



An Analysis of the need for a Sociology of Gender Violence in the Indian Context

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Introduction Violence against women is not a new or recent phenomenon. Women have been victims of violence all through the ages, in all social orders and regions and religious communities all over the world. It is indeed ironic that India which had given rise to apostles of peace and non – violence, women have had to bear the brunt of violence- domestic as well as public, physical as well as emotional and mental.

Violence against women can be viewed in a historical perspective, for it is to a large extent linked to her vulnerable ‘status’ in the social order. In the Vedic age women were supposed to enjoy a relatively comfortable position in the social hierarchy as we hear about women philosophers like Gargi and Maitreyi and their active participation in social gatherings and sacrifices. This position was very soon diluted and the doors of educational, economic, social, political, cultural and religious opportunities were denied to them and the very birth of a son became an occasion to rejoice, that of a girl a matter of grief and despair. Commodification of women ensued from this period and fair and dignified treatment meted out to them became a matter of rare occurrence.

Indian society is going through a phase of immense transition, especially where gender regimes, gender transition, gender structures and gender relations are concerned, need to understand and explore why this form of change is concomitantly producing higher degrees of gender violence. The Durkheimian notion of Anomie is very helpful in analysing gender violence. Anomie as Durkheim observes is “disturbance of the collective order”. This liminal period then becomes a period or an age of normlessness in which society is temporarily incapable of exercising its regulative function. Today older moral frameworks provided by kinship and marriage systems within which human action and human relationships were patterned are giving way to newer but relatively unclear moral frameworks. Hence individuals are often not sure as to whether what they are doing is right or wrong. Additionally desires are fuelled far beyond the possibilities of their actualization. This too Durkheim pointed out is a facet of an anomic state. At the same time, there is an unprecedented growth of individualism, a greater sense of the self which has both its positive and negative traits.

We will now make a statistical assessment of the magnitude and extend of gender specific violence in India over a period of time. Between 1998 and 2011 the rate of crime committed against women went up from 7 to 10 % of the total number of crimes. In 2012 as per the records of National Crime Records Bureau the rate had escalated to 10%. The figures showed a rapid increase to 15% in 2018. As most scholars would agree many of the crimes committed against women never get reported and it implies that the actual number would be even more higher. Reporting of kidnapping and crimes within marriage (dowry related crimes and domestic violence) has increased drastically between 1998 and 2018.

The Domestic Violence Act passed in 2005 lists many forms of violence within the so called sacred and dignified precincts of home- “Domestic violence includes the actual abuse or threat of abuse that is physical, sexual, verbal, emotional and economic. Harassment by way of unlawful dowry demands from

the woman or her relatives is also covered under this definition. Recently the law related to sexual offences has brought in many other types of offences under its ambit which were previously not included within its purview-stalking, voyeurism, sexual harassment, acid attacks, attempt to disrobe a woman etc. The definition of the term Sexual Harassment has been widened to include

- a) Physical contact and advances involving unwelcome and explicit sexual overtures
- b) A demand or request for sexual favours
- c) Making sexually coloured remarks
- d) Forcibly showing pornography
- e) Any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of sexual nature.

Violence against women in India

Most statistics today tell us that rape is most often committed by people known to the victim and takes place very often within the family, extended family, or by a person known to the victim. As social scientists how do we explain this aspect of violence within the family? This supposed to be sanctuary of a woman itself seems to become a hell for her. Female infanticide and sex selective abortions also take place at the hands of the family members. Does this seriously mean that we need to rethink the institution of family and relationships within it in a gendered fashion? Many sociologists and social thinkers and even economists like Dr. Amartya Sen (1991) now term the family as a site of cooperative conflicts and point to power relationships within the family as shaped by gender, age, generation and access to resources. In their work on women and property in Kerala, Panda and Agarwal (2006) show that women who own property face less domestic violence than those who do not.

Further women can be subjected to violence at any stage of their life cycle; pre-birth elimination through sex selection and infanticide that female foetuses and infants face, neglect of young girls can lead to early death, mature women face many kinds of violence, direct and indirect, related to reproduction, sexuality, marriage, and even in old age; some parts of India have been notorious for the very treatment meted out to widows.

Sociologists like Veena Das have attempted to sense and explain different types of violence against women in India (1998). She has assiduously studied the violence women suffered during the partition of the country when they were abducted, raped and tortured. She has also analysed extensively the violence perpetrated against women in Delhi in 1984 in the aftermath of the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi. She locates the explanations of such violence in the relationship of the female body to that of the nation and the community, with the nation or the community being mapped in the body of the woman. As a woman reproduces the nation through her reproductive capacities and through socialising the next generation, warring sides may attempt to control her sexuality as well as her fertility. Sociologists and others have documented how female body bear the burden of men's honour, family honour and even caste, community and national honour (Menon and Bhasin 1998). When men revenge the honour of any of these units, it is often expressed through violence perpetrated on the female body which at that point of time variously represent the Hindu/Sikh/Muslim body, the Indian or Pakistani or Bangladeshi body, the Dalit body or one belonging to a particular family or caste. India even of recent days witness many similar types and forms of violence which serves the purpose of retribution and ostensibly the very recovery of male honour. As Veena Das puts it "her body was simply there as a symbol in this feud for an exchange of violence and for the very competition of honour" (1990; 69)

