

Sh.Y. Kanafyeva , **A.S. Turar** 

Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Kazakhstan, Almaty,
e-mail: aidanaturar1995@gmail.com

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE NATIONAL INDIAN TRADITION

This paper explores how the language of tradition and modernity has been the dominant idiom that has sought to capture the “essence” of both the Indian nation and the Indian woman. The salience of this discourse demands a critical enquiry to understand how this overarching and hegemonic idiom been accepted as an unproblematic given. India is often seen as a land of contrasts where tradition and modernity coexist - where Indian women are often showcased as emblematic of this coexistence. The paper seeks to look into the complex processes that lie beneath this easy description. It seeks to do so primarily: by presenting a more historicized account of India’s modernity from the vantage point of gender, offering a feminist critique of the public private divide which forms the theoretical hub of the modernization framework, and; by drawing attention to the centrality of gender in the nation state’s political, developmental and cultural policies and its more recent shifts in a contemporary globalizing India.

Key words: India, modernity, Indian women, national tradition, gender.

Ш.Е. Канафьева, А.С. Турар

Әл-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университеті, Қазақстан, Алматы қ., e-mail: aidanaturar1995@gmail.com

Үндістанның ұлттық дәстүріндегі әйелдің жағдайы

Бұл мақалада дәстүр мен қазіргі тілдің үнді ұлтының да, үнді әйелінің де «мәнін» алуға ұмтылған басым идиоманың қалай болғандығы қарастырылады. Бұл дискурстың маңыздылығы осы жан-жақты және гегемониялық идиоманың тікелей емес дерек ретінде қабылданғанын түсіну үшін сыни зерттеуді талап етеді. Үндістан жиі дәстүрлер мен заманауи өмір сүретін контраст елі ретінде қарастырылады – онда дәстүр мен қазіргі заман бірге өмір сүреді – мұнда үнді әйелдері жиі бірге өмір сүрудің символы ретінде көрсетіледі. Мақалада осы қарапайым сипаттамаға негізделген күрделі процестерді зерттеуге тырысамыз. Біз бірінші кезекте: Үндістанның гендерлік тұрғысынан қазіргі заманғы туралы неғұрлым тарихи баяндама ұсыну арқылы, жаңғырту құрылымының теориялық орталығын құрайтын көпшілік-жеке алшақтықты феминистік сынауды ұсыну жолымен және мемлекеттің, мемлекеттің даму және мәдениет саласындағы саясатындағы гендерлік аспектілердің орталықсыздығына назар аудару жолымен, сондай-ақ қазіргі жаһандану дәуіріндегі оның жақындағы ілгерілеулерін көрсете отырып жазуға тырыстық. Әр түрлі ғылыми зерттеу әдістерін қолдана отырып, біз осы мақалада жоғарыда аталған мәселелерді қарастыруға тырыстық.

Түйін сөздер: Үндістан, қазіргі заман, үнді әйелдері, ұлттық дәстүр, жыныс.

Ш.Е. Канафьева, А.С. Турар

Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби, Казахстан, г. Алматы, e-mail: aidanaturar1995@gmail.com

Положение женщины в национальной традиции Индии

Эта статья исследует язык традиции и современности как доминирующую идиому, которая стремилась уловить «сущность» как индийской нации, так и индийской женщины. Значимость этого дискурса требует критического исследования, чтобы понять, каким образом эта всеобъемлющая и гегемонистская идиома была воспринята как непроблематичная данность. Индию часто рассматривают как страну контрастов, где сосуществуют традиции и современность. В статье делается попытка изучить сложные процессы, лежащие в основе этого. Авторы стремились сделать это, используя различные научные методы исследования, в первую очередь, путем представления более исторического отчета о современности Индии с точки зрения гендера, предложения феминистской критики публично-частного разрыва, которая образует теоретический центр структуры модернизации, и путем привлечения внимания к гендерным аспектам в политике государства, в области развития культуры, а также его недавние сдвиги в современной глобализирующейся Индии.

Ключевые слова: Индия, современность, индийские женщины, национальная традиция, пол.

Introduction

Here is always some truth in stereotypes, however skewed, however exaggerated. The image of India as a land of contrasts is one such. There is probably no nation in the world, which is marked by greater internal inequality, diversity and plurality. Great wealth coexists with abysmal poverty. There is no dearth of confident, assertive women in various facets of India's public and corporate life. There is no shortage of women who have never gone to school, who have been married as children, who have neither experienced nor likely to experience the basic requirements of nutrition, health care and education. Newspaper headlines carry stories about "honour killings" and sex trafficking with a depressing regularity, reflecting the state of a large section of women in India. A large number of women are simply "missing" because of technology driven selective termination of female fetuses.

Justification of the choice of article and goals and objectives

This paper will however not delve into either the systematic cases of violence and discrimination of Indian woman nor of her many achievements. Instead it will explore how the language of tradition and modernity has been the dominant idiom that has sought to capture the "essence" of both the Indian nation and the Indian woman. Touristy brochures capture pictures of women in colourful, "traditional" attire alongside visuals of "modern," professional women in western attire "manning" the various flourishing sectors of a globalizing India. We use the two terms "traditional" and "modern" with care.

