

Globalisation in India and Women

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In my talk, I will address globalisation as an economic process, and ask how far that has been gender neutral. Has it weakened patriarchy and created greater employment opportunities and greater equality for women in India or just equalized poverty? There is a need for an assessment from a feminist and socialist standpoint, since the bourgeois/ non-feminist scholarship makes invisible both the class and gender dimensions of the dynamics of power and capital distribution.

The imperialist offensive on state regulated economies, begun by Reagan and Thatcher, intensified from the late 1980s. Globalisation as an ideology and a strategy involved using the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO to transfer wealth from the poor to the rich, and from the peripheries to the core countries. Hundreds of millions have been impoverished since the late 1980s across the world. (Chossudovsky). For women, the impact of globalisation has been uneven. A small layer have gained work opportunity in terms of newly emerging forms of employment, especially in the IT, service and food-processing sectors, but the semi-/unskilled ones have lost control over their natural resources (land, water forest etc), as well as in traditional industries, resulting in the loss of traditional livelihood and sustainability. Gender is not a homogeneous category, but is intersected by class, caste, community and ethnicity, and impacted by age, ideology and sexual preference.

I. GLOBALISATION AND WOMEN'S WORK

Even among leftists, there exist various views on globalisation. Rohini Hensman argues that an 'anti-globalisation' agenda would actually deprive third-world women of job opportunities and improving their conditions. She argues that talk of alternatives at the present juncture is to dream, and reality demands recognizing that some job is better than no job. Even if trade unions have collapsed due to capitalist offensives, jobs for some women enable them to survive, be independent of male relatives and feed their families. However the Second NGO Shadow Report (2006) on CEDAW shows a considerable decline and in some cases closure of employment opportunities for large numbers of women. Work participation rates for women fell from 444 per thousand in 1993-1994 to 419 in 1999-2000 across rural India, and from 154 per thousand to 139 in urban India in the same period.

But nationalist oriented leftists like Jayati Ghosh and others like Sumita Sarkar argue that globalisation-generated international mobility of capital has increased its relative strength vis-à-vis labour. As a result, tough conditions are imposed on workers, with women workers facing the worst attacks. True but focus on import-restrictions and restoration of state control, link the fate of indigenous labour with the fate of native capital. As though indigenous capital will voluntarily increase wages of local workers, and will not adopt strategies to exploit workers more ruthlessly.

Inter-capitalist competition under neo-liberal free market conditions mean intense pressure on workers viz, (a) Labour flexibility – a shift in many sectors from full-time, pensionable, medical benefit enabled jobs to part-time, temporary, sub-contracted and home-based work. (b) Casualisation of labour— companies use a small permanent labour force, and hire casual workers depending on the expansion of work. (c) Feminisation of certain types of labour, especially home based as well as low skilled jobs. The consequences are: (i) decline of regular social-security based work, (ii) fragmentation of labour processes— the creation of a small layer of well-paid skilled workers, especially in or using information communication technology and called upon to do multi-tasking (thereby maximising profit) and a large segment of low-salaried workers mostly women. Labour flexibility tantamounts to super-exploitation of women who have to do both housework and “flexible” production, with no flexible time for themselves.

The growing predominance of international trade in the economy has meant a growing power of exporters and importers. Both Indian and Transnational companies seek more women workers, to gain flexible labour with cheaper wages. Women workers are seen as more subservient to male managers’ authority, and hence hired more. They are also perceived as anti-union/ lesser capability to organize unions, more willing to accept poor working conditions and easier to dismiss using lifecycle criteria such as marriage and child birth (Ghosh, 1999).

The argument in favour of globalisation is that the country that can produce something most efficiently will produce it at low cost and will then export it in order to buy other things from other countries at low rates where restrictions on imports and exports will no longer be necessary. Surplus production, lower prices will whip up demand, expand domestic market as well as employment opportunities thereby making ample scope for steady progression of global economy.

Vibhuti Patel contesting this argued that in looking at the impact of globalisation on women, we need to look, not at the binary of national frontier versus globalisation, but at capitalist-patriarchy. She shows that the ideology of globalisation and the drive for cheap labour has meant the defiance of India’s labour laws, especially those affecting women.

