social Conference. Other organizations followed: the All India Muslim Ladies Conference (1914), the Women's India Association (1917), the National Council for Women (1925) and the All India Women's Conference (1927). Most of these were initiated by women in the nationalist struggle and by British women who supported the suffrage movement in England as well as the independence movement in India such as Margaret Cousins and Annie Besant.

Although the issue of women's suffrage was first launched in 1917, the major focus of these national organizations remained education and the upliftment of women

by reforming Hindu and Muslim practices to facilitate women's participation in society and politics (Desai 1989). It is not surprising then that most of the women leaders came from the new middle class created by the English education system. The recently formed women's organizations were able to get the support of the male reformers as well as the other male leaders of the independence movement mainly because the early phase of the women's movement was strongly linked with the nationalist movement. The nationalist movement convinced the women's organizations that freedom from the British was the most important issue and that once independence was achieved, women's issues would be addressed.

However, there remained differences regarding certain issues. For example the nationalist movement supported suffrage for women, but was divided over issues of property rights, purdah and child marriage (Everett 1979; Mies 1980). The changes demanded by women in the Hindu Code Bill particularly faced severe opposition by nationalist leaders. They supported the principle of sexual equality and its implementation through women's suffrage. But they opposed the implementation of the principle in marriage and inheritance, which threatened their own privileges as men in the family (Liddle & Joshi 1989).

Ideology of the Women's Movement

Between 1901 and 1947, there were two different concepts of improving the position of women in the ideology of the early Indian women's movement. In the first, the goal was women's upliftment, which meant reform of social practices so as

to enable women to play a more important and constructive role in society. In the second concept, the goal was equal rights for men and women. Here equal rights meant the extension of the civil rights enjoyed by men in the political, economic and social setting. The women's upliftment perspective can be seen as a corporate feminist ideology while the equal rights perspective can be seen as a liberal feminist ideology (Everett 1979).

Moreover, the early Indian women leaders considered women's participation in politics as an extension of their traditional role, thus making the nation a part of the extended family. They also developed an ideology which emphasized women's strengths by stretching the boundaries of women's spheres without transforming them (Asthana 1974, 534).

It was only with the participation of Mahatma Gandhi in the nationalist struggle that the nationalist and the women's movement changed from an elite to a mass based movement. Gandhi supported women's participation for ideological and political reasons (Desai 1989). He set out very consciously to mobilize women by drawing on various religious symbols and by linking women's subordinate status within the family to India's subordinate status to Britain. He convinced women that they had a duty to transform themselves and their country. In other words, Gandhi concentrated on making the political issue a personal one for Indian women.

To further ensure women's participation in the nationalist struggle, Gandhi chose issues which would be connected to women's everyday lives and serve as expressions of foreign domination. In his support for the swadeshi movement

(support for home made goods), he encouraged women to take up spinning instead of buying foreign cloth (Desai 1989). This united women of all classes and castes. Gandhi's strategy broadened the base of the nationalist movement and the women's movement and as a result, women's organizations shifted their attention from social feminism to equal rights and equality. The nationalists supported the women's movement by guaranteeing them equality after independence. According to Vina Mazumdar,

Gandhi's greatest contribution towards the raising of women's status lay in his revolutionary approach to women in society. He respected their personal dignity without belittling their roles as wives and mothers and gave women equal tasks to perform in the achievement of freedom (Mazumdar cited in Nanda 1976, 267).

This first wave of the women's movement has thus resulted in conflicting analyses. Scholars such as Asthana (1974) view the change in women's condition as vast and varied with Gandhi as a radical reformer. However, others such as Mazumdar (1976), Everett (1979), and Mies (1980), suggest that the paternalistic support of the nationalist leaders ensured that the women's movement would not go beyond the basic patriarchal structure of Indian society.

The examples of women's suffrage and the Hindu Code suggest that the nationalists were not in favor of greater freedom for women any more than the British. They supported the principle of sexual equality but they were divided over how to implement it. Women's suffrage was supported partly because it also fulfilled nationalistic purposes, but opinion on the Hindu Code was split since the Code represented a challenge to male dominance rather than British colonialism (Liddle &

Joshi 1989, 38). It is no surprise then that the resistance faced by the women's movement was in the personal areas of marriage and inheritance in the Hindu Code. Equality in the areas of politics and employment was never a issue, but it was precisely in the very area that characterizes women's subordination; the domestic sphere, that the men were reluctant to give up their privileges.

Despite its limited successes, this first phase of the women's movement provides several important conclusions. Manisha Desai (1989, 110) summarizes them as: legislative issues that are non-threatening to male dominance are easier to achieve, while the strategy of cooperation with other movements may increase men's support for women's issues, it tends to be at the cost of women's gender issues. Because the women's movement only focused on upper caste women's issues, the lives of poor women remained unchanged. Thus it was not until the next phase of the women's movement that these issues were addressed.

So the alliance between the nationalist movement and the women's movement broke down on the personal issue. Both movements wanted freedom from the British, but women also wanted freedom from male domination, which not all nationalists were willing to concede. Although the women's movement obtained a great deal of support for their cause and achieved some legal changes, they were unable to achieve equality in the domestic sphere.

