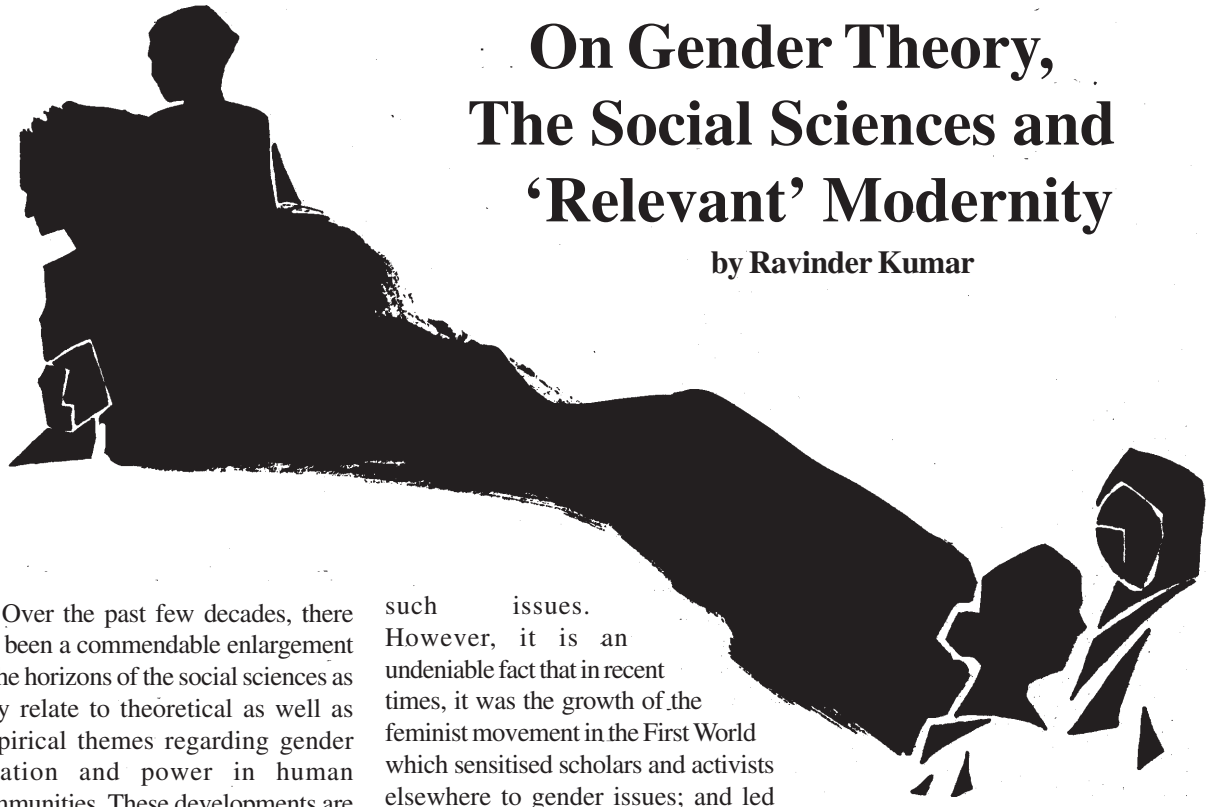
On Gender Theory, The Social Sciences and 'Relevant' Modernity

by Ravinder Kumar



Over the past few decades, there has been a commendable enlargement in the horizons of the social sciences as they relate to theoretical as well as empirical themes regarding gender location and power in human communities. These developments are germane to a number of issues: How can we profitably study the position occupied by men and women in society, historically and contemporaneously? What are the bodies of data relevant to such studies? What is the nexus between gender power, on the one hand, and the total structuring of human communities, on the other? How is our understanding of gender relations to be drawn into purposeful social intervention? And last but not least, what is the social terrain which feminist scholars and activists should map out for themselves in the future? These are some of the issues upon which I propose to dwell in this essay.

It is difficult to resist the conclusion that, in its modern variant, consciousness of subordination and superordination in gender relations has come to us as a result of liberal discourse from the west. This is not to suggest that pre-modern societies in Asia or Africa were not at all concerned with such issues. However, it is an undeniable fact that in recent times, it was the growth of the feminist movement in the First World which sensitised scholars and activists elsewhere to gender issues; and led them to look to the west for social theory and programmes of action; and towards the exploration of their own traditions, for understanding gender conflict and locating modes of social liberation.

