

CONTOURS OF MODERNITY AND GENDER JUSTICE IN INDIA: A HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY OF WOMEN'S AGENCY

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ABSTRACT

Indian society has undergone through a unique version of modernity. The present article tries to unearth the inherent contradictions in India's negotiation of modernity and gender justice. Drawing on feminist historiography, cultural sociology and intersectional theory, the article traces how Indian women's agency has evolved within selective modernities that valorize technological advancement while resisting socio-cultural transformation. The article also attempts a serious critique of the symbolic elevation of women in our religious and nationalistic discourses and reveals the structural mechanisms that constrain women's autonomy and agency. By analyzing historical narratives, reform movements, autobiographies and contemporary gendered practices this article offers a layered account of Indian womanhood, resistance and the cultural politics of modernity. Modernity's impact on women in India cannot be divorced from the broader sociopolitical context. The continuing struggle for gender justice is intertwined with the evolution of caste dynamics and economic inequalities, which shape the lived experiences of women across diverse communities. Furthermore, the discussion extends to contemporary movements advocating for rights and recognition, emphasizing how grassroots activism fosters agency and reshapes narratives around womanhood. Through a multi-faceted approach, this article aims to provide insights into the resilience of Indian women, showcasing their relentless pursuit of autonomy amidst systemic barriers. The ongoing dialogue about modernity and gender justice reflects the complexities of Indian society, necessitating a more nuanced understanding of women's roles that transcends simplistic binaries and acknowledges the diverse realities they navigate. The future of gender justice in India will depend greatly on collaborative efforts that engage various stakeholders, including policymakers, civil society, and grassroots activists, to dismantle the entrenched patriarchal norms that continue to hinder women's agency.

KEYWORDS: *Modernity, Feminist Historiography, Cultural Sociology, Intersectional Theory, Autonomy.*

Introduction

Indian modernity has never been monolithic. While scientific and technological innovations—such as digital infrastructure, nuclear energy, and space exploration—are readily embraced, religious and socio-cultural modernities have been contested (Chatterjee, 1993). Gender roles, especially those pertaining to women's mobility, labor, and autonomy, remain embedded in traditional moral frameworks. This cultural selectivity stems from a deep civilizational anxiety—seeking to preserve 'authentic' Indian values against Western intrusion. Women have often borne the burden of this anxiety, becoming both the symbols and the battlegrounds of modernity.

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The interplay between tradition and modernity confines Indian women to static roles, hindering their ability to redefine their identities. This tension is evident in literature, media, and education, shaping perceptions of femininity and empowerment. Literary narratives offer insights into women's experiences with modern identities and cultural values. Media perpetuates stereotypes, obscuring real women's aspirations and achievements. Gender justice in India must involve men as allies, challenging toxic masculinity and promoting shared responsibility for societal transformation. Rethinking societal norms around gender interactions is essential. Hearing from marginalized voices deepens our understanding of women's struggles for agency and justice. Collaborative efforts for gender justice in India aim to redefine modernity to celebrate and empower all individuals, regardless of gender.

The “New Woman” and Revivalist Modernity

The nationalist reform movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries constructed the figure of the “New Woman”—educated yet domestic, modern yet moral (Sarkar, 2001). While literacy was encouraged among upper-caste women, public participation and wage labor remained frowned upon. Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare-Baire* (The Home and the World) captures this tension, where Bimala's entry into politics leads to emotional and moral crisis—reaffirming the belief that women's true domain lies within the home (Tagore, 1916/2005).

This selective modernity reinforced patriarchal norms. Matrimonial advertisements today still reflect this duality: degrees are desirable, but not ambition. As Uberoi (2006) argues, the ideal Indian woman continues to embody sacrifice, submission, and domesticity—now coated in the veneer of modern education.

The “New Woman” phenomenon intertwined with sociopolitical currents of the time. Era saw women's awareness of rights and identities, amplified by global feminist movements. Promise of autonomy often faced backlash from traditionalist sectors, reviving efforts to restrict women. Acceptance of women's education for empowerment masked gendered expectations.

Contemporary feminism reevaluates legacies of the “New Woman.” New generations challenge historical narratives, portraying women as active agents. Feminist movements emphasize intersectionality, recognizing impact of various identities. Broadened perspective critical in understanding women's complexities in diverse Indian contexts.