In this chapter I discussed India's encounter with colonialism and its specific effects on the lives of Indian women. The reforms that followed were a result of a variety of historical events that took place. While the British initiated reforms to

improve the status of women, their policies were sometimes contradictory and in some cases women's situations even worsened as a result of the reforms. In this period of women's history in India, it was their encounter with the nationalist struggle that had the most profound impact on the creation of a women's movement. The entry of women in the political sphere was a significant event because it broke the features which characterized the women's question in the social reform movement, which for the main part saw women as recipients of a more humane treatment through the initiatives of the enlightened Indian males (Chaudhuri 1993). However, because women's issues were intertwined with the greater cause of freedom from the British, they remained unsolved even after independence and were addressed only two decades later.

CHAPTER IV

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN THE POST INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

As I have argued in the last chapter, the experience of colonial rule and the subsequent involvement of women in the nationalist movement were two of the most important formative influences on the women's movement in the nineteenth century. The next phase of the Indian Women's movement which has its origins with India's independence in 1947, was most influenced by India's experiment with democracy and nation-building. At the time of independence in 1947, the women's movement succeeded in bringing women's legal position to a level higher than many Western countries.

The Constitution conferred equal rights and status on all citizens, forbidding any discrimination on grounds of caste, creed, religion or sex. The states were required to secure to all citizens-men and women-equality, the right to education and to adequate means of livelihood (Liddle & Joshi 1989). Women acquired full political rights, including the right to vote, to contest elections and to enter the administrative services. Several sets of legislation were also passed to protect the interests of women between the years 1948- 1952. Thus the leaders of independent India believed that they had accomplished their goals in granting equal rights to women and had succeeded in transforming their status in society.

However, despite the various laws and legislation passed regarding the interests of women, the nationalist leaders failed to solve the grievances of the women's movement and the next phase of the women's movement attempted to bring women's issues to the forefront of the governmental agenda and still continues to do so. The contradiction for the women's movement today is that despite the liberality of the laws, the inequalities remain. A major factor contributing to these inequalities is the nature of women's identities in independent India. While the leaders of the nationalist movement were interested in providing equal rights for women, they did not view women's identities in secular terms but continued to do so in religious terms. In other words, by refusing to interfere in the personal laws affecting women (which were dominated by religion), the government established women's social identity based on religion.

In this chapter I will begin with a brief discussion of the political events surrounding India's independence in 1947 and the drafting of the Constitution. These events were significant in the history of the women's movement particularly because women had played a significant part in the nationalist movement and the leaders of the women's movement hoped that they would continue to be involved in the nation-building process. Next, I will discuss the legal and political reforms for women which were initiated by the Indian government. Thirdly, I will discuss the nature of the contemporary women's movement from 1947 to the present by analyzing the goals and accomplishments of some of the most significant women's organizations. I will also analyze some of the social issues affecting women in the 1970's and 1980's as

they were influential in shaping the feminist movement.

Legal and Political Reforms

The Preamble of the Constitution of India declared its desire to secure social, economic and political justice for women. Apart from ensuring equality before the law and equal protection of the laws, the Constitution also prohibited the States from discriminating against women on the basis of sex, in the areas of education and employment. The Constitution also emphasized the State's responsibilities in promoting women's health care. Thus the Constitution did three things: first, it prohibited discrimination on the grounds of sex; secondly, it empowered the States to make special provisions for women, particularly in the areas of health care and social welfare; and finally, the Constitution gave the individual states specific directions to make these provisions for women (Mehta 1987). The relevant provisions of the Constitution which relate to these three issues are:

Articles 14, 15, and 16: Right to equality. Under this provision, discrimination is prohibited on the grounds of sex, religion, race, caste or place of birth. It also guarantees citizens equality of opportunity in public employment.

Article 23: Right Against Exploitation. This article prohibits traffic of human beings by slavery and prostitution.

Article 39a, 39d, 39e, and Article 42: Directive Principles. Under these articles the States are required to ensure that all citizens-men and women- have the right to an adequate means of livelihood, equal pay for equal work and that the health

of workers is not abused.

Article 51e: Fundamental Duties. This article renounced practices such as sati, child marriage and dowry which are derogatory to women.

This was the framework of the Constitution with which the laws regarding women were to operate. Based on this framework, the legislatures enacted a large number of new laws. The period between 1934-50 is marked by legal reform, particularly relating to Hindu Law. Each religious community in India, i.e. Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Parsi, Jain, Sikh etc is governed by its own laws in matters of marriage and inheritance and divorce. Hindu law prescribed certain rules which were far behind the value perception of the people in general and women in particular (Panda 1990, 92).

Before independence, Hindu law was encoded in the Srutis and Smritis (digests and commentaries). The Hindu law basically restricted women's rights in the family, prescribed early marriage, prohibited divorce and widow remarriage. Further, women had no right of inheritance. The sons had the right to property by birth. Most Hindu religious texts treated women as dependents, requiring protection and considering them incapable of exercising independent authority (Everett 1979). However, these laws did not apply to the lower castes, whose customs were less restrictive to women.