FORMAL SECTOR

Despite protective legislations and Minimum Wages Act the workers in the organized sectors are not adequately better off as there is lack of political will to implement them. While, minimum wages fixed by the government are low (Rs 80 per day), but even that basic level is denied to many workers. Often, bribes to factory inspectors or threats to close down factories ensure flouting the minimum wages laws. Crèches in workplaces are often not maintained in violation of the Factories Act (1987) where according to the Act the crèches are supposed to be maintained only when there are 30 women employees. Women activists in India are demanding the clause 30 women to be replaced by 30 men and women employees. Moreover in the service sector there is no legal compulsion to maintain crèches. Both the absence of crèches and insistence of its presence only in women’s workplace have obvious gender implications.

The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 is seldom implemented. The definition and evaluation of the same work or work of a similar nature often makes gender discrimination very easy. In the era of globalisation, attempts to enforce this law have come down even more. Regardless of whether they work in the formal or the informal/home-based sector/s women suffer from a significant pay differential. The forms however vary. In the formal sector there are laws to protect equal pay, but due to lesser access to education and consequent lower skills women could not always get the better paid jobs. In some cases, formal distinction of designations ensures pay differentials, as between air hostesses and stewards. In the informal sector, there is a straightforward pay differential, based on several assumptions – that men have a greater responsibility of feeding the family, that women are

necessarily less skilled even when doing the same kind of job, and cultural constraints and life cycle factors making prolonged work for women more difficult (Esteve-Volart and Bhan).

The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 covers benefit during childbirth, miscarriages, abortions, and tubectomy. But substantially large number of establishments employing less than ten persons are excluded from this Act as well as the Employees State Insurance Act. Under the former the woman before availing the leave must have worked for eighty days in that establishment or organization. Even the Calcutta University First Statutes, 1979, prevents women teachers from availing of this paid leave if they have not completed nine months of service. This a travesty of Constitutional guarantee of the right to work without discrimination. Moreover given the power equations in the family women are not always in a position to take the decision when to have a child. In many organizations they are never allowed to complete the required number of days on record. Globalisation in particular has seen the rise of Export Promotion Zones (EPZs) and Free Trade Zones (FTZs), all or most recently renamed Special Economic Zones (SEZs). In these areas, women's employment is most precarious. To avoid payment of maternity benefits, women are thrown out of job if they get married, and certainly if they are found to be pregnant. Dr Pratibha Sharma, who runs a clinic in Noida Export Processing Zone, points out with horror that women workers often go for unsafe abortions to retain their jobs. With weak or non-existent trade unions in the SEZs, it is easy to impose such distortions of the law. Especially, by Section 49 of the SEZ Act (2005), the government is empowered to exempt any SEZ from the operation of any central law, which means for all practical purposes SEZs exist outside the laws of India, though on paper unionization is legal.

UNORGANISED SECTOR

In the informal sector women workers have neither contracts nor social security, and have low wages and unhygienic working conditions. Poverty, lack of medical insurance, and forced overtime and the culture of self-denial often make health the first casualty. Women suffer from malnutrition, chronic anaemia, TB, respiratory problems, pelvic inflammatory disease, severe cases of dehydration and miscarriages are common. The lack of income security for women in the informal sector also means children's lack of access to education. As a result the children also get pushed into the informal sector themselves.

The worst off among all the unorganized sector women are the women employed across urban India as domestic maids or "naukars", a feudal term still much in use among the well to do. Since 1959, there have been repeated, but abortive, attempts at legislating their social security, [the latest being the Domestic workers (Registration social security and welfare) Act 2008] because the ruling elite in India, as well as the more comfortable layers of the salaried population, all depend on exploiting such people, most of whom are women. There are about 20 million of them across India (Faleiro). Globalisation and the growing insecurity as well as work pressure has also brought a little greater awareness among such women about the need for greater rights and the possibility of upward mobility. In September 2008, the Sara Bangla Paricharika Samiti (All Bengal Maids' Association) representing 17,000 such women, organized a protest meeting, demanding social security from the state, identity cards, fixed holidays and minimum wages. In few cities, like Mumbai, there have been of women domestic workers' organizations demanding rights. But Parichiti, a Calcutta-based NGO organising women domestic workers, says that organizing them is particularly difficult, because many of the women work as part time help in several houses at different times and have to commute from quite a distance. So these women lacking a collective space are among the most vulnerable even among unorganized workers. Formally, the new Act provides for implementation of the Minimum Wages Act, 15 days a year paid leave, and ten hours of rest time per day. But the word "as far as practicable" leaves a leeway for flouting its provisions under any pretext.

AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

Globalisation has also dealt blows to traditional rural economy where despite patriarchy women had a space, since family units did much of the work of vegetable and food grain production. Globalised push for cash crops and high end technologies has attacked food security for the entire family and the national economy. The widely reported suicides by Indian farmers involve not the poorest, but well-to-do farmers who took bank loans to fund cash crop production and were ruined when global competition and overproduction led to plummeting prices and failure to repay loans (Shiva). The immediate effects of the IMF-World Bank dictated Structural Adjustment Programme meant, in 1991-92, a rise in cash crop production for export by 3 per cent, while the cultivation of basic grains fell 1.5 per cent (The People vs Global Capital). At the same time, this shift to cash crop and the need to meet orders quickly meant regular hired (male) labour replacing women who henceforth used to combine house and field-work flexibly leading to a higher wage gap. On an average, in rural India, a woman's daily wage in early 2008 was Rs 20 less than that of a man, though both worked equal hours. (It's a Free World). The introduction of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 is an evidence that the economy by itself was totally failing to provide jobs, and that the state had to step in. If a BPL family were to get the full promised benefit of NREGA they could earn the equivalent of more than 40% of their annual income from this one scheme alone. Data for the three years during which NREGA has been in operation, 2006-09 shows that on average only 50% of the households that registered under the scheme actually got employment and that only for 45 days against the promised 100 (Shankar Raghuraman). Moreover, an ungendered notion of "the average worker" means that in reality, gender and age have not been factored in, so women and the aged will be getting less than average wages, as the same productivity norm is imposed on them. A survey carried out in January, 2008, in the Nuapada district of Orissa observes that the absence of crèche facilities may severely affect women's participation in the NREGA schemes (Centre for Science and Environment report).

Another development has been the attempt by major corporate groups to go into agricultural production directly, like the recent attempt by the Reliance group in Gujarat to set up its own organic farming units involving setting up SEZs by taking over peasants' lands. At best, this will, given the pre-existing patriarchy in Indian agriculture, mean that the compensation in the form of cash will go to males. It is the experience of the present author, that when compensation is paid, whether in the Narmada eviction cases in Western India (since the 1970s) or in Singur in West Bengal (2006), most often the money is given singly to a male "head of household". In the case of the Narmada displacements, that "head of household" has even been as young as a thirteen year old boy. One result of the displacements due to the building of the Bargi Dam on the Narmada was the influx of rural women into prostitution in nearby Jabbalpur city. Even when that does not happen, the shift from an agricultural to a non-agricultural economy is traumatic, and women lose much of their voice in family level decision making as men control the money.

II. THE LOGIC OF GREATER EMPLOYMENT

As opposed to the hope of the supporters of globalisation, greater employment for women in the new industries like textile and food-processing in the 1990s, instead of breaking the patriarchal hold reintensifies gender division of labour and their deskilling led to wider wage gap. The demand for greater female labour has come because female labour is seen as cheaper and safer than male labour. Capital intensive industries, not women, are taking away men's jobs. Women of female-headed households, about one-third in India, have to go for salaried employment in order to feed themselves and their family members. Poverty is another reason why the older patriarchal model, where the woman was expected to be an unpaid housewife, no longer operates. Among the so-called "middle classes", women's employment has gone up as lifestyles change, as greater education leads to greater expectations, and as globalisation itself needs more consumers.

A survey (1985-1990) of export oriented industries carried out across 165 countries, showed that though the majority of new entrants in the industries were women they face gender disparity at almost every step. In this process of feminization of poverty - on one hand the rich are truly getting richer while the poor grow poorer, and on the other hand women constitute a disproportionate part of the poor. A noted feminist economist remarked in a study of the 1990s that "FTZs and EPZs thrive on young women's super-exploitation". (Patel)

