



Invisible Hand of Patriarchy: Tracing Modern Gender Concerns through Ancient Indian Texts

Santosh Kumar

Department of History, University of Delhi, Delhi, India
santoshkumarmamgain@gmail.com

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Abstract

Patriarchy exists all around us in myriad forms. We often define patriarchy as a structure of oppression mostly targeted against women, but actually patriarchy is a structure under which all of us, irrespective of our socially constructed gender identities are oppressed. In this structure, we are the oppressor and we are the oppressed as well. But patriarchy is not a tangible entity whose presence can always be seen or felt directly. Many a times, patriarchy exists in so many different forms that we don't even realize the inherent patriarchy vested in it. And that situation is even more dangerous because it makes us a participant in our own oppression. Our everyday actions, our ideas, perceptions, festivals and rituals etc all reflect this structure. Here mythology, folk tales, anecdotes, allegories etc plays a very important role. These stories through metaphors and symbolic meaning not only convey stories but also moral statements. They are carriers of moral values and social norms in such a way that they make way to our culture, to our subconscious mind and become part of our existence. In long run, these cultural norms make us look patriarchy as a natural and everlasting institution. Another thing, most of the scriptures were written over a period of time and reflects the tensions and dynamics of that era. Most of these scriptures like Manusmriti, or Dharma-shastras, Niti-shastras and epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata were actually prescriptive texts, that is, they tell us what ought to be and not what was. Thus, they represent an ideal that was not always followed or not followed as strictly as presumed. But when these texts reappear, they are exalted in their status and their teachings are taken literally, which makes patriarchy appear more rigid and which narrows down the scope of dynamics in the practice. In our research we will try to understand the theoretical, practical and liturgical values of our cultures through which patriarchy is reflected, exercised and legitimised.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Gender, Culture, Religion, Society.

Introduction

Ancient Indian texts cannot be relegated merely as articles of faith but rather they could be understood as markers of our social values, cultures, traditions, norms and ideologies and thus it is imperative for analysis the role played by these texts to influence our psyche in conscious and unconscious ways. Religion plays a vital role not only in the cultural context but also in the context of ideas and values it proposes, which becomes at the same time a liturgical formulation, a normative dogma and an essential part of what we call "practicing religion".

In our analysis, we intend to study the pattern of gendered distinctions through religious texts. Here, we are not concerned with the religious texts which are beyond the comprehension of the masses, and which proposes an esoteric discourse meant for the comprehension of a selected few with a deeper teleological emphasis on soteriology; but rather the mythologies and dogma that are imbibed in our subconscious mind and our popular culture and which we encounter in our daily lives and thus shaped and reflected in our gendered behavior, having internalized them as acceptable cultural behavior. Here I will

discuss three Hindu religious texts, namely Bhagavad Gita, Rama Charitmanas and Durga Shaptashati with which we will be discussing how religion and its interpretations and also the popular memory of religious texts affects and defines gender relations in those societies and how it is continuously affecting us in contemporary times. All these texts, as we can see, can be dated to different periods of time and represent varied genres, idioms and discourses. Even in terms of language, these texts have their own characteristic features. While Bhagavad Gita and Durga Shaptashati are works in Classical Sanskrit (though scholars like Hildebrandt place the epics in between the Vedic and Classical Sanskrit), Ramacharitmanas is written in a local dialect of what later became Hindi or Hindavi. This dialect was called Awadhi, and this use of local dialect with a smattering of Sanskrit in between helped the text in acquiring a pan Indian audience. Akshay Mukul has done a detailed study on Bhagavad Gita and its politics of representation in modern India¹.

Similarly the rich tradition of Ramayana from the ancient times till its modern discourse has been a subject of various scholarly debates that we will look into, through the work of Namita Gokhale, who in her book *In Search of Sita* has tried to analyse the different recensions of Ramayana and how they have

addressed the question of gender². Durga Shaptashati has been read from historical, anthropological and gender perspective in many of the works and we will try to understand the possible authorship and readers of this particular work. The one particular work we will be referring to, will include the edited book *Devi: Goddesses of India* by John Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff³. We will also see how patriarchy is constantly reinforced through the cultural performances and as suggested by M. Sabharwal in her paper *Rising Gender Inequities: The Case of Authoritarian Patriarchy* through the hegemonic assertion of the Brahmanical structure, which even though in most of the cases are prescriptive texts, but these texts have a very strong liturgical value which give them religious and cultural sanctity in the Indian subcontinent⁴.