Hindu Law was drastically modified in the mid-50's through the following acts, which became part of the Hindu Code Bill: the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act of 1956, and the Hindu Succession Act of 1956. Although these acts were important because they provided women with greater

freedom in the areas of marriage, divorce and inheritance, they were only partially successful in granting women equal rights in the areas of personal laws. The majority of the Hindu law remained in a state of confusion unable to meet the needs of the changing times. The biggest weakness of this law was that it failed to provide equality of status to women and failed to provide protection to them where it was most necessary.

Muslim Law

Muslim Personal Law basically relates to issues of polygamy, marriage, divorce and inheritance. Polygamy was a practice prevalent amongst the Muslim community of India. Muslims practiced polygamy under the pretext of the Koran which allows a man to have up to four wives (Mehta 1987). The Indian judicial system was unable to pass an injunction against a Muslim who would take a second wife. Divorce is another institution in Islam which has been the target of much controversy and criticism. Islam treats marriage as a social contract and accordingly also provides for its dissolution by talaq (divorce). Although the divorced wife is entitled to maintenance for a specific period, many scholars believe that this time period is insufficient for women and thus the law needs reform (Yaqin & Anwar 1982).

Laws Governing Other Religious Communities

Most of the laws governing the Hindus also apply equally to persons

professing the Sikh, Jain and Buddhist traditions. There are, however, a few laws which specifically deal with these individual communities. Various statutes give legislative recognition to the fact that even though persons who are Sikh, Buddhist or Jains may not be Hindus by religion, they are to be governed by Hindu laws (Yaqin & Anwar 1982). There is not much literature available which deals specifically with women in these communities.

As far as women belonging to other religious communities such as Christian and Parsi, special laws do exist which mostly regulate their family relations including matters of marriage, divorce and inheritance. Christian law recognizes divorce; however, it includes some contradictions. All Christians in India are governed by the Christian Marriage Act of 1872. Under this act, adultery is the only ground to seek divorce. But the Catholic Church does not recognize such a divorce. Further, under the Indian Divorce Act of 1869 (which applies to all Christians), the wife has to have some additional grounds in addition to adultery to obtain a divorce. Among Parsis, divorce is negotiated by a matrimonial court established under the Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act of 1936.

Based on the above description of the laws of the various religious communities, it is obvious that women's legal position, particularly in the case of personal law remains confused. While the government did set up a number of legal provisions for women both through the Constitution as well as through the various legislatures passed in the early years after independence, they failed to resolve the issue of women's personal laws. One can argue that this failure was a result of the

contradiction in the ideology of building a secular India. The secularism which was preached by the leaders of India was not followed through in the areas of personal laws, which continue to be governed by religion (Sushi Datta-Sandhu, personal communication, May 1996).

Women's identities continued to be viewed from a religious perspective. In other words, India did not succeed in providing a completely secular identity for women. The common saying that laws are an instrument of social change does not always apply in the Indian context, as the most important laws regarding women are still governed by religious patriarchs. It can also be argued that even with all the progress in areas such as women's education and employment, women's personal issues were still considered as part of the "private sphere". Both the judicial system and the legislature were uncomfortable in dealing with these issues and preferred to concentrate on other social welfare issues. No radical steps were taken to address the discrepancies in the various religious laws affecting women. These issues were addressed only in the next phase of the women's movement.

The Contemporary Women's Movement

In post-independence India, feminists became more fragmented than ever before as political divisions became more important and because they no longer could identify with a common goal such as independence from the British (Kumar 1993, 97). In the fifties and sixties, there was a lull in feminist campaigning. The movement which started in the seventies and eighties was a very different one,

growing out of a number of radical movements of that time.

In the immediate aftermath of partition and independence, the government failed to establish a uniform civil code to regulate matters of marriage, divorce and inheritance. These issues continued to fall under the jurisdiction of the various religious laws and were decided differently for women of different religions (Liddle & Joshi 1986). Thus secular India failed to provide a secular law for women and this further perpetuated their subordination in society.

However, the first wave women's movement organizations continued to function as agencies of uplifting women by providing educational training and income-generating programs. The newly elected Congress Government set up various social service programs for women and children and worked with a number of the women's organizations. Mahila Mandals, or women's circles, were instituted as a means for channeling government programs. These programs included cultural and social service activities, sewing, embroidery and handicrafts production (Desai 1989). The mahila mandals were dominated by middle class and elite women which did not reach out to the poor women. Hence, after independence, both the government and the women's organizations considered the women's question to be solved. Many of the women from the movement organizations received government positions and the movement became institutionalized with the organizations having lost their dynamism (Mazumdar 1985).

