

Women's Mobilisation in the Jammu Agitation: Religion, Caste, Community and Gender

MOHITA BHATIA

The widespread protests in 2008 in the Hindu-dominated Dogra belt of Jammu on the subject of land for the Shri Amarnath Shrine Board saw protestors asserting their "Hindu" identity. The most striking factor of the demonstration was the massive participation of women in a region where they had so far been politically passive. But the liberation of women from purely domestic chores and their elevation to a political level under the communal Hindutva banner did not emancipate them.

The massive protests in Kashmir in 2008 over the issue of transfer of land to the Shri Amarnath Shrine Board initially led to its revocation. This in turn, generated a frenzied reaction in the Hindu-dominated Dogra belt of Jammu. In an agitation that lasted for 62 days, a furore was raised about the "hurt sentiments of Hindus" and "discrimination against the Jammu region". The agitation was strongly backed by right wing Hindu forces; however, soon the mobs attained autonomy of their own. Regional, communal and chauvinistic nationalist emotions were kindled by Hindu organisations and placed against the "Kashmiri", "Muslim" and "separatist" sentiments. The agitation acquired communal tones, which ultimately resulted in inter-religious clashes at a few places.¹

The disconcerting part of the agitation was the manifestation of chauvinistic response by Jammu, asserting its "Hindu" identity. But the most striking factor throughout the agitation was the immense participation of women, who hitherto have been politically passive. As part of the conservative Dogra society,² they have not asserted their presence in the electoral sphere³ nor have been active in any other kind of protest or movement politics. Women's activism elsewhere in northern India has bypassed them completely and there is neither a women's constituency nor gender-related politics in this region. In the absence of a tradition of women's participation in the public space, their mobilisation by conservative Hindu forces demands explanation.

1 Women's Mobilisation and Participation

Ironically, women who remain politically invisible in this part of the state were seen backing the "Hindu" cause enthusiastically. Unlike Kashmir where women are generally seen in the forefront of demonstrations against the Indian state, women in Jammu have not shown much inclination for intervention in the politics of the state. Of course, it remains a matter of debate as to how autonomous Kashmiri women are in their political representation and how emancipated is their role in the Kashmiri movement – the subordination of gender identity to the Kashmiri identity is a generally acknowledged reality of the movement in the politics of Kashmir (Manchanda 2001). However, analysing the case of women's mobilisation and participation in the Jammu agitation, it can be pointed out that they formed a substantial part of the massive demonstrations that took place on a daily basis. Shouting abusive anti-Kashmiri and anti-Muslim slogans they displayed an assertion of the aggressive "Jammu-Hindu-women" identity. Apart from some of the belligerent slogans – *Lathi Goli Khayenge*, *Zameen Waapis Layenge* (We will face bullets and

Mohita Bhatia (mohita27@gmail.com) is a PhD student at the Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge, UK.

batons and get our land back); *Jammu Ki Naariyan, Aag Ki Chingariyan* (Women of Jammu are like burning embers); *Desh ke Gadaron Ko, Jute Maaro Saloon Ko* (Traitors to the Nation should be beaten with shoes); *Khoon Bhi Denge, Jaan Bhi Denge, Bhole Ki Gaddi Waapis Lenge* (We will give our blood, our lives, but we will take back Shiva's (Bhole) throne [Amarnath]) – women were seen beating their chests, displaying swords and *trishuls*, and taking a pledge that they would keep the struggle going till the land is restored back to the Amarnath Shrine Board. They defied curfews to stage dharnas, confronted police lathis and supported all the violent methods that were adopted during the course of the protests. During the *Jail Bharo Andolan* on the day when they had decided to voluntarily offer themselves up for arrest, a number of government schools and play grounds were temporarily converted into jails to accommodate huge number of women.⁴

How do we comprehend the transformation of otherwise politically apathetic women into active and violent custodians of Hindu faith? How did the normally conventional Dogra society legitimise the transcending of the private sphere by women and their coming out into the open public sphere? Before placing these questions in the specific context of Jammu, it is imperative to refer to the existing conceptualisation of mobilisation of women via rightist politics. A few scholars opine that the redefinition of “womanhood” as combative defenders of the Hindu faith was taking place within the framework of cultural nationalism during the early 20th century (Sethi 2002). However the militant activism of Hindu women is generally seen as a relatively new phenomenon, which can be traced back to the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. In a reversal of their purely apolitical and domestic roles, women during this movement were seen to have become active agents of physical and sexual aggression against the Muslim community (Jaffrelot 2005; Banerjee 1996). The implications of the mobilisation and participation of women during this movement remains a very pertinent issue of debate among feminists. They concede that the liberation of women from purely domestic chores and their elevation to a political level under the communal Hindutva banner did not emancipate them (Sarkar 1999).