This will help us amalgamate literature, language and social sciences by using the source as a sociological representation of a normative order as well as a complex historical picture of the dynamic religious and gendered society. These texts are not meant to be just understood as figments of antiquity but rather through constant liturgical performance and rhetorical evocation, these texts continue to evoke new discourses and new dynamics which will be the chief concern of our analysis.

Gender is undeniably one of the most important factors of any society. Not only gender molds socio-cultural relations, dictates terms of interaction of the sexes and exposes the underlying structures of patriarchy, it also provides an epistemology to understand the different processes in different temporal-spatial zones and understand and help understand aspects of colonialism, nationalism, caste, religion etc. with a new lens. Over the time, different scholars have worked on different aspects of gender and have tried to understand various phenomena and challenge the existing notions through its gender analysis.

The question of gender is one of the most debatable concepts of our times. With gender consciousness gaining ground in both academic and activism, gender constructs are no longer seen as inevitable ones and normative gender values and binaries are being problematized to allow more fuzzy categories to replace clear cut categorization. Studies like those by Kate Millet, Simon De Beauvoir unearthed a new wave of gender consciousness, particularly owing to its radical nature which can be gauged by the phrase "The Personal is Political". The origins of the phrase are contested and a bit obscure, but over the years, it has acquired the status of a war cry for feminist movements that saw a huge resurgence in the 1970's popularly known as the "Third wave of Feminism", which over the years has become the rallying point of gender discourse around the world. So we need to see these processes and layers of the gendered structures intertwined in such a way that a superficial imposed structure after a time looks inevitable and natural to us. Nivedita Menon in her book *Seeing Like a Feminist*, posits the notion of "nude makeup", wherein layers of makeup are applied so that the face look "natural" sans any embellishment⁵. This constructed

naturalism is similarly deployed in the cultural trajectory as well wherein cultural performances are regularly employed by the society to create a façade of natural and inevitable existence of the patriarchal order among other things.

Gender: A Historiographical Perspective

Gender is a field of the huge contestation as this is a field where there is a lack of consensus among scholars over the meaning, nature and extent of gender distinctions. Thus the historiography of gender analysis is a complex and subjective discourse and need to be analyzed within a set of socioeconomic context.

John W. Scott in her work *Gender: a useful category of historical analysis* analyzes the concepts of gender and proposing how a new understanding of gender influences our understanding of history⁶. But Scott's understanding of gender also casts its effect on the discipline of history altogether. Her theory revolves around knowledge, meanings and truths as constructive discourse, a structure, a way of "ordering the world" which is not strictly predecessor to social organization. That's why, according to John Scott, the discipline of history produces knowledge generally about the past. Feminist history, in that context, is not restricted to just an attempt to correct or supplement an incomplete record of the past, but rather a critical understanding of history as a "site of production of knowledge of gender in specific and knowledge in general".

She also points out that as soon as historians will acknowledge the multivalent and constructed nature of society and knowledge, they will be forced to abandon single cause explanations for historical change. Power is central to Scott's analysis, for she is interested in the notion of equality, and she argues that by studying gender relations, one can gain an understanding of (in) equality in general.

Thus there is a need to modify our understanding of power and see it as discursive. Lastly, Joan Scott believes in the intermingling of intersectional ties like caste, class and gender etc as a "useful category of historical analysis".

