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Maitrayee Chaudhuri

I
The historical context of the 1938 Sub-Committee on Women

The National Planning Committee (NPC) was established in October 1938 under the Chairpersonship of Jawaharlal Nehru to draw an outline for Independent India's planned development. One of the twenty-nine sub-committees established by the NPC was on 'Woman's Role in Planned Economy'. The formation of the NPC clearly expressed the intention of the Congress to adopt planning as the most effective means for the comprehensive economic development of the new nation. Nehru was probably the most vocal advocate of planning, and was primarily responsible for putting it on the national agenda as the only viable instrument for alleviating the poverty of the Indian people. He was aided by Subhash Chandra Bose, during whose first tenure as Congress President the NPC was constituted. Gandhi, however, was firmly against the planning exercise, and even asked his followers not to cooperate with the Planning Commission, believing as he did that 'the whole of planning is a waste of effort'.

This is only one, and the most obvious, of the conflicts within the national movement about the path of development that the new nation should adopt. Gandhi's view, however, finds no place within the Woman's

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1 Gandhi to Amrit Kaur, 29 June 1939, quoted in Gopal (1975: 247). Gandhi had also written to Nehru: 'I have never been able to understand or appreciate the labours of the Committee . . . . I have not understood the purpose of the numerous sub-committees. It has appeared to me that much money and labour are being wasted on an effort which will bring forth little or no fruits.' Gandhi to Nehru, 11 August 1939 in Nehru (1958: 378-79).

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Role in Planned Economy. Even amongst those who were agreed upon the
significance of centralised planning there was considerable ideological
disagreement on questions of gender, nation, religion, class, development
and the state, to mention but the more salient issues being disputed at that
time. Many of these contradictions have left their mark on the proceedings
of the Sub-Committee on Women (SCW) and its eventual report entitled
Woman’s role in planned economy (WRPE 1947).

This paper will seek to explore the various tensions which have gone into
the making of the NPC and which surface from a reading of the WRPE.
The paper rests on the assumption that the NPC has to be understood as a
concerted effort of the Congress and the Indian business section towards
formulating a policy document for the impending Indian state.

The Congress in 1938 had come to represent the promise of some
meaningful changes. It had done extremely well in the 1937 elections,
winning 711 out of 1,585 provincial assembly seats, with absolute majority
in five out of eleven provinces. For millions of Indians the ‘vote for
Gandhiji and the yellow box’ signified appreciation of patriotic self-
sacrifice, plus some hope of socio-economic change (Sarkar 1983: 349). At
the same time, elections on a wider (but by no means universal) franchise
demanded more money and the cultivation of links with locally dominant
groups, businessmen in towns and landlords and dominant peasant groups
in the countryside.2 Through the period the Congress was under the con-
tradictory pressure of both Left and Right political forces, and the NPC in
a very important sense embodied these conflicting pressures. To quote
Nehru, the NPC was ‘a strange assortment of different types’. There were
‘hard-headed big businessmen’ as well as people who are called ‘idealis-
sts and doctrinaires, and socialists and near communists’ (Nehru 1966: 419).

Indian capitalists, while retaining close ties with elements in the Gandhian
‘Right’, like Patel and Rajaji, had also started cultivating sections of the
Congress ‘Left’. Nehru’s vision of a modern industrialised India fitted
much better with bourgeois aspirations than did the Gandhian evocation of
rural simplicity and handicrafts. And there were enough indications that
Nehru’s socialist flourishes were manageable (Sarkar 1983: 343). In a letter
to the Editor of the NPC on 13 May 1938, Nehru conceded the need to
accept ‘to a large extent the present structure, at any rate as a jumping off
ground’ (Krishna 1945: 49). These developments are significant for under-
standing the process by which the Congress, while fighting the Raj, was

2 Birla contributed Rs. 5 lakhs for the Congress Central Parliamentary Board headed by
Patel, while R.K. Dalmia provided Rs. 27,000 out of Rs. 37,000 raised by the Bihar PCC.
Since such amounts were evidently inadequate (election costs came to at least Rs. 2,000 per
seat), most candidates were expected to provide their own finances—which meant in practice
a clear preference for propertied men. In Bihar, for instance, numerous Kisan Sabha milita-
tants were deprived of nomination under local landlord pressure, and the Congress leader A.N.
Sinha admitted that most of his party candidates came from the zamindari class (Sarkar 1983:
350–51).
slowly becoming the Raj. The realignment between the Congress and the Indian business section also helps make sense of the curious manner in which the WRPE, while presenting a radical, class analysis of the women’s question, also forecloses the possibility of its realisation.