Tanika Sarkar has extensively pointed towards the ambivalences within women affiliated with the Hindu-Right. In activist roles, the women attain self-confidence, fill their quest for intellectual hunger, and “release frustrations built up as a result of having been marginalised members of orthodox families”. Nonetheless, this empowerment is constrained within a “mainstream patriarchal Hindu nationalist” frame where women’s primary role as defenders of tradition wipes out any discussion on gender oppression and the notion of “equal rights” is incessantly excoriated.⁵

Manjari Katju and Manisha Sethi have delved into the role of the Durga Vahini to explain that women in the Hindu organisations are viewed as “builders of a Hinduised future” and towards this end they are trained to be vocal and assertive. Nevertheless, these activities are not geared towards challenging social or gender hierarchies. On the contrary, these privilege women as educated mothers and housewives who can provide Hindu samskaras to their families (Katju 2005; Sethi 2002).

On the whole, the mobilisation by the rightist forces privileges the family, community and the nation over gender; hence the gender consciousness within women is strategically subordinated to these collectives. By involving women in “protecting” the honour of “community” and “nation”, the energies of women are diverted. Rather than fighting the source of their oppression within their gendered context, they are faced with an abstract construct: “the Muslim other”.

2 Role of Hindu Right in Jammu

A key catalyst that led to the immense involvement of women in Jammu agitation was the premeditated mobilisation by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Shiv Sena, Bajrang Dal, Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and other family affiliates. The RSS and other Hindu groups have been striving hard to create a space for their politics in Jammu since independence. Though these organisations have been partially successful in swaying certain sections, they could never pull together people on such an enormous scale in the past. The only exception was the Praja Parishad movement in 1952, which could rally large numbers around its rhetoric of *Ek Pradhan aur Ek Nishan*.⁶ Nevertheless, the Praja Parishad movement was confined to urban centres and to middle class and upper caste segments among Hindus, with hardly any visible participation by women.

The transcendence of women from a passive to an active role during the Amarnath agitation is most probably linked to the nature of the mobilisation. Since the 1952 movement, the RSS and the BJP have been the most vocal organisations in the Dogra stretch of Jammu, and have claimed to be speaking on behalf of “Jammu” and the “Hindus”. Yet, they have not been able to garner support of the people on a mass scale. Most importantly, these groups could never directly propagate their communal discourse at the ground level because of the culturally and religiously mixed disposition of the Jammu society. Though Jammu is projected as a Hindu majority region, it has a unique blend of different religions, cultures and languages. The lives of people belonging to diverse groups are intricately entwined together. In such a heterogeneous social fabric, it is problematic for the RSS or BJP to speak of a Hindu-Muslim divide and whip up religious passions. However, the Amarnath land issue provided an opportunity to these organisations to stir up Hindu sentiments. Despite the fact that the agitation also had a regional dimension, restoration of the “Baba Bhole ki Zameen” became the basis of raising the religious frenzy. This was an unprecedented situation where for the first time a religious issue had been located in the public space and politics generated around such a matter.

This religion-based politics could easily allow women not only to identify with the “sentiment” but also to take part in the protest rallies enthusiastically. Due to the centrality of the Hindu faith, the agitation became a family affair, whereby all active members of the household including the women participated. In the demonstrations, women would beat thalis (utensils) and sing bhajans (religious songs), organise kirtans (sacred hymns) – treating these activities simply as extension of their domestic and religious roles.⁷ Since their engagement with this religiously-defined

agitation did not challenge any patriarchal norms or other societal power structures, the family rationalised and legitimised the participation of women.

