Book Review of Women in the Indian National Movement: Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices 1930–1942

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BOOK REVIEW:

Women in the Indian National Movement: Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices 1930-1942
Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, Sage: New Delhi, 305 Pages

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In *Women in the Indian National Movement: Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices 1930-1942*, Suruchi Thapar-Björkert uses the dual conceptual optics of 'domestication of the public sphere' and 'politicization of the domestic sphere' to focus empirically on women's contribution in the anti-colonial nationalist movement from the United Provinces. Following major works by Partha Chatterjee (1989), Sumit Sarkar (1997) and Tanika Sarkar (2001), among others, these conceptual tools are now well established in the study of colonial history, culture and politics in India and particularly for the interrogation of how the 'women's question' was addressed by various actors in the social reform and nationalist movements.

To provide a snapshot of a decade long history of Indian women's contribution to the national struggle, Thapar-Björkert uses the feminist methodology of understanding perceptions of women's contributions through their own discourses. The refreshing aspect of this work is how it combines interviews, oral narratives, autobiographies, poetry, cartoons, songs, proscribed literature, letters and contributions from Hindi and Urdu magazines of the period, with a focus on the everyday world of 'ordinary middle class' (mostly upper caste, viz., Bania, Brahmin, Kayastha, and Khatri) women who were unable to cross the domestic threshold but nevertheless experienced and contributed to the nationalist movement. The subtitle of the book, 'unseen faces and unheard voices,' makes sense in this context. The author points out that much has been already written about the contribution of visible and elite women (who were active in the

political sphere), compared to these 'ordinary middle class women' in India's nationalist movement. The crucial analytical questions posed by her are: can the idea of domestic/domesticated also incorporate the idea of politics/politicization? How important was domesticity for women themselves and in what ways did it enable them to shape their own subjectivities? In other words, how was domestic life organized, given the political upheavals taking place in the public sphere? The memory of middle class Indian women boycotting Manchester manufactured saris in favour of *khaddar* (hand spun, hand woven fabric), for example, is ensconced in the popular imagination even today.

These questions are empirically answered with reference to women's own spoken and written words. The author shows how constraining social customs such as *purdah* and gender segregation were re-invented and made into enabling ones within the confines of the domestic space. This in turn politicized women's subjectivities. Existing historical works reveal that the domestic space was permeable to nationalist politics in the public sphere and shaped by anti-colonial nationalist requirements. The novelty of Thapar-Björkert's work consists in exploring the significance of domesticity to the Indian nationalist discourse and civic-political life not only among male nationalists but from women's standpoint as well. She argues that it is myopic to view colonial and nationalist discourses as rendering women 'domesticated and not political subjects'.

Mining through interviews, poetry, autobiographies and songs, Thapar-Björkert recovers the 'invisible' (from the public sphere) contributions of women in the nationalist movement who remained in the domestic space. She delineates five main ways in which these women participated in public spaces and thus accorded political significance to the domestic sphere: constructive practices like spinning *khaddar*, sacrificing for the family, acting as supportive

wives and mothers to activists, serving as pillars of support and strength in families facing economic and emotional predicaments (often due to the imprisonment of male family members for anti-colonial activities), and conducting secret activities, particularly for revolutionary groups such as the Hindustan Republican Socialist Party. The author presents numerous examples demonstrating how women re-aligned their domestic roles to accommodate the nationalist cause. This challenges the commonplace notion that political activism has to involve engagement with formal political machinery. Besides, Thapar-Björkert questions another taken for granted notion that invisibility from the public sphere translates into 'oppression' and 'inequality' in the domestic private space. Thus, she draws attention to a crucial epistemological and methodological issue, in arguing that feminist analysis should become more nuanced in understanding women's experiences in different cultural and historical contexts. In the decades of the 1930s and 1940s, Thapar-Björkert argues, the domestic space emerged as a site of both contestation and subordination for women.

