THE CONCEPT OF WOMAN IN INDIAN AND WESTERN TRADITION

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The concept of the woman in the Vedic tradition could be traced back to the *Aitareya Upaṇiṣad*[1] where the ontological priority of the male generative organ is established in clear terms. And further it is stated[2] that the woman is but the womb that bears the discharged seed marking the first birth of a human being, while the second birth is the delivery of the child from the mother's womb. The woman is the receptacle of the seed, and hence is of secondary importance. This is obviously an account of the patriarchal tradition as for the position of the woman. There had been, of course, another tradition, that of the *Tantra*, wherein the womb was raised to the status of the ontological primacy. The universal mother delivers the worlds in the capacity of the Primal Power, *ādiśakti*. This is theological matriarchy: the Absolute is female, and she has her manifestation in all the females of the world. As the *Durgāsaptaśati* says, "Thou alone art the sole support and basis of the world"[3], and "all women are thee in entirety"[4]. Now the *Vedic* and the *Tantric* are two competing traditions, claiming allegiance of the society, which could never make up its mind as to its theological archetype. The greater tradition has been patriarchal in the matter of structuring the social milieu, while the lesser tradition has been *Tantric*.

The roots of Tantric ideology lie in obscure antiquity. Parts of its ideological features are modelled on the Sāmkhya with a strong accent on materialism. The *Durgāsaptaśati* does not shy away from declaring that the mother principle is one with the earth: "thou standest in the form of the vast earth", *mahīsvarupeṇa* (xi.6). There have been attempts at showing the Tantric matriarchal ideology to have a Vedic ancestry on the basis of the two *suktas*, the *Devī* and the *Rātri*, of the *Ṛgveda*. But the ambiguity persists. Tantric icononic representation of the mother goddess reflects Sāmkhya principle of an active *Prakṛti*, with the *puruṣa* lying as a corpse under her feet. The *Nāsadīya Sukta*[5] confesses the ambiguity: The self, sustained as cause below, Projected, as Effect, above. Who then understood? Who then declared? How came into being this Projected? This passage is taken as the root idea of the icon of *Kali*.[6]

Philosophically speaking, under the aegis of Brahminical or Vedic patriarchal mode of looking at the world as linguistically conditioned, concept-structures are based overwhelmingly on the noun. We are told to identify the processes of our experience with a 'self' around which the apparently stationary structure of our world of concepts crystallizes. The *Tantra* represents an effort to overcome the semantic mode based on the noun without stepping outside it. All Indian languages favour the noun, with its variations and compounds, to an extreme degree. One of the goals of Indian mysticism can be described as the unselving of objects, dissolving the

individual man and his world of separate things by a vision of the endlessly mobile tissue of change borne by currents of energy and kinetic principles of shape related to each other through time in different ways. To think and speak of this vision should demand the noun, which is a semantic parallel to the selved object, should be overcome somehow. But *Tantra*, because of its Indian linguistic heritage, was obliged to refine selved concepts, to push continually further its refinement of supernatural noun-objects in an endless pursuit of the unselved and hence non-objective 'absolute' which will never, in fact, submit to noun-shaped thoughts.

For *Tantra* the feminine aspect of Reality is responsible for the activity of creation, it is the feminine, the cosmic *Śakti* or power-energy that presides over the Tantrik *weltanchauung*. The *Tantra* concentrates on the images of the female. This should have had a message for matriarchy, but patriarchy hijacked the ideology, and the women came to be disallowed to worship the image of the Goddess in any official manner of ritual. This came about as a result of the Brahminical sophistry of linking *Tantra* to the Vedas.

The *Dharmaśāstras* are the male-oriented treatises, and have treated women as second-rate members of the patriarchal society. They, as Manu has famously asserted, as girls are to be in the guardianship of the father, as young women she is to be in the guardianship of her husband, and in old age she is to be taken care of by her sons. On no occasion whatever she is to have or enjoy a streak of freedom or to have her own social identity. A female is either a daughter, or a wife or a mother of a male member of society. This is the most current ideological mapping of a woman's existence in the greater tradition. *Tantra* admitted the existence of independent woman, through the backdoor in the form of the women from the *vrātya* class, the social outcasts, who could consort with the *tantric* practitioners. The patriarchal law books were emphatic on the periodic uncleanness of the women, and ruled their segregation on account of taboo infection of the menstrual blood. Curiously enough the patriarchal taboo is perpetuated by the women themselves, since it has been so internalized by them through thousands of years. The cosmic goddess is venerated when she menstruates during the onset of rains, *ambuvāci*, but the women at home are shunned as unclean when they undergo the physiological process. This is plainly a matter of bifocal vision, one attitude for the Goddess, and another for the women at

home. Patriarchy everywhere abhors the taboo concerning blood. In the *Old Testament*, the book of Leviticus lays down elaborate norms for the menstruating women. Hindus disallow such women to participate in the rituals and worship. *Tantra* accords a higher status to women, and disregards the taboo of blood. The message was betrayed by Brahminical patriarchal orthodox tradition.

