An Enquiry into the Functionality of the Dominant Ideology of Gender in Traditional Hindu Society

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Abstract: *Gender disparity in rights and freedoms and social atrocities on women in the form of strict sexual division of labour, Sati and child marriage were justified by a sanskritic ideology embedded in Hindu socio-cultural milieu. This paper seeks to analyze the causes for, and implications of such an ideology for women. Radical feminist scholars mostly blame men and men dominated society for various restrictions and impositions on women, but the conclusion drawn in this paper is that this sanskritic ideology has evolved over time partly owing to women themselves. This is because of the functional role of this ideology to women.*

1. Introduction

'Male dominance' is a popular topic among radical feminists. The concept of male dominance is based on the difference between sex and gender. Sex refers to the 'biological division into male and female; gender to the parallel and socially unequal division into femininity and masculinity'[1] . This division is based on the dominant ideology of the society. Radical feminists, especially of the Marxist brand, believe that the dominant ideology is a handiwork of upper caste men and hence male dominance over women. The dominant ideology and resultant norms and values of society are responsible for sexual division of labour confining women to the domestic sphere, so also for various social evils like Sati, widowhood and child marriage.

In short, the feminists portray woman in traditional Hindu society as passive, unintelligent and excessively confirming automans. Women's ability to influence men's decisions and behaviours through attachment[2] , affect,

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[1] Ann Oakley, quoted in *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* (1994)
[2] In the sense defined by Bowlby

socialization, sexuality and other means of social interaction in group situation are usually not stressed. For instance, take the argument of pioneer feminist Ernestine Friedl (see Haralambos & Heald, 1981). She believes that men are dominant because they control the exchange of valued goods beyond the family group. The greater control of men over resources outside the family, the greater their power. But she does not investigate into how much influence women have over men.

This article starts with the assumption that women are active, intelligent beings and goes on to investigate into relative contribution of men and women in traditional Hindu society in formulation of dominant ideology of gender. Using this perspective, an attempt is made to understand the functions of the dominant ideology to society at large and women in particular.

Section II presents three discussions to be used later in the article. The first relates to functions of sexual division of labour in traditional Hindu society while the two other investigate social interaction, power and politics in Indian household. Section III investigates issues such as sexuality, sati, widowhood and child marriage. Section IV discusses in brief about the functionality of dominant ideology.

2. Sexual Division of Labour

Pre-modern India was mired by political instability and frequent wars. It was only after colonial rule that a semblance of social stability dawned on Indian soil. The life expectancy at birth in 1891 was 24.5 (Mehta, 1978:15). It can safely be assumed that life expectancy in pre-colonial India was lower. Major casualties occurred in wars. Risky sea and land voyages by traders and merchants also led to loss of life.

Women play the crucial role of reproduction and thereby are instrumental in survival of society. They also perform

Smarak Swain, *Independent Scholar (India)*

expressive roles[1]. Hence, it was not advisable for members of society to let women work in the army or commerce and face unpredictability and vagaries of life outside the family.

Upper and middle castes in peasant societies lived on surplus value or at subsistence level...the sexual division of labour between field and household was convenient. The lower castes worked at below subsistence level; hence both men and women worked outside the realm of household.

Due to above reasons, the sexual division of labour in pre-colonial India was contingent to survival of society and functional to women. This had started as an arrangement but later became part of normative system, thus gaining rigidity.

Saas – Bahu – Nanad Cycle

The ideal-typical household in most of Hindu India is the 'patrilineal patrilocal joint family. Its actual frequency varies across socio-economic levels, caste groups, occupations and regions' (Dube, 1985:7). Decision making in joint families is theoretically in the hands of the male patriarch. Social interaction and relative influences of members in a joint family can be better understood by an analysis of power and politics within the family.

Power refers to the ability to influence another person's behaviour and decisions. Politics refers to all the activities of an individual to gain power. Here we shall concentrate on politics played by women in a joint family. A woman's political career in traditional Hindu society can be broadly divided into three phases[2]:

1. *Nanad.* When she is in her natal home, unmarried.
2. *Bahu.* When she marries and joins her affinal family

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[1] Ann Oakley was extremely critical of Parsons' view of the 'expressive function of women (see Haralambos & Heald, 1980). The expressive function isn't functionally universal and exceptions do exist, nevertheless its role in socialization can not be overlooked.