The reasons why we use the terms in quotes is that both within commonsense everyday discourse as well as a reasonably influential intellectual current in Indian sociological literature on women there are some ready characteristics that tend to be associated with the idea of "traditional" or "modern" women. Though men are not always described as either "traditional" or "modern" it is significant that very often a man's likelihood of being described as "modern" or "traditional" rests on his purported attitude towards women. A cursory examination of matrimonial advertisements in newspapers searching for brides would show a recurrent emphasis on desiring women with a blend of the "traditional" and "modern." The ideal woman would be a judicious blend of traditional qualities of domestic skills, knowledge of religious rituals and practices and modern abilities acquired through education and employment opportunities. In more common parlance the perfect

Indian woman ought to be smart but not too smart, traditional but not too much.

Scientific research methodology

General scientific methods, such as analysis, analytical analysis were used during the writing of the article. Materials related to the research topic were collected, processed and structural analysis of foreign authors' works was carried out. Methods of logical and historical-comparative analysis were used in the study of social reality.

Results and discussion

Cultural representations are crucial in the making of modern nations. Central in the making of the national imaginary has been the figure of the woman. India has been no exception (Chaudhuri 1996). Women are often projected as cultural emblems of the Indian nation and society. Changes in her attire and demeanor are therefore hastily condemned as threats to culture and tradition. Such responses have been witnessed in many parts of the world and at one level can be read as a response typical of patriarchal societies. At another level this essentially patriarchal response has to be conjoined with the specific historical experience of colonial societies. Changes to "tradition" had to be condemned on two grounds *one*, that they ran counter to "natural" patriarchal norms and *two*, that they are alien and western. It is well known that India experienced a colonially mediated modernity. However so many years after the end of colonial rule, at a time when postcolonial presence within the western academia is overtly conspicuous, the actual trauma that a colonized people underwent has retreated perhaps from public awareness. The humiliation and denial that marked the colonial experience therefore needs reiteration to fully appreciate how a colonially mediated modernity paved an uneasy and contentious relationship to the west necessarily involved a difficult link to the modern. This ambiguous connection with both the modern and the west persists as a strong and deep feeling in the "modern" Indian mind.

A society which accepts intellectual inanition and moral stagnation as the natural condition of its womankind cannot hope to develop the higher qualities of courage, devotion and self sacrifice which go to the making of nations (cited in Chaudhuri 2011: 15).

Goaded by such attacks, the new Indian middle class sought to reinterpret traditional institutions and culture. Understanding this middle class is important for much of contemporary debates on gender and culture embody the tensions of this class

that emerged under the aegis of colonialism. "On the one hand they..." were products of an English education introduced by the colonial masters and therefore victim to a Eurocentric view of modern society. On the other they were victim to the "feeling of historical denial" (John, Mary, 1996: 12–13).

While Hindus remembered the glories of an ancient Hindu past, Muslims recalled the might of pre-British Muslim India. Since the Muslim memories of the recent past were stronger, the Muslims had less of the new class in their ranks; so their sentimentality was mainly that of restoration (John, Mary, 1996:13).

To return to questions of culture, community identity and scriptural sanctions, they have been very much part of the manner in which the women's question emerged in India. One of the first issues where this comes up is the sati dispute. While the Brahmo Samaj marshalled enormous *shastric* evidence to show that sati is not mandatory, the Dharma Sabha pleaded with the British to disallow those who nothing of their customs and religion to deter from speaking. It petitioned "that in a question so delicate as the interpretation of our sacred books, and the authority of our religious usages none but Pundits and Brahmins and teachers of holy lives, and known learning ought to be consulted not men who have neither faith nor care for the memory of their ancestors or their religion" (Chaudhuri 2011: 20–22). The Age of Consent Bill that raged through India in the end of the 19th century further argued that the natural and nationalist right of a community to decide when and how to reform, rejecting the right of an alien and unresponsive state to legislate on the private matters of Indians (Benhabib, Seyla. 1987: 72–77).

While the establishment of an independent state in a way altered the terms of discourse, the problem of differing identification of communities to the state persist. The majority community "naturally" identifies with the "nation state" while degrees of discomfort persist with the other communities. That India attained independence with the partitioning of the country and unprecedented killings on "communal" grounds have marked the discourse of state and communities till date. So far as women are concerned the questions that persist are: Who decides who speaks legitimately for a "community"? Who decides what constitutes the "culture" of a community?

