

**India 1901 : The Birth of the “Indian Woman” ?
1901 as metaphor for the sexual politics of Indian democracy**
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Perhaps many of you would argue that this title is mere sophism – and since the aim of the present paper is to chase sophisms, I would like to begin by explaining the term “birth of the Indian woman”. I am using the term “Indian” loosely, encompassing the geographical entity which came into being in 1947. 1901 seemed to me a critical point as it represents a benchmark in Indian politics, a turning point in the Indian psyche, as the country began to become aware of itself as a geographical cum cultural identity.

Before continuing, I would like to acknowledge my debt to Michel Foucault, whose concepts have provided the basic analytical tools and the terminology for the present paper. I would also like to acknowledge my debt to the historian Joan W. Scott and her theory of the discursive production of subjects as developed in her article “The Evidence of Experience”¹.

In this paper, I would like to briefly examine the politico-epistemic practices which helped to construct the historical identity of the subject “Indian woman”. In other words, which discursive processes were in operation at the time, and up to what point do they define contemporary Indian identity? In order to do so, I will begin by a very brief historical survey of the nineteenth century, and the major turn of the century reforms. Then I would like to talk about Gandhian ideology in relation to Indian women, after which I will go on to look at the subject “Indian woman” in the year 2001, one century later and the repercussions of 1901. Finally, I will conclude with a few remarks on secularism in India.

The question of representation is central to this paper. Therefore we will attempt to study collective mentalities, and the resultant cultural determination of individual behaviour. What sort of representation emerges of the nineteenth century woman in colonial India? What was the collective experience of Indian women in the 19th century, and the ideological construction within which it operated? As in the west, emancipation of women was an important issue at the time. In India reformers were mainly concerned with issues like sati, child marriage, widowhood, polygamy, and prohibitions on education. These concerns were part of the cultural politics of the transition to democracy and secularism at the turn of the century. As pointed out by Lata Mani, the debates over social issues construed women as victims or heroines, denying them complex personalities. Mani writes: “Tradition was thus not the ground

¹ Scott, Joan. « The Evidence of Experience ». *Critical Inquiry* 17, (summer) : 773-97. 1991.

on which the status of women was being contested. Rather the reverse was true: women in fact became the site on which tradition was debated and reformulated.”²

Mani has put her finger on the dominant discourse on the representation of women in India. Right from the times of the nineteenth century reforms women became inextricably linked with tradition, as its holders and its perpetuators. The point was to modernise women without upsetting the basic tenets of the *Manav Dharam Shastra*, sacred law of the Hindus, dating back to the seventh century. The *Manav Dharam Sastra* defines women’s status very clearly: “*Pendant son enfance, une femme doit dépendre de son père; pendant sa jeunesse, elle dépend de son mari; son mari étant mort, de ses fils; . . . une femme ne doit jamais se gouverner à sa guise.* »(V :148)³ In this way, women were excluded from full-fledged citizenship at the turn of the century through forced adherence to the private sphere.

While there can be no doubt as to the necessity for the above-mentioned reforms – it suffices to read an excerpt from Pandita Ramabai’s writings: “Throughout India widowhood is regarded as the punishment for horrible crimes committed by the woman in her former existence. . . . But it is the child-widow upon whom in an especial manner falls the abuse and hatred of the community as the greatest criminal upon whom Heaven’s judgement has been pronounced.”⁴, or to look at any wedding portrait of the time, showing eight-year-olds resplendent in wedding finery. Nevertheless the fact remains that larger women’s issues were being drowned in social problems. For example, the pupils of the Brahma Samaji, a reform society which fought for women’s education were being taught subjects ‘suitable’ for girls – sewing, religious instruction and so forth. I quote Annie Besant, another famous name in the annals of turn of the century reformers on education in 1904: “the national movement for girl’s education must be on national lines; it must accept the general Hindu conceptions of women’s place in the national life . . . India needs nobly trained wives and mothers, wise and tender rulers of the household, educated teachers of the young, helpful counsellors of their husbands, skilled nurses of the sick, rather than girl graduates”.⁵

Except for certain brilliant exceptions like Pandita Ramabhai herself, Indian women were held fast in the *Manav Dharam Shastra* androcentric straitjacket. I can but resort to Foucault, in an attempt to underline the obvious: “Foucault remarks: “the subject is constituted through practices of subjection, or. . . . through practices of liberation, of freedom . . . starting of course from a certain number of rules, styles and conventions that are found in the culture”.⁶ This point is central to the question of gender based identity politics as the identity of Indian women was forged in the nineteenth century. And almost all nineteenth century discourse firmly anchors that

² Mani, Lata. in *Women in Modern India* by Geraldine Forbes. Cambridge UP. New Delhi: 1998. 12.

