Gender Discrimination in Marxian Context

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Abstract

No doubt women have been exploited from the ancient period to this very day based on social rules. Everyone has to follow social norms in order to live in society. But who controls these social norms? Marx has shown that man has used religion as a tool to exploit women. Custom or religion is used in social discrimination, wrong doing and oppression of a woman, which continue as a person`s destiny. In *Manusaṃhitā* Manu had refuted the rights of women. Dependence on males in every aspect of life was imposed on women. In the late middle Ages, Sabitri Bai Phule was the first woman in India, who opposed social discrimination. Attempts are still being made to resist this discrimination in society. Discriminatory practices have prevailed in the minds of people for a long time. It is not easy to eliminate. In reality women are working hard to earn money outside of the home, but they are still forced to work at home. It is a masculine mindset that, domestic work is compulsory for women and is identified with women. Women's domestic work has no value. In this way, the use of their labor force is not considered as productive labor and men enjoy the result of this surplus. In this context, Marxists show that the oppressed class is exploited by the ruling class, embodying the capitalist. The ruling class uses the oppressed class as a way to make a surplus. The main focus of this paper is to explain the social problem of patriarchy in exploitation of women by the social rules in the context of Marxian point of view.

Keywords: *Patriarchy, discrimination, women, ethics, Marxian*

Introduction:

Social development and the advancement of civilization depend upon women`s dignified status. The ideal of womanhood not only include the relationship of husband and wife or mother and

children but recognition of women's personality, power, independence, rights, and duties as members of society. With the advancement of civilization, gender inequality in society is increasing constantly. Gender discrimination is one of the major issues at present. This has continued in India from the period of Manu and has become an important matter of discussion today. Attempts are being made to resist this discrimination in society. It is not easy to eliminate the discriminatory practices that have been in the minds of people for a long time. In practice, most of the women are self-reliant, working hard to earn money outside the home, but they are still forced to work at home, because it is a masculine mindset that, domestic work is compulsory for women, it is identified with women. Women's domestic work has no monetary value. In this way, the use of their labor force is not considered as productive labor and men enjoy the result of this surplus. Marxists argue that the working class is being exploited by the ruling class that is the capitalists. The ruling class uses the oppressed class as a way to make a surplus. Marx had shown that man has used religion as a tool to exploit women. Class division and capitalism have an important role to play in establishing and perpetuating gender discrimination. Class is one of the sources of gender discrimination. Marx had looked upon every problem from the historical point of view; either it may be class inequality or gender inequality. If we explain this gender inequality from the historical point of view, we can see that it started in the Vedic period and became terrible from the middle ages.

The present paper will try to show the gender discrimination of women from the Vedic period to the modern era through the method of historical materialism. And in the later part, it will try to develop the important role of class division in gender discrimination through the dialectic method. Thus it may be concluded that capitalism is derived from Class division and gender discrimination is derived from both Class discrimination and capitalism.

The historical aspect of gender discrimination:

The Rig Vedic women in India enjoyed high status in society and their condition was good. Even the women were provided an opportunity to attain high intellectual and spiritual standards. The Vedic period can be somehow termed as the period of feminine glory and liberalism. Women participated in every sphere like men. Brahmin women used to take part in religious activities and sacrifices along with her husband. This is found in verses of 1/173/2. Women had the opportunity to study in *Gurukuls* and enjoyed equality in learning the Vedas and went through the *brahmachāry* discipline including the *upanayana* ritual. The Vedic age had witnessed many efficient and sagacious women who composed mantras, namely, Lopāmudrā composed 179th hymns of the 1st *maṇḍala*, Viśvavarā composed 28th *sūkta* of the 5th *maṇḍala*, and Ghoṣa composed 39th and 40th *sūkta* of the 10th *maṇḍala*. They were called *ṛṣi*. Marriage in the Vedic period was considered as a social and religious duty. Women enjoyed freedom in selecting their male partner or husband. Women had the right to remain spinsters throughout their lives. Widows were allowed to remarry. Vedic women had economic freedom. They were engaged in teaching, spinning, weaving clothes, and helped their husbands in agricultural work. Women had the right

to inherit their ancestral property. This is found in verses of 2/17/7. The Rig Vedic period can be compared to the primitive communist society from the point of view of gender equality. At that time men and women were given equal status in society, just as Marx had shown in a primitive communist society in historical materialism.