During this time, the only efforts to redefine the women's question were made by the communist and socialist parties. The National Federation of Indian Women

(NFIW) affiliated with the Communist party was formed in 1954 and the Socialist Women's Meeting (SMS) affiliated with the Socialist party was formed in 1959. Both these organizations viewed women's secondary position in society as a result of their absence from social production and the presence of a feudal ideology and capitalist economy (Kumar 1993). Their strategies were to mobilize large women's protests and rallies and to fight for working women and rural women's rights. However, the national organization and its state and local branches were led by urban middle class women with the poor women remaining only as numbers to be mobilized. As Gail Omvedt summarizes,

communists and socialists... brought working class and peasant women into some kind of organized movement for the first time. It is ironical, however, that this left organizing was mainly on reforming (toilets, or other village facilities) or general class issues (unionizing women), while the upper caste middle class AIWC took up some basic feminist economic issues (women's right to property) but only at a legal level. There was no coming together to produce a radical cultural and social challenge (Omvedt 1985, 8).

The women's question reemerged in the 1970's with the publication of the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, and with the international focus on women emphasized by the U.N. with the sponsorship of the International Women's Decade.

In 1974, the Indian National Committee on the Status of Women published Towards Equality. In that report, the result of several years of research, were details concerning Indian women's rights in law, their opportunities for economic progress, development in education and political status. This report provided a benchmark for the contemporary women's movement to measure women's rights and status.

Reviewing women's political participation, the committee concluded that women had a negligible impact in the political process (Swarup et al, 1995). To increase women's political participation, the committee recommended that political parties set quotas for women candidates.

The report also alerted the women's movement to a growing crisis in Indian society: a declining sex ratio for women, an increasing disparity between life expectancy and death rates of men and women, and a poor access to education, which led to an accelerating decline in women's positions (Desai 1989, 114). In this context, the women's question was now being framed by new political actors based on their caste, class and gender subordination. Women's roles in economic development also contributed to the formation of the women's movement. The data collected from all over India and presented in Towards Equality led to the conclusion that the status of Indian women had continually deteriorated in all spheres of life, particularly in the decade 1961-71.

This report was considered to be a positive step in solving the women's question since it was sponsored by the government. This was the first time since independence that the government was involved in such a detailed study of women's issues. The recommendations provided by the committee were also given serious consideration. However, it can also be argued that the report was not comprehensive and was limited to only a certain section of Indian society. It was only partly accurate because it did not represent all Indian women. There were also criticisms of the committee members regarding their socio-economic and elite bias.

However, the very process of writing Towards Equality, brought together many women from various disciplines who were largely committed to the women's cause. A number of international factors also helped give rise to the women's movement. The U.N. declared International Decade for Women, in particular, further helped strengthen feminist consciousness among members of the movement. Thus by the late 1970's and early 1980's several women's studies centers and organizations were established, such as the Center for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi (1980), and the Indian Association for Women's Studies (1981).

Among the various women's organizations, the Progressive Organization of Women (POW), formed in Hyderabad in 1974, is considered as the first feminist organization of the Indian women's movement. Most of the women involved in POW came from Marxist backgrounds. This organization argued that the two primary structures of women's oppression were the sexual division of labor and the culture which rationalized it (Kumar 1993, 104). They argued that sexual division of labor was the base of women's oppression because it made women economically dependent on men, while the culture justified the theories which argued that the biological differences between men and women made women inferior. The manifesto of the POW clearly defined the problem:

the concept of the Indian woman as an equal partner of man and as an active participant in all walks of life has never been so clearly shattered as today. We have, on the one hand, our Constitution mouthing pious platitudes about the equality of women, and a few women scattered here and there as leaders, and on the other hand the terrible conditions of the majority of the Indian women... Feudal culture preaches to women seclusion at home and restriction from active participation in public life... Some of us are not allowed to work

for our own living, while others who work on par with men, are not treated on the basis of equal pay for equal work. The position of the housewife is no better. Confined to her home, working from morning to night in back breaking chores, she has neither independence nor dignity (Omvedt 1980, Appendix II).

It can be argued that this indirectly created conditions for a women's liberation movement by outlining how women's oppression could be brought to an end: by ending the economic oppression and by promoting gender equality. Several other organizations formed around this time such as the Stree Mukti Sanghatana (women's liberation organization), formed in 1975 in Bombay, Samata Manch (Equality Forum), and the Stree Shakti Sanghatana (women's power organization) were also involved in feminist activities. These organizations clearly represented the contemporary feminist movement and distinguished themselves from the earlier women's movement, which was a part of the social reform movement and the nationalist movement.

The contemporary feminist movement was, however most deeply concerned about the economic conditions prevailing in the country in the 1970's and by the social issues such as domestic violence affecting women in the 1980's.

In the 1960's and 1970's India witnessed a spread of state sponsored economic development programs as well as a growth of the private sector. These economic reforms were based mainly on socialist rhetoric and capitalist practices (Desai 1989). The economic crisis thus was a result of the contradictions of a rapid industrialization and gradual agrarian reforms being implemented together. At independence, the goals of the Indian Government reflected both semi-socialist (Nehru's) and Gandhian ideologies, both of which advocated different strategies. While Nehru wanted to build

a modern, industrial nation, Gandhi was totally opposed to modernization and believed that it would only aggravate the situation of the poor (Kumar 1993). During this time, there were a number of agitations by peasant groups and workers who demanded that the Congress fulfil its promises of land redistribution. Inflation further led to a number of anti-price movements, among which women played an important role. In Gujarat, the first attempt at a women's trade union was made by Ela Bhatt, who formed the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in 1972. SEWA was an organization of women who worked in different trades in the informal sector, but shared a common experience of extremely poor working conditions and low wages (Gandhi & Shah 1991). The aims of SEWA were to improve these conditions through training and technical aid. Thus the 1970's saw a rapid increase in the number of labor unions, strikes, demonstrations and grassroots organizations in general, and women's organizations in particular.