III. Urbanization and its Impact

One of the important dimensions of the recent globalization process is, there is a huge amount of capital in the developed capitalist world, which wants to find new areas of investment. At the same time, in countries like India, where there have been some amount of capital accumulation, both the local capitalist class and the upper layer of the salaried want access to the consumer goods and services available in the developed countries. So a massive urbanization process has begun in India, with funding from the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, as well as numerous private capitalist consortiums. The steps include huge outlays for building residential areas, office complexes, shopping malls and supermarkets, road widening to facilitate the new cars coming in, more expensive varieties of public transportation (e.g., the proposal that Calcutta should have an elevated monorail). The boom in car manufacturing and selling, and the boom in real estate, were the crucial driving forces of the urbanization process. But everywhere, whether in Calcutta, Bombay, or Delhi, the bottleneck for this dream of unimpeded beauty was the existence of the urban poor. In India, the urban poor were essential for the urban rich. They provide services, from road side tea stalls to domestic maids, from small food shops for the other poor (who in turn provide services for the rich) to pavement hawkers who have so far sold goods at lower prices (since they have little establishment cost) to the lower middle classes. Many of them live in terrible slums, not because they like it, but because that is the only option open to them. And everywhere, development now meant targeting these layers of urban poor. This is done in open contravention of Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees right to life and livelihood, as well as of India's accession to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), whose articles 2, 11, 12, 13 and 15 are being flouted. In Bombay, nearly 80,000 slums are going to be "rehabilitated" so that airport expansion and modernisation can take place. In one such slum, Gaodevi, which is one of the poorest slums (housing 85000 families), private builders are moving in, trying to buy up the property from the slum dwellers before the state comes in, presumably in order to do a spot of profitable real estate deal. But locals are not happy. Vijaya Muthu argued that relocation to some far away place would not benefit them. She also said that many of the women living in the slum worked as domestic help in the city and therefore could not afford to be relocated very far away. "Bring on the bull dozers. We will not move so easily," Vijaya says. (Meena Menon) Yet with land at a premium in Bombay, that is inevitably what the government would do at best.

In 2006, a Supreme Court order paved the way for the sale of 602 acres of land owned by textile mills in the heart of a city where prices are high even by world standards. The land will be used to build expensive shopping malls and high-end apartments for the affluent few. The court ruling immediately affected 285 acres. Under Development Control Rules (1991) 58, the vacant mill land was to be allocated according to "a one-third formula"—one third of affordable homes for mill workers, one third for public use, including parks, and one third for commercial use. According to this legal provision, Mumbai municipal authorities were to guarantee 400 acres of mill land for open space and for public housing.

In 2001, using a loophole in the Maharashtra Town and Planning Act 1966, DCR 58 was amended to DCR 58 (I), which stated: "Only land that is vacant on mill properties, that is, with no built-up

structure, would be divided by the one-third formula". With this legal sleight of hand, the way was opened to sell most prime land to private developers, leaving just 133 acres for public housing and recreation.

The amendment allowed the National Textile Mills to be sold in 2005 for \$US158 million to the Delhi-based builder DLF in what was one of India's highest priced real estate sales. Another mill Kohinoor was sold for \$95 million to a company, reportedly owned by two leading Mumbai politicians. The Supreme Court ruling has upheld these deals and opened the door for further land sales.

In West Bengal, ruled since 1977 by the Left Front, the picture was not different. What was different was that because of the leftist past, there was a degree of militancy. Developmental discourses of the World Bank have led in fact to a sustained pumping out of money from the poorer to the richer countries and from the poor to the rich in every country. So how has development been tackled in West Bengal? How are the poorest of the poor availing of the safety net?

The Development paradigm has created a uniform model of urbanisation. The "middle class" is being redefined, so the new middle class (i.e., the well paid salariat, especially those in the IT and IT enabled sectors), tempted to copy a western model of living (shopping malls, electronic gadgets, semi-cooked food bought from shops, or eating out relatively regularly) no longer needs the hawkers, the slum dwellers providing part time domestic help, and the rest. Moreover in the languages of power, the people evicted/ to be evicted were all illegal occupants.

The first major charge came in November 1996, when a project called Operation Sunshine saw around 100,000 pavement hawkers being evicted from their livelihoods. Though most hawkers were male, and hence the movement was mostly male dominated) many women who were connected to street hawkers, including women who supplied food to the hawkers, women who manufactured at home many of the goods sold by the hawkers, as well as the family members of the hawkers themselves, suffered a deep negative impact. Hawking was not ultimately abolished, but it came to be regulated through a symbiosis between the state, and an association that, developing originally from a Hawkers' movement, became an institutionalized bureaucracy. Within the bureaucratic structure, women seem to have had no space. (Bandyopadhyay)