The book starts off with an exhaustive discussion on the imbricated issues of nationalism, gender, and sexuality from various schools of Indian historiography and Anglo-American and Indian feminist scholarship. The metaphors of extended family, women as desexualized nurturing mothers, non-violent, sublimated, and ever-ready to self-sacrifice, were effectively used in the mainstream nationalist movement to facilitate upper caste elite and middle class women to step out from the domestic sphere and enter the political arena. As was the case in the nationalist movements of many other countries, gendered symbolism was intimately tied up with anti-colonial nationalism in India. Similar to the case of elite Indian women who plunged into the whirlpool of the nationalist movement, Thapar-Björkert finds that family support for the movement was a facilitating factor for ordinary middle class women as well. As one interviewee

explained: ‘The main inspiration in my life was my father. He had given me a *kripan* (a small dagger) to wear and used to exhort me to emulate the Rani of Jhansi. My father used to write fiery patriotic speeches and ask me to read them aloud’ (quoted in Thapar-Björkert, 2006: 73). Elder women in joint families often played a supportive role for the young nationalist male and female members when the male household heads disapproved of their anti-British activities.

Even though the decision to participate in political activities was made within individual families, the wider process of the ‘domestication of the public sphere’ facilitated the entry of women into the movement. The author elaborately discusses Gandhi’s contribution and frequent invocation of the domestic ideology in maintaining the ‘domestic values on the streets’ by keeping the involvement of women ‘respectable’ and segregated. In the words of one respondent, ‘in those days women from good families did not come out of the house’ (quoted in Thapar-Björkert, 2006: 176). To ease the entry of upper caste and upper and middle class women into the movement, the nationalist ideology made an effort to maintain the distinction between ‘women on the street’ and ‘women of the street’. Here, the class-caste angle with respect to the category ‘women of the street’ should be underscored. This is particularly important as in the decade of 1930s, the Ambedkarite movement in Maharashtra, which often organized women’s conferences along with general meetings, reiterated the intermeshing of a caste based division of labor with the sexual division of labor and how an elevated caste status often is often preceded by the withdrawal of women of that caste from productive activities outside the private sphere (Rege, 1998).

Support for the observance of the custom of *purdah* (gender segregation) and the repeated invocation of respectability and high morality of nationalist activities contributed to this practice of boundary maintenance. At the same time, the public space of the streets and political

meeting venues emerged as newfound spaces for re-negotiationing social customs for participating women. The active participation by women in the anti-colonial struggle (both of non-violent and violent varieties) was in effect a rebuttal to the British stereotype of Indian women as weak and passive, and more generally to the lower rank assigned to India in the civilizational index based on the 'status of women.' In Gayatri Spivak's sharp phrase, the notion of 'white men saving brown women from brown men' sums up the complex complicity of male colonizers and colonized men (Spivak, 1988: 296).

The constraining yet partially enabling (given the colonial context) nature of the domestic ideology and the metaphors of motherhood and chaste wife, for example, via the imagery of *Sita*, is indicated by the fact that women (mother-nation) were perceived as bearers of civilizational, national and finally masculine honor and shame. Thapar-Björkert brings out this analytical point with an in-depth discussion of various nationalist symbols of motherhood, sublimated *Bharatmata*, feminine sacrifice (particularly, sacrifice of the body by revolutionaries using violence) and women's participation in *satyagraha*. She skillfully combines this discussion with pertinent empirical findings and theoretical generalizations by feminist researchers from other countries. Drawing from her study of the United Provinces, the author concludes that especially for 'ordinary middle class' women, the incorporation of domestic articles (salt and cloth), the custom of gender segregation and the elevated image of women as nurturer and defender of civilization in political discourse and practice, acted as fundamental facilitators. Moreover, many women intrepidly pushed boundaries that were created through the domestication of public space and the feminization of nationalist politics. Male leaders such as Gandhi emphasized the inclusion of women in very specific political activities such as picketing liquor and cloth shops. But, during the historic march for breaking the salt law, many such boundaries were broken. In

the words of Sarojini Naidu, a woman nationalist who led the Dharasana salt raid, 'The time has come in my opinion when women can no longer seek immunity behind the shelter of their sex, but must share equally with their men comrades all the perils and sacrifices for the liberation of the country' (quoted in Thapar-Björkert, 2006: 105-106).

A chapter is devoted entirely to the discussion of how location in a 'total institution' such as the prison forged new solidarity among women political prisoners. The entry of these women into a male-dominated space further dispelled the British stereotype about Indian women. Here, Thapar-Björkert makes an interesting point that the British jail authorities showed differential attitudes towards revolutionaries and *satyagrahis* (nationalists using non-violent social boycott). Although she does not develop this theme further as this is beyond the scope of the work, it does indicate how prisons and punishments exposed the ways in which colonialist and nationalist discourses intersected to promote their won political agendas at specific historical junctures.