In the context of Indian subcontinent, there has been a long history of the struggle for emancipation of women. Radha Kumar in her book *The History of Doing* points out that though the Sati tradition was officially abolished in the 19th century through legislation in 1829, there was a resurgence of the Sati movement in the 1980's in Rajasthan⁷. The basis of this movement was harking back to the glorious tradition of the "Sati-Mata" which was an antithesis to the wave of the feminist movement in India at the same time. Radha Kumar has discussed the movement and its political and social context as well as its implications for the gender rights movement which was also gaining traction in India at the same time. Nevertheless, religious symbols are put to use in a very different way to justify a movement. Another irony lies in the fact that the staunchest supporters of the movement were women

themselves. Thus, it actually reveals the process of legitimizing and “sacralizing” the institution and the rhetoric to create an illusion of a glorious tradition. Thus, religious tradition could themselves be used as a text to study the dynamics of gender and the process of legitimization through religion.

As Michel Foucault point's out in his work *The History of Sexuality*- church, educational institutions and hospitals were three spheres of “discursive discourse” of sexuality through which sexuality, which was supposedly repressed in the public sphere and the locus of “legitimate sexuality” were restricted to the private sphere, was able to manifest it without harking to the “illegitimate” sphere of sexuality⁸. Michel Foucault criticizes the notion of “repression of sexuality” wherein sexuality is condemned and repressed in the society. Rather, he claims exactly the opposite. Sexuality remains the mainstay of our discourses. Sexuality is talked in hushes and silences and is often garbed in alternative taxonomies. Schools, religious institutions and schools, then become the site where not only this language is developed, but also the discourse of sexuality is exercised through the act of disciplining, morality and pathological descriptions respectively. The power structure has an indelible presence in the realm of gender relations, but whether the relations are always hierarchical or sometimes the relation is rhizomatic as well, whether the power structure has an overarching presence or it emanated from different nodes of interaction is a question to ponder. The idea of looking at the phenomenon as rhizomatic or as various lines and measures amounting to an assemblage without a necessary thread to bind them in a structural unity, was posed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*⁹

In that sense, religion may prove very useful in not only studying these interactions of the power structures of gender, but how the process of signification in the rhetoric of gender, becomes an enigma that creates an illusion of a hidden meaning that have to be priced out through a commentary (as in different interpretations of religious texts) and which sometimes create meanings which doesn't exist in the first place. Through deconstructing the structure we can analyze women's sphere through the prism of religion, and similarly through the prism of history. Now, having discussed the theoretical propositions of gender and its relation with history, we can now move on to the more specific study of ancient Indian texts. Foucault further explores this notion of control in his work *Discipline and Punish*, where he points out that through everyday performance of language and culture, adherence to a particular norm is instilled in the mind and we unconsciously become part of our own disciplining¹⁰.

Indian Scriptures and the Norms of Patriarchy

Indian women are considered to be the upholder of the *Pativrata Dharma* and embodies the value of willful surrender and chastity to their husbands. This notion of unflinching and exclusive devotion of a wife towards her husband is a recurrent

trope in Indian mythology. From Sati to Parvati, different archetypes of “Pati-vrata” women were conditioned through these narratives, providing an unapologetic justification to a male dominated patriarchal setting. Scholars like Romila Thapar, A. K. Ramanujan, etc. have tried to dissect this gender trope of chastity and submissiveness typically expected from these women¹¹. Hindu Mythology is full of such stories and accounts showing women giving their life for the honour of their husbands. Throughout our scriptures we find mention of many such women who are hailed as the ideal wife for their devotion towards their husbands. Parvati, Sati, Sita, Anusuya etc are all considered to be ideal wives whom our society and particularly women needs to emulate and venerate.

The predominant characteristic of the Indian society is its patriarchal nature through which any dissenting voice is easily suppressed. These texts, then act as a moral guide for this patriarchal structure and their “holiness” guarantee that they shall not be subject to examination and scrutiny.

These scriptures continue to serve as the moral guide for a large part of Indian population and they exercise an unparalleled influence on the way of thinking of Indian people.