[2] The three phases have been named here after the local names of statuses of: a woman newly recruited into a family by marriage (*bahu*), her mother-in-law (*saas*) and her sisters-in-law in affinal family (*nanad*).

An Enquiry into the Functionality of Dominant Ideology of Gender in Traditional Hindu Society

3. *Saas.* When her son marries and brings a *bahu.* She is now the mother-in-law of the *bahu.*

Attachment between mother and child is common in most cultures. Kakkar however, through his psychoanalytic study of Indian family, draws attention to the unusually close mother-son bond in Indian society (Kakar, 1978). The man is tied forever to the mother especially in view of the fact that mother's own longing for love is insatiate in patriarchal, joint families[1].

The girl child observes the close bond between *her* mother and *her* brothers. Partly by identification and partly by socialization, *she* starts perceiving *her* brothers as independent entities and *herself* as a dependant variable. *She* perceives men as productive resources and *herself* as a relative dependant on the resource. When the brother marries and brings in a sister-in-law, *she* faces a major threat to appropriation of resources. Due to similarity of situation, *she* finds common cause with *her* mother. Together they try to minimize the *bahu*'s zone of influence in the family. Marriage in traditional India being arranged, *she* experiences many insecurities in her affinal house post-marriage (as explained later). Due to this she maintains contact with *her* natal family even after marriage and takes an active interest in household politics of *her* natal family.

After marriage, *she* enters *her* affinal family with the status of a *bahu.* Owing to the novelty of environment in the new joint family, *she* has to undergo resocialization. *Her* resocialization is closely connected to *her* social interaction with her *saas* (mother-in-law) and *nanad* (sisters-in-law)[2]. As

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[1] Observes Mandelbaum 'Between mother and son there is everywhere in India a strong, tender, unchanging, dependable bond…a mother is respected; motherhood is revered' (1970:62). Ashis Nandy has defined mother-son relationship in upper-caste society as 'the basic nexus and the ultimate paradigm of human social relationships in India' (1980:37).

[2] The affinal family for a newly wed is close to a total institution for the bride. 'The young wife is at the bottom rung of the hierarchal ladder. She is expected to fit into her new family, learning and adhering to its customs and norms rather than to those of her natal family, and gradually learning to consider this family as her own. She is expected to be extremely submissive and deferent, expressing respect for the female in-laws and her husband in the first few years, and containing almost all her feelings. It is culturally recognized that her husband is more attached to his mother than to her, since the maternal nurturance is viewed as transcending sexual intimacy. Nevertheless, it is understood that he and his wife will gradually become increasingly involved over the

Smarak Swain, *Independent Scholar (India)*

pre-marital sex is a taboo in traditional Hindu family, the husband becomes vulnerable to *her* influence in return for sexual gratification. The *saas*, who had reared her son as an exclusive resource (as explained later) feels insecure. She tries to suppress romantic love between her son and the *bahu* so as to keep the conjugal bond secondary. Her daughter, the nanad, helps her in this politics.

The *bahu* feels insecure because of attempts at marginalizing *her* relations with *her* husband (a perceived productive force). *She* desperately desires a male child. *She* considers the birth of a male child (that is, a productive force) as *her* foremost achievement. This child is the product of *her* self and hence an exclusive resource *she* doesn't have to share with her *saas* or *nanad.*

After *her* son marries, *she* assumes the status of *saas* to the *bahu* who joins *her* family. Due to a taboo on pre-marital sex, *her* son becomes intimate to the *bahu*, a stranger who can influence him through her romantic moves. *She* feels threatened by the influence the bahu has over *her* exclusive resource.

'Since sons are a woman's most critical resource, ensuring their life-long loyalty is an enduring preoccupation. Older women have a vested interest in the suppression of romantic love between youngsters to keep the conjugal bond secondary and to claim sons' primary allegiance' (Kandiyoti: 1997:89-90)

Above is an ideal-typical rendition of politics in household. Actual incidence depends on relative capability of players like *saas* and *bahu*. Another point to note is that life within the household can be active and far from the alienation of women observed by Leela Dube[1]. Alienation of a player in households may happen when he/she is completely sidelined and dominated, which is an exception rather than the norm.