The social reform movement and struggles for women's education were integral part of a 'modernizing' India and the agenda of 'the emancipation of women' had deep anti-colonial and nationalist roots. The concept of 'new woman' was modeled after the ideals of Victorian (patriarchal) domesticity and genteel Hindu mythological figures such as *Sita.* The 'new woman' (a model of femininity) would be modern (progressive) without giving up her gender specific roles (becoming westernized). An article in *Stree Darpan* argues, '…..when those [educated and trained] women were the *Indian*[1] mothers, heroes and *rishis* (sages) were born and now out of child mothers, cowards and social pygmies come forth' (quoted in Thapar-Björkert, 2006: 230). This androcentric argument, steeped in the ideologies of son-preference and anti-colonial nationalism, aptly demonstrates the complicated imbrications of nationalism and the 'women's question' in India. However, many radical women's voices about domesticity also reverberated

in that period: '….. [time] has washed away man's godlike position and women's position as a slave. Now both will have to behave like human beings' (quoted in Thapar-Björkert, 2006: 232). Feminist readings of women's contribution to the Indian nationalist movement, including this work, unfold the presence of ambiguity in the discourse of the 'women's question.' The obvious 'Hinduness' of conceiving the nation as *Bharatmata* (Mother India), the eclipse of womanhood under motherhood as part of the project of nation building and the need for intelligent and educated companions for the *bhadralok* (a respectable man)[2], smitten by the Victorian ideal of companionate marriage, all of these notions evince the ambiguity embedded in that discourse. Thapar-Björkert painstakingly exposes these ambiguities and keeps alive the debate that they necessarily provoke.

One question that remains somewhat unclear is how the author defines the category, of the 'ordinary middle class' women. The distinction offered by Thapar-Björkert, in terms of women's non-visibility in the public domain, seems less convincing, particularly as the concept of middle class (and even Indian middle class with its unique complexity of caste hierarchy enmeshed with class inequality) is a widely discussed sociological concept and the adjective, 'ordinary,' lacks the analytical rigor that one expects in a conceptual category.

A major significance of this study is that it explores women's contribution in the anti-colonial struggle from the United Provinces, "[which was] an extremely conservative society steeped in repressive social norms and high rates of female illiteracy" (Thapar-Björkert, 2006: 255). This region is relatively less researched for women's contribution to the nationalist movement, compared to other regions such as Bengal and Maharashtra. Another interesting point made by Thapar-Björkert is that the distinct bilingualism (Urdu and Hindi) of the United

[1] My emphasis

Provinces, which originated in its ethnic, religious and historical specificity, was reflected in anti-colonial cultural productions. For instance, the Hindi/Urdu periodical *Viplav* was published from Lucknow and Lahore. In the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition and the phenomenal rise of Hindutva politics in Uttar Pradesh in the 1990s, this bilingual aspect of cultural production from the United Provinces needs further attention by scholars in order to expose the indigenous roots of tolerance and pluralism in colonial India.

Nationalism is a significant context for understanding the development of middle class-upper caste values and ideas that are predominant in feminist thought and women's movement in India. Feminist historiography from India continues to tease out the redefinitions of patriarchy and gender during the anti-colonial struggle. Thapar-Björkert's work is a useful contribution in this area. Given the enormous regional diversity within India, it will particularly enrich our knowledge of the region-specific dimensions of these issues. The distinctively post-colonial feminist dimension to this scholarship is also worth emphasizing. The classical early feminist pronouncements on the domestic sphere as "static and timeless" and in particular that "the home has not developed in proportion to our other institutions, and by its rudimentary condition it arrests development" (Gilman, 2002[1903]: xv; 10) are challenged in the colonial context of India. In colonial India, the domestic space was not only politicized by both men and women, albeit differentially, but profane everyday symbols from the domestic domain, such as salt and the *charkha* (wooden spinning wheel) were endowed with 'national sacredness.' This in turn was one of the pivotal forces that helped in the mobilization of women in the last two decades of the Indian National Congress led nationalist movement. The active participation by women in the nationalist movement played a crucial role in sensitizing the framers of India's Constitution

[2] *Bhadralok* is a Bengali word indicating a social category comprising different strata of upper and middle-income groups, administrative employees and professionals as well as the landed gentry.

about women's rights and gender justice in the post-colonial period. That said, a feminist critic needs to remain vigilant about the intrinsic limits to this kind of mobilization of women for the nationalist cause. Throughout the text, Suruchi Thapar-Björkert evinces this feminist vigilance.

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Resume:

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