Take the case of marriage as per the Hindu tradition. It is the man who weds; he is the subject of the sentence in Sanskrit giving the information. The woman, the bride is the object of the act of wedding. She is given in marriage, and she undergoes or even loses her paternal *gotra* in course of solemnization of the wedding ceremony. If the mother dies before the father, the son would not perform the *śrāddha* at Gaya. When the father's ceremonies are over, the mother would get her share of oblations only as the wife of the deceased. Ambiguity of identity follows the woman here as well as hereafter. Traditionally the woman has got to be *chāyāvānugatā*, the shadow of her husband; she is not to have an identity of her own, or a personhood on account of herself.

Cosmatic changes, though important and significant ones, have taken place, but underneath the surface glitter, there persists the internalized patriarchal values borne by women, and mothers indoctrinate their daughters in the lore. In this way patriarchy gets perpetrated by women themselves. There have been social reforms and programmes for the amelioration of the state of women, but they were all initiated by well-intentioned persons who were men, and hence the reforms were effective within the parameters of patriarchy. These were halfway houses as regards the dialectic of women and the tradition. In India religion has been conservatory of traditional patriarchal values. Even the *Gītā* classifies women and *śudras* as having been born in sin, *pāpayonaya*[7] and it is hardly ever known that women have protested against the demeaning appellation. This is how tradition has come to look upon the lot of women.

There have been no dearth of high-flown rhetoric about women, and strings of pseudo-historical names like those of Gārgī and Maitreyī have been mentioned in order to show how high a status women enjoyed in the tradition. But no one cares to point to the case that Gārgī was snubbed by Yāgñyavalkya for asking questions which

he could not answer. Again, whoever and whatever Gārgī and Maitreyī had been, granted that they were great in their metaphysical quests, yet how could they be models for the women of today? How tradition dealt with women in ancient India, it is not enough historically to go to Gārgī and Maitreyī all the time. Even a cursory glance at the *Theri Gāthā*, the collection of poems by Buddhist nuns would show that women were not a happy lot in the traditional society of ancient India. Hardly ever a mention of the *Theri Gāthā* is made by the protagonists of the women in Indian tradition. Many of the *theris* or Buddhist nuns were poets of considerable merit in Pali and that they were literate is a point in the face of the wide illiteracy that prevailed among the Hindu women of the times. Even the Jain nun Pingalakeśā was remarkable for her dialectical skill. Her name also is profaned by the Hindu traditionalists, who are more often than not bad historians.

When we look at the West, we notice that it is Kant who is taken as the target of feminist criticism. Feminist epistemology has asked whether different ways of knowing, for instance with different criteria of justification, and different emphases on logic and imagination, characterize male and female attempts to understand the world. Such concerns include awareness of the 'masculine' self-image, itself a socially variable and potentially distorted picture of what thought and action should be. A particular target of much feminist epistemology is a Kantian or Enlightenment conception of rationality, which is seen as a device for claiming mastery and control, and for refusing to acknowledge differing perspectives and different relations to life and nature. Although extreme claims have been made, such as that logic is a phallic and patriarchal device for coercing other people, it is still unclear whether differences between individual capacities and training count as much as gender in explaining how people acquire knowledge. Again there is a spectrum of concern, from the highly theoretical to the relatively practical. In this latter area particular attention is given to the institutional biases that stand in the way of equal opportunities in science and other academic pursuits or the ideologies that stand in the way of women seeing themselves as leading contributors to various disciplines. However, to more radical feminists such concerns merely exhibit women wanting for themselves the same power and rights over others that men have claimed, and failing to confront the real problem, which is how to live without such asymmetrical powers and rights.

Feminism is the approach to social life, philosophy and ethics that commits itself to correcting biases leading to the subordination of women or the disparagement of women's particular experience. Contemporary feminist ethics is sensitive to the gender bias that may be implicit in philosophical theories. For instance, philosophers' lists of virtues may be typically manly or culturally masculine, and in social structures, legal and political procedures, and the general culture. One controversial claim (influentially made in Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Routledge, London, 1982) is that women approach practical reasoning from a different perspective from that of men. The difference includes emphasis on community, caring, and bonding with particular individuals, in place of abstract impartiality. It is controversial whether or not this is a real difference in male and female psychology, or whether the different values reflect the way men and women have been taught to form different aspirations and ideals. While feminist ethics is often addressed to particular problems faced by women, the underlying idea may or may not be tied to specific practical problems, or to the adversarial relationships with men and pessimistic views about sex that popularly characterize the movement.