II

The scope of the sub-committee report: Woman’s role in planned economy

On 16 June 1939, the NPC appointed the Sub-Committee on Woman’s Role in Planned Economy (WRPE: 27). The WRPE is a comprehensive account of the status of women in India of that period. It is also an outline of a plan for changing the status of women in Independent India.

The terms of reference of the Sub-Committee, which sought to ‘deal with every aspect of women’s life and work’, were as follows:

This Sub-Committee will deal with the place of women in the planned economy of India, including consideration of her social, economic and legal status, her right to hold property, carry on any trade, profession or occupation and remove all obstacles or handicaps in the way of realising an equal status and opportunity for women. In particular it will confine itself to:

(a) the family life and organisation, and women’s employment in the house and the changes therein in recent years;
(b) marriage and succession and the laws governing these;
(c) the conditions of industrial employment of women and the protection of working women in mines, factories, plantations, workshops and cottage industries as well as domestic employment and retail trade;
(d) social customs and institutions which preclude women from taking her full share in India’s planned economy;
(e) the types and methods of appropriate education to play her due role in household work, in the profession and social and national services; and
(f) any other questions connected therewith (WRPE: 27).³

The terms of reference, though extensive, laid special emphasis on providing women equal opportunities as a matter of right to enable her to take ‘full share in India’s planned economy’. Entry into the production sphere was seen as the key to resolving the unequal status of women. This is a radical departure from the concern of 19th century reformers and early

³ All quotes are in the original language used in the WRPE, despite occasional awkwardness of expression.
nationalists with middle class women's issues stemming wholly from their lives within the family. However, this departure is in turn marked by its own bias, namely the very cursory mention of women in the agricultural sector. Such an omission could have been possible only in a context where this silence could go uncontested. Women in agriculture are not completely invisible from the document, but the kind of detail which characterises the section on women in industry and even in cottage industries is missing.\(^4\) Incidentally, the *Report of the sub-committee on labour* in its terms of reference also clarifies that its scope extends only to 'labour other than agricultural labour, including the problem of employment' (*The sub-committee on labour* 1947: 11, emphasis in original).

Entitled *Woman's role in planned economy*, the 265-page SCW report contains a Preface and Introduction by K.T. Shah, who was also the Editor of the other reports produced by the various sub-committees. The main text is divided into three principal sections: Section 1, on individual status of women, has four chapters, namely, 'Civic rights', 'Economic rights', 'Property rights' and 'Education'. (Why the chapter on 'Education' does not have 'rights' appended to its title we do not know.) Section 2 on the social status of women has two chapters, entitled 'Marriage and its problems' and 'Family life'. Section 3 on miscellaneous issues begins with a chapter entitled 'Miscellaneous', dealing with caste, widows, widow remarriage, widows' home, unmarried mother, abortion, illegitimate child (*sic*), prostitution and traffic, women and children (*sic*) prostitutes, commercial prostitutes, courtesan and temple prostitutes. Then follow the 'Summary statement of policy' (chapter 8), and the 'Summary of recommendations'. The final chapter contains the resolutions of the NPC on the report of the SCW.

The separation of 'Individual status' from 'Social status' in the report hinges on the basic understanding of the SCW that the individual is the legitimate unit of society while the social—understood as 'marriage, family problems, caste and religion'—refers to the encumbrances which impinge upon the individuality of the woman.

The *WRPE* opens with a long Introduction by K.T. Shah, one of the three economists in the NPC (along with Radha Kamal Mukherjee and M. Visvavswaraya). It plays an important role in placing the document, standing between the reader and authors and clarifying its meaning and significance in a way that may even be at variance with the intentions of the report. In this light, the clarificatory remarks made by K.T. Shah about the personnel of the Sub-Committee are telling:

\(^4\) A possible explanation for this neglect could be the *WRPE* view that: 'Already more than 60 per cent of our population depend on agriculture . . . a percentage which the land can hardly support', and that therefore 'fresh avenues of employment to women' should be opened up (*WRPE*: 94).
While the personnel of almost every other Sub-Committee was made of people claiming special knowledge of the subject or personal experience, this Sub-Committee was formed largely of women who might, without injustice, be described as lay persons. They were, no doubt, highly educated and distinguished in the public life of the country by their service or sacrifice; but not all of them could claim personal expertise on all the variety of topics falling within the scope of this Sub-Committee. The results are nevertheless such as would do credit to any body of experts; and that is the only justification for the writer to make such a special mention, which, he hopes, will be found to be neither invidious nor impertinent (WRPE: 24–25).

