

The idea of State and Women: Scope and Limits of the Feminist Approaches

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Abstract:

State is the centre and the stage of modern politics. Modern State, as organization of collective power, as arbiter, as allocator is the key agency in social-political processes. State interacts with, operates on, shapes and in turn is shaped by power relations in society. The nature and role of the State have been defined variously from various ideological perspectives. Indian State has been theorised from various perspectives in the discipline of Political Science. State's relationship with women has not been a central theme in the theorization of Indian State. Feminism gives varied and contrasting understandings of State's relationship with women. There is no agreement whether State is an ally of women or the enforcer and upholder of patriarchal power relations that oppress women. The present paper looks at the literature on State in general and the Indian State in particular to map the views on State's relation with women. It identifies the open ends and gaps in our understanding of State vis-à-vis women and attempts to hint at the possibilities of further research in the subject.

Key words: Feminism, State, Women, Theorizations of Indian State

Introduction: Yogendra Yadav (2020: 237), in an attempt to find a balance between defining State as a set of government institutions on one hand and as political community on the other, defines the State as 'continuous public power, distinct from and above both the rulers and the ruled'. The nature and role of the State have been defined variously from various ideological perspectives. It is either considered rooted in or autonomous from society, depending on the theoretical perspective. But Modern State, as organization of collective power, as arbiter, as allocator is the key agency in social-political processes. State interacts with, operates on, shapes and in turn is shaped by power relations in society. We need to see the feminist and other readings vis-à-vis each other to understand their limits, the difference between these approaches and their points of intersection.

Feminist Readings of State

Liberal feminism treats the State as a neutral arbiter and does suggest that increased representation of women in state will lead to greater equality. It undermines the divides in power created by social, economic inequalities. Socialist feminists see patriarchy as a structure aligned with class. Welfare feminists see State as a partner, excusing the effects of the patronising role of the State. Radical feminists see State as essentially patriarchal. Johanna Kantola (2006) concludes that the contexts are of great importance while theorising the 'States'. Underlining the post-structural understanding that the state is constituted by the discourses that imagine it, she says that the

experience of State is different for different for women in different state traditions. The experience of State is also differentiated for different sections of women.

MacKinnon (1983) defines masculinity of State in terms of patriarchal power and interests of men and as a means of perpetuation of power over women – something that is done through concepts, perception and treatment. State is male in the sense that it embodies male point of view. MacKinnon discusses ‘maleness’ (including that of State) as what benefits men and their place in the power hierarchy. Objectivity and practical rationality implicit in liberal legalism are identified as maleness as they validate conforming to the existing division of power. MacKinnon underlines that the bias towards the powerful is characteristic of both liberal and Marxist State. She says ‘embodiment of the male experience of the world’ by the State does not merely add to but is core to and structures the inequality of women in the ‘modern’ world. MacKinnon does not relate the male world view of the state with other aspects of the structuring of power in society that are not the relation between men and women.

Wendy Brown looks (1998) at State as “a significantly unbounded terrain of powers and techniques, an ensemble of discourses, rules, and practices, cohabiting in limited, tension-ridden often contradictory relation with one another.” She identifies and explains ‘masculinism’ in four modes of the functioning of (US) State. She separates the masculinism of the State from the interests of men. The similarities in patterns (multiplicity, plurality, ubiquitous nature) of male and State domination are ascertained. The gender spectrum of State domination is explored in four aspects of State’s ‘modalities of power’, it is separate from but

intersects with other modes of domination and forms part of the whole nature of State power in an unsystematic way. We understand from this theorization the gendered structuring of State power in its different dimensions.

Feminist Readings of Indian State: Some prominent themes in feminist literature on politics in India have dealt with the themes of organizational structures of women’s movements, the cross-section of Marxist and feminist struggles, theory and theoretical implications of ecofeminism, the issue of gender and sexuality, laws and women.

Some prominent themes in feminist literature on politics in India have dealt with the themes of organizational structures of women’s movements, the cross-section of Marxist and feminist struggles, theory and theoretical implications of ecofeminism, the issue of gender and sexuality, laws and women. Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan (2003) explores the relationship, the essence, and implications of State’s citizenship for women. She attempts to analyse the ways in which State deals with women’s issues. “Women’s issues’ have tended to remain a mere item on the developmental agendas of postcolonial nations.’ (Rajan 2003). She insists that the State be seen with the discourse of Nation it inhabits. The book explores various aspects of the relationship between women and the Indian State

through a set of case studies. The book also presents a review of important strands of feminist understanding of Indian State. She looks at ‘women’, aspects of their struggles vis-vis society and State. The Indian State’s response as a postcolonial State to women’s issues and movements has been ‘uneven’ (Rajan 2003).