³ Manava-Dharma-Shastra, livre II :213. trans. A Loiseleur Deslongchamps, *Les Livres Sacrés de toutes les religions, sauf la Bible*. Tome 1 eds G. Pauthier & G. Brunet, Paris: J-P Migne, 1858. 331-460.

⁴ Pandita Ramabai, *The High Caste Hindu Women* qtd in Adhya, G.L. Project-in-charge. *India’s Struggle for Independence* New Delhi. National Council of Educational Research and Training, 1985.

⁵ Kumar, R. *op.cit.* 50.

⁶ *Foucault Live* ed. Sylvère Lotringer, 313 in “Foucault, feminism and questions of identity” Jana Sawicki, *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*. Ed. Gary Gutting. Cambridge UP. Cambridge: 1994. 288.

identity in the role of wife/mother. I quote Sarojini Naidu in 1906: "Educate your women and the nation will take care of itself, for it is as true today as it was yesterday and will be to the end of human life that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world."⁷

Add to this the Hindu revivalist movement of the turn of the century, ideology in which this discourse was pronounced, and we get a clearer picture of the severe limitations reforms concerning women were subjected to. This intermingling of religion and state laws was thus embedded in the Indian psyche as of the turn of the century, and was to cost women heavily in the years to come. The social reformer M.G. Ranade, for example, a commanding influence in the intellectual world up to his death in 1901, pursued a cautious policy of social reform "along the least lines of resistance"⁸. Ranade refused to dine intercaste or 'marry a widow' when his first wife died in 1873, bringing home a child bride instead.

When the Savajanik Sabha, a liberal political organization was formed in 1871, its members decided they would not venture into 'religious' terrain, thus disassociating politics from social reform. But in the process two separate spheres were being created in the Indian mind, the public and the private, and women were clearly relegated to the latter. One can practically speak of the "formation of a disciplinary society", only in this case the prison bars are mental, and the "social quarantine" is constructed through a socio-religious process.⁹ And it is not really possible to write off these nineteenth century concepts simply as notions belonging to a pre-existing social order, for to do so would be to deny to the nineteenth century its claim of transition.

Now I would like to move on further in the history of India, to 1915, and the advent of Gandhian ideology.¹⁰ As we have seen, at the time the Independence Movement began to mobilise India, woman was Man's inferior, totally dependent on him, with no legal status. The majority of middle class women were unseen, isolated and uneducated. Women of the lower classes were not kept in isolation, as their presence was required in the fields and other work places, but they were illiterate and their labour badly paid. In both cases, in keeping with the *Manav Dharam Shastra*, women were considered to be the property of the father, and later, of the husband. Despite this, women participated massively in the Independence Movement, largely due to the Mahatma. However, women's participation was enabled by Gandhi because he legitimated their political involvement and entrance into the public sphere by constructing an image of Indian woman through the Sita symbol which was a continuation of the 1901 dominant discourse on women's identity.

For many of these women, this participation meant crossing the family threshold for the first time. Prior to Gandhi, women's participation in the Indian Independence Movement was largely confined to supporting roles. With Gandhi, all Indian women

⁷ Kumar, R. *op cit* 50.

⁸ Sarkar, Sumit *Modern India. 1885-1947*. Macmillan, London : 1989. 70.

⁹ Foucault, Michel *Discipline and Punish*. In Joseph Rouse's article « Power/Knowledge » *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*. Ed Gary Gutting. Cambridge UP, Cambridge: 1994. 97

¹⁰ My remarks on Gandhi are taken from my paper 'The Androgynous Warfare of Mahatma Gandhi' where this question is more fully developed

were invited to step up to the forefront. As the Indian woman emerged from *purdah* in response to the Mahatma's magic piping, she freed herself of her shackles, refusing to remain on the sidelines. For example, of the 30,000 people arrested after the Salt March, 17,000 were women. As women fought on par with men, a political awakening became inevitable. Now had the Mahatma freed the Indian Woman of the *Manav Dharam Shastra*? Was she now free to quit the private sphere for the public sphere, and did the limitations of the 1901 reforms melt before the new liberated freedom fighter?