Notwithstanding their lay status, the members of the SCW, consisting ‘largely of women’, were ‘highly educated’ and ‘distinguished in the public life of the country’ (WRPE: 25), and therefore party to the central ideas of their time. The WRPE in this sense embodies the dominant ideological debates, tensions and ambiguities of the period.

The Introduction begins with the following statement:

This report considers the entire structure of Planned Economy with Woman as the focus. On the ground of examining socio-economic position of woman [sic], the Sub-committee has reviewed every field in which woman operates or should operate, to contribute her share of the nation’s wealth and the people’s well-being. While considering principally the material aspect of Woman’s Role in Planned Economy, the cultural or spiritual position of women under a National Plan, and its reaction on the nation’s life and work is by no means ignored (WRPE: 17).

The deference to women’s ‘cultural’ and ‘spiritual’ role, the significance accorded to the ‘material’ aspects of ‘woman’s role’ and the privileging of the ‘nation’s wealth’ are important cues for entering the text.

III

Perspective and methodological observations

In this paper I seek to read the WRPE as simultaneously the voice of its authors, as a product of a historical period, and as an ideological text which nonetheless contains within it voices that are not intended. That is, the text is a plan document authored within the dominant trend of the national movement (itself containing multiple tendencies) and disclosing the various discourses of the period at work, processed dialogically (Bakhtin 1988: 131). The WRPE is a kind of hybrid sum of institutional and discursive practices bearing on the nation, family, class, gender, religion and community. We have here divergent languages, often encapsulating antithetical
worldviews. We have images of a liberal nationalist worldview, jostling with visions of cultural revivalism and socialist utopias. The hegemony of the liberal nationalist view is finally established, though not without a concerted struggle, with the other views. The WRPE reflects the basic ideological thrust of its time. It contains the ideas of the grand narratives of the West, which had such a powerful impact on the English-educated middle class, but which were interpreted in the specific context of colonialism, a context peculiarly gifted with the potential of endowing new meanings. This potential of transformation is, of course, located in the very process of the skewed development of colonialism.

This paper can in no way do justice to the report. Reading it today, almost sixty years after the SCW was constituted, reading it in the light of the issues which the women’s movement has raised in the last few decades, it is remarkably contemporary. To mention but a few of the issues which were widely debated in the WRPE then, and which have continued to be debated since, the report considered: the nature of household labour and the need to recognise its value (WRPE: 104); the rights of the unmarried woman; the irrelevance of legitimacy for determining the rights of children so far as the state is concerned (ibid.: 204); and even issues like ‘identical moral standards’ (ibid.: 38).

The WRPE is also remarkable as a well-documented status report, the first of its kind, based entirely on primary investigation in an era when such exercises were not the order of the day; and on women, an area where paucity of data continues to be a major problem. This data itself is based on an understanding of the complex ways in which the lives of women are structured by the economic, social, political, cultural and religious spheres, thereby grappling with the perplexities of the woman’s question in Indian society. In this respect, the report puts many studies on women in India of the late 1960s and 1970s in a poor light.

The central focus of the ensuing discussion will be to unravel the key concepts which directly and indirectly shaped the analysis and recommendations of the SCW. This focus unfortunately also forecloses any detailed discussion on the rich body of information contained within the WRPE, and also an analysis of the reasons why the document in a very real sense receded from the public eye, even while planning itself acquired a certain urgency in Independent India.

In our attempt to analyse the text we will identify certain themes which run through it, and which derive from earlier discourses. A reading of the text clearly shows the imprint of the ideas of liberalism and socialism. However, these ideas, whether about the ‘nation’ or about ‘democracy’,

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1 For a discussion on the limits set by colonialism on the articulation of the women’s question in India, see Chaudhuri (1993).

2 Significantly, however, Samya shakti, the journal of the Centre for Women’s Development Studies, carried a summary of the WRPE in the early 1990s (see Kasturi 1991–92).
whether about ‘citizenship’ or ‘family and property’, are not derived unchanged from the earlier discourses but, either in the form of worked-out critiques or class resistances, are incorporated in the discourse itself. To give an example, a critique against unbounded individualism in a liberal worldview and a plea for state intervention are incorporated into the discourse of the WRPE, a discourse which nevertheless is arguing for a liberal social order. This shift of emphasis is never complete, however, and what we observe is a constant but subtle contestation of the concept of ‘individualism’ within the WRPE. This is but one example of the several ways in which the ‘text’ gets inflected by the ‘context’ and whereby the ‘context’ is already textualised.

This dialogic relationship works in a particular fashion in a colonial society where the ‘texts’ offering emancipatory models were alien and Western. We thus also have a tension between nationalistic pride in tradition and the modern commitment to change which the liberal and socialist paths were offering.