3 Nationalism, Rightist Politics and Women

For those women who have never used the public domain to protest against the commonplace gender oppression in their everyday lives, it is interesting to see the passion in their stand for a religious cause. What does this mean? Does this imply a natural leaning among women towards rightist politics? Why is it so that women can be easily mobilised for a religious issue but not for their gender interest?

Much of the literature exploring the political visibility of women in the public spaces, especially when activated by the reactive forces, points to the inevitable processes of mobilisation by invoking categories like “community”, “religion” or “nation”. Since each of these categories is represented as an extension of the family, the traditional domestic role of women is not seen to be eroded when they cross the boundaries of their homes and enter the public domain. Participation of women in times of “crisis”, when the community, religion or nation is in “danger” does not take them away from their essential familial context.

The general conservatism in Jammu’s Hindu society results in the socialisation of women into conformist, homely and reproductive beings. The identity of women is defined in the context of men, family, kin and caste. This situation is not specific to Jammu but reflects a broader Indian reality. Generally, middle class modernity refashions the notion of “femininity” in accordance with the contemporary processes of urbanisation, globalisation and homogenisation of urban cultures. The modern urban middle class woman is allowed to venture into the public or political sphere, pursue higher education, wear western attire and imbibe global consumerist values. Yet, this redefinition should not undermine the underlying “womanly” virtues and certainly not threaten the basic pillars of patriarchy. Family and kin still remain the most essential spheres of influence that define the identity of the majority of urban women. Rather than challenging oppression within these spheres and constructing their independent identity women remain subordinated and dependent. The modern form of patriarchy in a consumerist culture provides new ways for women to be feminine, motherly and homemakers without interrogating the main issues of gender inequality and subjugation within and outside the family.

3.1 Redefining Women’s Identity

Partha Chatterjee has reflected on the process of reconstruction of the ideas of femininity, which evolved during the anti-colonial struggle. In defining the contours of the struggle against the colonial power, the nationalist discourse had separated two domains of culture – material and spiritual. It was mainly in the spiritual domain that the superiority of the “east” against the colonial “west” could be established. It was in this realm of distinctive culture and values that nationalist ideology drew its power to resist and confront the west. The material/spiritual analogy was extended to symbolise the “world/home” dichotomy where home, the domain of woman, represented the “true inner self” that had

to be retained for pursuing the nationalist objectives (Chatterjee 1989). Elaborating on this nationalist pursuit, Chatterjee remarks,

the world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests...It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation” (ibid: 624).

In accord with the changing social and economic conditions, woman’s identity also had to be redefined. Chatterjee argues:

...she would also need to have some idea of the world outside the home into which she could even venture as long as it did not threaten her femininity. It is this latter criterion, now invested with a characteristically nationalistic content, which made possible the displacement of boundaries of the home from the physical confines earlier defined by the rules of purdah to a more flexible, but culturally nonetheless determinate, domain set by the *differences* between socially approved male and female conduct...The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honour of a new social responsibility, and by associating the task of female emancipation with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination (ibid: 629).

Thus, the nationalist discourse accorded a non-traditional and public yet secondary position to women, assigning them demarcated roles with well-defined boundaries. The internalisation of this new form of patriarchy by educated middle class women did not alter the structures of gender oppression within society.

Controlled Emancipation

Partha Chatterjee’s analysis still seems relevant for the contemporary era, especially in urban areas, where the will of the free market prevails. The apparent empowerment of women is contained within the somewhat loose and modernised version of patriarchy. It is interesting to note how Hindu nationalist discourse tackles the question of women in this changed social and economic setting, whereby women have shown an inclination to join the public space. Thomas Blom Hansen (1995) reflects on the strategies that Hindu right wing groups have come up with to deal with modernity and the women’s yearning for emancipation. He points out:

...the Hindu nationalist movement in India has tried to confront women’s quest for a greater visibility and autonomy in the public realm through a strategy of *controlled emancipation*. This strategy...is derived from the more general attempt on part of the Hindu nationalist movement to cope with modernity through recourse to various types of ideological and physical control (ibid: 82).

He further elucidates the notion of “controlled emancipation”:

This strategy takes two main forms: (i) recruitment and reconstruction of motherhood in the nationalist discourse, and (ii) establishment of an internal institutional patriarchy within the Hindu nationalist movement itself (ibid: 86).

