

CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCING PATRIARCHY AND GENDER HISTORY

In today's world, there has been a lot of study on gender and gender roles in the society. One of the reasons for this can be attributed to feminists who studied women vis-à-vis men in the society. As the studies progressed it was found that most of the societies in the world are dominated by men. The histories of different countries and culture are all about the history of men and what they had achieved. These histories were written by men and they wrote that which they assumed to be important. Some of the works which are mostly used in studying history, to name a few, are the works by Edward Gibbon¹, C.J.H. Hayes², Henry Beveridge³, Arnold J. Toynbee⁴. In these works it can be seen that women's participation in history was totally neglected and they were rather pushed to the background. Women's participation in the evolution of society and the fact that they were partners in the process of civilization were completely ignored. The authors of the traditional histories shared the positivist image of the masculine, a set of superior dominating characteristics even though they were living in different countries. Judith Zinsser observed that 'a brief survey of some of the "great historians" from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries shows the ways in which the realities of women's past disappeared in the denigrating, stereotypical portraits painted of individuals, and in the rhetorical uses made of women in the abstract.'⁵ However, when women like

¹ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, (Hartfordshire, 1998)

² C.J.H. Hayes, *Modern Europe to 1870*, (Delhi, 3rd Indian reprint, 1998)

³ Henry Beveridge, *A Comprehensive History of India*, (New Delhi, 6th reprint, 1974)

⁴ Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History* (New York, 1962)

⁵ Judith P. Zinsser, *History & Feminism*, (New York, 1993) p,7,9

Mary Wollstonecraft, Sheila Rowbotham⁶ and others began to look for the women in history they came to know more about their history and how they were hidden in the writings of history and how they were subordinated. They also realised that they were subordinated primarily due to the influence of patriarchal ideas in the recording and writing of history.

The word patriarchy which is frequently used by feminists and writers literally means the rule of the father or the 'patriarch' in a family where the eldest male is the head of the family and controls his wife, children, other members of the family and slaves⁷. According to Gerda Lerner, the period of the establishment of patriarchy was not one event but a process which developed over a period of nearly 2500 years from approximately 3100 to 600 BC.⁸ As time passed the word patriarchy came to be generally used to refer to male domination in the family, society, polity etc whereby men are the decision makers in all aspects of life. It is a system of social structures and practices in which men selfishly dominate and exploit women to their own satisfaction. It can also be said to be an ideology in which men are seen as superior to women, that women are and should be controlled by men and that they are part of men's properties.⁹

Patriarchy can be seen in almost all the societies in the world. But it should be noted that its nature is different in different societies, in different classes in the same society and also in different periods of history. For instance, the practice of *purdah*, (the veil used by Hindu and Muslim women to cover their faces), which is

⁶ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (London, 1992); Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History*, (New York, 1974)

⁷ Kamla Bhasin, *What is Patriarchy*, (New Delhi, 1994) p,3

⁸ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York, 1986) p,8.

⁹ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, (New York, 1993) p.3,4

one of the forms for subordinating women can be different for women of different region. It can also vary for Muslim and Hindu women. This custom can also differ according to the changes in time. An example for this can be inferred from the days of the Taliban in Afghanistan when all women were forced to cover themselves from head to toe even covering their faces, forbidden to work and leave the house without a male escort. But after the fall of the Taliban, women have been allowed to return to work and the government no longer forces women to cover themselves.¹⁰ However women still faced a lot of problems and discrimination. Another example for the difference of subordination of women through the changing times can be also seen in the case of widow remarriage. Traditionally in Indian society, widows were not allowed to remarry. However as time passed the Widow Remarriage Act (Act XV of 1856) was passed in which widows could remarry without any fear,¹¹ although the societal acceptance of this was a different matter. So though the function of patriarchy may vary, yet the concept remains the same. In all patriarchal societies, economic, political, religious, social and cultural institutions are by and large controlled by men.