Explorations in the history of feminist literature reveal, that as societies underwent a bourgeois transformation, there was a substantial restructuring of social, psychological and economic relations between classes, between genders and within families at this juncture; though the nature of this restructuring varied enormously from the middle classes to the emerging working classes and the lumpenised rural communities. This was also an era characterised by the growth of new forms of knowledge about, and understanding of, human communities; of novel social designs and Utopian values; and finally, of hitherto unexplored forms of social organisation and political intervention.

A new corpus of creative literature was able to focus with great sensitivity upon the totality of emerging western bourgeois society in the eighteenth and ninteenth centuries at the same time as it focussed upon gender location and relations in different class and community formations. Yet the social theory thrown up at this time—it is important to remember that this was an era in which the social sciences first crystallised as a distinctive body of knowledge—was curiously indifferent to attempts in earlier phases of human history to explore gender relations, to transform them for the better. There was, so to speak, a naive assumption, on the part of both theorists and social actors, that their concerns were unique and distinctive. There was an understandable focus on the middle classes as constituting a constituency worthy of special attention. But before long, the condition of the urban proletariat, more particularly the

condition of working class women, became a subject of intensive exploration, although such exploration simultaneously reached out to the vast social undergrowth in the city. Above all, there was a theoretical as well as empirical interest in the reduction of a great many men and women of highly varied backgrounds to wage earners in bourgeois society.

The first stirrings of a novel social science consciousness, as it reached out to gender issues, were reflected in activism whose agenda as well as objectives were shaped by the then prevailing contours of knowledge and realities of social power. Property, as it underpinned bourgeois society, was too formidable a bastion to be assaulted frontally in any bid to democratise the polity and reorder gender relations. But short of a property revolution, there was a substantial measure of reform which could (as, indeed, it did) reinforce the status of middle class women at the same time as it shaped and defined afresh the middle class family within bourgeois society. Yet another arena of gender activism was within the space occupied by women hailing from working class and lumpen families in urban communities. If we turn to the popular historiography (or 'history from below') of this period, we immediately sense a great religious ferment designed to stabilise working class and lumpen communities, particularly women folk, through proselytisation or the extension of social support to the communities concerned. Indeed, the growth of democratic sentiment among the aristocratic classes, and of radical sentiment among the middle classes, reflects the extent to which social concern had reached out. Perhaps it would be appropriate to argue that both social theory and social intervention, at this juncture, were supportive of bourgeois hegemony at the same time as they attempted to provide a measure of dignity to those who were its most hapless victims.

In any critique of society and politics, the conjuncture at which a "social" becomes a "political" question is a significant moment. The transformation of the feminist movement through a growing demand for voting rights for women is, in this context, a development of great significance. Among women activists, even though they belonged largely to the upper and the middle classes, the realisation dawned, before long, that "charity" and "benevolence" and "spiritual" concern were wholly inadequate as instruments of social liberation. For equitable gender relations, therefore, the democratisation of liberal society had to reach out to women of all classes in the form of the right to vote, just as the enfranchisement of men of all classes was considered a precondition of the "good society" in bourgeois theory.

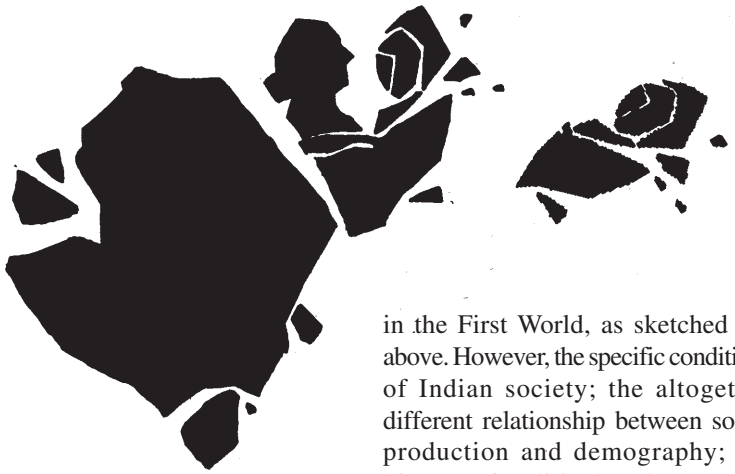
That the suffragette movement should surface at the same time as a variety of socialist movements were visible on the political horizon should occasion no surprise at all. For socialist critiques of industrialisation, even when they refrained from attacking the right of property and the private ownership of factors of production, emphasised the role of adult franchise in the democratisation of bourgeois societies. As it happened, feminist movements had to wage a long and bitter struggle before they realised the right to vote for their constituents in liberal societies. It may be legitimately argued that the realisation of this right—the right to act (at least in theory) as a fully empowered citizen—went a long way towards generating those political pressures which shaped the social climate of western societies in the middle decades of the twentieth century. I refer here to the emergence of the welfare state in the West.