Hence, men of working age in a family are perceived as productive forces. All relations between them and other

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years…her anxiety is much more focused on her mother-in-law to whom she is an outsider, than to her husband' (Ahmed, 2003)

[1] By using 'seed and earth' metaphor, Dube states that women are alienated from productive resources because they have no control over production (1986)

members of family (father, mother, sibling, spouse etc) are relations of production. Exact nature of relations of production depends on nature of social interaction between them. All relations to production try to play politics to maximize their power. Interaction between relations of production is characterized by both cooperation and conflict. The primary conflict, it is to be noted, is between the *saas* and the *bahu* (Dube 1997:8).

Decision-Making in Family

On a theoretical plane, the eldest male member of a patriarchal joint family is the absolute head. The unitary model of family which 'treats the household as a single entity in relation to both consumption and production [and] assumes that all household resources and incomes are pooled and that resources are allocated by an altruistic household head who represents the household's tastes and preferences' (Agarwal, 1997) also supports above view of joint family. However, this model has fallen into disrepute (see Agarwal, 1997). It is now recognized that there are multiple poles in a joint family's decision-making process.

The decisions taken in a family are ultimately a summation of 'bargaining power' of the members. The members can be divided into:
1. Those with direct control over external resources, such as men of the working age group
2. Those who don't have direct control over external resources, including women, persons in old age and children

Bargaining power of those in the second category depends primarily on the following factors:
1. Attachment
2. Sexuality
3. Fall-back options
4. Strength of socialization of those in first category

The mother-son bond can be associated with attachment and husband-wife bond with sexuality. It may be noted that

Smarak Swain, Independent Scholar (India)

when the wife gets well settled in her affinal household, she may develop an attachment with her husband but never of the type a mother and her son develop.

It can be said that a wife's bargaining power is more in nuclear families than in joint families[1]. This is because of the primacy of attachment over sexuality in the dominant ideology of society. Whereas 'the western civilization stresses the sexual role of women as wife, Indian civilization stresses the maternal role as mother'[2].

3. Consequences

From the first discussion in section II, it can be inferred that male casualty was high because of frequent wars and vagaries of trade and commerce. Logically, sex ratio in warring castes in pre-colonial India must be heavily skewed in favour of women. Trying to investigate this hypothesis, J.M. Dutta made an analysis of prescriptions on women in Indological literature dated between 600 BC and 300 AD (1957, 1981). He found that contrary to above logic there was a shortage of women in this period. The sex ratio may have varied in this period but never reached equality. It was always skewed against women.

Male casualty in this period was high. Also, 'females have a biological advantage in survival from the time of conception until old age. This advantage [could have been] reversed by actual discrimination against females' (Das Gupta and Adetunji, 1998) like sati, social death and child marriage (associated with ill health and high maternal mortality). These social evils played the role of maintaining a sex ratio wherein women are less in number than men in society. What all functions, then, did these social evils play in society?

The purpose here is to investigate into causality of these crimes. No doubt these social evils are an eventuality of the

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[1] Conjugal bond is weaker than consanguine bond in joint families

[2] Central theme of '*The Indian Ideal of Womanhood*' published by Ramakrishna Mission, referred in Allen (1982)

dominant Hindu ideology. But what led to such an ideology? There are numerous contributing factors and pinning the blame on one causal source is naïve. This article intends to concentrate on one of the factors…

Sexuality and Child Marriage

It is seen in many feminist studies that the dominant ideology has tried to control female sexuality (see Uberoi, 2004) through ideals like chastity, purity, unselfishness, simplicity and modesty. In the sanskritic model of conjugal sexual relations, 'sexuality is deemed legitimate only for the production of male offspring to continue the ritual offerings to ancestors: and not, primarily, for the production of pleasure' (ibid). One wonders why a dominant male would try to suppress female sexuality when it would imply suppression of his sexuality as well.

A contributing cause to formulation of the Sanskritic model could be women themselves. As discussed in section II, attachment and sexuality are two major techniques of control women exercise over perceived productive forces (working age group men and young male dependants). Based on the following reasoning:
1. Mother-son attachment is 'special' in India
2. Mother-son attachment has been glorified in the dominant Sanskritic ideology
3. Wife is often at a disadvantage in household politics…she has to undergo resocialization and play against the mother who is an entrenched power centre
4. Her control over male by means of sexuality is deplored in the Sanskritic ideology

It can be concluded that *saas* has a dominating influence in household politics. On feeling threatened by the *bahu*, she created ideas like purity and chastity in the local tradition. Due to the *Saas-Bahu-Nanad* cycle, these ideas became pervasive and deep-rooted. The local tradition got universalised and found mention in the dominant ideology.

