

Review: Challenging Caste and Gender Ideologies

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Challenging Caste and Gender Ideologies

De-Eroticising Assault: Essays on Modesty, Honour and Power, by Kalpana Kannabiran and Vasanth Kannabiran; Stree, Kolkata 2002; pp 267 (with index), price Rs 500.

VEENA POONACHA

Written in the last decade of the 20th century, these essays reflect the agonising concerns of the women's movement when confronted with the dramatic changes of the period: For the era had witnessed the restructuring of the prevailing socio-economic structures – a process that was marked with greater state repressions, economic inequalities and ideological conservatism. The globalisation of the world economy and the entry of foreign capital into the country had created an illusion of prosperity for the middle classes; this unfortunately was achieved on the suffering of many who were dispossessed because of the current development policies or rendered unemployed by the closure of many factories and small manufacturing units. Exacerbating the economic hardships of the people was the growing communal tensions fostered by Right-winged ideologies and political agendas. These developments had serious implications for women. The rising cost of living and the shrinking employment markets were increasing women's economic burdens, at the same time encoded ideas of gender identities within the fundamentalist discourse were pushing women back into their homes.

Capturing the complexity and the dilemmas of the times, the essays give us insights into the theory and praxis of the women's movement from the south. Located in Andhra Pradesh – a state with a long history of radical politics – the essays delineate feminist politics through the experiences of those were in the

forefront of the struggle. The introspective, first essay 'Looking at Ourselves: Stree Shakti Sanghatana' (pp 25-54), does not merely record the history of the organisation but goes on to explore the processes that shaped the consciousness of its members and re-defined their life course. In this sense, the essay is deeply autobiographical and represents an attempt made by the authors to theorise on their lives. It thus provides fresh insights into the trajectories of the women's movement. Stree Shakti Sanghatana (SSS) was formed after the emergency was lifted in 1977, when a group of 15 women came together in order to express their political concerns. Set against the backdrop of the radical politics in Andhra Pradesh, the essay describes the political moorings of the founder members of the SSS as radical and historically rooted in Telengana, a region known for its economic/cultural marginalisation and its tense relationship to the other parts of the state. All the founding members of the group had close connections with the Left politics.

Modes of Violence

Written over a period of time, the essays point to the evolution of thought of the two writers Kalpana and Vasanth. Nevertheless, despite the time lag, the essays develop as a cohesive whole to indicate the central concerns of feminist politics. Focusing on sexuality, rape, sexual harassment and domestic violence, the essays point out to the ways in which women are silenced through the use of violence. Violence is not limited to the physical use of force; it also operates at both the material and normative levels in society to maintain existing caste/gender hierarchies. The violation of even a seemingly simple dress code by a lower caste woman could prove to be potential tinderbox that could ignite a communal violence. A stalemate occurred in Orissa between the kshatriyas and the dalits because a dalit woman 'dressed

up well' when she went to receive her wages. A sexist remark by the landlord made all the dalit women strike work. The tension between the two groups was finally mediated through an agreement between the men in the two communities that the women from both the communities would not step into each other's terrain (59-60). What the incident also poignantly brings home is the centrality of control over women to a group identity. This is precisely the reason why women become targets of attack in times of inter-community conflicts.

Discussing the use of gender based violence in inter-community rivalries, in the essay, 'Caste and Gender: Understanding Dynamics of Power and Violence' (pp 55-67), Kalpana and Vasanth argue that insofar as masculinity is tied up to the degree of control men (collectively and individually) exercise over women's sexuality, women from the other group are violated during inter-community conflicts. The aim of such violence is to demoralise the men from the other group. This important understanding of the underlying reasons for violence perpetrated by the upper castes against women from the lower castes has emerged from the experiences of dalit women. The National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) in its draft declaration on Gender and Racism asserted:

Descent-based discrimination based on caste results in the violent appropriation of and sexual control over dalit women by men of the dominant castes, evident in the systematic rape of dalit women and the perpetuation of forced prostitution in the name of religion through the devadasi system (p 9).

Further deconstructing various incidents of caste-based violence, they argue that there must be a distinction made between the violence perpetrated by men from the dominant groups to maintain the prevailing caste/gender domination and the violence that results from the legitimate anger of the downtrodden against the oppressors. They also point out that in understanding communal violence, it is also necessary to recognise women's roles in perpetuating violence. Failing to recognise that the intersecting ideologies of caste and gender controls are also enacted

in their own lives, the women from the dominant groups often side with the men in their communities against the other.

The next three essays namely, 'Outrageous Modesty, Outraged Honour' (pp 68-95), 'Death for Rape?' (pp 96-103) and 'A Ravished Justice: Half a Century of Judicial Discourse on Rape' (pp 104-69) concentrate on the legal discourses on violence. The first of the three essays show that the supreme court guidelines issued in its judgment on *Vishaka vs the State of Rajasthan* has been framed from the standpoint of the vulnerability of a dalit woman. It seeks to protect working women from exploitation by the dominant castes and holds the state government responsible for their safety. It also points out the difficulty of getting the seriousness of the offense of sexual harassment accepted by society. This is evident from the attitude of politicians and bureaucrats to the complaint of sexual harassment filed by Rupan Bajaj against the super cop K P S Gill. It was as if the reputation of a fine officer was needlessly tarnished by a woman because of a petty misdemeanour. If an upper class woman faces such disbelief in getting her complaint taken seriously, what hope could ordinary women have that their complaints would be heard?