The answer to these questions lies in the basic contradiction inherent in the Gandhian discourse on gender identity. Despite his genuine commitment to the cause of women, the Mahatma's support came with its price tag. His vision of Indian women was profoundly coloured by Hindu religion, and he chose to symbolize India's womanhood by Sita, the mythological heroine of the Ramayana. The Sita symbol, paradigm of womanly devotion and the spirit of sacrifice (did not Sita voluntarily follow her husband into exile?) on the one hand, and great strength on the other (Sita unhesitatingly threw herself into fire when doubts were cast on her purity) continued the representation of the ideal wife/mother we noted earlier at the turn of the century.

The body language as projected by the Sita symbol is clear: – To quote Sandra Lee Bartky: “Feminine faces, as well as bodies , are trained to the expression of deference. Under male scrutiny, women will avert their eyes or cast them downward; the female gaze is trained to abandon its claim to the sovereign status of seer. The ‘nice’ girl learns to avoid the bold and unfettered staring of the ‘loose’ woman who looks at whatever and whomever she pleases.”¹¹ The reader of the Ramayan will immediately recognize the “Sita body politics” practised by the Mahatma. The Foucauldian analysis of power enables us to understand, how, through, the Sita symbol, women's bodies were constructed as a site of oppression. I quote Foucault: “l'évolution de la morale, c'est avant tout l'histoire du corps, l'histoire des corps. . . . La transformation de la pénalité ne relève pas seulement d'une histoire des corps, elle relève plus précisément d'une histoire des rapports entre le pouvoir et les corps ».¹² Kathy Davis notes that Foucault's work shows how “the body became the primary site for the operation of modern forms of power – power which was not top-down and repressive, but rather, subtle, elusive and productive.”¹³

Now I would like to go on to contemporary India, and discuss the repercussions of 1901 on 2001. The Sita symbol is still central in the representation Indian women have of themselves. I am not denying the presence of women in the public sphere in India since Independence, one of the highest in the world after the Scandinavian countries, but I am merely attempting to analyse an undeniable pattern of social dichotomy in contemporary Indian. Turning to an issue of India Today, we find a fair number of women chief ministers, including Sheila Dikshit, Chief Minister of Delhi,

¹¹ Bartky, Sandra Lee. « Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power ». *Feminism and Foucault*. Ed. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby. Northeastern UP, Boston: 1988. 67

¹² Foucault, Michel. *Dits et écrits 1954-1988* vol II 1970-1975. Gallimard, Paris :1994. pp468-69.

¹³ Kathy Davis, « Embodiment Theory », *Embodied Practices, Feminist Perspectives on the Body*. Ed. Kathy Davis. Sage, London: 1997. 3

the famous Jayalalitha of Tamil Nadu, Rabri Devi of Bihar, and the 'Daupine', Priyanka Gandhi. However, political participation tends to be severely limited. The references I have just given are a *trompe l'oeil* inasmuch as women are reluctant to participate in politics at the grass root level. Rohini Gawankar, in her fascinating article: "Role of Women in the Panchayati Raj" analyses the low rate of participation of women in local politics explaining that women receive very little support, public opinion considering their real place to be in the kitchen.¹⁴

I will now conclude my paper with a few remarks on secularism. When we attempt to analyse the collective experience of women in 2001, we find it dominated by the religious considerations of 1901 – the tenets of the *Manav Dharam Shastra*, reinforced by the Mahatma with the Sita Symbol. Which brings us back to the representation of women in 1901. Using 1901 as a metaphor, 1901 can be considered as the historical process in which, through discourse, the modern Indian woman was positioned as a Subject and the discursive conditions of her experience produced. In the process, the sexual politics of the transition to democracy and secularism in India at the turn of the century allowed a definition of secularism which placed women firmly within the grip of family and community, denying them equal access to citizenship. Whereas equality for women in India can only come from true secularism, i.e. a clear separation of state and religion, which would free women from the 1901 construction of women's gender identity. In the meantime the status of women in contemporary India is woefully low. Dowry burning, female infanticide and foeticide are the cruel symbols of women's inferior status and oppression in the contemporary Indian social scene. Figures are eloquent, and I will close with a quote from *The Times of India* dated 27 July 2001, "774 females to 1000 males, and still slipping".

¹⁴ Gawankar, Rohini. *Women's Participation in Politics*. Ed. S. Kaushik, Vikas, New Delhi: 1997. 88-100.