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by LEE HARVEY

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PART 3 GENDER

3.7 Joanna Liddle & Rama Joshi—Daughters of Independence

3.7.1 Introduction

Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi (1986) undertake an ethnographic and historical analysis of the impact of class and caste on women's subordination in India. Their ethnographic study looks at the lives of professional women. They locate these women's experiences 'in the context of the social structures in which they occur to show that the experiences are not merely personal and individual but part of a wider pattern of social relations' (Liddle & Joshi, 1986, p. 10).

The ethnographic study is paralleled by an historical analysis. Their approach to the history of women's oppression is similar to that of Mills (see section 2.4). The substantive question they raise is 'why are women subordinate in the sex/gender system'? They address this through the examination of several less extensive but related questions that address different facets of the overall area of enquiry. For example, they ask, what is the basis of the relationship between gender and caste in India?³⁰ What have been the main influences in freeing women from the constraints of the caste system? What are the social processes that link gender with the particular system of class that began to develop as a result of British imperialist intervention?

The historical analysis addresses both the recent history of colonialism (and nationalism), particularly the impact of the British Raj on upper-caste women, and the longer-term struggle between female and male power principles in the sub-continent.

Liddle and Joshi show that the development of the women's movement in India over the last century, like in Pakistan (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987), has been inextricably linked with the nationalist movement. The organised women's movement, like the nationalist movement, was dominated by the urban English-educated middle class and they tended to see custom rather than men as the prime enemy of women's freedom. The major concerns of the movement, property rights, widow remarriage, dowry and polygamy, primarily affected the higher castes and middle class. Thus, until the mid-1970s, the women's movement, which has waxed and waned with the nationalist struggle, tended both to underplay the impact of gender domination, subordinating it to imperialism, and to neglect the impact of class and caste on women's subordination.

On a longer view, they show that the subordination of women was crucial to the development of caste hierarchy, with struggles over the maintenance of the caste system being associated with constraints on women. The development of a class system had contradictory effects. Although acting to reinforce women's subordination albeit in

different forms, it also provided an escape from the patriarchal caste restrictions for a small number of educated middle class women.

3.7.2 Power

Underpinning all this is the core construct of power. The question of power is crucial for Liddle and Joshi, as it was for Mills in his analysis of American society. While Mills considered power as the exercise of social and political control and linked it with corporate wealth, Liddle and Joshi are concerned with idea of female power. They argue that female power, which has a long history in Asia, is regarded as strong and has been seen as a threat by men. Male dominance over women has been established by suppressing female power. This suppression has occurred in the caste suppression of women and in the patriarchal family organisation, which is neither universal nor natural but has been the site of the struggle to restrain female power. This is contrary to Western notions where females are regarded as 'weak' and in need of protection.

Liddle and Joshi argue that the historical analysis of the female power principle and the opposition to it embodied in the dominant male structures, particularly the patriarchal family, are crucial for both an understanding of the subjects of their ethnographic study and for the lessons that Western feminists can learn from the Indian experience.

Their historical analysis is contingent upon the assertion of a female power principle. It provides the basis for a critical historicist reconstruction that engages dominant ideological forms. They concentrate on reconstructing the history of female power particularly as it relates to family structure and religious culture. Tracing the history of the unique cultural heritage of women in India is not easy as most written history is recorded by men and represents predominantly male concerns. To get beneath the surface of the dominant history requires finding 'alternative sources such as later written history, oral history, archaeological evidence, and surviving religious practices and social organisation' (Liddle & Joshi, 1986, p. 51).

They argue that although the idea of the male as the dominant source of power attained supremacy in India, as it did in the West, this followed a struggle in which the female power principle was accommodated into the patriarchal culture and remained visible (which is what makes it distinct from its Western counterpart). For example, in the residual elements of pre-brahmin religious symbolism the goddess is powerful and not suppressed by the power of male gods. Only in the dominant brahmin religious forms (which suppose the dominance of the male) does the powerful, and usually malevolent, goddess become controlled by her male partner. The result is that given a cultural heritage of female power, male dominance over women is exercised in different ways to that found in the West.