The difficulties the Western tradition has had with sexual desire are spectacularly voiced by Kant. "Taken by itself sexual love is a degradation of human nature, for as soon as a person becomes an object of appetite for another, all motives of moral relationship cease to function, because as an object of appetite for another a person becomes a thing and can be treated and used as such by everyone"[8]. Kant seems to be describing a gang rape rather than sexual love, but he thought the only fragile, escape from the fate of being "cast aside as one casts away a lemon that has been sucked dry"[9] was contractual relationship based on marriage, although he himself did not try it, not, probably, sex. In Plato, sexual desire is a good, although only the first step on a ladder of perfection, as in the dialogues, *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*. The movements of thought, whereby Plato's view degenerated to the views of Kant include increasing disgust with merely material as opposed to spiritual existence. St. Paul and St. Augustine held that original sin is somehow associated with sexual desire. There is a strong note current in India from medieval times that women are the gateway of hell, *nārī narakasya dvāram*.

A more optimistic view of the matter than Kant was voiced by Hobbes. “The appetite which men call lust....is a sensual pleasure, but not only that: there is in it also a delight of the mind; for it consists of two appetites together, to please, and to be pleased, and the delight men take in delighting, is not sensual, but a pleasure or joy of the mind consisting in the imagination of the power they have so much to please”[10]. In this area, prophecies are apt to be self-fulfilling; it is predictable that if we side with Kant our sexual relationships will be a lot worse than if we understand Hobbes. The power of tradition of sin is still visible in the ratio of writings, often from a feminist perspective that pay serious attention to Kant’s view as opposed to ones that start with Plato, or Hobbes. Of course there has not been any concept of the original sin in the Indian tradition. But adulation of a life of sexual abstinence has vitiated the scale of values in such a degree that women have proved to be a soft target of vilification as temptresses incarnate. It is indeed very, very sad.

In recent years women studies have become fashionable academic enterprise in the campus. The inspiration comes from the West. Hardly does one come across researchers addressing specific issues concerning women *vis-a-vis* Indian cultural hegemony or tradition. To understand the problems of Indian women requires deeper study of the Indian ethos, norms and culture from a historical perspective. More often the studies suffer from a confusion of ideal culture for real culture. The two are different entities. Rama was monogamous, while his father Dasharatha was polygamous. We cannot take Rama, who is an ideal culture hero, to represent the real marital mode of the people at large, Arjuna the archer hero of the *Mahābhārata*, was the prince of polygamy. Time and again, the religiously inspired writers of modern India tire themselves out in quoting verses from Manu’s law book: “Where women are honoured, there gods are pleased; where they are dishonoured, religious acts become of no avail”[11]. These lines are quoted to the point of boredom, and in order to show how the tradition held woman in high esteem. This is but the half of the story. Women are respected so long as they beget male children. By begetting a girl child the woman loses the right to be respected in the eyes of the tradition. The mother of daughters only lives a sort of accursed existence in social and family esteem, and the husband of such a fated wife is qualified to enter another marriage to try his luck to be the father of a son. This is also Manu, and equally the expression of the spirit of

the people. Tradition has spoken of women in two voices. In one manner of speaking tradition raised them to the status of goddesses, in another it pulled them down to the lot of secondary importance, with no identity of their own. As a device of hijacking the *Tantric* view they have been hailed as goddesses, and in consonance with the Vedic patriarchy they are segregated to the household with no social roles to play. We have earlier mentioned that patriarchal norms and values have become so internalized by women that oppression of the daughters who dare defy the patriarchal any role model is left to be carried out the women of the household. In case honour killing and decisions of bodies like the Khap Panchayet are often actively executed with support of women members of the household. This is a paradox of setting women against women, and it is how tradition of patriarchy works out its way through women. Whenever an event of rape or molestation takes place, it is the women victim who comes under the moral scanner, and it is she who is held responsible for the episode, she is accused of sporting a particular sort of dress, her daring, and so on and so forth. These accusations are part of the patriarchal moral judgments, which other women too share unawares and voice it. The victim is often held to be justly served for violating the norms respected in society.