Nivedita Menon (2001) in her essay ‘Rights, Bodies and the Law: Rethinking Feminist Politics of Justice’ underlines the contrast between the universalization and fixing of identities that the concept of justice embedded in Law and the necessary plurality and fluidity that ‘justice’ in the feminist sense requires. She calls for deconstructing the associations between female body and the patriarchally structured concepts; in the process Menon hints toward reinterpretation of self (and hence political self) in a way that stretches the assumptions and relations that form the basis of modern State. The present study would like to understand the necessity and availability of frames of operation/ practices that (potentially) manifest such reinterpretation of political self and reimagination of the assumptions of modern State.

Dalit feminist readings emerged prominently in last two decades of twentieth century. They focused on intersectionality of gender and caste. Dalit feminism emphasized the need to uphold ‘difference’ within feminism and also the epistemic prioritization of Dalit women’s point of view. Sharmila Rege underlined the importance of embracing ‘Dalit feminist standpoint’ as an epistemologically advantageous standpoint to understand the whole gamut of power relations with their intersectionality. Dalit feminism presented a critique of feminism from within feminism.

Anuradha Ghandy has analysed the implications of religious fundamentalist turn in Indian politics for women (Ansari, 2022). Hindutva uses women as political means. She has taken the view that feminism cannot be divorced from anti-class struggles and anti-imperialism.

Vishwnathan (2009) has noted the phenomenon of rising masculinity of Indian State.

Theorizations of Indian State in Political Science: Indian State had been theorised in Political Science within different frameworks of analysis. The initial theorizations after independence focussed on the institutional aspects of the State. The modernization theories focussed on the interaction of modern institutions with the traditional structures and ethos. The liberal framework of these theories assumed that State was autonomous and an embodiment of certain principles. State was defined in terms of its agency (its necessity and role) in pursuing collective social, economic and political goals for and within a plural and developing society. The gendered or the social hierarchical nature of the State wasn’t the focus of these theorizations. It sees women largely as non-gendered citizens. The Marxist theories focused on the social character of the Indian State – the hold of, and relation of dominant ‘classes’ with the Indian State. The dominant classes are defined variously but from political economic perspective, e.g. the agrarian elite, the industrial bourgeoisie, the bureaucracy, and the implications of their dominance for State policy, largely economic, are studied. The results of

economic agendas of the State for women specifically are not sought to be defined – that analysis remains largely ungendered. The Marxist theorization also happened to operate within the framework of comparisons of the nature and trajectories of the State in the West and the East. It is critiqued that the class character theory treats State as instrument and doesn't do justice to the agency of the political. Gramsci's concept of passive revolution has been explored to understand the political economic transition in India. It fails to account fully for the democratic agency of the masses and the meanings infused by them into the frameworks and structures that get operationalized as and around modern State. The discussion of blurring of boundaries between State and society doesn't particularly focus on the effect of this very important phenomenon on women's issues. The question of how patriarchy as a structure and discourse interacts with, is limited by or captures the state remained unstudied.

Gopal Guru (2011), giving Dalit critique of liberal democracy in India says that the elite and the marginalised classes are associated with democracy in two different ways. The latter viewed it as opportunity to open spaces for dignity, self-esteem and equality. They associated with nationalism by prioritising the struggles for self-respect. Constitutional framework with the promise of equality before the law would enable Dalits to demonstrate their agency. But Indian democracy was viewed by scholarship on Indian State largely in institutional perspective rather than from point of view of 'welfare of human beings'. Guru (2011) centres the idea of self-esteem to assess liberal democracy.

Partha Chatterjee (2012) in his 'Empire and Nation' underlines the theme of subversion of liberal framework that came in response to elitist nation-building. This subversion carried the potential of side-lining the liberal framework for progression in women's issues and further enforcement of oppression for women of all communities involved in community-based engagement with politics.

These theories discuss the scope of agency of the State, its constitution by the interests of different classes. Sometimes it takes shape of the discussion of democratic trajectory of society. The analyses are largely limited to the arena of 'political' processes within the realm of the State.

The stream that focuses on the 'borrowed nature of Statecraft' (Nandy 1989) and nation-state representing the transition from pluralist to centrist consciousness does not account for the potential of liberal constitutional framework adopted at Nation- State level in rendering opportunities of equalities for women (or more likely, at least some sections of it).

Ambedkar has elaborated the role played by the restrictions put on women in the construction and sustenance of caste system. Dr. Ambedkar's hopes for the State in independent India were staked on the codification of socio-political justice and the rules of engagement based on those principles through the constitution.