Smarak Swain, *Independent Scholar (India)*

Child marriage is a logical effect of this stringent definition of purity and chastity []. Among other reasons, one could have been the insecurity faced by natal family about appropriation of productive forces and their perception of an unmarried girl being a liability. Also, child marriage was functional to members of affinal family, especially *saas*, in the sense that resocialization and domination of a child became easier. In child marriage, the *bahu*'s political career as a *nanad* also got shortened; she couldn't get sufficient political socialization in her natal family. This would have further eased the *saas*'s domination over her.

Sati and Widow Remarriage

The Sanskrit word *sati* means a chaste and virtuous wife (Statchbury, 1982). The rationale behind sati in Hindu ideology can be inferred not from a single perspective but from numerous ways of viewing women in society. First, woman and her sexuality were seen as a temptation to the other-worldly Hindus. Primary goal in life of a Hindu was to gain *moksha* and renunciation was advocated as the means to gain *moksha*. Since

'woman was, for men, Nature's normal means for the satisfaction of his sexual desire, she became synonymous with Desire. For such philosophies and ideals, which emphasized celibacy, *Brahmacharya*, and required that one should conserve one's vital fluid and so build up stocks and reserves of energy, woman became an enemy' (Lal, quoted in Allen(1982)).

Hence sexuality of a woman without a husband had to be kept under control. Problem with this explanation is that

'neither in real life nor in the traditional postulates has Hinduism denied materialism or pursuit of pleasure in life. Emphasis has always been on a healthy combination of the material pursuit, *artha-kama*, with the moral-transcendental goals or *dharma-moksha*. The latter was given a theoretically higher place than the former but in practice the major pre-occupation of all sections of the Hindus was pursuit of material goals and a robust practical attitude towards life' (Singh, 1986:111).

A second major explanation for sati is purity.

'Historically the development of Hindu society has been one of ever-increasing hierarchy –of hierarchy based explicitly on an ideology of a parallel development of institutions concerned with the control of female sexuality…[whenever]   purity   is   the   primary   idiom   of   status

An Enquiry into the Functionality of Dominant Ideology of Gender in Traditional Hindu Society

differentiation, there is certain to be a major preoccupation with the maintenance of female chastity. This is especially so in India where the purity of the caste is a direct function of the purity of its womenfolk. The male members of the caste are in large measure dependant for their status rating on the purity of their women' (Allen, 1982)

This is a plausible explanation. This argument also gets support from the fact that hypergamy (*anuloma*), but not hypogamy, is sanctioned in *Manusmriti*. A woman isn't allowed to marry a person of lower birth but a man is. Notion of purity could be a factor but neither the only one nor a strong one. If it were, sati would have been the norm –given the fact that purity was jealously guarded by Hindus. But it was not. Not all upper caste widows were burnt.

A third plausible reason was pointed out by Swami Vivekananda. He observed that a surplus of women in the upper classes gave rise to a practice like sati[1](see Sen: 18)). In a similar vein, the Bengali novelist Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, who made a historical survey of the oppression to which women were subjected in different societies, traced the low value of females among marital races to their relatively surplus number (ibid:19).

A deeper understanding of this view can be had from the many variants of sati in Indian society:
'Two forms of sati are enjoined in the Hindu scriptures: *Sahamarana* or co-cremation, whereby the widow is burned on her husband's funeral pyre, and *anumarana*, when she is burned after her husband's cremation. There are records of this second type occurring up to thirty-five years after the husband's death. There are also a few cases in which the widow became a sati, on premonition of her husband's death, if he had been absent for some time' (Statchbury: Allen).