The beginnings of the campaign against violence can be traced to the post-emergency period (1977) when civil liberties groups and other political organizations brought to attention the various police atrocities and dowry murders (Gandhi & Shah 1991). In the 1980's the issue of dowry and the related issue of domestic violence against women clearly dominated the agendas of women's organizations.

One of the most important features of the dowry system which applies strongly to India is its link with the socio-economic condition of the families involved and their concerns with maintaining that status. Dowry, then, goes hand in hand with the class system and in order to attract husbands of higher ranks, there exists tremendous

pressure on the bride's family to endow her sufficiently with wealth. Madhu Kishwar, who has written extensively about dowry for the journal Manushi, argues that the Indian dowry system functions to disinherit women and promote their economic dependence on men, which according to her is the root of the problem of dowry murders (Kishwar 1986). While dowry may be defined as female inheritance, the system in India does not allow the woman to control any of the materials that are supposedly hers to use. So, the idea of dowry as female property or wealth does not apply here.

Over the last two decades there have been reports about married women who were burned to death by their husbands or in-laws over the issue of inadequate dowry. These incidents of bride burning are a shocking example of the new forms of violence against women arising even in the most modern settings. From what is known about dowry deaths, they appear to be largely, though not exclusively, occurring in Northwest India, mostly among Hindu groups (although other religions also practice dowry). They occur mostly in the case of arranged marriages. There are at least an estimated 2000 dowry deaths per year, with an estimated two deaths per day occurring in the city of New Delhi alone (Stone & James 1995, 127). Dowry and dowry murders continue despite the fact that dowry transactions have been made illegal since the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961. As a result of pressure by women's organizations, several amendments to the act have further strengthened the laws against dowry.

The dowry issue was seen as a common rallying point for various women's

organizations who began providing help ranging from protest demonstrations to providing legal and medical help to the victims of dowry related violence. A number of well-publicized protests against dowry and bride burning triggered off a chain reaction from 1980 onwards, with the formation of many new women's organizations and the definitions of the many forms of violence against women. Today the campaign against violence includes domestic violence, wife battering, sexual harassment of women on the streets and at work, degrading portrayal in the media, and more recently the increase in sex-determination tests and abortion of female fetuses (Gandhi & Shah 1991, 37). However, despite all the publicity and the activism by the women's organizations, the number of dowry deaths and rape cases continued to increase in the last fifteen years.

The 1980's saw the women's movement question its tactics on a wider scale as it became disillusioned with the lack of success in preventing dowry deaths and rape. The realization that there was very little connection between the enactment and the implementation of laws left many feminists feeling bitter. They accused the government of once again sidetracking their demands and began questioning the efficacy of basing campaigns around demands for changes in the law. On the one hand, this strengthened their decision to keep fighting by taking up individual cases. On the other hand, women's groups began to move away from methods of agitation such as public campaigns and demonstrations because they believed that these had limited meaning unless they were accompanied by attempts to develop their own structures to aid and support individual women (Kumar 1993).

As a result of this, feminists began to organize to provide a mixture of legal aid, health care, counselling and employment based on their resources. In some areas, urban groups began to co-ordinate activities with other rural groups and were able to form joint platforms for action. This was also the time when the first of the feminist publications began to emerge with magazines such as Manushi. Women's Studies centers were established in Universities and there was a lot of discussion of feminism and feminist theory in academic circles. But this activity was limited to the elite circles and one can argue that these activists were not very successful in mobilizing the majority of Indian women for any sort of radical change. By this I mean women's organizations have been unsuccessful in achieving what Molyneux has called "strategic gender interests", referring to, among other things, understanding and analyzing the basis of women's oppression (Molyneux 1985, 232).

The situation today is not much different. There have been an increasing number of women's organizations both in the rural and urban areas dealing with a variety of economic, legal and social welfare issues. There is also a vast amount of literature which documents the activities and achievements of various women's organizations. It is important to note that some of these organizations have been quite successful in some areas such as improving economic conditions of many working women. However, a major point of debate for the women's movement which remains unresolved is the issue of representation. It is argued that the movement is largely urban based with little or no contact with the rural movement. This is considered to be a major factor limiting the women's movement. Other factors such as the lack of

resources and the problem of accessibility further limit the women's movement. While these are important factors, I believe that the women's movement has not had a stronger impact on the lives of Indian women because of the lack of its emphasis on creating a gender consciousness and because of its lack of emphasis on changing the patriarchal structure of Indian society.

