

GENDER, COLONIALISM, AND INDIA!

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Gender inequalities have a negative effect on growth, human development, and the quality of human resources. Gender inequality and limited economic growth thereby make poverty reduction a distant dream to achieve. Therefore, considering the issue of gender inequality and its various aspects are of great importance for economists (Turner, 1998). Most of us are aware of the benevolent deeds by Her Majesty, Queen Victoria—especially those of the abolition of Sati Pratha and the legalization of the remarriage of widows. Yet, considering the ruthless annexation of India by the British and draconian governance policies, it makes the most sense to talk about gender, development, and colonialism in a single breath. While we are familiar with the usual ledger of horrors that the British had unleashed in their colonies throughout the world; not to mention the detrimental ripple effects of the *Firangi Raj* on gender inequality in India and South Asia in general (as a foreign dominion colonized most South Asian countries at a point of time) is of significant importance. Talking in simplified terms, colonialism, and imperialism, as concepts, involve the full-fledged dismantling of economic, social, and cultural constructs of the colony and declare de-facto and de jure superiority of the European knowledge systems.

To begin with, the colonial state was built as a power structure operated by men, based on continuing force. Be it the British armed forces, blue or white-collared office bearers, or even the “tradesmen” were predominantly men. Therefore, the sexual division of labor perpetuated gender inequality. Quite hegemonically, women in colonial India came to be defined relative to men, devoid of power, the right to own land, and the right to vote, and were even barred from participation in decision-making processes. This was in polar opposition to women’s stature in the pre-colonial era. More so, rapes, honor killings, and physical and mental abuse of women were frequent occurrences during outright territorial expansionary wars waged by the British. It could be said that the British displayed double-doored interests in both emancipating women to marginal extents and upholding their subordination in all walks of life.

Although we cannot deny the prevalence of practices in pre-colonial India that outperformed themselves at suppressing women, British played a diabolical role by initiating the formalization of the caste system. It would be safe to say that caste, as is interpreted in India today, has its roots in British intervention during the colonial era. Caste, however, an Indian-

born phenomenon that classified indigenous people according to their birth, became rather rigid and existing caste-based inequalities were reinforced under British reign. On a popular pretext of trying to understand the complex rituals and practices of the people in India, they successfully moulded public opinion regarding the system. What made the 1901 caste-based census by Herbert Risley pivotal in determining the gender discourse in the country is that every caste had its subtle ways of subjugating women. For instance, it was the beginning of the later Vedic Age that witnessed a significant deterioration in the status of women. Gender role stereotypes and compulsory subjugation of women started budding as a social menace, thus constraining them within four walls of household chores and child-rearing responsibilities. They were also prohibited from the right to education and employment at paid jobs. *Smritis* and *Puranas* left no stone unturned to accord and uphold baseless forms of domination by men over women. Ancient practices of Sati, the *purdah* system, and polygamy provide staunch evidence of perpetuating gender inequity. Additionally, appropriate characterization of the caste system only spewed a pinch of salt on the wounded cut. When people were more sensitized about their standing on the social ladder, it only motivated them to fight for a position in the perceived "upper rung" of society. It led to severe disparities between women belonging to different hierarchies within the caste system. This particular syndrome was evident from the clear distinction between the causes that women fought for, pressing for equality and upliftment of the status quo. Even within the upper caste, women were treated poorly, let alone lower castes, whose women were quite impoverished.

Moreover, colonial rule displayed negligible rather, zero enthusiasm towards conducting any sort of census survey that could shed light on various significant metrics concerning the plight of the population, or more strictly women. This brought to the foreground, their sheer apathy towards attempting to study the existing gender bias, let alone trying to improve it. In such a scenario, single-handed efforts were made by famous economists like Dadabhai Naoroji, Findlay Shiras, and Dr. VKRV Rao to understand the socio-economic dynamic of the country. For instance, data collected on levels of literacy in the country during British rule attests that the overall literacy rate in the country was around 16%, whereas female literacy rates hovered around an appalling 6.4%. On one hand, where a majority of Indians were skeptical about the implementation of western English education in the country, no legitimate action was taken to sensitize the Indian masses or press for greater female inclusion in educational institutions. Apart from education, other welfare indicators like health and wellness were at an all-time low. The scarcity of public health institutions resulted in maternal mortality rates peaking due

to dearth of reproductive and post-reproductive healthcare and nutrition for women during the colonial reign.

British had a superimposing influence on certain family structures that existed in India since time immemorial. By popular example, the Khasi tribes of Meghalaya and the Nairs of Kerala in India were matrilineal and matriarchal families, in essence, women asserted authority on all household matters, and the devolution of the ancestral property was in the female line. But the advent of colonialism marked the onset of the growing popularity of nuclear and patriarchal families. Various matrilineal family structures started resembling those of western nuclear families where the male member was the sole source of authority.

Gender discrimination, necessarily but does not sufficiently imply cradling a divide between gender binaries. The idea extends to the shameful degradation of gender non-binaries and banishing them from society. Thriving European ideologies can be solely held responsible for the popularization of gender binaries. Early travelers were baffled at the idea of egalitarianism between men and women. The fact that we can, with utmost certainty, claim that ‘mainstream’ pre-colonial India accepted so much more gender fluidity and so less discrimination based on gender, is why we should resent the colonial impact on gender relations in India. For instance, the notion of heteronormativity manifested itself in the admonishment of Hijras, Khwajasaras, and Aravanis by the passage of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871.

There is no denying that gender inequality was an entrenched characteristic of Indian society in pre-colonial times as well. But a twenty-decade-long suzerainty that was supposed to be “western, modern, and liberal” caused more harm than good to women. They had legalized certain revolutionary reforms during their rule that aimed at the emancipation of women. But unfortunately, those failed to mask the herald of a horrific tale of discrimination and exploitation of women. Gender inequality and stagnation of overall development hence continued to move around in vicious circles since then. Thus, in order to unravel the journey towards economic growth, it is necessary to examine the roots of gender inequality (British colonialism being one of them) which in itself is multifaceted, encompassing economic, social, political, and social inequality. Although India’s current Gender Inequality Index doesn’t paint an optimistic picture, balanced and farsighted redressals that serve each basis of inequality can carve out a practical path of development in the future.

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