Contemporaneous Situation and Extend of Gender specific violence in India

Today violence against women has assumed alarming proportions and according to one estimate there are thirty two specific forms of violence being committed on women. Many of these increased in number and ramification. A study conducted by Shrimati Basu (2018; 68) shows that the forms of gender specific crime has become so rampant and institutional that out of the 17,789 cases reported in UP alone in 2017-18, 8765 were

directly related to women specific atrocities. This shows the magnitude and extend of gender specific atrocities committed in India. Sociologists like RajniPalriwala have classified these into two categories(2016) which are A) Dowry related violence or domestic/private violence and B) Public/Social violence. The latter is increasing as per all recent statistical parameters in an unprecedented proportion. The NCRB statistics make it evident that heinous crimes like Gang rape and subsequent murder is on the rise. The percentage of gang rape to total number of women specific crimes have increased to 18% which is a shocking number as against the 5% in 1998. Most disturbing figures is related to the dangerous cocktail of Caste-Gender nexus in anti- women violence. The number of Dalit women who are molested and raped is on the rise and majority of the perpetrators are persons belonging to upper castes. The Dalit forum in India has released a statistics(2017) which is speaking voluminously on the way dalit identity itself becomes a potential reason for committing atrocities on women. The percentage of dalit women raped and molested was 7% in 2005 and it has made a drastic increase to 17% of the total number of crimes committed against women. The figure is alarming and equally disturbing in some states of India like UP, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh.

Redefining the Approach to Gender specific Violence

Although some scholars have pointed to the need to explain the universal subordination of women (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1994), it is necessary to identify how this subordination is embedded variously within specific social structures. In this context Connell (2004) talks of Gender regimes that produce the distinct and varying conditions governing women's lives. Karve (1964) the pioneer in kinship studies in India, pointed out to the complex variations in how kinship and marriage were organised in different parts of India and how these affected women especially to draw a broad North/South contrast of less and more women friendly systems. The differing kinship systems have been seen as a major factor in women's lower status in the north and used to explain the persistence of various types of gender bias such as child marriage, lower female infant survival, infanticide, sex selective abortion, dowry and violence against women.

In the south, in contrast has been seen to somewhat more friendly towards women despite the fact that scholars like Ravinder Kaur (2015) who speaks of entrenched rules of patriarchy in different corners of South India.

Today, the question we need to ask is whether our gender regimes are changing and whether the heightened violence could be related to this change. The work of Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) demonstrated how women needed to bargain with patriarchy in order to carve out the best outcome for themselves under conditions of domination. She also noted that changes in material conditions could seriously undermine the existing normative order such as patriarchy. Social scientists especially sociologists need to examine the ways in which patriarchal structures are challenged today or whether shifts are taking place due to the socio economic changes enumerated above.

Need and Demand for a Sociology of Gender Violence

Violence against women is on the rise and the ways and means of dealing with the same need to seriously go beyond the husky policing cum prevention oriented response. Issue is multi-dimensional and should be perceived from a multi-pronged perspective. Modern researches show that the safety net functions of family/households are deeply transformed leading to marginalisation of vulnerable family members especially women and children who do not have any access to social security devices or state support in old age.

While Gender studies and researches have provided a huge window to women's worlds and enriched the sociological literature on women's lives, Viswesvaran (2007; 593) argues that in some ways the sociology of gender by arguing that gender was socially constructed and by identifying all women with the category of 'woman' have created an essentialized idea of the fairer gender. He argues that "one should not be arguing that gender characterizes the core of all of women's experiences. Woman is not a universal category transcending all differences" Thus the dire need today is to generate a representation of the woman as a person

with as many diverse roles as men may have. While understanding women from a gendered perspective, we also need to go beyond her gender and see her as a worker, a carer, nurturer, lover, adventurer, businessperson, politician, artist, thinker and so on and so forth. We need to perceive her as a person in the many roles she takes on, which perhaps comprise a major portion of her life as a modern person. Of course, these roles remain embedded in diverse social structures which need to be transformed.

Sociology as well as other positive sciences should turn their respective attention to documenting gendered violence and seeking its social sources in the family, kinship grouping, class, caste, work place, the state, and in the patriarchal structure that undergird state and society. At the same time, it must pay definite and serious attention to female agency in contesting these structures in the struggle for greater gender equality.

Thus the major concern today is to redefine the way we approach gender violence especially in the backdrop of the deeply embedded social structures. Empowerment as stated should rightly begin with active involvement and participation of women. Michel Foucault, argues that hegemonization has crossed all limits and even includes hegemonization of female body and mind.

Unless women throw off the shackles which ignore and indemnify their potential, their skill and spirit, they cannot be empowered. The very process of empowerment has to happen only if the entrenched nature of the gender sensitive violence is abandoned and a gender specific academic discourse fructify in its full bloom. The responsibility of a social science is to convert and to transform a public discourse into an academic discourse.

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