The family, which is the basic unit of society, can be said to be the most patriarchal. A man is assumed to be the head of the family and it is he who controls women's labour or production and mobility. Decisions about reproduction are also generally under the control of the male members. This has been noted by Kathleen A. Lahey when she wrote, "Most women procreate and nurture under conditions of such unrelenting male control that it is fair to say that all of women's reproductive

¹⁰ www.afghan-web.com/woman

¹¹ Shailly Sahai, *Social Legislation and Status of Hindu Women*, (Jaipur, 1996) p.21

arrangements are subject to some form of patriarchal domination.”¹² The mother is also made to internalise the belief that she should be under the authority of the husband. Hence it is from this unit that the first lesson of patriarchy is taught and where a hierarchical system is created. The family not merely mirrors the order in the state and educates its children to follow what is being taught, it also creates and constantly reinforces that order.¹³ When the children follow this order, the next generation is socialized into those patriarchal ideas through the family.

In the religious sphere it can also be seen that all established religions in the world are patriarchal as they regard male authority as supreme. In Brahmanical and Vedic teachings women were described as property. The Bhagavad-Gita places women, *vaisyas* and *shudras* in the same category and describes them all as being of sinful birth, and punishment for killing either a woman or a shudra is the same.¹⁴ The *Atharva Veda* has said that women should be kept away as sinfulness, deceit and ignorance are inherent in them.¹⁵ In Islam also, women had no recognised place. They were treated like properties bought by a price. Women also cannot be a *kazi*. “Women are like jewels are admired and sought after, but should be protected and guarded lest they be stolen. They are property, valuable property, but really not persons, and must not take upon themselves the prerogative of persons who are after all exclusively male.”¹⁶ The *Quran* also said that “men are superior to women on account of the qualities in which God has given them pre-eminence and also because

¹² Kathleen A. Lahey, “Celebration and Struggle: Feminism and Law” in Angela Mies & Geraldine Finn (ed), *Feminism, From Pressure to Politics* (Jaipur, 2002) p.104

¹³ Gerda Lerner, *op. cit.* p.217

¹⁴ Neera Desai & Maithreyi Krishnaraj, *Women and Society in India*, (Delhi, 1987), p.34

¹⁵ Bibekananda Das & L.N.Dash, *The Feminine Gender*, (New Delhi, 1995) p, 61

¹⁶ *ibid*, p.64

they furnish dowry for women."¹⁷ Patriarchal idea is also seen in Christianity. The Old Testament of the Bible placed women in a secondary position. In today's church also a lot of discrimination is seen against women. In the church women play an important role but very often they are given a secondary position. Though some churches have allowed women to become a minister / pastor, yet majority of the churches including the churches in Mizoram still have not permitted women to be ordained ministers and elders.¹⁸ Hence women cannot occupy the position of decision makers. So it can be said that all major religions have been interpreted and controlled by men. Women are hardly seen in the forefront. It is always the men who have defined morality, ethics, behaviour and even law. So in all religions the world over women are subordinated and pushed to the background.

Men also control the economic institutions. In Asian countries where majority of the people live in rural areas, land is an important significant form of property. Land determines a person's economic well being, social status, and political power¹⁹. Men are the ones who own most of the land and hence they tend to have more power than women and very often women had to be subservient to them. So, women had to be dependent on the male members of the family and had to be under their authority. Even if they happen to have some land, they hardly have any control over it. Ownership of land does not necessarily mean control over of the land.²⁰ Some women might have access to the land, but they hardly have any rights over it. In matrilineal societies also, it is found that even though women may inherit

¹⁷ Quoted in Simone de Beavoir, *The Second Sex*, (New York, 1984) p,115

¹⁸ B.Lalrinchhani, "Christianity and Women in Mizoram:A Study of the Impact of Christianity on Women in Lunglei District", Unpublished M.Phil dissertation, NEHU, 1998

¹⁹ Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own* (New Delhi, reprinted, 1998) p,xv