Conflicts between these models exist at the ideological level and also at the level of realpolitik (if such distinctions are viable), for instance in the ongoing ambivalence of the Indian business classes to the Congress and the subsequent rapprochement by 1938. Historically we should remember that the communist movement in India was gaining strength, and that the Soviet Union was a great inspiring model for all nationalist movements.\(^7\)

Amidst these various sets of conflicts the woman’s question itself was being defined and redefined. The most explicitly stated (though not hegemonic) model evident in the WRPE for changing the status of women is the socialist model. The argument is that the emancipation of women becomes possible only when women are enabled to take part in production on a large scale, and when domestic duties require their attention only to a minor degree. This had become possible as a result of modern large-scale industry which not only permitted the participation of women in production in large numbers but actually called for it; and, moreover, which also strove to convert private domestic work into a public industry (Engels 1948). The marginalisation of agricultural labourers in the text has already been mentioned. Gandhi would not have approved. Other Congress leaders would not have approved either, but more on account of their conservatism in regard to women than any concern about the logic of ‘modern large-scale industry’.\(^8\)

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\(^7\) In a letter to his daughter Indira, Nehru had written: ‘The argument about the success or failure of the Five Year Plans is rather pointless. The answer to it is really the present state of the Soviet Union. And a further answer is the fact that this plan has impressed itself on the imagination of the world. Everybody talks of “Planning” now... the Soviets have put magic into the word’ (Nehru to Indira, 9/7/1937, in Nehru 1962: 887).

\(^8\) The dithering and stalling on the Hindu Code Bill and the subsequent resistance by the Congress members are good indicators of this conservatism (see Chaudhuri 1993).
While the socialist model is the one which is most frankly advocated, emphasis on key liberal concepts like ‘citizenship’ (WRPE: 36–38), the ‘individual as the primary unit’ (ibid.: 153) and ‘private property’ (ibid.: 118) runs through the WRPE. This is but one of the lines of conflict regarding political options. The other discernible tension is that between the avowed aim of the WRPE to reorganise society by doing away with the past, with the family and existing forms of marriage, and stray comments within the WRPE which reaffirm the past, the gendered nature of the family and the role of traditional religion.

The SCW, like the other sub-committees of the NPC, was trying to outline a society based on secular principles. That this was not an issue likely to pass uncontested is clear in the report not only from manifest mention of differences (WRPE: Appendix I, p. 232), but also from the manner in which issues such as the Uniform Civil Code (ibid.: 229–31) are presented, and in evidently ambiguous views regarding religion.

The following exercise of analysing the WRPE will be more or less confined to the set of conflicting lines of thought just identified: (a) the ideas of liberal democracy, centred around the sanctity of the family and private property, and the ideas of socialism, premised on the understanding that the two institutions have to be done away with for the emancipation of women; (b) a vision of the inevitability of historical progress paving way for a new social order, and the historical evocation of a golden past with an enviable record on the status of women; (c) the proclamation of a secular order, that is, a break with religion, and a simultaneous celebration of a past when the true spirit of religion had not yet been tainted; and (d) the prioritisation of the individual on the one hand and the nation-state on the other.

While we will try to focus on these issues separately, compartmentalisation is difficult: these ideas are so densely woven into the text and are so often interworked within the same phrase, sentence or paragraph (as the case may be), that exposition of any one will invariably draw in several others.

Apart from this complex set of ideas is the disconcerting fact that the text is now being read by a particular person with particular orientations almost sixty years after the Committee set down to work. The weight of hindsight is immense and there is no way of suspending the armoury of concepts through which the text is being read: hence this preliminary disclaimer.

IV

Privileging the nation, the individual, the citizen or the worker

The WRPE had separated ‘individual status’ from ‘social status’ (see Section II above) with what seemed a clear preference for the ‘individual’. This
preference is, however, marked by a tension between the unfettered individual free to develop his/her potentialities unhindered by social problems and the call of the nation-state for useful citizens and productive workers. The note of dissent by Miss K. Khandwala argues that the perspective which had informed the SCW to start with had been eventually waylaid by the WRPE (WRPE: 232). The perspective had clearly foregrounded the individual.

The only social status to be recognized in planned society will be that of the individual worker, or the child who has to be the citizen or worker of tomorrow, or of the aged, disabled, defective person, who will have to be dealt with separately. The social status, therefore which presents the most serious question of social reform, will not. I take it, matter at all in planned society. Neither motherhood, nor wifehood, nor, a fortiori, widowhood matter at all (WRPE: 238, emphasis in original).