If the transformation of gender problems from "social" into "political" questions achieved substantial results by the middle decades of the twentieth century, then more recent developments mark the emergence of a wholly novel range of theoretical and empirical issues, within the feminist movement. This phase was triggered off by a new understanding of the place of knowledge and power in the structuration of human relations, and it stimulated a detailed critique of historical developments as they affected the role and place of women in society. For instance, feminist scholars carried out a detailed examination of conventional historical periodisation, with its focus upon male power and status, to discover that the liberation of men in different epochs was often achieved at the cost of inflicting new burdens on women. Indeed, the results of interrogating the insights of conventional historical writing, so far as they related to gender relations, were truly revolutionary in their impact upon social consciousness as a whole.

Even more revolutionary were explorations of family structure and the location of women within family structure; just as the role and position of women in newly industrialised, or mature industrial communities, revealed the enormous gulf between "progress" as conceived by liberal social theory and the situation on the ground as revealed through critical analysis. Over and above this, discourse analysis based on the interface between social theory and biological knowledge has thrown open a new understanding of gender construction in society. In all these explorations, the belief that the distinction between social and political issues was illusion proved a powerful solvent of male hegemony.

For this very reason, contemporary social theory on gender relations is wedded to the notion that these relations are substantively political; and that it is only through the mediation of politics that equity can be achieved in relations of power between men and women, in the private no less than in the public domain.

If we were to examine the



contemporary debate within the feminist movement in the West, then the flawed character of modernity, both in its liberal and its radical variants, is a matter of the most serious concern for those engaged in reflection or action, severally or collectively. This is not the place to dwell at any length upon where modernity is flawed in its construction of gender. A whole range of issues immediately come to the fore: the place occupied by women in vocations and professions, skilled or unskilled; the manner in which political power is distributed as between men and women; what are the appropriate and desirable spaces, shared or solitary, which different genders need to carve out for themselves in the "good society"; how is the family itself to be restructured so that it enables men no less than it enables women to fully realise their creative potential; and finally, how important it is to mould equitable generational relationships within the family, on the work space, or the community space, as marked out by societal politics. These are some of the issues—our list is suggestive rather than exhaustive—which those seized of feminist concerns are seeking to resolve in mature industrial societies.

The trajectory of the feminist movement within the Third World, more particularly within India, offers fascinating points of comparison with the all too brief critiqueof its trajectory in the First World, as sketched out above. However, the specific conditions of Indian society; the altogether different relationship between social production and demography; the history of political and economic subordination to Great Britain for virtually two centuries; and the historical no less than the contemporary realities of social structure and discursive formations, confer upon social movements reaching out to gender relations a specificity markedly different from that of the women's movement in the West.

In any attempt to trace gender activism within India, one is struck, in the first instance, at the refusal of the feminist leadership to look to sources other than western reform movements of the nineteenth century as the basis of intellectual empowerment and social action. Small wonder, then, that various endeavours to upgrade the position of women, and to reconstruct the family as an equitable unit of social and biological reproduction, were completely trapped in liberal discourse and displayed both an ignorance of, and an inability to draw upon, other facets of the past which could provide legitimacy and strength to gender activism and reform.

Such a divorce of the women's movement in India from its cultural roots was related to the brute fact of colonial subjugation. Let me spell out what I mean. While a substantial literature has grown around economic exploitation during the decades of British domination, little attention has hitherto been paid to the social and moral consequences of alien control of our society. The result of alien hegemony over Indian society in the nineteenth century was to oblige social activists of all shades of opinion, radicals and conservatives, to reach out to western ideals as the most appropriate ideals to be drawn into movements of social transformation.