Right from earlier times, women are subjected to be treated either as an object or a fragile being who requires protection. To see the structure of patriarchy inbuilt in these writings, we first need to bust the myth of its divine nature and need to treat it as a text written by mortal beings (many beings over a period of time) who described and many a times, prescribed the rules and laws for the society of their time. Many of these rules over the passage of time and continuous change in the socioeconomic structure of the society became obsolete and thus need to be re-evaluated. Look, for instance the following shloka in the Bhagavad Gita Chapter 1 Verse number 41-

“Adharma abhibhavat Krishna
Pradyushyanti kulstriya
Strishu dusthasu vasmreya
Jayte varnasankara”¹²

A patriarchal notion that reflects in this sholka is that men are the carrier of the ideals of the society whom women can emulate; or rather men are the prototype of civilization and order that is to be followed by women. In the absence of such norms the society will go into chaos. Similarly, women will loose her morality if men don't present themselves as an example of moral and ethical. Here Arjun says to Krishna that if he kills Kauravas, it will lead to the destruction of the coal (clan), which would lead to women loosing their morality, which will lead to “varnasankara”.

Here, varnasankara has a very different connotation than the historical understanding of varnasankara and should be seen in the specific context. *Bhagavad Gita As It Is*, a commentary on the text, translates the term as “illegitimate children” (unwanted progeny according to its English version)¹³.

Their interpretation is patriarchal in itself- According to the Prabhupada in his *Bhagavad Gita As it Is*, “children are very prone to degradation, women are similarly prone to degradation. Therefore, both children and women require protection by the elder members of the family”

Chanakya's Arthashastra states that- “women are not very intelligent and thus not trustworthy”. So family traditions of religious activities should always engage them and thus their chastity and devotion will give birth to a good population eligible to participate in varnashrama system. On failure of the varnashrama dharma women will be free to act and mix with men of unequal Varna (which is considered a much graver sin than the act of adultery itself). *The Bhagavad Gita as It Is* also points out that “irresponsible men also provoke adultery”. It seems that the Brahmins were wary of the instances of proliferation of mixed caste but the onus of the blame doesn't fall upon men and women equally. Thus a union between high caste women and low caste men was more condemn-able than vice versa.

The text also states that “unmarried women are more prone to varnasankara”. This assumption could be located in the historical context of war. In a clan based society as that of Mahabharata, a majority of the population act as a warrior class at the time of war. Thus a prolonged war with many casualties can upset the ratio of men-women in the society and even more the Varna hierarchy, as after every war there is a scarcity of men for the unmarried women as well as the widowed ones especially the one without an heir. At this point women are more prone to marry outside their Varna. Perhaps this may also be a reason for the wide prevalence of Sati (which need not be glorified as a sacrifice) in warring communities apart from the fear of the enemy there is also a fear of varnasankara for newlywed and childless widowed women.

In a war, Arjun imagines a “kulshaya” (destruction of the whole clan) (shloka 1:38, 1:39). In such a war situation, women are not even left with the option of “Niyoga” (marrying her brother in law for an heir) leading to more chances of *Varnasankara*.

Secondly, the elders in the family act as a guiding force for the family and the clan who try to keep the prestige and the morality of the family intact. But the death of these elders will loosen the grip of morality and guidance and women can become “wayward and promiscuous”

Historically, this Shloka defines a society where men are treated as an enlightened and somewhat superior being, an active force and thus considers it his moral duty to regulate the sexuality of women in the direction of the welfare of the clan. Actually, this can be seen as an anxiety of the patriarchs to ascertain the purity of lineage as we know that “maternity is a fact but paternity is always an assumption”. So the idea of “Kuldharmā” (clan ethics, which are often patriarchal in principle) is used to control women through imbibing such “virtues” in women subconscious mind. As soon as the threads are loosening, women's sexuality is unleashed which leads to *Varnasankara*.

Here, the blame of *Varnasankara* is levied on women who are seen as a potential threat to the rigidity of lineage due to her sexuality and the uncertainty of the paternity which requires the control of women's sexuality by men.

Women's sexuality is a theme of grave concern in these texts particularly because of the importance of women in the procreation process. Often we find that the goddesses are venerated as an embodiment of fertility in the Hindu texts. According to Devdutt Patnaik, we find two notions of fertility manifested in the notions of “Gauri” and “Kali”. While Kali symbolises the nature in its wild and natural form which is violent and naked, “Gauri” is the tamed and domesticated woman who is tamed by the man for their use. Taming of women's sexuality is thus equated with taming of forest land into agricultural land¹⁴.