The SCW accords the individual woman an unequivocal centrality, but what is significant is that the aspects of the individual accorded the highest premium are those of the ‘useful citizen’ and ‘the productive worker’ (ibid.: 36). The underlying assumption is that this usefulness and productivity of the individual is to be evaluated in terms of her contribution to the making of the nation. While societal barriers in the way of women’s progress are sought to be pushed back, the retreat of society and the celebration of the individual are not absolute. For now the nation-state emerges as the central actor and the question of women’s individual progress becomes a question of the nation’s progress. For instance, on education the WRPE writes:

All restrictions which prove a handicap to the free and full development of woman’s personality shall be abolished (WRPE: 219, emphasis added).

On trade unions the view is similar:

Trade unions should accept the principle of equality between men and women and recognize the individual as a unit (ibid.: 114, emphasis added).

On the question of leisure we have:

Every human being is entitled to a certain amount of leisure for self-development. The effect of routine tasks performed monotonously each day has a deadening effect on the individual reducing his or her capacity to contribute to national progress (ibid.: 41, emphasis added).
And again on the matter of recreation:

It is the civic right of every individual to expect from the State suitable parks and open spaces in the city where they may spend their leisure and preserve the health necessary for carrying on their work efficiently (ibid.: 43, emphasis added).

On health we have:

Any steps taken to protect the health of the women workers should not be considered as for their exclusive benefit only, but as taken in the interests of the whole nation (ibid.: 209, emphasis added).

On widowhood:

We are strongly opposed to widowhood being considered as a perpetual condition and every effort should be made by education, social reform and even legal reform, to put an end to the evils that result from such condition. We desire that the widow, instead of being the nation's liability be turned into a [sic] useful member of society . . . (ibid.: 182, emphasis added).

On birth control the document notes that 'from the national point of view, birth control is very important' (ibid.: 175) and,

From the eugenic point of view the Indian stock is definitely deteriorating for want of proper selection as well as due to poverty, malnutrition, etc., factors which are detrimental to the nation's health (ibid.: 175).

Though this tone is not dominant in the WRPE, the Report of the sub-committee on population does read like this for the most part.

Elaborating on the condition of women in industrial employment, the WRPE uses the phrases 'in the interests of social economy' and 'the interests of the community' to argue for 'protective measures' for women working in 'occupations involving disproportionate physical strain' and for 'expectant mothers' in 'industrial or other exacting employment' (WRPE: 45–117). A constant process is under way to ensure the free development of the individual, but also to make sure that this individuality at no point transgresses the interests of the nation. For the point is not to grant rights
for the ‘exclusive benefit’ of the individual but ‘in the interests of the whole nation’ (ibid.: 209).

The interest of the whole nation is itself understood in the particular sense of ‘growth’, the basic value underpinning modern social thought. This is reflected in the chapter on ‘Civic rights’ which argues that: ‘In order to help woman to become a useful citizen and productive worker she must be assured of her fundamental rights’ (WRPE: 209, emphasis added). Apart from the obviously utilitarian vision that informs the WRPE, we have a certain prioritisation of the nation as a collective unit. Social organisations other than the nation are seen as hindrances to the growth of the individual.

The rigidity of the caste system has affected the individual rights of man and woman, by preventing them from marrying outside the caste and thereby limiting their choice (ibid.: 177, emphasis added).

And,

Marriage from a rational viewpoint can no longer be a divine dispensation but a voluntary association of two individuals with rights and obligations attached to it (ibid.: 153, emphasis added).

What we have is a hierarchical placement of the community (caste, religion) at the base (understood as a legacy of the past and therefore transitional until a point when the nation becomes the community), the individual (understood as citizen and worker), and finally the overarching state.

Individual families will and should continue, but as far as the State is concerned, the individual must be the basic unit to which consideration should specifically be given (WRPE: 221, emphasis added).

For in a planned society the basic unit would be the individual. All groups (e.g., the family, the caste), however tied together, must be ‘voluntary associations’ regulated by their own codes (ibid.: 153, emphasis added). This emphasis on choice, on ‘voluntary associations’, is a necessary part of the package of liberal individualism. So we have the ‘right to adopt a child’ (ibid.: 174), an ‘individual right’ which cannot be interfered with, but with the qualification ‘that adoption of a son for purposes of inheritance is undesirable’ (ibid.: 174). Married women must have ‘the right to choose their own nationality in the event of their being married to a non-national,
or residing in Indian States or foreign countries' (ibid.: 43). Similarly, the report opposed those who sought to give 'the woman a vote not in her own right as an individual but as a wife' (ibid.: 37).