The beginning of the 21st century saw large-scale projects of eviction of illegal squatters. One major test case was the Tolly Nallah eviction. The Chief Minister has gone on record saying: "Where is the problem in accepting a minor loss of 4000 people for a development project [Tollynallah Metro Rail] that is proposed for the benefit of 4 lakhs of people? (Krishna Roy)" In 2002, the NNPM brought out a pamphlet highlighting the gender dimensions of these evictions. The following narrative is mainly based on that pamphlet (NNPM: 2002). Women were major victims, especially in the evictions at Beliaghata and Tolly's Nullah. 1100 shanties were demolished in and around Tolly's Nullah in South Calcutta, after landing the Rapid Action Force (created originally to tackle terrorists) and after using tremendous violence. Most of the women were employees in middle class houses as domestic help. After the first round of evictions, 147 families had taken shelter in a godown. Anima Chanda recounted that they had been given eviction notices only 15 days before the forced eviction occurred. Rekha Kundu remarked that police had broken up her home with great brutality. One woman told Maitreyi Chatterjee, convenor of Mancha that the RAF had urinated on her bed while throwing her stuff out. They also recounted that as a result of the timing of the eviction some 300 children, including some who were preparing for their Class X test examinations, faced an uncertain future. The women tried to fight on, by organising a common kitchen, which became the symbol of collective resistance. However this symbol is not free of gender stereotype. Here too, Maitree members campaigned both before and after the evictions, and assisted the victims in organising their rehabilitation, including in running a community kitchen, as a result of which, when the police

broke up the kitchen, Maitree members were among those arrested. On October 2, 2001, on Gandhi Jayanti and immediately after observing World Housing Day, the police smashed that kitchen, even though it was located in a place outside the distance marked off by the police. Maitree immediately adopted a resolution condemning it.

Evictions have occurred in all major metros. But even when we consider the infamous Turkoman Gate evictions during the Emergency (1976), we should remember that the government was condemned for relocating the people so far away. Repayment of debt and interest becomes the paramount fiscal task of all governments. The attack on “subsidies” ensures that social security is heavily reduced. (Chossudovsky) At the same time, the fact that a supposedly progressive regime like West Bengal has a brutal policy also needs to be stressed. In 2002, the Sachar Commission Inquiry Report stated that there have never been such brutal evictions as in West Bengal.

On December 10, 2002, police in Calcutta unleashed brutality on shanty dwellers in the Beliaghata Canal area. A large number of people were evicted from the only homes they had ever known, for the crime of being “illegal squatters”, in a country where a huge number of people live below the poverty line and where the idea of a room of one’s own is a distant dream for most men and women. Protesters were beaten up, and over a hundred were arrested, including Sujato Bhadra, former General Secretary of the Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights, West Bengal, Shaktiman Ghosh of the Hawkers Sangram Committee, and Pranab Bandyopadhyay, veteran Gandhian and local community activist. Subsequently, the shanties were set on fire. It was symbolic, that the Left Front Government chose Human Rights Day as the latest date for eviction. It sent out a message that the squatters and such other people do not merit human treatment. Once more, thousands of women were among those evicted. During our visit to the area, we talked with many of them. They had been living in those slums for four decades. Indeed, many had been born there. They worked in areas within walking distance, because often they did not have the money to pay the daily bus fare.

In West Bengal, the process of evictions and job losses of the poor in the name of development has been temporarily halted after the severe electoral reverses of the Left Front in 2009. But the Calcutta High Court’s orders, such as permitting the banning of “non-licensed” hand-pulled rickshaws, banning the (genuinely environmentally terrible) auto rickshaws without ensuring that the people who drive them get proper subsidies so that they can buy more eco-friendly models of auto rickshaws (using Compressed Natural Gas rather than an oil mix that releases huge quantities of poisonous fumes), and the other attempts at urban beautification that systematically target the urban poor, mean that the attacks of globalization on life and livelihood have not really stopped. And each set back enabled the rulers to attack more brutally. The initial success of Operation Sunshine emboldened the government so it could launch the eviction attacks at Tolly Nallah and Beliaghata. The successes there in turn made them think they could take on the entire rural communities, and build Special Economic Zones by taking over peasant land. This finally led to their hubris, but that will have to be discussed separately. West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee explained that his party was opposed to globalization only insofar as a handful of countries benefited from it. So as long as the capitalists of India also make a killing, it is good.

IV. IN PLACE OF A CONCLUSION

There is no conclusion to this paper, because it describes a situation that is still unfolding. Globalisation has met a global check, with the economic crash of 2008. At the same time, there have been local level struggles. The anti-SEZ, anti-globalisation struggles in India had mixed fortunes. Historically, people in such struggles have turned to the left parties. But the left was nationally a

supporter of the Congress between 2004 and mid-2008, while in its main turf, West Bengal, it played a role worse than the Congress. So the anti-globalisation campaign was harvested by the TMC. (Chattopadhyay and Marik). But the votes for the TMC should be seen primarily as votes against globalisation. The urban as well as the rural poor voted en masse. Many women who often did not care to turn out for the vote did so this time. It is unlikely that they will be satisfied with what is being done now. So the next chapter in this unfolding story of resistance to globalisation is still to be written.

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