Symbolic Reverence, Structural Disempowerment

Indian society elevates women symbolically—calling them Lakshmi, Annapurna, or Bharat Mata—yet denies them substantive autonomy. This is a classic case of symbolic violence, where elevation masks domination (Bourdieu, 2001). By positioning women as goddesses, society renders their suffering invisible. A goddess cannot complain. A deity cannot demand. This symbolic entrapment disempowers real women. If a woman refuses household chores, she is not merely lazy—she is seen as sacrilegious. This reverence restricts women's agency, presenting submission as virtue and ambition as deviance.

This duality in Indian society shows commitment to traditional identities alongside a quest for modernity. Cultural narratives venerate women but hide their challenges. Glorification of motherhood perpetuates dependency. “Superwoman” trope in media expects women to excel in both career and family, leading to mental health issues. Lack of support systems hinders women's progress. Gender justice dialogues in India now include sexual autonomy and reproductive rights. Movements for sexual education and ending gender-based violence gaining momentum. Evolution recognizes women's rights as human rights. Grassroots activism emphasizes intersectionality in gender justice discourse. Challenges faced by marginalized women require nuanced policies. Acknowledge women's multifaceted identities and empower them to claim their space in society. India must dismantle patriarchal constructs to achieve gender justice and equality.

Historical Resistance: Domesticity and Quiet Rebellion

Women have resisted these constraints, often within domestic spheres. The story of Savitribai Phule and Fatima Sheikh's pioneering work in girls' education is now recognized (Rege, 1998). Yet others, like Tarabai Shinde—whose 1882 text *Stri Purush Tulana* critiqued gender inequality—were marginalized and caricatured (Kosambi, 1994).

Similarly, women like Lakshmibai Tilak, and anonymous autobiographers from the 19th century, taught themselves to read in secret—reading scraps of paper while cooking, hidden behind purdah. Their

motivations were often religious—to read scriptures—but their consequences were emancipatory (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). Such stories disrupt the binary between rebellion and conformity, showing resistance as a quiet, coded practice rooted in domesticity.

In India, feminist voices reshape societal perceptions of womanhood. Young women use social media to change narratives on consent, harassment, and rights. They raise awareness and challenge patriarchal structures. Activism focuses on mental health, highlighting its importance for empowerment. Grassroots organizations provide support for women's unique challenges. Technology and feminism empower women through information dissemination and community-building.

Vigilance is crucial against backlash from conservative factions. Gender justice allies must protect gains and show solidarity. Recognition of non-binary and transgender identities is vital for an inclusive movement. Gender justice journey in India is complex but transformative. Embracing intersectionality ensures holistic advocacy. Resilience and collaboration envision a more equitable future affirming every woman's agency and reshaping cultural narratives.

Invisibility and Cultural Policing

Modern spaces both physical and virtual reflect older gender biases. Women are underrepresented and often dismissed as “incapable”. Let us take the example of entertainment industry. Modern spaces like stand-up comedy reflect such biases. Women comedians are underrepresented and often dismissed as “unfunny”. Audiences enforce gender norms by heckling or withholding laughter. Female comedians must outperform male counterparts to receive half the validation. This echoes Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, where women in public perform under heightened scrutiny, their behavior constantly policed for deviations from the “ideal woman.”

Furthermore, gender disparities impact women's access to resources, finances, and employment. Women often face limited roles due to entrenched patriarchal values. The “glass ceiling” hinders women's advancement in power and decision-making. Diversity initiatives face resistance from established hierarchies. Economic disparities worsen due to traditional family structures. Addressing disparities requires policy changes and cultural shifts. Education is crucial for empowerment, but barriers persist. Men play a vital role in advancing gender justice. Global feminist discourse offers opportunities and challenges. India must continue the quest for gender justice through collaborative efforts.

Live-In Relationships: Freedom or New Conformity?

Live-in relationships, often considered markers of modern progress, reproduce traditional anxieties. Most couples hide them from family. If discovered, women face moral judgment and reduced marriage prospects. Legal ambiguities around property, custody and consent exacerbate vulnerabilities (Agnes, 2011). From a sociological perspective, live-ins reflect “compressed modernity” (Chang, 2010), where liberal lifestyles coexist with conservative familial controls.