²⁰ *ibid.* p,12

the land, they could not dispose of it or take action on it as they wished. They had to have the consent of the brothers or uncles in the family. This becomes evident from the existing studies on the matrilineal societies like the Khasis and the Garos. Among the Khasis, women have no power or authority over the inherited property without the consent of the male members like the brothers or uncles.²¹ Among the Garos also, although the property is registered in the wife's name, the husband has the power to override her decision and wishes and women are under the control of their husbands.²² Women who work in the field had to toil for long hours and when they return to the house, they again had to do the many household chores without having any rest. In today's world many women are employed in offices. However in these cases it is seen that despite having a career outside the home they still have to look after the family. Hence they had to work outside to supplement the family's income and also had to bear the responsibility of being a mother. In spite of working hard for the family, the household works are not considered to be productive work as it is seen as personal work rather than an economic activity. If they did not happen to work outside, the chores which kept them busy all day long were not considered to be labour and therefore such women are often referred to as non-working women. It should be remembered that women maintain the other members of the family and makes it possible for them to reproduce the means of life through labour.²³ However women's role as producers, rearers of children and housework as mentioned is not considered to be an economic contribution. Women also have no control over their

²¹ Cerilla Khonglah, "Khasi Women and the Indigenous Question" in Walter Fernandes & Sanjay Barbora (ed), *Changing Women's Status in India Focus on the NorthEast* (Guwahati, 2002) p 169

²² Caroline R. Marak, "Matriliney and Education among the Garos" in Walter Fernandes & Sanjay Barbora (ed), *ibid.* p,161

²³ Sheila Rowbotham, *op cit.*, p,xxix

own production. They often had to submit whatever they earn to their husbands or to the male head in the family.²⁴ Even if both the husband and wife are earning, the wife's earnings are mainly used for family maintenance while men kept back their income for spending on food and drinks.²⁵ So it can be said that women have little access to resources and also have little control on the distribution of the products of their labour. They also have no control on reproduction. The numbers of children were often determined by the husband.

In political system also, it is seen that women rarely come to the forefront. The reason for women's exclusion in the polity was mainly because women were considered to have no reasoning power and that they were inferior. Aristotle reasoned that as males were superior and female inferior so men rule over women.²⁶ Moreover very often women were economically dependent on men and had no resources of their own. Since they did not have an earning to fall back on they were regarded to be of no significance and would not be able to contribute to the society. Moreover, it was believed that politics belongs to the public sphere where intrusion of women is not welcomed.²⁷ Hence, the structures and institutions of the state have been made by men and embody their interest rather than those of women. It took a long time even in the west for women to get suffrage. Even in the United States of America, when it was debated whether the American Indians should be able to cast their vote, the issue of women was not debated at all. There was no need felt even to mention or justify that while women were counted among the whole number of free

²⁴ Dr. Santosh, *Cultural Pattern and Economic Participation in Women* (New Delhi, 1996) p.86

²⁵ Bina Agarwal, *op. cit.*, p.28-30

²⁶ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* (New York, 1993) p.6

²⁷ Kiran Saxena (ed) *Women and Politics*, (New Delhi, 2000) p.21,22

persons in each state for purposes of representation, they had no right to vote and to be elected to public office.²⁸ It was only in the 20th century that women the world over received the right to vote. This shows that women were not regarded to be citizens and their status was lower than that of the men. As women were regarded to be inferior and devoid of reasoning power, they were excluded from the important decision making bodies. This idea is reflected even in the constitution making bodies of India and USA. In India, the members of the drafting committee of the constitution were A.K.Ayyar, N.G.Ayyar, Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, Dr.K.M.Munshi, M.Saadulla, B.L.Mitter, D.P.Khaitan and N.M.Rao²⁹ who are all men. This has to be seen in the context of the fact that women participated in large numbers in the Indian National Movement, and there were educated and qualified women too. It also needs to be asked that even though there were women members in the Constituent Assembly, did their voice make a very big difference in the field of gender concerns? The Constitution of USA was also drafted by representatives of twelve states³⁰ who were referred as the founding fathers which showed that they were all men. Thus the state constitutions, laws and other ordinances of the countries are all drafted and decided by the male members of the society without considering the opinions of the women. The exclusion of women as decision makers and denying them the right to vote indicates that the state consider women as unfit members of the polity. There