Featuring of women question in the discourse of Indian nation-state: The conflict around the axis of gender has not openly and exclusively played out in India though, as Ramchandra Guha (2007) mentions, it is one ‘even more pervasive than others’. As Tharu and Niranjana (1999) point out, the feminist narrative gets appropriated by other politics for their own agendas, hogging and subverting the feminist stands.

The interaction with colonialism and the formation of the ideas of nationhood under colonialism shaped the formative ‘national’ prism of looking at women’s issues. Reforms related to women’s lives became the stage for the question for the cultural elite of allowing the British (/modern) State entry into affairs of indigenous society (Kaviraj, 2010). Reform in women’s lives were approached in two ways – as a pretext of posturing oneself as a nation that is willing to modernise and wishes to revive an ‘imagined’ so called ‘lost’ progressive character of the past. This conception of ‘progressiveness’ and pro-women reform limited the scope of subjection of women, limited the concept of subjection of women to issues faced by a tiny minority of upper caste Hindu women in the initial period. Women’s issues then came to be interpreted differently - as being part of the non-negotiable cultural-private and national sphere, not be touched by the British (and hence any) State (Chatterjee cited in Menon, 2001).

The Caste and communal character of the State shapes its behaviour towards women. Though the intersectionality between caste and gender and communalism and gender has been explored, the caste-patriarchal and communal-patriarchal behaviour of State can be further explored by looking closely at cases. The impact of democratic State politics on caste in terms of ‘politicization of caste’ has been widely theorised. But, whether this ‘politicization of caste’, which is largely considered a positive phenomenon (Kothari, 1970, 2012), had any implications for women’s progressive liberation within and beyond caste groups has not been commented upon. What the changing nature of Indian State since independence meant for women remains underexplored in theoretical terms beyond observations. The national struggle was not a monolithic movement. It was a collision and exchange between different strands. The potential and relative influence of all major strands post our independence shapes the role of Indian nation (and hence State) towards women. It becomes important to look at the manifestations of these different strands in post-independence politics. The States are an outcome of their formative history and are also a continually changing entities. Hence it becomes important to assess their characteristics in a historical manner to identify the particularity of Indian State. The main theorizations of Indian State did not understand or analyse the political processes with women and their issues as an important lens. Dalit critique of liberal democracy in India subsumes the question of women under analysis of caste behaviour of democratic institutions. Women, their status, their oppression featured as a central theme in the pre-nationalist and nationalist struggles in India before independence. It had varied association with the national movement in its

different phases and marked different approaches spanning different strands of the movement. The Constitution of India came to represent an amalgam of some of these strands. The study aims to look at the Indian State from the standpoint of its behaviour toward women citizens in multifaceted structuring of power in society.

The question of masculinity of State: MacKinnon (1993) says there no feminist theory of State. Liberal and Marxist theories place women's issues in the already existing ideological propositions. For Mackinnon, radical feminism presents that hope for an independent theory of State. In India, Dalit feminism built the critique of subtle and complex interconnections among power structures leading to the subjection of women. At the same time, ecofeminism underlines the concept of femininity in the context of larger existential crisis coming for ecological challenge. Also, the political debate around environmental crisis can become a potential entry point for understanding the internal contradiction and theoretical limitation of the 'modernist' state and calls for exploration of new theoretical openings.

The studies around Women and the State get divided into State being a companion of women in their struggles for liberation or it being an embodiment of patriarchal, caste and religious structures channelising and strengthening women's subjection in the 'modern' context. To conclude that State is inherently patriarchal denies the theoretical possibility of the autonomy of State that can result from historical conditions or constitutional frameworks. The idea of historicity suggests that we cannot subsume all States under one conception of State. The structural bias of the modern State has been seen as 'masculinity' of the State. It is hypothesized that the established and possible readings of the State do not go beyond the frameworks that are embedded in these power structures.

Conclusion:

Johanna Kantola in '*Feminists Theorise the State*' reviews the feminist discourses on State and discusses the case studies from the select countries to make theoretical observations about State's relationship with women. She emphasizes that there cannot be universal feminist theory of State and 'the context' in terms of socio-economic and political history and culture plays an important role in shaping State behaviour toward women. Yet, historicization and particularization do present their own problems. Firstly, modern 'State' is not just a coordinating and regulating agency but represents a moral framework with the realization of certain universal values as its end. Though variation in the frameworks of State-women relationship can be established, the concept of modern State cannot be purged of its moral content. Hence it becomes essential to strive to develop language/idiom in which we can describe, discuss, theorise State's relationship with women. This includes weaving the moral expectations in the construction of the idea, the structure and principles of operation of State – a radical reconstruction of the idea of State in the process of defining it. The review in this paper underlines the need and opens up the direction for such renewed theorization of the concept of State.

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