In other words, the women's movement has not concentrated on creating an awareness of the traditional roles of women in Indian society which remain an obstacle to any change. Indian women have undoubtedly come a long way in the last fifty years in the areas of economic and legal reform. However, I argue that the social status of the majority of Indian women remains unchanged. Social change is what is needed to transform Indian society. This social change first involves an understanding of the patriarchal structure of Indian society, which continues to contribute to the subordinate status of women. Further, creation of gender consciousness among women is crucial for any change in the social status of Indian women. These concepts of patriarchy and gender consciousness and their significance in the context of Indian society will be explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

GENDER CONSCIOUSNESS AND PATRIARCHY IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

The emergence of a women's movement in India is regarded as a significant political development in recent years. Scholars have frequently characterized this movement by its various phases such as the social reform phase, the pre-independence nationalist phase and the post independence feminist phase. Such a time line is particularly useful in studying the Indian women's movement because it has always been strongly linked with the political and economic conditions prevailing in the country. While the traditional case study approach is also useful particularly in describing and analyzing the activities of individual organizations, a time line approach was used to provide an overview of the Indian women's movement.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that despite the fact that there have been political and legal reforms and a sustained women's movement in India, the social status of the majority of Indian women has not changed due to the lack of gender consciousness among women and the persistence of patriarchal attitudes. In this chapter, I will revisit the concepts of gender consciousness and patriarchy as they relate to Indian women. I will also discuss the influence of patriarchy in India today.

Gender Consciousness in India

Patricia Gurin's four dimensions of group consciousness discussed in the first chapter are useful in examining the concept of gender consciousness in India. Although Indian women have constitutional rights, it is the traditional social and religious customs that determine attitudes and beliefs. Based on these criteria, it can be argued that Indian women in general have not been able to successfully demonstrate the existence of all four dimensions of group consciousness that determine gender consciousness.

This thesis argues that the women's movement in India has not had a considerable impact in changing the social status of the majority of Indian women because of the lack of gender consciousness and the persistence of patriarchal attitudes in Indian society. The various theories on gender consciousness discussed in the introduction suggest that in order for gender consciousness to exist within a group, there has to be an awareness of existing inequalities followed by a communal desire for change. I argue that the majority of the Indian women lack this awareness. This is not to suggest that all Indian women lack gender consciousness. Rather, I make this generalization based on the fact that the majority of Indian women are not consciously aware of their situation, or do not feel the need for change. Furthermore, it can also be argued that there is no consensus among the women who are aware, in respect to their subordinate status.

In other words, there are conflicts and contradictions among women regarding

their interests and consequently regarding the strategies to achieve these interests. There is an absence of unity among women preventing them from collective orientation and collective action for change, thus falling short of fulfilling the first dimension of group consciousness. Among the number of possible reasons for this lack of unity, socio-economic status, the rural-urban dichotomy and cultural influences manifested through religion are the most important for this particular study.

Clearly, Indian women cannot be classified into one socio-economic category and thus it creates a problem in the use of this category to analyze Indian women. Class is an important determinant factor in the socio-economic status of women and women's lives continue to be dominated by their class in society. Furthermore, the second and fourth dimensions of group consciousness- discontent and identification respectively also prove to be a problem among Indian women. If discontent refers to a comparison of status of an individual with others outside the group, it can be argued that it does not relate to most Indian women. In other words, due to the vast discrepancies in class and caste which form the basis of identity in India, it is difficult, if not impossible to expect all women to see themselves as discontented. Moreover, the notion of discontent seems to imply that individuals (in this case, women) compare themselves with individuals in other groups (men). In the Indian context, women from one class or caste might be discontented with regards to women of another caste or class. However, this does not necessarily imply that they are discontented as a group.

A similar argument can be made for the fourth dimension of identification.

Women as a group are unable to recognize shared values and interests and thus are unable to find common causes for mobilization. The fourth concept of group consciousness- legitimacy of disparities, also elevates the problem. Indian women do not agree on the origins of the disparities. In other words, not all members believe that their disparities stem from illegitimate sources. It is important to emphasize that gender consciousness does exist within the women's movement, particularly among the leadership of the movement. However, I argue that the Indian women's movement has not been successful in projecting or promoting gender consciousness among the larger group of Indian women. In other words, gender consciousness is limited mainly to the leaders and the members of the women's movement.

Based on the above analysis of the four dimensions of gender consciousness, a number of factors can be identified which contribute to the problem of promoting gender consciousness. The rural-urban dichotomy plays an important role in the women's movement as it clearly divides the movement. Although this thesis has not focused on the different rural and urban women's organizations, this separation is a crucial factor as the women's movement consists of grass-roots organizations and urban organizations which have completely different agendas. Manisha Desai (1989), argues that the first wave of women's organizations which emerged after India's independence in 1947 were mainly rural, fighting for land rights, wages and equality in the work force. There is a vast body of literature which documents the activities of these organizations. Several of these organizations have continued to be strong advocates of rural and peasant women's rights.