A symbolic embodiment of this control of women's sexuality is also seen in the story of Ramayana where Lakshman draws a line for Sita beyond which she is expected not to go without facing disastrous consequences. Women's sexuality is seen as a thing of vital importance, so much so that the mere suspicion of losing it is seen as a sin. Sita was abandoned by Rama on similar grounds that she couldn't have remained purified after spending 10 months in the place of Ravana (who can most probably be a non Aryan ruler and thus the suspicion of purity of lineage is even more severe here). This kind of discourse is more inclined towards identity politics and politics of representation rather than historical evidence. According to Paula Richman, the dialectic that certain people see between the Aryans and the Dravidians is not new, but it has acquired, since the late 19th century, a form where mythologies are remolded, re-interpreted and re-stated to fit into the ideological mold¹⁵. Ramayana tradition encapsulates multiple, polyvalent, diverse and yet reflexive and self-conscious discourse. Ironically, the same logic doesn't seem to apply for Rama, but it seems the concept of purity applies predominantly to women, particularly those belonging to the royal, elite class to which predominantly the Nayika of these epics belong to. Caste and class both played a major role in facilitating gender roles as well as in determining the extent to which women can exercise their derivative agency. According to O. Roy, there has been a definite emphasis on the notions of chastity and propriety in ancient Indian text wherein women are expected to behave in an expected social code set up by the authors of these texts and reinforced by constant cultural performances¹⁶.

In the Bhagavad-Gita, Arjun's major anxiety lies also in the fact that the absence of able bodied men will led to the promiscuity of women which can derail the patriarchal lineage of the society. Women, even though absent from the battlefield are not absent from the discourse of war, even though they come across as source of patriarchal anxiety of maintaining the lineage and avoiding the *Varnasankara*. In the Ramacharitmanas, the question of women's propriety and the appropriate behaviour expected from them and the repercussions of not following the

moral ethics laid down by the society is constantly emphasized and the question is dealt morally as well as metaphorically in the form of “Lakshman Rekha”, “Agnipariksha”, “Mayasita” etc.

Women's Chastity is considered to be their biggest virtue which is always susceptible to be disrupted by an external threat and hence needs to be guarded constantly. The identification of this “other” varies from time to time and place to place. To resolve this conflict women are hereby advised to stay within the realm of their homes, and surrender themselves to the will of their husband who more than their partners stand out as the custodian of women's honour. Ramacharitmanas is a text which is most commonly found in most Hindu homes. In the Aranya Kaand, we have a passage titled *Sita-Anusuya samvad* which takes place in the hermitage where the eternal *Pativrata* Anusuya sermons Sita on “chastity” and “Pativrata Dharma” which signifies serving the husband with total surrender

*“Amit dani bharta baydehi
Adham so nari jo seva na tehi”*

In the Verse 5 of this dialogue, it is further emphasized that the Husband is the source of eternal bliss for a woman. And a woman who fails to serve her husband is doing a great disservice, a grave sin.

*“Aiseu pati kar kiye apmana
Nari paav jampur dukh nana
Aikai dharm ek brat nema
Kaye bachan man pati pad prema”*

The woman who doesn't respect her husband is bound to suffer in the abode of Yama or hell. A woman should only fulfill one duty, one aim and one vow to fulfill, which to serve at the feet of her husband with total commitment and love.

Tulsidas can well be seen as a harbinger of the orthodox and traditional school of thought who sought to resurrect the Brahmanical worldview in the light of the challenges it was facing from the anti-caste and anti-idolatory movements in the Bhakti movement.

At the end of the discourse, Anusuya proclaims-

“Sunu sita tav naam sumiri

Nari pativrata dharihi

Tehi pranpriya ram

Kahiu katha sansar hit”

O Sita, women will follow “Pativrata Dharma” following your ideal love towards Rama. I have told this story for the welfare of the world.