The notion of controlled emancipation is effective in comprehending the women’s mobilisation by the right wing organisations. The Hindu nationalist groups make available a religious and patriotic platform where women can assert and feel empowered. Yet, at the core of the Hindu nationalist ideology the hold of the family, society and nation remains supreme, and therefore, issues of social hierarchy or inequalities are flattened and institutionalised. The limited empowerment of women under the garb

of nationalism and Hindu faith not only provides a comfortable space to women but also obstructs the formation of gender consciousness among them.

A somewhat similar situation can be seen in Jammu's Hindu society, wherein the urban middle class is undergoing socio-economic changes. In response to these transformations, society has acquired an exterior modern, forward-looking appearance, while retaining the conservative gender-specific values inside. Due to the strong control of community or family over women, individual will and independent thinking on the part of women does not find enough space. As a result of such a construction, women fail to evolve an autonomous social or political identity. Rather than having a politics of their own, they follow their men and become an inherent part of the male-dominated and divisive identity politics. Moreover, in the absence of gender-based politics to lead, they themselves contribute to the process of reinforcement of patriarchal norms. Women can therefore, easily relate to the rightist discourse, which underpins the patriarchal ideology. A large number of women, whose lives remain limited to the domestic sphere and who are unexposed to any kind of resistance movements or women activism, find some appeal in this religion-based political discourse.⁸ More importantly, rightist discourse is convenient for women in a patriarchal setting since it creates no dichotomy for them between their gender expectations and political orientation. Without contradicting the power structure, they can acquire activist roles.

It is in this context that one can locate the mass mobilisation of women in the Hindu belt of Jammu. Women participated in the agitation with the active consent of their men. Their political role, however, did not go beyond their religious and family roles. Not many of them were seen to be in leading positions. Except for a few women who were noticeable due to family connections, women were generally a mob following the lead of their men.

Though for some women it was a liberating experience, the agitation could not be assessed as exhibiting women's empowerment and autonomy. The emancipatory quest or what Tanika Sarkar refers to as "intellectual hunger" is a fundamental requirement of most individuals. In case of women, who are confined to domestic or defined "feminine" boundaries, this quest can be translated into unproductive and even destructive channels in the absence of meaningful socio-political alternatives. This was reflected in the remarks of the president of women's wing of the BJP in Jammu whom I interviewed. She commented on the usually dormant desire of women in Jammu to feel free and unrestrained:

Women have become aware while participating in the demonstrations and rallies. They acquired a sense of confidence as they came out of their houses...They were so enthusiastic throughout the period of agitation that even after it ended women were not willing to get back to their usual domestic routine. They insisted that we should organise regular meetings where they can engage themselves with.

The agitation was an opportunity where large number of women could freely come out in the public realm and take part in activities which otherwise had been in the exclusive "male" domain. This was their new found freedom, where they could get rid of the household burden, even if on temporary basis. They

could shout, venture out and divest themselves of everyday life discipline. But beyond all these activities, the agitation strengthened the religious hold of the society and in no sense characterised the change in the position of women.

4 Caste, Community and Patriarchy

The participation of women in this event, though legitimised by religion, was not independent of patriarchal norms and the caste structure of society. On the whole, it depended on political mobilisation on the one hand and community and caste rules, on the other. Where such mobilisation was missing and where community and caste rules forbade women to take part, they could not come out of the shackles of patriarchy. In such cases one could see religious passions swaying women in favour of the sentiments expressed during the agitation. Yet, in the absence of caste and community legitimisation for active participation, these women felt inhibited and were not willing to join the demonstrations. One could see this situation in Kanhal village of Bishnah tehsil.