This utter dependence upon western values can be readily illustrated. Take the question of social and moral regeneration: the superior power of the dominant culture created so flawed a perception of their own history in the minds of those seeking the regeneration of India, that whether they sought to construct an idealised past, or a bourgeois future, they took their cue from the liberal discourse of the West. Thus the reform project of a Rammohun Roy; or the revivalist objectives of a Dayananda or a Vivekananda; were all profoundly influenced by the moral and organisational ideals of bourgeois civilisation, as it was perceived by such thinkers and activists.

We cannot overemphasise the magnitude of this dependence, because both the liberal and the revivalist movements were united in their bid to redefine society, polity, family and gender within Indian society in a manner very different from the manner in which they were defined in the eighteenth century. All the social actors of India in the nineteenth century, therefore, were the agents of liberal discourse, seeking to construct a bourgeois society in a community grievously burdened by the dead weight of colonial domination.

It would be legitimate to argue that nearer our own times, the Gandhian initiative was a more original and comprehensive endeavour to reorder gender relations than was true of the movements about which we have spoken earlier. The strength of the Gandhian initiative lay in a number of areas. In the first instance, it made no distinction between the social and the political. Secondly, it had a much more perceptive view of social power, as it

effects gender relations, than was true of earlier movements of reform, either in the First or in the Third World, in the nineteenth century. Finally, the redressal of gender inequity through Gandhian action was circumscribed neither by class nor by community; instead, it attempted to reach out to different classes and communities within Indian society as a whole. The incredible social range of Gandhian praxis, the manner in which it reached out to untouchable and tribal communities, is an example of what is being suggested here. Moreover, the sensitivity of Gandhian activism to indigenous cultural resources, at the same time as it reached out to modernity, is manifestly evident in Gandhi's impact upon society in general, and women in particular, in the recent past of India.

Yet Gandhian thought and practice was never able to establish a satisfactory relationship with the profound urge for a "relevant" modernity within Indian society. Such a modernity cannot be defined in terms identical to the modernity which has activated western societies over the past two centuries and more. It does not advocate the rejection of a rich cultural heritage; or a withdrawal from a community based social life whose vitality is grounded in its close linkage with the folk. Instead, relevant modernity stresses the enhanced generation of material wealth, in the factory no less than in the farm, through sophisticated technologies of production; just as it also stresses the generation of new social and political institutions, that would draw a society of our epic scale into a democratic order, resting upon our identity as a distinctive world civilisation.

Paradoxically, so I believe, the realisation of relevant modernity in our midst is possible only through (among other things) a critical awareness of our past. Indeed, the diversity of values and institutions which gave substance to the matrix of our social ordering constitutes a resource which needs to be drawn into our map of cognition through careful analysis. For there is increasing evidence of the manner in which some of these values and institutions provided liberal space for women, severally and collectively.

How the domain of religiosity was utilised in this manner has already been explored in feminist literature in India. But we need to know much more about other institutions drawn from our remote or recent past—like the matrilineal family, for instance—before we take up the task of constructing relevant modernity in our midst today.

I would, in conclusion, like to highlight two problems which lie at the root of the matter. In the first instance, it is necessary to emphasise that modernity in the means of wealth generation is a value on which there is a broad consensus in our society, particularly among the "wretched of the 'Indian' earth," despite the deep reservation with which Gandhian, or new-Gandhian, discourse views such a development. It is, of course, true that the notion of modernity is mediated, implicitly if not explicitly, through the concept of "sustainable" development; a term which implies that gross production, or per capita consumption, in India can never attain levels that have been attained in the First World. The entire basis of our social life, today, is premised on the incorporation of relevant modernity into our material and cultural lifestyle. Both gender theory and the social sciences have, therefore, to come to terms with this view of the "good society." There is a corresponding obligation to devise modes of social intervention which reach out to such aspirations.

I would also like to emphasise the necessity of placing feminist theory within the existing structure of the social sciences. It is necessary to stress this because (as a rank outsider) I discern on occasions a disturbing tendency towards a sort of "ghetto formation", wherein the theorists and the activists of women's movements at times locate themselves, and their intellectual and social labour. While such a location of intellectual and social activism is understandable in the initial stages of any novel initiative, reaching out to a hitherto untouched segment of humankind, in the long run this tendency can lead to unhappy results. Not only would our total understanding of society, and of ways and means to transform it, be grieviously weakened through such a sectarian development. But it would also lead to an impoverishment of feminist theory and social intervention itself. Perhaps the most appropriate forum to voice such a view is in a journal which has done so much over the past decade and more to explore women's issues, in theory and in practice.