Control over women's power is manifested in the caste system.³¹ Liddle & Joshi undertook an analysis of brahmin religious writings to show how the position of women was related to the concentration of economic power within the caste system. For example, as material prosperity came to be monopolised by the higher castes, women were seen as a potential source of loss of property and wealth as they might marry out of caste. They were therefore refused inheritance rights, reduced in social status and made increasingly dependent on men. This was legitimated by reference to the uncontrollable and damaging power of women, whose strength and unbridled sexuality would threaten the social order. Women's power was used to legitimate the economic concentration of

power in the upper castes (strict control of women was only something the upper castes could afford to do).

The adaptability of brahmin patriarchy is attested to in the way it inverted the legitimation for restrictions on women in the wake of various Muslim invasions (where restriction on upper caste women was then seen as protection from abduction and rape) and in their assimilation, contrary to their basic patriarchal philosophy, of popular goddess cults.

The rise of the middle class, in response to the administrative needs of the British Raj, was based on caste divisions. The urban middle class imposed similar strictures on women as did the rural upper castes and tended to build on caste-based gender divisions (Bhasin, 1972; D'Souza, 1980). Nonetheless, alternative opportunities arose for women through the development of the middle class, which was an embryonic force for change and provided the potential for economic independence for women. It is no accident that the women's movement was led and drew heavily on the urban middle class. However, while it has been possible for educated middle-class women to gain limited access to the professions because the social groups to which they belong are developing a class rather than a caste power and status system, this should not be seen as a march towards modernism in the wake of Western ideas. The class system does nothing to diminish male control and the access of women to the higher echelons of the professions and the freedom that goes with it is still limited by various forms of male control.

3.7.3 Ethnography and professional women

In their ethnographic study, Liddle and Joshi focus on the change that occurs when women struggle to emerge from domestic seclusion to professional employment. Professional women were chosen as subjects because they address the analytic questions of the relationship between gender and class/caste. Their move from high-caste seclusion to professional employment engages questions about the link between caste and gender subordination and allows an insight into what happens when this link is strained, adapted or broken in the transition to a class society. These professional women have been subjected to the dual process of Sanskritisation (restriction of higher caste women) and Westernisation (adoption of Western cultural norms) (Srinivas, 1962).

The ethnographic work, carried out in 1977, involved the researchers talking to 120 college-educated women employed in Delhi in one of four professions; education, medicine, civil service and management. The subjects from a variety of religions, were aged between 22 and 59, and came from most states in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan and from a variety of urban and rural backgrounds. Most of the subjects were selected at random, although this was in order to obtain a wide variety of respondents rather than for purposes of generalisation of statistical results. Liddle and Joshi make no attempt to generalise the findings to other groups nor to claim that professional women represent a vanguard in the struggle for women's freedom from oppression.

The sample of lecturers was selected randomly from one of the two universities in Delhi and three of its related co-educational colleges and came from twenty different subject disciplines although the arts and social sciences predominated. Thirty doctors ranging from house surgeons to professors were similarly selected at random from the staff lists of three state-owned and three private hospitals in Delhi. A similar-sized random sample, taken of all the women civil servants listed as working in Delhi, included

under-secretaries to joint secretaries in fifteen different ministries. The women managers constituted a non-random snowball sample (initially based on graduates of the Delhi Management Department's MBA course) who worked in five private and eight state-owned companies of various sizes. The refusal rate was low at around five per cent.

Data was collected by three methods. First, a structured questionnaire seeking standard classificatory data, mailed to the potential respondents prior to the interview. Second, a semi-structured interview relating to four major areas of enquiry and containing specific questions on actual experiences and the attitudes of others. Third, an unstructured interview with six topic areas and suggested questions designed to explore the respondent's general approach to the position of women, how they saw the social world and their place in it. This interview was sensitive to, and dependent upon, leads provided by the subjects. Besides the authors, a male interviewer was also used to collect information. There were no discernible differences in the kinds of information gathered by the interviewers in respect of their gender or race.

Drawing on the experiences of their subjects, which they quote for illustrative purposes, Liddle and Joshi describe the expectations forced on higher-caste women. These include economic restrictions such as prohibition of work outside the home and restrictions on their sexuality, notably early marriage and a life of penance for widows who are not permitted to re-marry. Their subjects' experiences show that seclusion, although occurring in varying degrees, is about how women should live in a patriarchal society. Seclusion privatises women and restricts them to the domestic sphere thus making them both sexually and economically dependent; effectively making women the sexual property of men (Hartmann, 1981). Liddle and Joshi describe and analyse both the pre-employment controls imposed on the women and also the mechanisms used by men to control professional women and thus maintain male domination in the class structure.