Bishnah, one of the tehsils in Jammu, witnessed the most intense involvement of women. Women along with their children devotedly marched in the demonstrations and showed no fear of the police or state authorities. They took part in burning effigies of Kashmiri leaders and applauded the provocative speeches of religious leaders and rightist politicians. The intensity of women's involvement here increased soon after the dramatic suicide of Kuldeep Verma. Verma belonged to Bishnah and his "martyrdom" for Baba Bhole's cause generated a lot of emotion. His widow, Shilpi Verma, was to later symbolise women's role in the agitation. She acquired a larger than life role as the "widow" whose very presence succeeded in mobilising women. She was later chosen by the BJP as a candidate for the legislative assembly election from Bishnah. Dressed in proper whites, she would proclaim her victimhood repeating that no other woman should meet her fate. That was her only political tool throughout her electoral campaign. Shilpi in many ways reflected the role that politicians had assigned to women during the agitation. Neither having an autonomous political role, nor an independent personal identity, she was merely a "martyr's wife/widow". Though she could not win elections and was appropriated by the BJP for opportunistic concerns, her entry into the political scenario was in continuity with the gigantic participation of women in the demonstrations.

The intensity of women's participation witnessed in Bishnah (especially after the martyrdom of Shilpi's husband), however did not touch the women of Kanhal, near Bishnah town. Kanhal is an all-Hindu village which is in the process of urbanisation. Factors such as proximity to the city, influence of market economy and loosening of community bonds makes it possible for urban-based regional and religious identity politics to make inroads in this village. The Amarnath land row also had a strong impact in this village and in my conversational interviews with people there, I was informed that men from the village used to join the rallies. Despite the fact that women were strongly supporting the agitation, they did not go out to join the cause. What stopped women from coming out in the open and standing for

their religious demands? An understanding of the caste and community structure of the village provides an answer.

4.1 Change in Caste Power Dynamics

This brahmin-dominated village has a peculiar caste composition. Other than brahmins, only scheduled castes (scs) have a substantial presence in the village.⁹ Consequently, the contestation between the so-called “highest” and “lowest” castes in Louis Dumont’s conception of caste order comes into play here in its most intense form. Brahminical values still have a hegemonic control over the village resulting in the continued subjugation of scs in the ritual as well as economic spheres. In most of the social and religious occasions – *yagna* (sacrificial invocations), marriage feast or *Ram Leela* theatrical performance – there is a clear isolation of the “low” caste Hindus as their entry into these spaces is frowned on in a brahmin-dominated community. They can join in the social or religious feasts only after brahmins have finished having their meals.

However, Dumont’s conception of linear hierarchy where so-called low castes are seen as being oppressed without questioning the order seems to be operating up to this point only. Underlying this apparent subordination, one can also get a glimpse of assertion and resistance. Though there is no visible protest on the part of the dalits in the village against these culturally humiliating practices, it would be erroneous to view them as mere “victims” meekly accepting the authority of the brahmins. It is essential to highlight the agency of these castes to see how they perceive their suppression or how they internalise or resist the hegemonic practices in their day to day life. Commenting on the studies that use the Dumont’s model, Gail Omvedt (1979) states, “such studies... end by viewing subordinate groups as being acted upon as victims and not as actors” (ibid: 769). Omvedt refers to Joan Mencher’s article, “The Caste Upside Down”, where Mencher has argued that the untouchables do not “accept the traditional upper caste interpretations of what is normal and proper, that they maintain an opposing set of values, that they perceive the system as exploitative and their own position as resulting from powerlessness rather than the workings of karma” (Mencher 1974).

In the context of the Kanhal village, one could see that due to a lack of political consciousness the dalits were ambiguous in their perceptions about the caste order that is so central to the Hindu religion and strongly endorsed their “Hindu” identity. Yet, they strongly opposed brahminical authority and reacted against their exclusion from social and religious realms, though in internal discussions of their caste community and not publicly. Resenting the upper caste domination, a dalit respondent informed:

In this village, dalits still feel subdued by the Brahmins. We cannot call Brahmin men by their names. We have to address them as ‘Bhai sahib’. But these people (brahmins) call us by names even if they are younger to us... We don’t like this... I don’t think we are in any way inferior to them.