²⁸ Gerda Lerner, *The ... of Feminist Consciousness, op. cit.*, p.8

²⁹ V.D.Kulshreshtha's *Landmarks in Indian Legal and Constitutional History*, Revised by B.M.Gandhi (Lucknow, 2005) p.349

³⁰ S.E.Morison, *The Growth of the American Republic* Vol.One (USA, 1970) p.245

are some women who are seen in the political field. It was said by feminists that women who took part in Marxist-Leninist organizations were often the wives or lovers of male leaders and their opinions tend to be indistinguishable from those of their mentors.³¹ In India too we see that Indira Gandhi was an important Prime Minister.³² There are also other prominent leaders in many Asian countries like Benazir Bhutto, Sirimavo Bandarnaike, Khaleda Zia and Corazon Aquino. But when studied closely it can be seen that these women are visible due to their association with some male political personalities. If the life of Indira Gandhi is carefully studied, one sees that she was carefully groomed by her father Jawaharlal Nehru. This is revealed in the many letters sent by Nehru to her daughter Indira.³³ In the life of Benazir Bhutto it is a known fact that after she completed her studies in Oxford, she wanted to join Foreign Service. But her father Z.A.Bhutto insisted that she contest the elections and at the time since she was not very experienced she assisted her father as an advisor and later became the Prime Minister of Pakistan.³⁴ Indian women politicians also perceive their participation in politics as being supportive of the activity of their male family members, husbands, brothers and fathers.³⁵ They were active in politics but the structure and pattern of gender relationship was not disrupted. They were involved in politics with the consent of their male family members. Vijaylakshmi Pandit, one of the pioneer Indian women politicians also

³¹ Alison M.Jagger, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, (New Jersey, 1983), p.232

³² N.B.Ghodke, *Indira Gandhi* (Jaipur, 1987); Don Moraes, *Mrs Gandhi* (New Delhi, 1980)

³³ Sonia Gandhi (ed), *Freedom's Daughter, Letters between Indira Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru* (Delhi, 1992)

³⁴ www.storyofpakistan.com/person

³⁵ Vijay Agnew, *Elite Women in Indian Politics*, (Delhi, 1979) p,138

acknowledged that she was able to participate in politics because her husband agreed and encouraged her to do so.³⁶ So it can be said that women's involvement in politics showed the spirit of cooperation and not of competition with men. Moreover it can be asked whether they had really challenged patriarchal system. This can be questioned as they had the conventional attitude and were not mobilized on the basis of personal gain or from a desire to emancipate women or to demand an equal share of political status and prestige. There are some women in politics like Margaret Thatcher and Golda Meir who did not have significant relations with other prominent men but it should be noted here that they also functioned within the structure and principles which were laid down by men which was an accepted framework. If they had questioned or tried to undermine patriarchy it can be wondered whether they would have been welcomed by other members of their party. Thus it becomes clear that women hardly have any place in the political institutions and hence "in no country do women have political status, access, or influence equal to men's."³⁷

Thus it can be said that in a patriarchal society men have to a certain degree, a sense of freedom. But on women, a 'cultural lobotomy'³⁸ is performed in which men undermine women in their physical and intellectual capacities under the most exploitative conditions. Hence there are divisions, distinctions and oppositions in the society. Patriarchal knowledge systems are also seen to emphasise specialization, to

³⁶ *ibid.*, p,139

³⁷ Barbara Nelson & Najma Chowdhury(ed), *Women and Politics Worldwide* (Delhi, 1997) p.3

³⁸ Ruby Rohrlich-Leavitt, *Women Cross Culturally – Change and Challenge*, (Chicago, 1975) p,286

be narrowly compartmentalized and fragmented and unable to see the wholeness of phenomena.³⁹