The second of the three essays examines the current debate on whether death penalty should be imposed in rape cases. Kalpana and Vasanth discuss the legal framework for the imposition of death penalty. Death penalty can only be imposed under Section 303 IPC. The sentence is only awarded in the rarest of rare cases and at the discretion of the judges. Given the difficulty of proving rape in a court of law, it is unlikely that death penalty would be awarded in a rape trial. The legal system in the country rests on the assumption of the innocence of the accused until proved guilty. Pointing to the difficulty of establishing criminal culpability of the accused, especially when the victim is not a minor and there are no signs of injuries on her body, they argue that the rate of conviction in rape trials is extremely low. No doubt this concern for the presumption of innocence has been set aside in rape cases in recent years. This is consequent to amendments of the IPC following feminist protests to the Supreme Court judgment in the Mathura rape case (*Tukaram vs State of Maharashtra*, 1979 sc[Cr] 381).

The third essay by Kalpana Kannabiran investigates the legal discourse on rape as

enacted in the various judgments delivered in India since independence. Pointing to contradictions in the discourse, she says that although rape is legally described as a crime, it is also a product of the internalised values of hetero-sexuality in the larger society. Rape cases hinge on the notion of a woman's consent; the prevailing socio-cultural norms on sexuality, however, deny minors the right to consent and adult woman not to consent. These ambiguities therefore are present in the legal system to deny women justice. The essay goes on to show that the victims of rape (contrary to the stereotyped image of a seductress asking for it) could be a child or an adult woman from any age group. Likewise the accused (who enjoys the benefit of doubt within the legal framework) could be a teenager, an old man, a father, guardian, uncle, brother, servant, neighbours, government officials, or even a stranger. These rapists are not criminals; rather they are ordinary citizens. This indicates that the crime of rape is committed within the social norms defining heterosexuality.

Vain Search for Justice

After pointing to the failure of the prevailing legal system in ensuring justice for women, the authors indict the police for manipulating the system in 'Desecrating Graves, Defiled Bodies, Dispossessed Community' (pp 170-88). Deconstructing the official position in the Rameeza Bee case, they point to the erasure of the crime in official investigation process in order to exonerate the accused policemen. The process of erasure also makes evident the ways in which women's identities are constructed in society. Apart from dividing women into good and bad women, the stereotyping of women also occurs on the basis of their community identities. Women from the minority communities are, in the process, denied their rights to equal protection under the law.

The next essay, 'Crossing the Black Waters, Commemorating 150 years of Indian Arrival in Trinidad' (pp 189-207) by Kalpana does not seem to apparently fit into the mainframe of the book, for it focuses on the Indian diaspora in Trinidad. The text, however, conforms to the ideological positions of the author. By attempting to reconstruct the history of the early Indian settlers in Trinidad, Kalpana points to the insidious ways that the fundamentalist discourse from the mother

country shapes the contours of their collective memories.

Subsequently reflecting on women's political participation in 'A Hen Crowing: Women and Political Power' (pp 208-41) Kalpana and Vasanth raise questions about women's political participation and consciousness. They point out that the prevailing dual gender classification forecloses political space for those who do not fit into the classification as seen in the story of Shabnam Mausi, a eunuch: although elected to the Madhya Pradesh legislative assembly in 2000 as an independent candidate, Shabnam Mausi was denied a ticket by the Congress Party. Subsequently reflecting on Lakshmi Parvathi's political career in Andhra Pradesh, they point that a woman with political ambitions has to conform to a predetermined script of appropriate gender/upper class norms to survive in politics. This construction of appropriate gender roles is also deeply ingrained even in progressive groups like the UCCRI (ML) groups. This, they suggest, is the reason why so many feminist groups quit radical Left parties. The essay also discusses the nature of women's political participation by describing the mass movement spearheaded by women against the liquor policies of the state. A lesson in an adult literacy primer triggered an apparently leaderless movement in Andhra Pradesh against the state government in the early 1990s. The last part of the essay convincingly argue for affirmative action for women in electoral politics.

In 'Sharing the Fish Head' (pp 242-61), Vasanth passionately discusses the multi-layered dissemination strategies devised by feminists. The essay begins by describing the growth and development of feminist politics in the country since the 1970s. Subsequently indicating some of the important milestones of the women's movement, such as the entry of women's studies into the university system and the establishment of the Indian Association of Women's Studies in the first national conference of women's studies in Mumbai, it goes on to examining some of the ongoing ideological debates on mainstreaming gender in development. The interest shown by international development agencies on gender issues has resulted in the mushrooming of gender training programmes. An examination of these programmes suggests that the differences between them are both ideological and theoretical. Vasanth defines programmes that seek to change socio-political and

economic underpinnings of gender inequities as 'women and empowerment programmes' and those that are undertaken with moderate goals as 'women and equity programmes'. The conceptual differences between these two kinds of programmes, however, needed to be elaborated. Subsequently, this discussion on gender training veers to the much-debated question within mass movements on the impact of international funding on the civil structures in society. Suggesting that the question is complex, Vasanth argues that the donor-driven label need not necessarily undermine the merits of the training programmes. While the aims of the

programme may be influenced by the ideology of the donor agency, it may equally be affected by the ideology of the organisations undertaking the training programmes.