Had sati been a regular ritual based on purity, only *sahamarana* would have been practised. Few probable causes of both forms are:
1. That the widow became an economic burden on her affinal family, given the fact that women were seen as unproductive
2. That she became a claimant for a fresh perceived productive force, thereby intensifying the competition

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[1] Though this observation of Swami Vivekananda wasn't based on any empirical evidence

Smarak Swain, *Independent Scholar (India)*

3. That her sexuality posed a threat to another woman...argument here is similar to the one presented in the discussion on sexuality

If sati is physical death, widowhood in India (among upper castes) is social death[1]. About widowhood in Hindu ideology it is said that

'...a widow was expected either to commit sati or lead a chaste, austere, ascetic lifestyle. According to manusmriti...a widow is supposed to be disfigured: and she is dressed in a plain garment appropriate to a widow. After that, she is expected to remain in perpetual mourning: to give up eating hot foods in order to cool her body (her sexual energy); to avoid auspicious occasions because she is considered in auspicious' (Chen 1998: 25-26).

In short, this social death guarantees that the woman's sexuality doesn't become a danger to vulnerable men. As already discussed ascetism and other-worldliness aren't practised in severity in India. Hence men were not averse to female sexuality. Then why would the patriarchal society of India, dominated by men, formulate such a dominant ideology so as to restrict the sexuality of widows?

Uma Chakraborti gives an explanation (Chakraborti, 1998). Assuming social death as a patriarchal formulation, she tries to draw a conceptual link with caste system: upper castes restrict their own reproduction in order to reduce pressure on the physical resources under their control while encouraging the lower castes to reproduce in order to increase the human resources under their control (ibid).

A problem with this explanation is that Brahmins are also upper castes. Brahmins (who professed occupation of priests, poets, teachers, clerks and ministers) used to depend more on service they provided to others for livelihood than on physical resources. They have no reason to restrict their own production. Also, widow remarriage was practised among lower castes not because they were encouraged by upper castes but because they were socially farthest from the upper castes and great traditions of Hinduism, besides other reasons (see Sen, 1985).

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[1] 'Social death' has been used in the context of Hindu widowhood by Chakraborti (1998)

One plausible causal factor for the treatment meted out on an upper caste widow is the one discussed earlier for sati. Both are deaths –one physical and one social. Both were meted out on widows. So on a conceptual level, purpose behind both must be same.

4. Functions and Disfunctions

The sexual division of labour in traditional Indian society was functional to the society. When it became rigid and a part of the dominant ideology it became dysfunctional to women's freedom in more than one ways. It influenced the psyche and pattern of social interaction of women. A dysfunctional result of this was the competition and conflict among women over men as perceived forces of production which contributed to widow-burning, widowhood rituals, child marriage, female infanticide and a value preference for sons. What was *dysfunctional* for the victims was *functional* to other women; also to society as the sex-ratio was aptly balanced thus not leading to a demand-supply imbalance in marriage pattern.

If unnatural discrimination against women leading to physical murder, social death or death by poor health hadn't been there, the consequences would have been either of two:
1. Practise of polygyny
2. Many girls would have remained unmarried

Polygyny would have intensified the household politics , giving the man greater latitude in decision-making (since his bonds with each woman would have been weaker). Such a situation could also make the *saas* all-powerful and tyrannical. Ultimately, this situation would have denigrated the condition of women further. Another dysfunction could be that polygyny would lead to frequent conflict over succession in joint families.

An excess of unmarried women in their natal families would be a worse consequence. It could lead to widespread prostitution and excessive female labour. Excessive female labour in high castes would have affected Jajmani relations of production (though this situation has the potential to

Smarak Swain, *Independent Scholar (India)*

break the sexual division of labour and give women the freedom to work beyond the household).

Hence, we see that the alternatives would have been dysfunctional to the society and its institutions as they existed then. I dare to opine that on the overall the dominant ideology was functional to society then and maintained a stable equilibrium between various social systems[1].

5. Conclusions

This article has tried to highlight the relative contribution of men and women in formulation of the dominant 'male' ideology of gender in traditional India, while debating on the functions and dysfunctions of this ideology over time. It concludes that over-emphasizing male dominance in studies of dominant ideology is risky. Women were as active and intelligent then as now. Their role in scripting of the sanskritic ideology and functionality of same to them needs to be studied further.

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[1] Today the same dominant ideology has become dysfunctional. Son preference as a value has led to heavily skewed and alarmingly decreasing sex ratio. Sex ratio in India has decreased consistently from 972 in 1901 to 933 in 2001. This can be explained in terms of the contradictions that come about in social system when a traditional society modernizes at a fast pace.

An Enquiry into the Functionality of Dominant Ideology of Gender in Traditional Hindu Society

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