The complexity of live-in relationships sparks discussions on sexual freedoms and societal backlash against moral decline. Conservative factions intensify rhetoric, framing such relationships as a threat to cultural integrity. This rhetoric polices personal choices and reinforces traditional expectations on women's bodies. Cultural narratives create a dichotomy between freedom and moral righteousness, placing women in precarious positions. Technology complicates the discourse on live-in relationships, with social media normalizing non-traditional partnerships but also exposing individuals to harassment. Legal frameworks for live-in relationships are inadequate, highlighting the need for reform and activism. Advocacy campaigns are essential in promoting legal literacy and awareness among young adults. Recognizing diverse family structures challenges traditional perceptions of family, reflecting broader shifts in understanding kinship within modern societies. The conversation on live-in relationships must consider gender dynamics, societal expectations, and legal protections. Community engagement and policy advocacy are vital in promoting inclusivity and dismantling barriers to personal autonomy.

Emotional Inequality and Gendered Scripts

Indian men are taught to suppress emotions; women are taught to over-regulate theirs. The male stoic and female caregiver archetypes are ingrained through generational transmission (Chodorow, 1978). Emotional inequality—where men cannot cry and women must always smile—creates psychological strain. Feminist psychologists like Gilligan (1982) have shown how moral development is also gendered—boys prioritize autonomy, girls empathy. In India, these norms remain intact despite changing urban lifestyles.

This emotional inequality perpetuates gendered spaces. Men struggle with mental health issues due to stigma. Women prioritize others' needs, leading to burnout. Cultural shift needed for healthy emotional expression. Gendered emotional scripts in education limit emotional intelligence development. Gender-sensitive approaches can cultivate empathy and resilience. In the workplace, emotional inequality affects leadership and collaboration. Organizations should embrace diverse leadership styles. Digital sphere allows for transcending gender norms in emotional expression. Critical engagement with online platforms is essential. Dismantling emotional inequality requires societal effort. Cultivating a culture that values emotional expression is key.

Intersectionality and Subaltern Feminisms

Feminism in India also replicates the overall character of feminist way of thinking. Upper-caste and urban bias have been characteristic features of mainstream feminism in India. Intersectional thinkers like Sharmila Rege (1998), Uma Chakravarti (2003), and Nivedita Menon (2012) argue that Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, and queer voices remain underrepresented. Autobiographies by Dalit women such as Baby Kamble or Bama document daily humiliations and caste-gender violence—forms of oppression often invisible to elite feminist discourse (Paik, 2014). Recognizing these multiplicities is essential for a truly emancipatory gender politics.

Inclusivity in feminist narratives requires active challenge to systemic barriers maintaining hierarchies. Understanding positionality reveals how privilege influences access within feminist spaces. Acknowledging privilege encourages allyship, fostering solidarity for gender justice. Advocacy for subaltern feminisms amplifies overlooked perspectives. Community-led initiatives reshape local discourses and assert need for representation in feminist agendas. Grassroots movements address pressing issues, underscoring interconnectedness of gender equality with survival struggles. Indigenous feminisms offer insights on traditional knowledge intertwining with feminist thought. Supporting Indigenous women can inspire holistic approaches to feminism honoring local traditions and contemporary identities. Scrutinize global context of feminist movements to balance transnational alliances with local realities. Creating spaces for globally informed perspectives to coexist with local knowledge ensures globally aware yet locally grounded activism. Bridging contexts can lead to nuanced understanding of gender in diverse settings within inclusive feminist framework.

Conclusion: Toward a Transformative Gender Modernity

India's tryst with modernity remains incomplete without gender transformation. The symbolic elevation of women must be replaced by structural change. The nation must stop moralizing women's choices—whether in dress, work, relationships, or laughter. True modernity is not about embracing Western consumerism but dismantling Brahmanical patriarchy.

As Ambedkar (1936) insisted, social reform must precede political freedom. The same holds true today: technological advancement cannot substitute for cultural liberation. Until women can think, feel, work, resist, and rest on their own terms, India cannot claim to be modern. Our progress must be measured not by skyscrapers or satellites, but by how we treat our daughters.

Moreover, gender and class intersect to complicate modernity in India. Working-class women face economic constraints and patriarchal norms. Grassroots organizations led by these women challenge gender norms and advocate for labor rights. Education transforms gender dynamics by empowering girls. Mentorship programs connect young women with role models. Technology offers new avenues but also reinforces existing inequalities. Bridging the digital divide requires initiatives focused on digital literacy. Transformative gender modernity involves engaging men in conversations about gender norms. Positive masculinity programs help dismantle toxic stereotypes. The path to a modern India requires confronting biases and aiming for societal shift towards true gender equality.

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