There is a class of writings eulogizing the ideal of Indian womanhood. For example we may mention the essays by Sister Nivedita in her *The Web of Indian Life* [12]. I would mention such essays as “The Eastern Mother”, “Of the Hindu Woman as Wife”, “The Place of Woman in the National Life”, and “The Immediate Problems of the Oriental Woman”. The essays are examples of what may be called paradigm case argument, seeking the pass the ideal for the real. Obviously, the paradigm of Indian womanhood should get upset in the face of anomalies and stresses of our times, and these cannot be resolved within the traditional framework. There is a ring of revivalism in such writings, and tradition capitalizes such ones in order to reinforce its values which are patriarchal in disguise. But Sister Nivedita herself admits that “women must be enabled to know, think, and judge freely on all questions”[13]. They must become of their own freedom. There has to be secular culture in all forms and grades, and once women seize the helm of the ship in solving the problems of her whole country, and afterwards redress her own grievances.

End Notes:

1. It remains to note that it were the novelists and the short-story writers who had focussed on the plight of women in a tradition-bound patriarchal society. But there has been an absence of such writings as J. S. Mill's *Subjection of Women*. The only exception in Bengali is the monograph by the novelist Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyaya. His *Nārīr Mūlya* is a forceful argument defending the case for women's identity and dignity against male domination in patriarchal set up. It is a basic text, though hardly ever taken in account by the enthusists of women studies in West Bengal today.

   The concept of empowerment of women requires a fresh took. Gandhi had revolutionised the concept when he called women to join the national movement for freedom. And his ideas about women's emancipation merit a close study. With a keen eye he observed women in Indian society and made important points. We shall have a few of them: (a) Somehow or other man has dominated woman from ages past, and so woman has developed an inferiority complex. She has believed in the truth of man's interested teaching that she is inferior to him. We have to recognize her equal status. (b) Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so shocking, so degrading or so brutal as his abuse of the female sex. (c) Women must cease to consider herself the object of man's lust. The remedy is more in her hands than man's. (d) Why is there the morbid anxiety about female purity? Have women any say in the matter male purity? Why should arrogate to themselves the right to regulate female purity? It cannot be superimposed from without. It is a matter of evolution from within and therefore of individual self-effort. (e) Women are labouring under the hypnotic influence of man. If they realise their strength they would not consent to be called the weaker sex. To call women the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to women. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably men's superior. (f) Gandhi did not believe that woman will not make her contribution to the world by mimicking or running a race with men. She can run the race, but she will not rise to the great heights she is capable of by mimicking man. She has to be the complement of man. (g)Women have the same right of freedom and liberty as men. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere as man is in his. By sheer force of vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying a superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have.

   There is of course a long discussion on the equality of the sexes in Bankimchandra Chatterjee's monograph *Sāmya*. It is based on Mill's *Subjection of Women*. Bankimchandra has argued at length for women's rights to education, to inherit property, even to marry if a widow so willed. Bankim's point at issue is that society and tradition treats women differentially, men are priviledged at the expense of women's unpriviledged status, and this is unjust, and should not be permitted to persist. Bankim's advocacy for women's cause had no takers in Bengali Society at large.

2. There is widely prevailing convention that no woman is allowed to pronounce the mystic word *Aum*, nor utter any Vedic sentence. Even the women of the Brahmin families are not exempted. They are not permitted to touch the holy *Śālagrām*, the women are looked upon as agents of spiritual pollution.

Notes:

1. *Aitareya Upaniṣad*, 1.1.4, "*śiśnaṁ nirbhidyata śiśnādreto retahsa āpa*".
2. *Aitareya Upaniṣad*, 2.1.3, "*tadyadā striyāṁ siñcatyathainajjanayati/ Tadasya prathaṁ janma"//*
3. *Durgāsaptaśati,* xi.4, "*mahīsvarūpā*".
4. *Durgāsaptaśati,* xi.6, "*sakalā strīyā sakala jagatṣu*".
5. *Nāsadiya Sūkta*, *Ṛgveda*, Verse-5, "*tirścīno vitatā raśmīreṣāmadhah Svidāsīdupari svidāsīt*".

6. Sister Nivedita, tr. (1996) p.155, *The Web of Indian Life*, Advaita Ashram, Calcutta.
7. The *Gītā*, 9/32 "*māṁ hi partha vyapāśritya yehpi suyah pāpayonaya/ striyo vaiśyāsatathā śūdrāstehpi yānti parāṁ gatiṁ*"//
8. Lewis White Beck, tr. (1964), *Lectures on Ethics*, Meridan Books, New York.
9. *Ibid*, p. 14
10. *Human Nature*, ix, 10 from D. D. Raphael, ed. (1972) *British Moralists*, vol 1, Oxford.
11. *Manu Saṁhitā* (1957), *Ārya Śāstra* edition*,* Kolkata*, Chap.* IV*"Yatra nārīnāṁ pujyate tatra devatā prītah*".
12. 'Sister Nivedita (1996), *The Web of Indian Life* , Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta
13. Op.cit, p.101

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