In conclusion, the book provides an insider's view of the growth of feminist politics in India. One appreciates the passion and clarity of their ideas as well as their commitment to feminist politics. However, as the essays have been written over a period of time, one wishes that the essays included brief notes on when each of them was written so that readers could appreciate the evolution of feminist ideas in India. [97]

conviction; qualities rare among the current generation. He had overcome the despair, poverty and casteism with education and through personal endurance in addition to the neighbourhood mission.

Frantz Fanon, on the tragedy of the Blacks, says: "I am talking of millions of men [and women] who have been skilfully injected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair and abasement". Precisely in similar circumstances, Moon who began his life with 'vasti', rose to become a civil servant, a great achievement indeed. Above all, he had edited more than 16 volumes of B R Ambedkar's writings and speeches, while engaging himself in the dalit struggle. His autobiography is thus more relevant today for every one of us, associated with the social movements.

Today's political class of all hues is entrenched with the syndromes 'of rushing' as observed by Gopal Guru. The book endows one with a perception of struggle and what does reaching mean itself. With ideology, commitment, conviction and morality becoming a rarity in contemporary Indian conditions, even the 'subordinated' groups are merely imitating the dominant political forces in every sphere – a process of 'political sanskritisation' in its peak.

The narrative also provides insights into the future of the liberation of the oppressed. Having consciously associated his life with that of the community he gives the reader an opportunity to consider his/her role in shaping up or contributing to the ongoing struggle, by provoking him/her to ask: What I have done for the society/community? Where our fellow persons stand? What kind of leadership we have? Here, it would be pertinent to raise how many of the dalit neighbourhoods or movements have book banks, community cooperative hostels, community libraries and study circles at least for themselves, to support the poor among the poorest whose unlettered parents still struggle to meet ends as landless agriculture labourers or underpaid urban migrant workers. However, these are the objective conditions that should strengthen the dalit activists' ideological commitment. Of course, there may be some but the point is whether they are sufficient enough to fight for the cause of liberation. In a pathetic situation, where state programmes are neither implemented properly nor reach the most deserved ones, mere state support is not enough to conscientise people about their predicament.

Out-Caste

Growing Up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography of Vasant Moon translated from the Marathi by Gail Omvedt; Vistaar Publications, New Delhi, 2002; pp xv + 203, Rs 250.

C LAKSHMANAN

Without darkness even the light of the sun is dim
Without sorrow the idea of happiness seems in vain

– Vasant Moon (p 121)

An effective student/youth movement is inevitable for social transformation. Whether a society aims to transform itself from traditional to modern, capitalist to socialist, feudal to just, class to classless, authoritarian to democratic or even from caste to casteless, students/youths can play a useful and catalytic role. This is the central theme, if I had understood it correctly, flowing like a stream throughout Vasant Moon's autobiography.

This book contains 29 chapters with an impressive introduction by an eminent scholar, Eleanor Zelliot, who has an extensive understanding of the Maharashtra dalit and Bhakti movements. It has precious messages for dalits as well as non-dalits. The messages are more relevant in the context of the prevailing conditions of Indian politics and social struggle, providing a futuristic vision to both the individuals and overall dalit movements. On the one hand it imparts a deep understanding

of the complex dalit situation and on the other, suggests a clear-cut vision of the struggle with a long-term perspective apart from an added emphasis on consistency. Accordingly: (i) the individual gaining the insights could strengthen the struggle without giving too much importance to mundane needs/pleasure; (ii) the dalit activist has been shown numerous programmes with clear strategies; (iii) both could find an answer to the current plight of the dalit movements across the regions, including the 'intractable' sub-caste issue; and finally (iv) cultural change, through adopting the Buddhist tradition, has been shown as an option and effective alternative.

Reading this book with fascination, one would certainly wonder what a meaningful life Moon had had. Legendary Tamil poetess Aavaiyar has sung thus centuries back:

*Karkai Nandre Karkai Nandre!
Pichai Puhinum Karkai Nandre...*

(Though left to beg it is better to learn)

It had happened literally to Vasant Moon in his childhood. The similarity of instances may be there for many of the first generation dalit literates across the country. The difference lies in that he had consciously acknowledged the important role of the vasti/neighbourhood. In a situation where a person's basic needs for mere survival – food, cloth and shelter – become a daydream, his soul and body remaining in a bond with the community, is really extraordinary. Nowhere in the book Moon has expressed regret. His narrative is full of hope and optimism coupled with serious commitment, persistence as well as