In *Manusaṃhitā* Manu has refuted the rights of women. Dependence on males in every aspect of life made them obedient slaves. During the period of Dharmaśāstra, the status of women gradually declined and underwent a major change. The girls were deprived of formal education. According to *Manusmṛti,* women were not allowed to enjoy liberty in their lives. Manu's view (9/3) was that- a woman, in her childhood, is dependent on her father, in her youth on her husband, and in her old age on her son. There were no rights for women in terms of worship, oblation, and fasting (5/155). Women had no right to enjoy any ancestral properties except for ornaments (8/416). Hārīta, a writer on Dharma Śāstra, said that women of the higher castes were not equal in the status with śūdra women. As a representative of a special class (Brahmins), Manu had used religion and scripture as a tool to establish class interests. The Brahmanical and patriarchal morality that Manu established is anti-humanistic. We can relate society of this period with the slave society mentioned by Marx in his historical materialism. Similarly, śūdras worked for the three upper classes at that time.

The Medieval period (500 A.D to 1500 A.D) was highly disappointing for the Indian women as their status further deteriorated at that time. In this period some new evils were raised such as child marriage, *Sati, Jauhar,* and restrictions were imposed on women's education. In this period women were regarded as commodities and they had become the property of males as men were holding absolute economic power.

Savitribai Phule and Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati appeared at the end of the medieval period. At the advent of the early modern period, Sabitribai Phule introduced a new image of religion which was known as a universal religion. Her social thoughts were based on humanism. Savitribai Phule established the 'Satyashodhak Samaj' that was based on values like equality, justice, and tranquility. She established 'Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha' for the helpless and rape victim widows in society. She worked to abolish the discrimination which was based on caste and gender. She was the first feminist in India and she fought against the economy-based social rules (Alterkar 1987).

We can see that with the development of civilization class discrimination, caste discrimination, and gender discrimination gradually began. There was no discrimination in pre-civilized society whether it is Indian or western civilization. For example, according to Engels, society is characterized by communal, egalitarian, classless social relations in pre-state level society. The status of women becomes denigrated with the rise of classes and the state (Gough, 1973). In hunter-gatherer societies (approximately one million years ago) the production and distribution were communal. The society was classified as a primitive communist society. They were economically and socially classless because they were incapable of producing a food surplus. There was no private property. In hunter-gatherer societies, women were playing an important

role to procure food (Gough, 1973). The rise of the state is concurrent with the rise of classes in society. This time male domination emerges with the rise of the state.

Class increases gender discrimination:

We can see that all women do not get equal opportunities in Indian society. The status of higher caste and lower caste women are not the same. According to the Hārīta, "women of the higher castes are not equal in the status of those of Śūdras. From a Śūdras' womb Brāhmaṇas, Kṣattriyas and Vaiśys cannot be born. Therefore women deserve to have the sacraments performed with Vedic texts". Therefore all Indian women do not get equal opportunities. Sometimes the women of the lower caste are oppressed by the higher caste women. Discrimination not only exists between men and women but in between the women of the higher and lower casts also. In general, there is a connection between the lower caste women and the lower caste men, because they are conscious about their oppression by the men and women of higher caste. Gopal examines the labour of traditional *dai* in his writing "Ruptures and Reproduction in Caste/Gender/Labour" and shows that women of higher cast avoided the work of *dai* while they knew how to assist in childbirth because they thought this is the work of lower caste and they maintained their social status (Gopal, 2013).

Marx, Engels, and Marxian feminists tried to use a class analysis to explain women's oppression. Marxian feminist Evelyn Reed tries to show in her writing "Women: Caste, Class, or Oppressed Sex?", that all women were not equally oppressed by men. In a capitalist system, proletarian men and women were both oppressed by bourgeois women (Reed, 1970). "Proletarian women linked with bourgeoisie women who are economical, social, and political as well as sexual partners of bourgeois men" (Tong, 2009). But bourgeois women are not united with proletarian women with bourgeois men "in defense of private property, profiteering, militarism, racism and the exploitation of other women" (Reed, 1970). According to Reed, patriarchy is not the enemy of proletarian women- it is only capitalism (Tong, 2009). In India domestic labour depends on the caste position of the woman who performs it. Dalit (lower caste) women are not permitted to enter the middle-class kitchens because their works are fixed in the cleaning of toilets. But they clean dishes for their *savarna* employers.

After the communist revolution in 1917, women were invited to enter the productive workforce. People thought that was the beginning of their full human liberation with economic independence. But it happened that in the workplace most women foundto be engaged in very tiring work like cooking, cleaning, which is naturally less valued than men`s work. Marxian feminists point out the disadvantages of women's work. They were relegated to low-status jobs like cooking, cleaning, and caring known as domestic work; thereby creating a professional division between males and females and turning women into lower-wage earners. Rohini Henceman agrees with Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, and Wally Seccombe that domestic work is productive work therefore it has *wage value*. Thus the condition of the Indian working-class family is that the unpaid domestic labour reimburses for the fact that part of the value of labour power is kept by capital as surplus value (Hensman, 2011).