The resistance to brahmin supremacy is also to be seen in the economic sphere. Although a majority of sc households are poor and are either landless or have very little land, there has been some economic upward mobility among them due to opportunities

provided by the market. Due to the establishment of a number of private factories near by in Bari-Brahmana, the major industrial complex of the state, the not so educated are also able to find employment on contractual basis. Even though the working conditions are exploitative and wages are meagre, it provides a relief from labour on brahmin lands and also endows them with a sense of self-dependency and dignity. Reservation in the government sector also provides some reprieve from caste oppression as a few educated ones are able to find government employment. The relative economic self-sufficiency among the scs causes a sense of insecurity among the brahmins. This got clearly reflected during my interviews with the members of this caste. A brahmin male respondent showing his discomfort with the relatively changed social position of dalits mentioned this as the new-found “arrogance” of the dalits: “These people would search for labour work on daily basis or prefer to get a job in a private factory on less wages, and even sit idle if they don’t find any work; but they won’t prefer to work in our fields”. Another brahmin woman showed her contempt for the upward mobility of the dalits in this manner: “We call them shudras. Earlier they used to sit on ground while talking to us. Now they sit equal to us and don’t even observe the rituals of purity. When they take tea in our house, they leave the utensils unwashed.” Finding this behaviour as the erosion of the established social customs and practices, she stated that, “These people should observe some social distance and remain in their ‘mariyada’ (limits)... Just like Christians and Muslims, these castes should not be included in Hindu religion”.

4.2 Community Norms and Status Standardisation

It is in this context of urbanisation, the waning traditional brahmin-dalit patron client relations and change in caste power dynamics that the brahmins try to reinforce their hegemony. They try to maintain a social gap from the dalits and uphold strict patriarchal norms to assert their high social status. It is by negotiating and curbing women’s freedom that high social status and family values are preserved. The role of women in sustaining upper caste traditions is considered most important. This, in turn, leads to women becoming the agency of their own subjugation.

Assertion of high social status by the brahmin community was one of the prime reasons why women did not join in the marches and rallies. There was lot of eagerness among them about what they considered a “religious struggle”. Still, community rules did not allow women to venture out into the political field. The conventional family norms set up by the brahmin community are also imitated by the scs. Even though these castes defy brahminical authority and show resistance in the social, political and religious realms in several ways, women’s oppression is replicated within the dalit castes. Women’s subjugation is common for all the castes in the village. In a conversational interview with a sc woman, I inquired as to the reason for the non-participation of women in the agitation. She told me,

This is a brahmin village, so women here don’t go out. Women going out on to the streets, screaming and shouting with men is not considered good. Women here feel shy... The married women have to observe ‘parda’ (veil) in front of the elder male members and do not even sit equal to them. How can we go and shout along with these men?

When I asked her if women in the village were aware of the reasons behind the agitation, she nodded forcefully and responded that it was about “our land” to be used for Amarnath pilgrimage. She told me that,

I was very keen to join in the rallies and one day I suggested to my neighbour that we should go and demonstrate our solidarity with the struggle. But my neighbour clearly replied that she would join the rallies on that day when the wife of the brahmin Nambardar will go.

Implicitly her neighbour’s statement reflected the hold of community and brahminical values in the village. These values and norms set a status-standardisation in the village, which even subaltern community imitate and abide by.

Grip of Upper Caste Women

Dalit women showed their lack of autonomy from the hold of the upper castes. They would not dare follow a course until the upper caste women took the lead. A dalit woman stated that, “If Brahmin women had volunteered to participate, then we would also have followed”. It was in the same spirit that woman from the same caste from a nearby village had informed me: “In our village few women participated. It was only when we saw Charak (high-ranking Rajput) women going out that we also participated”.

A brahmin female respondent was convinced about the cause of the protests and even justified the violent methods that were adopted during its course. She asserted: “Initially peaceful rallies were organised, but when Jammu people realised that we are not being heard, we had no choice but to opt for violent methods like pelting stones at public transport, burning properties, etc”. She had internalised the repeatedly propagated discourse by the right wing and the media that presented the grievances of Jammu in opposition to Kashmir. She remarked,

Kashmiri people are different from the Jammu Dogras. They do not want non-Kashmiris to set up business in Kashmir. In contrast to the Kashmiris, Jammu Dogras are innocent and accommodating people. They show no hesitation in allowing people from different regions to settle down in Jammu.

Stating that she was quite eager to join the rallies she added that:

...If I had gone on my own I would have become the talk of the village. Not only men would have resented that, even women of the village would have been scandalised by my role.