The WRPE reflects this emphasis both in content, balance and form. It is significant that Section 1 dealing with 'individual status' is spread over 114 pages (pp. 35–150), including seventy-two pages (pp. 45–117) devoted to 'Economic rights', while Section 2 concerning 'social status' was limited to 46 pages (pp. 151–97). Despite the neglect of women in agriculture, the report's detailed investigation on women's economic life and role is of special significance in relation to planning in Independent India, for the very idea of the woman as a productive worker was subsequently eclipsed in state and academic discourse except with reference to the new middle class working woman. It was only in 1974 that the Committee on the Status of Women in India raised the matter of the invisibility of women workers, and only as recently as the 1993 Census that a concerted attempt was made to both redefine women's work and communicate to the people a more comprehensive understanding of 'work'.

In contrast, the chapter on 'Economic rights' in the WRPE expresses a very clear understanding about the process of marginalisation of women's work and the significance of the notion of a 'right to work'.

The right to work is a claim to something more fundamental than a mere chance of earning an independent income. Out of the total female population of about 180 millions nearly 50 million are wage earners (ibid.: 199).

And:

In both rural and urban areas women of the working classes are recognized as instruments of labour. A fairly large proportion of them are found engaged in all types of manual labour, agricultural, domestic and industrial occupations. This labour must be recognized as a separate unit of production and not as it is today, a corporate part of the family work (ibid.: 199).

Special mention is made of the invisibility of work done in the precincts of the 'home' and the need to recognise household work.

A great many women will confine their activities to the home, in any event, a great part of their work will be done in the home. This home work, though not recognized in terms of money value, is an essential

* For an analysis of the theoretical traditions responsible for the significance attached to the entry of middle class women in the workforce, see Chaudhuri (1982).
contribution to the social wealth of the State and should be recognized as such. The aggregate of social wealth under planned economy will include all kinds of work, whether rewarded in money value or not (ibid.: 200).

As mentioned, we have a substantive thrust on ‘Economic rights’, and an empirical focus on working class women, but an ideological tilt in favour of bourgeois rights—the right of women to hold private property (ibid.: 118), the right of citizenship and the individual woman’s right to choose (ibid.: 37). On the one hand the liberal view contains the socialist position; on the other the nation-state contains the individual.

V

The historical project: The denial and retrieval of the nation’s past

Much of the *WRPE* is about the significance of the period, and about the historical task at hand of defining the nature of the unborn nation-state and the status and place of women in it:

In the world today great changes are taking place, and we are told that this is a period of transitions, so also in India where a new order is being born, not only political but also social and economic (ibid.: 32).

And again:

Circumstances have altered so radically in recent years that the old frame no longer fits the new picture, and hence it has become necessary to make some changes (ibid.: 32).

The present seems to be a time like no other, an epoch irrevocably burdened or blessed with the gift of choice. The phrase ‘new social order’ occurs repeatedly. The social unit for change is the ‘nation’, the legitimate form of self-representation in a world order marked by the simultaneous birth of the sovereign nation-state and a global world. It is within the new global order that the status of each nation was to be judged. This is the broad vision which informs the SCW.

The new order was to be brought in but, as the *WRPE* states, time was needed in order ‘to bridge the gulf between existing conditions and what might seem at first glance to be drastic recommendations’ (ibid.: 32). These ‘drastic recommendations’ would be based on the ‘rational explanation of scientific thought’ for:

An essential characteristic of our time is the rational application of scientific thought and experience to all vital problems and it is in this
spirit, desirous of finding practical solutions, that we have tried to approach each subject (ibid.: 32).

The WRPE today strikes us as remarkable in its spirit of optimism, its faith in unending progress and its belief in the state as an agent of change.

The WRPE shares this utopianism both with the French Enlightenment and the more hard-headed new science of political economy offered by the socialist model, but we also hear in the WRPE echoes of cultural revivalism, a harking back to the past. In this revanchism, however, the hope of society still resides in the future, when the essence of the nation’s past would be realised. Commenting upon the altered circumstances of the modern period and the need for changes the WRPE clarifies that it in no way belittles past traditions:

This does not imply condemnation. It merely seeks to make the system more fitted for the task before it by an effort of conscious planning. It is not our desire to belittle in any way these traditions, which have in the past, contributed to the happiness and progress of the individual and have been the means of raising the dignity and beauty of Indian womanhood and conserving the spiritual attributes of the Indian Nation. We do not wish to turn woman into a cheap imitation of man or render her useless for the great tasks of motherhood and nation-building (ibid.: 32–33, emphasis in original).