Any plea for a composite, as opposed to a distinctive, development of gender theory and social intervention can be sustained by a number of very substantive arguments. It would be appropriate, in this context, to look at the manner in which the intellectual horizons of the social sciences have actually expanded over the past two centuries. In order to reach out to a new section of humanity or to explore a new social phenomenon, initially those involved in such an endeavour necessarily focus their attention exclusively upon the subject matter of their sectarian concerns. Quite often such an endeavour calls for radical departures from conventional wisdom not only in the subject matter of analysis; but also in the underlying notions informing the mode of exploration.

However, as already suggested earlier, what happens after the initial crystallisation of a new understanding is a matter of the utmost significance. The question of relating new bodies of knowledge to existing understanding is a question which can be resolved in a number of ways. There may be, in principle, a conscious decision to retain the distinctive identity of the new knowledge; or there may be a decision

in a wholly contrary direction. More often than not, the integrationist principle is the one which is pursued in the long run by those engaged in intellectual reflection. But there are instances where the new knowledge—and the consequent social activism—retain a distinctive identity for the foreseeable future. It is important to remember, at this juncture, that such developments are shaped as much by philosophical considerations as they are shaped by hard interest crystallisations.

Since the Cartesian intervention in western intellectual life, there is a widespread assumption among those engaged in reflection that reality can be reduced to more manageable fragments; these fragments analysed severally; and the results of such analyses pieced together in a higher understanding of moral and societal issues as a whole. The location of new areas of reflection and praxis in human society often pursues the Cartesian logic, which, it should be emphasised, is an assumption rather than a self-evident truth. However, as indicated above, such a piecing together of sectoral critiques is, by no means, the only trajectory pursued by knowledge formation within the social sciences. There is an equally powerful trend which leads to intellectual sectarianism and discipline proliferation; and to the formation of distinctive, indeed, fragmented bodies of knowledge about the human condition.

Where the growth of a new intellectual corpus pursues a logic lodged in the subject matter of analysis, we can have no dispute with the crystallisation of a distinctive discipline. But if we survey the development of the social sciences in recent times, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that, in a large number of cases, such crystallisations are related much more to the pursuit of scholarly and activist interest, than they are related to the intrinsic subject matter of analysis. To put the matter bluntly, the new field of scholarship and social action often becomes the vested interest of a core of intellectuals and activists. As such, the discipline remains impoverished on its own, at the sametime as it impoverishes social theory as a whole.

While fully conscious of the crucial issues involved, I nevertheless believe that there is no reason why gender theory should remain distinct as a discipline from other disciplines in the social sciences. Quite the contrary. A failure to integrate gender issues into wider social science enquiry would be positively harmful in its consequences. Let me buttress my position through an illustration. It seems likely that in the years which lie ahead, liberal discourse in the domain of economic production and distribution, no less than in the domain of political articulation and cultural creativity, will shape the thought and action of those who exercise political power in India. In the context of such a development, it is crucially important to know how gender location and power will be affected by the dominance which liberal values shall acquire in society. If gender theory were to be kept in a ghetto of its own, it would find it very difficult to anticipate the problems women will face through a full blooded liberalisation of Indian society. However, if gender understanding matures as a part of overall social theory, then gender concerns would be an integral constituent of the liberal understanding of society. I would, therefore, argue with all the emphasis at my command, that gender theory and activism should orient itself in an open, and mutually beneficial relationship, with social science theory and activism as a whole. The tendency to nurture gender theory as a closed world of its own is related to another trend which those who view gender reflection and activism sympathetically have noticed over the years. There has been in recent times a remarkable growth in our understanding of how women in society are located, and how they can create more space for themselves. Yet the dissemination of this knowledge, among those who need it most of all, has not proceeded as rapidly as one would have ideally desired. Here, too, the integration of gender theory with the social sciences as a whole would help the women's movement of our times to reach out to larger social constituencies. For the location of gender theory in a ghetto serves no social purpose at all. Instead, it stands in the way of the wider dissemination of transformative values which can play a crucial role in the liberation of women from the shackles of male hegemony. ❐