Even the few educated women, who are relatively assertive, have imbibed these community norms. Rita Sharma (name changed) completed an advanced graduate degree a few years ago and now runs a small enterprise in the village. She is the main breadwinner of the family, while her husband helps her. Her views on participation of women in the demonstrations manifested her internalisation of patriarchal principles:

Women in this village don’t go out of their homes as the family rules are very strict. If I go out and join the protest marches, my father-in-law won’t approve of it. Two or three Schedule Caste women used to participate in the agitation. But they are women of loose character and do sloganeering only for money...The Brahmin women don’t go out here...And there was no need for the women to go as our men were already in the forefront.

Not only did Rita uphold conventional values, she glorified upper caste control upon women, while labelling lower caste

women as untamed and unethical. When asked why women do not come together to fight gender oppression she responded:

Every woman has to face lot of problems, especially after marriage... Especially in this village people are conventional in their thinking and keep an eye on every woman’s activities...But women cannot come together to raise their voice as in reality a woman is the root cause of all family conflicts. She provokes her husband and eventually initiates family disputes.

Despite being the sole source of income in the family and conscious about the commonly experienced subjugation of women, Rita ultimately holds women responsible for their own oppression.

Gender Perceptions

The reinforcement of patriarchal values through the agency of women is clearly reflected in the way the women of this village perceive political roles for women. Savitri (name changed) is a staunch supporter of the Sangh parivar as her father was a dedicated Sangh worker. She was full of pride about the role of women in the Jammu upheaval and narrated incidents as portrayed by the media – as to how women confronted the police and defied law. But at the same time she disapproved of Shilpi Verma, a recent widow, contesting elections. She commented that,

Shilpi had got enough money as compensation when her husband committed suicide from the government as well as the BJP. She should not have come forward to fight elections just a few months after the demise of her husband. It is not considered good for women to come out in public just after the husband’s death.¹⁰

Notwithstanding the fact that religion had accorded legitimacy for women’s involvement, the entwined upper caste family status and patriarchy determined the participation of women in the agitation. Though they appeared to have acted on their own, societal control on women was quite evident. It neither allowed women to develop independent political orientation nor led to their empowerment in any manner. The lack of independence on part of women is reflected from the fact that despite experiencing common gender-specific problems across caste and class, women in the village did not transcend their caste identities. The brahmin women were quite vocal and aggressive about the “dalit other”, while not having much to say about the women’s suppression. In a focus group interview with the brahmin women, they shared the view about brahminical superiority and maintained that scs should conform to the purity-pollution caste rules. These women asserted:

We can talk to them and even go to their houses if required, but we cannot eat with them...If they sit and eat with us, then how will we maintain our caste boundaries...With low castes getting all facilities due to reservations, not only we are losing on economic but also on social front as these people are also defying the caste rules...

While maintaining their caste identities, male-dominated regional and religious identity politics provided women other avenues to assert themselves as seen in the agitation. The women not only followed the dominant politics but also felt passionately for the “Jammu Hindu” cause during the agitation phase. The silence on their own repression, while being violent about the caste, religious and regional identities, clearly indicates lack of autonomy and real emancipation among women. Dalit women, due to their context of caste, class and gender oppression, were

relatively more vocal about the class as well as gender exploitation. A dalit woman remarked:

We work three times more than men. We do cook food, take care of children and husband's needs and also work outside home in the fields, while men do only one kind of work. In spite of that, women have no value in this society.

Another sc illiterate woman amazed me by her class and political consciousness:

No political party works in our interest in Jammu. BJP is clearly a Brahmin-Rajput party. Only National Conference has worked for the upliftment of the poor. In my parental village, lot of development has been done when it was in power....My father used to inform us that poor people barely had any land. And it was the National Conference leader Sheikh Abdullah who took away land from the big lords and gave it to us. We should always remember him...National Conference has empowered the low caste Hindus.

Despite being aware of their subjugated class and gender positions, there is no available progressive political or social platform to mobilise these women in a constructive way. In absence of productive channelisation, women from different caste and class backgrounds feel empowered in the limited space that is provided to them in the dominant divisive politics. Though majority

of rural peasants and poor classes may not support the BJP, this party could use the political vacuum to garner the support of people from diverse backgrounds by evoking religious and regional sentiments.

The case study of women's mobilisation during the recent Jammu agitation shows that political mobilisation of women by religious or narrow identity movements, does not in any way deconstruct the power structure of society. It is only the involvement of women in progressive political movements or gender-based politics, which can lead to the real emancipation of women. Only such politics has the potential to engage women in challenging their patriarchal chains.