Western ideas had a great bearing on the manner that the ideas of early social reformers, nationalists, socialists and communists were shaped. As mentioned already these ideas entered India through a colonial

encounter which meant an abiding paradoxical relationship with the west (and the modern) at once admiring and envious, at once suspicious and superior. The harking back to the ancient Hindu past and the purported high status of women thereof which forms a necessary trope of modern Indian historiography has to be located within this colonial state. This eulogy of a Hindu past was an assertion both against the colonial west and the Muslim other. The Muslim community on the other hand likewise developed a narrative of a pristine Koranic past that had got sullied by contamination with many suspect Hindu practices in India. This attempt by the two major communities to distinguish themselves from the "other" often rested on gendered practices. Indeed scholars have contended that the very construction of monolithic and apparently internally homogeneous communities, namely the Hindu and Muslim gave the lie to a longer tradition of syncretism and overlapping identities. In that sense the contemporary form of the communities themselves are modern, not traditional. The shift from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft* did not quite happen. An assertion of fixed bonded communities, a deeply gendered process, has had very severe and often tragic implications for South Asia. The next section seeks to capture a persisting pattern of contesting gender and community rights that has played out from the colonial period right into the contemporary present.

Conclusion

Today in a globalized era politics is emptied of its egalitarian content and disengaged with democratic aspirations of the ordinary woman and man. Politics is reduced to power blocks and smart moves, reflective of corporate deals rather than engagement with democratic ideals and practices. Tradition in such a context thus becomes a pawn to promote "consumption" or a ploy to win "electoral support."

The newer has also seen dramatic transformations in the Indian media. A new public discourse in India began to be articulated from the 1990s with the new liberal economic policies. Accompanying this was also a marked change of the state and nation's approach to the gender question (Chaudhuri 1996). In an earlier era the poor and dispossessed occupied an ideologically central place in the state vision. In the new globalized developmental frame, the state retreated from many of its welfare functions. The market increasingly occupied a central space. This was accompanied by a major ideological shift in public discourse in which an advertisement driven

media has had a significant role to play (Chaudhuri 2001). In the images that the media projects the dispossessed classes have virtually disappeared. Significantly the domestic space, the private realm of women, has returned in a globalized India but with some changes. Thus just we have a redefining of middle class virtues at home, the household is actively redrawn as a site of consumption and the Indian woman learns that “thrift” is no longer a virtue and shopping a legitimate pleasure (Chaudhuri 1998). And Indian men learn that looking good is not only a woman’s privilege as new images of groomed Indian men flood the electronic and print media. Simultaneously “tradition” appears to become a key site for promoting consumption. Each traditional ritual, once a localized practice has now become potent forums for national celebration and conspicuous consumption. The “Big Indian Wedding” has become a site for conspicuous

consumption and celebration of “traditions” – often very recently invented. The rhetoric of tradition and modernity now gets appropriated by a market keen to promote its goods and services.

In this new phase of globalization, even as dominant and visible sections of the Indian society move forward to what may appear as an unmarked consumer society, deep lines of contestation between the modern and traditional play themselves out even as basic questions regarding what constitutes “tradition” and whose “tradition” remain unresolved. In the entire story of India’s modernity, a gendered perspective offers us a critical look into how patriarchal power whether of class or caste, of state or community plays out in issues pertaining to gender. As this paper sought to show the rhetoric of “tradition and modernity” within which the status and role of Indian women were sought to be understood hid more than it revealed.

References

- Benhabib, Seyla. (1987). “The Generalised and the Concrete Other,” in: Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (ed), *Feminism as Critique*. Oxford: Blackwell; Mineapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 1–15.
- Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. (2011). *The Indian Women’s Movement: Reform and Revival*. New Delhi: Palm Leaf.
- Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. (1996). “Citizens, Workers and Emblems of Culture: An Analysis of the First Plan Document on Women,” in: Patricia Uberoi (ed.), *Social Reform, Sexuality and the State*. New Delhi: Sage, pp. 211–235.
- Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. (1998). “Advertisements, Print Media and the New Indian Woman,” *Social Action* July 1998: 239–252.
- Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. (2001). “Gender and Advertisements: The Rhetoric of Globalisation,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* Vol. 24 No 3/4 pp. 373–385. Reprinted in Joseph Turow and Matthew McAllister, *The Advertising and Consumer Culture Reader* (Routledge 2009) Ch. 11.
- Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. (2005) (ed.), *Feminism in India*. London: Zed.
- Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. (2010) “The Concept of Gender: Its Travels and Travails,”
- John, Mary. (1996). “Gender and Development in India, 1970s–1990s: Some Reflections on the Constitutive Role of Contexts,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 23.
- Natarajan Jayanthi. (1996). “A Political Hypocrisy,” *The Hindu* December.
- Rege, Sharmila. (1998). “Dalit Women talk Differently: A Critique of ‘Difference’ and Towards a Dalit feminist Standpoint,” *Economic and Political Weekly* October 31st
- Sangari, Kumkum. (1988). “Perpetuating the Myth,” *Seminar*, No. 342, February.
- Singer, Milton. (1972). *When a Great Tradition Modernizes : An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization*. New York: Praeger.
- Yuval Davis, Nira; Athias, Floya. (1989). *Woman-Nation-State*. New Delhi: Palgrave Macmillan