Liddle and Joshi have a wealth of material that they use to explore the emergence of the women from seclusion to professional employment. In practice, their subjects reveal that economic independence and family support are necessary in order for their determination to resist subordination to manifest itself in action. For example, 'Puja Shukla', a brahmin high-caste woman, only broke out of the seclusion enforced on her at the death of her husband. As a result of her determination to write books while secluded in the home, she gained a university lectureship. This resulted in her family changing from implacable opposition to her seeking employment to pride at her prestigious position. Further, from being a brahmin widow she took control of her own sexuality by marrying a non-Brahmin, a foreigner of her own choice.

Nonetheless, while achieving a degree of economic independence and social-class status, women still provide men with status in the class system, albeit in ways different from those in the caste system, but are still subject to restrictions that have essentially the same economic and patriarchal basis. For example, 'Veena Goyal' a financial manager noted

Women aren't suitable for marketing because they have to travel, so I chose an office job in finance in a housing company. The touring aspect is the most satisfying part of the job; when you see work being executed and people living in the houses. But mobility's a great hindrance for women. For instance, on tour they don't see women's motive as work, only immorality. (Quoted in Liddle & Joshi, 1986, p. 138)

3.7.4 Engaging the myths

Liddle and Joshi, similarly to Mills, raise certain preconceptions or myths about the oppression of women in India and provide an alternative analysis based on their ethnographic research as well as a wide variety of documentary sources.

For example, they analyse the myth of the emancipatory impact of British colonialism. The British claimed, and were often believed, to be a liberating force for women in India (in particular, the banning of sati—widow burning). British liberalism in respect of women was, however, less extensive in theory and practice than claimed and, more importantly, it was dependent upon British financial interests. The impact of colonialism was therefore selective and not always progressive, especially in the personal realm. The matrilineal system of the Nayers, for example, was eradicated as a result of concerted legal and economic action by the British, supported by the patrilineal groups, who regarded the Nayar family and its system of inheritance as alien.

Ambiguity was also evident in the nationalist movement's attitude to women's issues. Women's causes were supported when they furthered the nationalist cause but resulted in split support when they posed a direct challenge to male privilege. While female suffrage was supported, the Hindu Code, which related to the personal areas of marriage and inheritance, was resisted. The area of personal law reform exemplified the divergence of nationalist and feminist concerns. The women's movement went into decline following independence, universal suffrage, and a constitutional guarantee of sex equality in all realms of life. However, in practice, women were clearly not as 'free' as men on either the personal or structural levels.

More fundamentally, Liddle and Joshi address some of the cultural ideas, stereotypes and myths that inform the position of professional women in the gender and class hierarchies, examining the context of the development of the myths and the relationship between them and the socioeconomic lives of the women. Their data shows that women become aware of the contradiction between their own experience and the construction of that experience within a male-oriented gender ideology. They know that the stereotypes of women form part of a gender ideology, which is specific to class, cultural and national context. They know that the dominance by men is a social process, not a natural one.

Three major myths were identified by Liddle and Joshi's respondents as contributing to the ideology of gender: women's inferiority, subservience and domesticity. These myths are created, or at least sustained, in a number of specific ways. The idea that women are intellectually inferior or less competent is sustained by the active exclusion of women from many areas of education, training and employment. These restrictions mean that women have less opportunity in employment, which in turn fosters the myth of female domesticity. In turn, the requirement for women to work, unacknowledged, in the domestic sphere, with its inevitable drain on stamina, further fuels the myth of women's weakness. The myth that women are naturally subservient is a legitimation for the existing social order in which men have economic and sexual control. These myths, of course, serve men through greater leisure time, domestic and personal services, priority in education and employment, and gender dominance. And each myth is easily countered empirically, for example, by the everyday sight of working-class women doing heavy labouring jobs on building sites and to powerful images in Indian religion of strong female goddesses.