This however does not imply that women even in the most conservative situations are mutely subjugated to their day to day experiences of repression. At least at their experiential level they do understand the context of their oppression and when probed deeper they do talk about their devaluation in a very aggressive manner. However, they are not in a position either to articulate their gender-related problems or to break the culturally rooted patriarchal norms. This makes a very strong case for a constructive political empowerment of women, their political activism in a progressive direction and their organisation into a collective.

NOTES

- 1 For a more substantial discussion on agitation in Jammu and Kashmir, see Balraj Puri (2008), also see Gautam Navlakha (2008).
- 2 The position of women in Jammu Dogra culture can be historically traced back to the period of feudal rule by the Hindu Rajput Dogra kings. The Rajputs were recruited to the most important positions, especially the in military services, followed by the brahmins and Baniyas who were associated with educational jobs and trading respectively. The dominance of the Rajput culture with rigid patriarchal traditions strictly curbed women's freedom and mobility, which was replicated by other upper castes. This social context created oppressive conditions for women not only of their own castes, but more so for low caste women who were at times regarded as "sexual objects". Several Dogri plays, for instance, "Achuut", staged by Vishwanath Khajuria in 1935, reflects on a similar theme – the sexual exploitation of low caste women by upper caste men.
- 3 Women's participation as contestants in assembly elections remains bleak. According to figures provided by the Election Commission of India, in 1972, only eight women contested elections of the total 342 candidates. The total number of contestants increased to 409 in the 1977 elections, however, the number of women candidates remained limited to four. Only seven women contested the 1983 assembly elections out of total 512 candidates. The number of women contestants increased to 13 in 1987, but they formed less than 3% of the total contestants. The number of contestants swelled to 1027 in 1996, out of which only 15 were women. In 2002, 30 women contested elections, yet they formed just 4% of the total candidates. Although scenario is much better in terms of voter participation among women, there remains a wide gap between male and female voters.
- 4 This section is based on reports carried during the agitation period by various local newspapers
- 5 For details see Tanika Sarkar, "Heroic Women, Mother Goddesses: Family and Organisation in Hindutva Politics" in Christophe Jaffrelot (ed.), op cit.

- 6 Praja Parishad, a Jammu-based Hindu party was founded by Balraj Madhok along with Pt Prem Nath Dogra in 1949. Based on the RSS ideology, it drew support from the upper caste Dogra Hindus who had been dispossessed of large proportions of their lands as a result of the radical land reforms undertaken under the leadership of Sheikh Abdullah. The Praja Parishad resented the abolition of monarchy and the transfer of power from Hindu Dogra rulers to the Kashmiri leadership. It launched a popular agitation in Jammu in 1952 and demanded full integration of the Jammu and Kashmir state with the Indian Union and abrogation of Article 370. The popular catchphrase of the agitation was – *Ek Desh Mein Do Vidhan, Ek Desh Mein Do Nishan, Ek Desh Mein Do Pradhan, Nahin Chalenge*. Praja Parishad merged with Bharatiya Jana Sangh in 1970.
- 7 This section is based on media reports during the agitation period.
- 8 Appeal for women towards the narrow Hindu ideology does not signify the strength of the religion-based politics. But instead it represents the failure of progressive political forces to make inroads in this Dogra stretch. Unlike NC that represents the regional party of the Valley, Jammu has no secular or progressive regional party. Though NC, Congress, BSP, PPP have been using the electoral space in Jammu to garner votes, any of these parties have not been making any serious efforts to base itself at the grass root level in Jammu region or provide a platform to the people's discontents and grievances. There generally remains a political void in Jammu region and whenever a regional discontent erupts, the BJP takes the opportunity to come forward and fill the vacuum. In the absence of any constructive political consciousness or an alternate ideology, women can conveniently slide from the domestic role to the custodians of "Hindu" religion without any major dilemmas.
- 9 Kanhal has 30.9% scheduled caste population. Approximately, brahmins constitute 65% of the population. The rest very few are OBC households.
- 10 For the purposes of preserving the anonymity of the respondents, names and other identity markers have been changed.

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