In Marxian theory, exploitation is plainly described as the expropriation of surplus value. 'Surplus value' must be conceptualized as a value product, but not consumed by the worker. The distinction between these two aspects of exploitation is central to any dialogue of Marxian theory. It is particularly crucial to any assessment of the Marxian theory of patriarchy as it explains why Marxists seldom ever apply the term exploitation to the forms of involuntary inequality which are observed within the family.

Marx briefly mentioned two other factors which might enter into the determination of the value of labor power, 'the cost of developing that power' and the 'difference between the labor power of men and women'(Marx, 1977).

Maria Dalla Costa and Selma James point out in their writing "*The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community"* that woman`s domestic labor serves to lower the value of labor power, cheapening real wages (James, 1970). Harrison argues that household labor does not produce value because it is a separate mode of production but it produces a surplus-value (Harrison, 1973). Secombe thinks that the regeneration of labor-power may be analyzed in value terms because labor power is a commodity. But he denies that it can produce a surplus-value (Seccombe, 1974). Many Marxists (Himmelweit and Mohun) argue that household work is simply irrelevant to wage labor because it is not subject to the law of value (Mohun, 1977). Thus the status of women within society decreased (Tong, 2009). Engels said, the husband ruled his wife by his economic power, he is bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat (Engels, 1972).

According to Marx, class consciousness is important for achieving its fundamental goals. It is a power in group awareness. Those people who belong to any class initially and have no unity are not regarded as a class. Bourgeois women and Proletariate women do not constitute a single class in the strict Marxist sense. But their domestic experiences and motivated unifying struggles are similar, for example, the 1970s wages for housework campaign. Marxist and Social scientists argue that women would be regarded as a class when their works are accepted as productive work. Classical Marxian feminist, Dalla Costa James claimed that "women`s work inside the home generates surplus value because women`s domestic work is the necessary condition for all other labor, from where surplus value is extracted in turn. Women keep the cogs of the capitalists' machines running by providing not only food and clothes but also emotional comfort to present and future workers. Therefore, Dalla Costa and James argue that men employers should pay women wages for their household works (Tong 2009).

Reed believed that women's subordinated status in relation to men depends on capitalism. But Margarate Benston defines in her writing "The political economy of Women's Liberation" that married women having children and working outside of home can do her job if she fulfills her primary responsibility at home. It is the precondition for her liberation. Maria Dalla Costa and Selma James show in their writing entitled, "*The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community"* that "all women are housewives and even those who work outside the home continue to be a housewife". Women decide to earn money to help their male partners, support their families but male partners are not interested in helping their female partners with domestic

work. Therefore it can be mentioned that the Government of India declared six months' maternity leave for the female employees and after the childbearing two years of paid leave for the nourishment of their children. That means women drop their career for their family and children but men race ahead because the household responsibilities are fully performed by their wives. Everywhere women have faced the oppression of sexual division of labor. The only way for women's liberation is to fight against capitalism and patriarchy simultaneously. Women's liberation not only depends on capitalism but on patriarchal thoughts as well.

Conclusion:

We see in Manusaṃhitā that by depriving women of their property rights, they became dependent on men and they are enslaved. Since education made people aware of their rights, their right to education was also taken away at that time. This was the beginning of gender inequality from the time when women began to be neglected and oppressed. So my understanding is that capitalism is derived from Class division and gender discrimination is derived from capitalism. Therefore, despite the recognition of women's education and property rights, women are still neglected and oppressed due to patriarchal mentality. This is because, from the time of birth, the patriarchal mentality enters into the mindset of the children; first through the family and then through the prohibitive social norms, depending on the fact, whether it is a boy or a girl. Patriarchal reforms are practiced among women since childhood. They can never get out of that reformed mindset. As long as women are not able to get out of this patriarchal mentality, there will be gender inequality in society and women will be exploited.

The barriers that upper class women can easily overcome cannot be surpassed by lower class women. Because they have two barriers; both class division and gender discrimination. Gender discrimination is an element in creating social inequality but it does not work in a class-neutral way. The class division has an important role to play in establishing and perpetuating gender discrimination. Class is one of the sources of gender discrimination. Thus, according to Marxist ideas, it can be concluded that not only patriarchal society but also both capitalism and patriarchal society are responsible for gender inequality. Thus, in the end, it can be said that although all women are oppressed, lower-class women are oppressed in two ways; first by the elite as working class, and second by men and women. Therefore as human beings, women's value is being exploited in this society.

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