As patriarchy is seen in almost all societies in the world, many writers have debated over its origin or why women were subordinated. There were some anthropologists and historians who were known as the maternalists who assumed that the family had originally been matriarchal in nature. They postulated their theory from the evidence of mother-goddess figures in many ancient religions and said that this proved the existence of female power in the past.⁴⁰ To prove that matriarchy had existed they cite the status of Iroquois women who they claimed had powerful public role in controlling food distribution and in the Council of Elders.⁴¹ However, other anthropologists when studying about these people found out that the Iroquois women never held the office of the leaders of the tribes and never became chiefs. According to Lerner, the maternalists who talked of matriarchy where women subordinate men could not cite anthropological, ethnological or historical evidence. They based their assumptions on myth and religion.⁴² Moreover when further studies were carried out, it was found that most of the societies which were said to be matriarchal were instead matrilineal and matrilineal where women did not have political power and all authorities were not vested in them. There were many societies where a sort of egalitarian system was found and this was usually seen among hunting / gathering tribes which are characterized by economic interdependency. This can still be seen among the Kalahari Bushmen where men

³⁹ Alison Jagger, *op.cit.*, p.367

⁴⁰ Gerda Lerner, *Theof Patriarchy, op.cit.*, p.28 ff

⁴¹ *ibid.*,p.30

⁴² *ibid.*, p.31

hunt and women are the gatherers and among the Eskimos the raw materials to be used for hunting were processed by women⁴³. This economic interdependency does not mean that women and men are equal and as Margaret Mead has shown that men and women are not taken as equal in any culture of the world.⁴⁴ In some societies power is shared between the women and men and in some groups women greatly influence the power of men. However a matriarchal society where women held power over men and made all the important decisions in all aspects of life is not to be found.

It has also been said that women were subordinated by men 'by reason of his greater strength, his stronger sex drive, his insistence upon exogamous marriage, or some similar reasons relating to his greater sexuality or aggressiveness.'⁴⁵ However, this has to be examined closely. Men appear to be stronger physically as they were conditioned right from childhood to be strong and were taught by the father and other male elders so as to make them appear strong and brave. Researchers have found that "fathers sex-type children more than mothers. They treat sons and daughters more differently and enforce gender role expectations more vigorously than mothers do."⁴⁶ The question of aggressiveness also cannot be ascertained as the level of aggressiveness is not clear. Hence the traits which are placed on men seem to be socially determined rather than biologically determined. Therefore the male character traits cannot be used for subordinating women. So it needs to be

⁴³ Bibekananda Das & L.N.Dash, *The Feminine Gender*, (New Delhi, 1995) p.45

⁴⁴ Margaret Mead, *Male and Female*, (London, 1950) p.8

⁴⁵ Ruby Rohrlich-Leavitt, *op.cit.*, p.286

⁴⁶ Nancy Chodorow, "Gender, Relation and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective" in *The Polity Readers in Gender Studies* (Delhi, 2002) p.45

questioned whether male subordination of women has been physically conditioned or socially conditioned.

While some feminists have accepted that women's subordination was because of men's greater physical strength, F.Engels in his work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*⁴⁷ had postulated that women's subordination is historically related to the development of private property and emergence of a class society. Before private property and wealth were accumulated, there existed the mother right. The division of labour was also clearly drawn. "The men went to war, hunted, fished, provided the raw materials for food and the tools necessary for these pursuits. The women cared for the house, and prepared food and clothing; they cooked, weaved and sewed. Each was master in his or her own field of activity; the men in the forest, the women in the house."⁴⁸ In case of separation also, men could take the objects or the tools which were used by them for hunting or working and the cattle while women could retain household goods.⁴⁹ Inheritance and lineage were drawn from the mother's side. But as wealth increased through domestication and owning of slaves and private property became more prominent, surplus was produced in areas controlled by men. Men then wanted their wealth to be under their name and to be inherited by their sons. So monogamy for women and the bondage of women to men was insisted upon and thus the mother right was overthrown and this was described by Engels as the *world-historic defeat of the female sex*.⁵⁰ Patriarchy then became to be enforced and women became dependents on men which enabled

⁴⁷ F.Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, (Moscow, reprint, 1977)

⁴⁸ *ibid.* p.155

⁴⁹ *ibid.* p.55

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p.57