Yet notwithstanding this conscious deference to the past and to tradition, the WRPE is marked by a broad view that ‘deleterious social customs’ act as ‘hindrances to women’ (ibid.: 255), and that every custom or usage likely to militate against the freedom and equality of women as citizens and workers must be progressively put an end to. Thus, regarding ‘the idea of the sanctity of marriage’ (ibid.: 153), the WRPE observes that such ideas arose in ‘times when most of the human institutions flourished with the sanction of religion. The domination of religion—doctrinal religion—has done much harm to the individual in the past and continues to harm him today wherever such domination exists. With the growth of a rational outlook on life such a domination is bound to go’ (ibid.: 153). The past must go, but the past must be retrieved; traditions have been a bane for women in the past but they also ‘have been the means of raising the dignity and beauty of Indian womanhood and conserving the spiritual attributes of the Indian Nation’ (ibid.: 33).

VI

Women as emblems of national culture and invented tradition

The constant weaving of the language of cultural revivalism and the language of rationalism, which we witness in the foregoing, is common to much of
nationalist discourse. The WRPE marks a departure from this trend so far as the middle class woman’s experience (as perceived by the middle class man) has not been generalised to encompass the entire gamut of women’s experience. Attention to working class women has necessarily shifted the tenor of the report away from questions of sati and widow marriage, from purdah and cultural identity to the productive sphere, to questions of wages and working hours, to factory legislation and creches. However, as already noted, this retreat from an understanding of women as representatives of culture and tradition, and as the pillars of family and society, to a recognition of women’s role in the productive sphere is never absolute. As the report puts it: ‘we do not wish to turn woman into a cheap imitation of man or render her useless for the great tasks of motherhood and nation building’ (ibid.: 33).

The WRPE contains a number of allusions to a utopian past:

Polygamy was first permitted to man by the Hindu Law in case when there was no male issue by the first marriage. In course of time this permission was exploited by man and the Kshatriyas began to marry more than one wife for political reasons and later it became a general privilege for every man who wished to marry again (ibid.: 155).

On the issue of inter-caste marriage, similar views are expressed.

Hindu marriage lays down certain restrictions about inter-marriage within the castes. These restrictions were not always there. In Vedic times inter-caste marriages were not unknown (ibid.: 150, emphasis added).

The underlying assumption is that these customs are not part of the ‘real’ Hinduism, that:

Age long customs have grown around the institution of marriage resulting in greater rigidity or greater relaxation for marriage bonds for different sections of the Hindu society (ibid.: 154).

On divorce the WRPE observes:

We find, however in the earlier religious texts authorities like Parashar and even Manu allowing a woman to marry again in certain circumstances. Kautiliya has definitely laid down detailed rules of divorce intended for the couples who found it impossible to live together. They were, however, applicable only to Asura, Gandharva, Kshatra and Paishacha marriages. The institution of marriage underwent a radical change during the years immediately preceding the Christian era when Hindu society came under the grip of ascetic influence. We refer to these instances merely to emphasise the point that even in very early times divorce and
remarriage were recognized but this practice was discontinued. This tightening of the bond of marriage created obstacles in the way of the social advancement of women (ibid.: 163, emphasis added).

The sentiment expressed here, namely that the sorry state of affairs in colonial India is an aberration, is typical of 19th century reform movements. So is the view that the West may have taught us a great deal, but that this knowledge is not intrinsically alien to our culture; we have always been privy to modern enlightenment, ‘even in very early times’.

Since these ‘early times’ of modern enlightenment tend to refer to the period prior to Muslim rule, we have a simplified but powerful image of two contrasting historical periods—the golden age of ancient India, and the dark age of medieval India (De 1963–64). This version of history was essentially a Hindu\textsuperscript{10} reconstruction of the past. While there was also a Muslim rendering of the past,\textsuperscript{11} the hegemony of the Hindu view in the national movement and subsequently in the Indian nation has led to a transformation of the Hindu view into the Indian view, the patriotic and natural view.

We have in the \textit{WRPE} a curious juxtaposition of two utopias, belonging to two worldviews and to two language games. The woman as ‘productive worker’ and equal ‘citizen’ is never replaced but the woman as ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ has an unerring tendency to intrude into the text. This point is worthy of attention for ideas of cultural revivalism run counter to the manifest tone of the document. Though the past is never actually eulogised in the \textit{WRPE}, at different stages the point is made that ‘due to social degeneration certain common malpractices have crept into almost all communities’ (ibid.: 100). Nonetheless, the past has to be redeemed and retrieved, for a nation without history is no nation at all.\textsuperscript{12}

If the project of nation building is crucial to the whole exercise of planning, the reconstruction of the past, what Gellner calls ‘memory and forgetfulness’, is essential to the enterprise of nation building. In this we witness the contestation of the various community identities before an apparent collapsing of these identities within the supreme identity of the sovereign nation-state.