The women in the study operated on a number of different ways in respect of these myths. While accepting the social (male) construction of femininity they would sometimes regard themselves as deficient when their experiences were at variance with the constructions and thereby collude unknowingly. At other times they would collude consciously 'keeping to themselves the evidence which contradicts men's deficient knowledge of them' (Liddle & Joshi, 1986, p. 194). For example, 'Shikha Munshi' said

Men often can't handle an intelligent woman. They expect them to be inferior. If they're not they can't be natural with them. Senior colleagues will not talk to me in Japanese because I speak it better. I have to play down my ability, otherwise it creates problems. (Quoted in Liddle & Joshi, 1986, p. 178)

In short, Liddle and Joshi's ethnographic analysis shows that men's dominant position in the social hierarchy is far from natural but based on the control of women's sexuality, itself based on the control of economic resources. The impact of the West on women's liberation is at best ambiguous. Women's resistance to oppression in India neither began nor ended with the British women's intervention but had its roots in the Indian social structure and cultural heritage. The psychological basis for women's individual resistance is drawn from the Indian cultural heritage of female power rather than Western 'liberal' ideas. International capitalism binds the gender and social hierarchies together. That women's experiences are not purely personal but are crucially related to the social structure is shown in stark relief when the Indian economy is seen in the context of its subordination to Western financial interests. Ideologically, cultural imperialism introduced the notion of female inferiority into Indian culture. On a material level, the gender division is maintained and legitimated in imperialism by giving men priority in scarcity.

3.7.5 Conclusion

Liddle and Joshi's research leads them to the view that the socio-economic hierarchy and the gender hierarchy are distinct but interrelated aspects of women's subordination. Neither form of oppression is primary. The link between them is historical not logical (Barrett, 1980). In this respect they adopt a dualist socialist feminist approach (Cockburn, 1983) and are opposed to views that argue that the gender hierarchy exists independently of the class hierarchy (Leonard, 1982). Their data shows that isolating either system of oppression leads to a failure to understand the reality of women's lives.

Daughters of Independence is not only a critical study by dint of its analysis of the oppressive structure of Indian society as experienced by women, its critique is also linked to practice. Throughout, the authors refer to the lessons that can be learned from history, not only for Indian women but also for women in the West. These are linked to the particular experiences and tactics adopted by the women in the study who have broken out of the socially constructed role expected of them. The authors argue that whether or not social movements exist for the promotion of women's rights, in the last resort women have to take these demands into their own homes, as these, as much as wider social structures, are sites of oppression. The tactics adopted by the women, and their outcomes, provide data for practical recommendations.

In all cases the women in the sample engaged oppression through individual initiative, although often supported by another member of the family. Sacrifice,

compromise and resistance were approaches adopted by different members of the sample. Sacrifice is encouraged in middle-class society as it is a means of oppressing women and embodies the self-negating ideology of Hinduism. Although essentially inhibiting the woman's potential and freedom, is also a form of resistance in the last resort as it can be used to deprive others as well as oneself. However, it is essentially mutually destructive and is only effective in struggle when used collectively as a form of passive resistance. Compromise is only effective from an established power base, and most women in the sample were already established in their profession before they married. Compromise was managed most effectively when women established their position in the marriage relationship prior to getting married. Not surprisingly, older brides were in the strongest position. Resistance usually takes the form of rejecting the expectations of society and family, particularly by denying marriage or by leaving a marriage relationship when personal oppression becomes intolerable.

The political lessons of India's history and the experiences of the sample indicate that women's liberation requires both collective social change and individual personal change. This involves: first, negotiating changes at a personal level with family members; second, making sure that when alliances are formed with other movements the specific differences between groups is clearly confronted; and third, realising that there are differences between different class groups within the women's movement.

³⁰ In other societies, the constraints on women have been shown by some researchers to be related to their social class position. In India the caste system is confused by the imperialist class system.

³¹ Caste is defined primarily by social honour attained through personal lifestyle. There are four main caste distinctions and thousands of sub-castes that operate at a local level. Social mobility is not achieved by individuals in the caste system but by the rise of a complete sub-caste. This is a slow process. A major feature of the patriarchal caste system was control over women's sexuality, which is more rigid and extreme the higher the caste. So as a sub-caste rises in the hierarchy, the women are more tightly constrained. The men benefit at the expense of the women. Other academics have commented on this phenomenon (Hutton, 1963; Yalman, 1968; Das, 1976) but have not analysed its ideological and material basis.