On the other hand, the urban organizations emerged only in the 1970's and 1980's as a result of a combination of feminist influences and the publicity regarding the atrocities committed against women such as dowry and domestic violence. These organizations were different from the rural organizations, as they were primarily dealing with women's legal rights. It is clear how the goals of these two sets of organizations were quite different; with the rural organizations emphasizing the "practical gender needs", and the urban organizations emphasizing the more "strategic gender needs". The situation remains the same today, with a large communication gap existing between the rural and urban organizations regarding the status of women.

Leslie Calman (1989), in her research on women and movement politics in India, suggests that the Indian women's movement is decentralized into loosely allied organizations, some of which are associated with political parties and others of which are autonomous. According to Calman, this loose network of organizations is one of the most important characteristics of the women's movement because it provides room for a diversity of viewpoints to be accepted. A friendly alliance among such groups might result in an effective movement (Calman 1989). However, in the Indian context, I believe that this is one of the very reasons for the lack of a stronger impact on the lives of women as the groups struggle to find common goals.

Furthermore, the various cultural influences to which Indian women are subjected also create problems for gender consciousness to exist. As I have tried to demonstrate in the previous chapters, religion and culture are two of the most important influential factors in the lives of Indian women. The dominant Hindu

culture legitimizes women's subordinations and thus not all Indian women see themselves as subordinate, or even if they do, they see nothing wrong with it. This patriarchal culture over generations has convinced women that they are in fact inferior. It can be argued that the greatest challenge to the women's movement is to decide how to change this belief system. In other words, the women's movement has to develop some kind of a theoretical framework within which this issue can be addressed. Thus one can suggest that the Indian women's movement as a whole does not completely fulfill any of the dimensions of group consciousness because of class differences, rural-urban differences and cultural differences among Indian women.

Patriarchy in India

From the discussion of patriarchy in Chapter I, it is apparent that there is no single explanation for the origins of patriarchy around the world. Patriarchy as a system has manifested itself uniquely in different parts of the world as a result of many factors. Culture, religion, caste and class are some of the factors which have greatly influenced this system, particularly in India. According to Uma Chakravarti, patriarchy in India evolved historically as a result of caste and gender hierarchies. The Brahmanical Code was established along these very lines of caste and gender hierarchies, which further reinforced the patriarchal system (Chakravarti 1993).

Gail Omvedt, another feminist scholar, concludes that several factors like economic participation, the role of violence and force and ideology led to the creation of patriarchy in India. Although all these factors are important, most of the

scholarship on Indian patriarchy deals primarily with the economic aspect. The Marxist explanation appeals to many Indian feminists. The existing literature fails to provide adequate explanations regarding the influence that religion and the subsequent ideology had on the creation of patriarchy in India. While patriarchy is defined as male control of female fertility, sexuality and labor power, the areas of sexuality and fertility are not emphasized sufficiently. Although, a number of Indian feminist groups accept the social feminist position i.e. both patriarchy and class oppression are significantly related- they have yet to successfully articulate how to challenge these simultaneously.

Thus based on the examination of the literature on patriarchy in Chapter I, it can be argued that most of the existing literature does not adequately explain the status of Indian women, because it fails to emphasize the influence of religion and ideology in Indian society. I argue that in order to understand women's subordination in India, one must begin with an understanding of patriarchy as it is manifested in the Indian context. Uma Chakravarti's definition of patriarchy as embedded in the caste and gender hierarchies in India comes closest to explaining the status of Indian women. Kamla Bhasin's explanation of patriarchy as a system of complete male dominance is also useful to a certain extent. However, in the Indian context, a definition and understanding of patriarchy needs to be developed which includes its religious roots. In other words, as I have argued throughout the thesis, patriarchy in India is strongly influenced by the religious ideology.

It is important to note that during the last three decades there have been a

growing number of feminist organizations in India who have been organizing against patriarchy in different ways through political parties, trade unions or other such associations. Besides such general opposition to patriarchy, individual women and women's organizations have also come together and challenged patriarchal ideology through the media, conferences and projects aimed at women's empowerment. However, I argue that they have not concentrated on attacking the ideology in Indian tradition which reinforces the patriarchal structure.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The impetus for writing this thesis was to ask the question of why the women's movement has not been successful in changing the social status of Indian women. In trying to provide answers to this question, I began with a discussion of Hindu ideology and its influence on women in ancient India. I argued that the social structure existing in ancient India enhanced the creation and development of gender roles which continue to persist to this day. Furthermore, the impact of the patriarchal structure which developed as a result of both the ideology and the social structure has had a significant impact on the roles and positions of Indian women.

In the next two chapters, I traced the evolution of the Indian Women's Movement within the historical context of the national movement. Here I discussed how the movement was formed, its ideology and its phases of activism. I also discussed the legal and political reforms which were created to improve the status of Indian women. In Chapter V, I discussed the concepts of gender consciousness and patriarchy as the factors limiting the women's movement in India. In this chapter, I will provide some concluding remarks regarding the future of the women's movement in India.