Even more evident from these texts is the fact that most often these texts are written from the vantage point of a male and the aspirations, anxieties and desires reflected in these texts are dominated by a male gaze. For e.g. in the closing lines of the Arglastrotam in Durga Shaptashati the shloka says-

*“Patni Manoramam Dehi Manovrittanasarinim
Tarinim Durgasansarsagarasya Kulodbhawam”¹⁷*

The following verse represents a prayer on the part of a (male) devotee who ask for a wife who has a pleasant mind, who works according to my will, who helps in furthering my lineage and who provides me support in my soteriological aspirations.

What we see here, that the idea of salvation seems to be the legitimate territory of men and women seem to be only a means for men attaining salvation. Durga Shaptashati which is understood as the first text devoted entirely to a goddess is not devoid of patriarchal elements as the voice which is speaking to the goddess, the aspirations, the needs and the discourse all belong to that of men. It can well be pointed out that the very conception of heaven, salvation, cosmology is somehow conceived from a male point of view wherein women play a second fiddle and a support for the men to achieve salvation, even the concept of Ardhanareshvara which is typically seen as men and women completing each other, actually has a woman becoming a part of men and not vice versa. It's always women whose agencies are derivative, who is the passive onlooker of the achievements of men, which may not be the historical reality, but is a constructed social myth which helps in consolidating the hold of patriarchy.

Coming back to the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna describes the consequences of varnasankara (the blame of which is levied on women) in shloka 42, 43 and 44 of chapter 1

*“Sankaro narkayaiva
Kula ghnanam kulasya cha
Patanti pitro hy esam
Lupta pindodaka kriya
Dosair etaih kula ghnanam
Varnasankara karakaih
Utsyadante jati dharma
Kul dharman cha shashvata
Utsanna kul dharmanam
Manusyanam janardana
Narake niyatam vaso
Bhavatity anususruma”*

The following verses talks about the problem of children born out of Varnasankara which not only contaminate the lineage and blood line; it also takes away from the future generations the right to participate in Shrada and other omniuous activities for the salvation of the ancestors, leading to their perpetual damnation.

O Krishna, I have heard from the learned men that those persons, whose spiritual family traditions have been destroyed, perpetually rot in hell

Now, returning to our earlier verses on the Sita-Anusuya samvad, it talks about the role of women in the society and why their status is lesser than that of men.

*“Sahej apavani nari
Pati sevati shubh gati lahi*

*Jasu gavati shruti chari
Ajahu tulsika harihi priya*¹⁸

This verse talks about the innate impurity of women from their birth only which can only be rectified after serving her husband properly

*“Matu pita bhrata hitkari
Mitprada sab sunu rajkumari”*

Even though a woman is honoured by her mother, father and brother but these joys are limited and irrelevant to what she receives from her husband. A husband is considered to be the source of unending source of joy for her. Women are incomplete without the support and companionship of a man and thus they are unworthy of their own emancipation unless guided by their husband.

*“Bhrata pita putra urgari
Purush manohar nirkhat nari
Hoyi bikal sak manahi na roki
Jimi rabimani drava rabihi biloki”*

A woman gets aroused at the very sight of a handsome man, no matter whether the man is her own brother, father or even son. A woman is unable to control her passion similar to a sunstone that emits fire when brought in contact with the sunstone.

In this text we can also see the underlying motive of this text is to restrict the mobility of women to the domestic sphere in order to avoid degradation of her chastity.

Conclusion

We have taken Bhagavad Gita, Ramacharitmanas and Durga Shaptashati as primary sources for our analysis because of their liturgical value as well as their perpetual presence in most of the Hindu household. These texts, therefore, are always relevant in one or the other ways in influencing and moulding our psyche and often become the moral guidebook for everyone to follow, albeit in a prescriptive sense. These texts also have a very strong presence in the written, oral, visual and performative tradition around us, which further exemplifies its impact on the popular culture manifolds. Thus, the impact of such texts, directly or indirectly can never be discredited or denounced in the context of gender Relations and the notions of propriety that they dictate. These values, imageries, norms and traditions are constantly sung, replicated and imitated in the popular culture, and thus in this constant act of replication and imitation these texts remain relevant to the modern gender discourse.

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