Throughout the thesis, I have argued that the power relations in the patriarchal

structure of Indian society are a major cause for the continued subordinate status of women. These power relations exist in abundance in the family life of women and transcend caste and class lines. Here I am not suggesting a lack of love or goodness in the Indian family structure. Rather, my emphasis is on the patriarchal values which have been passed down through generations which gives immense power to Indian men. What is even more clear is the fact that Indian women, have been socialized to accept this inequality of power.

As I have demonstrated, there does exist a strong legal environment and a women's movement in India, both of which should be able to promote change in the lives of women. While there have been significant changes occurring in areas such as education, employment and political involvement, these changes do not seem to have affected the patriarchal system.

I argued that the women's movement has not been successful in changing the social status of women mainly due to the lack of gender consciousness and the persistence of patriarchal ideas in society. As I write this conclusion, I am aware that this is a complex issue. Based on the historical analysis of the women's movement, several cleavages which have limited the movement can be identified, such as the solved/unsolved cleavage, the legal change/cultural change cleavage, the urban/rural divide, the strategic/gender needs cleavage and finally the division over aims and goals- for example preventing violence against women as opposed to promoting economic development (Jim Butterfield, personal communication, November 1996).

The first cleavage emerged immediately after independence with the question

of whether women's issues were solved or remained unsolved. In addition, the cleavage of legal change versus cultural change also emerged in the years following independence. It can be argued that this is an important cleavage which has limited the women's movement because the women's movement in general and most of the women's organizations in particular have been engaged in an effort to bring about legal change. Although they have succeeded, I argue that because this legal change has not been accompanied by a cultural change, the lives of the majority of Indian women have remained unaffected by it. Furthermore, I argue that in order for the social status of Indian women to improve, the legal change has to be followed by a cultural change. Creating gender consciousness among Indian women can be seen as a possible solution to initiating change in the patriarchal attitudes in Indian society.

The urban/rural division has also affected the women's movement by creating problems over goals. What is seen in India, is a highly decentralized movement consisting of numerous organizations from both the rural and urban sectors. While this may not necessarily be a limiting factor for social movements in general, and the Indian women's movement in particular, it clearly reflects the dichotomy between the urban and the rural organizations, which in turn reflects the dichotomy between the two classes of women in India: upper-middle and lower class. It is important to note that the majority of Indian women come from the rural, lower class. Thus any prospect of creating gender consciousness among Indian women has to involve the rural women. Their needs and demands have to be fulfilled in order to include them in the struggle against patriarchy. Historical evidence demonstrates that women's

organizations in India have always been highly de-centralized, working on different issues. This is not to suggest that they have been unsuccessful. Women's organizations in India are actively engaged in an attempt address inequities. However, I argue that until a gender consciousness is created among the larger population of Indian women, their social status will remain unchanged.

The cleavage of strategic versus practical needs is also linked with the division along the rural and urban lines. It is clear that the practical needs have to be met before gender needs can be addressed. However, in the Indian women's movement, I argue that strategic gender needs have not been successfully articulated as it has not promoted gender consciousness among women. Thus it can be argued that due to the lack of promoting cultural change and strategic needs, the Indian women's movement has not successfully promoted gender consciousness among women. Furthermore, the women's movement has not successfully attacked the patriarchal system which has significantly contributed to the subordination of Indian women.

There are no easy solutions to this problem. Providing them with economic security is one possible solution. The right to work and to earn a livelihood sufficient for a woman and her children must be struggled for as the most fundamental right of every women. There are a number of women's organizations attempting to this. However, the movement needs to take a step further and create a gender consciousness in the minds of these women, which will allow not only their practical needs but also their strategic needs to be fulfilled.

Creating a gender consciousness among women regarding their role in society

is absolutely crucial in the case of Indian women. Unless women are made aware of their existing inequalities, they will remain subordinate. This is particularly true regarding their social status. There is an urgent need for the women's movement to respond to the issue of cultural attitudes which are manifested through patriarchy. The movement has to dedicate itself to the total and consistent struggle against this ideology of subservience, and the varied ways in which it has been woven into the lives of women. Women have to begin to see the struggle against oppressive cultural attitudes as part of the political struggle to challenge power relations between men and women. This is the greatest challenge to the women's movement.

So far the few attempts made to challenge patriarchy have focused mainly on the portrayal of women in the media and films. However, as Madhu Kishwar argues, the culture of women's subservience in India, especially in villages, does not draw its primary sustenance from these new sources of ideological control. The women's movement must identify and begin with those underlying cultural sources of discrimination against women on which the media draws to reinforce the existing prejudices (Kishwar and Vanita 1984).

Moreover, the women who do try and fight these ideas have been ineffective because they have been accused of using Western standards. Clearly, change is taking place in the lives of Indian women. The past three decades in particular have seen a women's organizations active in this endeavor. However, one can argue that the change is taking place only at a certain level. In other words, women's organizations have succeeded in improving the legal, and economic status of Indian women but

have failed to successfully change the social status of women because of their lack of emphasis on questioning the tenants of patriarchy. What is needed in India is not a total and outright rejection of tradition (as it would imply asking people, particularly women, to change their entire belief system), but rather an understanding of the reasons why tradition and ideology have such power over women. This thesis has been a small attempt in that direction.

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