Another curious turn takes place vis-à-vis the perception of history where essentially modern understandings of concepts like ‘state’ and the

\textsuperscript{10} By ‘Hindu’ we are of course confining ourselves to the upper caste, middle class Hindu rendering of the past.

\textsuperscript{11} For a discussion of the manner in which the two communities reconstructed their ‘past’ in an attempt to legitimise the effort to improve the status of women in their respective communities, see Chaudhuri (1993).

\textsuperscript{12} Decrying the lamentable state of the Bengali nation, Bankim Chandra had commented that it could not be otherwise since this nation does not even have a history of itself. The two projects were linked. This significance of ‘imagining history’ is discussed in Kaviraj (1988: esp. 7–8).
‘individual’ are inserted into the past. The particular becomes the general to the extent of becoming ‘natural’ as the very first lines of the chapter entitled ‘Civic rights’ suggest:

The individual in India has little or no conception of his duties to the State and the State on the other hand has not discharged its duty to the individual. This lack of harmonious cooperation between the two has led to the lowering of civic ideals and has been harmful alike to the individual, the community and the State (WRPE: 36).

In this closed world of modern discourse, ‘the individual in India’ is abstracted and appears as a constant throughout history, awaiting only a more correct definition of his relationship with the ‘state’, the other necessary constant. Similarly, both ‘India’ itself and an image of ‘Indian womanhood’ become entities located outside history, ‘givens’, meriting the status of the natural. Indeed as we move through the text this collapsing of the social into the natural recurs time and again.

VII

A class view of the national project: In defence of the family and private property

The question of the nation is central in the WRPE. The interests of individual women, citizens and workers, classes and castes, voluntary associations and families are subordinate to the nation-state which both encompasses and overrides them.

The nation-building scheme, of which the NPC and the WRPE are integral components, has to be seen as a class project. I argue so not only because of the historical context, the attitude of the Indian capitalist section to the Congress and the NPC (see Section I above), but because of the manner in which the right of property is written into the WRPE, thus foreclosing the fulfilment of the promise of equal rights for all women. For this promise which the WRPE initially holds up is eventually granted only to the woman likely to have property for:

... so long as the system of private property remains the foundation of the social structure, woman shall have the same rights as man to hold, acquire, inherit and dispose of property (ibid.: 201).

Nehru, if we remember, had clarified that the Congress had ‘not in any way accepted socialism’.

11 If that was so, phrases such as the above, ‘... so long

13 Nehru contended in his speech of 21 December 1938 that the Congress had in no way accepted socialism (Krishna 1945: 49).
as the system of private property remains the foundation...", seem a deliberate ploy to give the impression that if the pace of change is slow the onus rests on the conservativeness of the people, not in the class character of the Congress. Such contradictions within the text are explainable only when placed against the overall social and political context.

An examination of some of the contrary views that emerge in the text may elucidate the point. What we have is a play of categorical statements about doing away with 'private property' and the 'family' on the one hand and a kind of hedging and setting of actual limits on the other. For instance, the dissent note, which states what the role of the family should be in a planned society—a view which we can assume informed the Sub-Committee at a wider level—is unequivocal on the need for doing away with the responsibilities of the family as they exist in today's society:

Once these two responsibilities are taken over frankly by the State as a collective concern and not as individual liability, the foundation stone of the twin institutions of family and property will have been removed, and the institutions rendered as unnecessary as they are objectionable today (WRPE: 240, emphasis in original).

The WRPE draws a well-defined line between the long-term objective and the actually possible, yet at no point is the impression given that the original goal has been given up. We thus have express intentions to do away with private property (ibid.), but when discussing proposals for industrial housing we find:

We realise that this would mean extra financial strain on the industry and to meet this we recommend that the State and the employer would co-operate to meet the cost (ibid.: 75, emphasis in original).

It appears that, when drawing out the macro model, the SCW has a utopian vision, but when it comes to the micro clauses spelling out actual proposals, it is Nehru's position that the Congress 'approval' of socialism does not imply an 'acceptance', and that the 'present structure' has to be 'accepted' to a 'large extent as jumping off ground' that gains ascendancy.

The introductory passages of the section dealing specifically with property are skilfully worded, capturing the apparent ambiguity of the SCW on this question:

Private property is the root cause of many inequalities. In a planned society the object of which will be to regularise and control the acquisitive impulses of men, efforts will, we hope, be taken to levelise inequality, by placing property in its true perspective, so that it is no longer mistaken for privilege and power, and so that every man, woman and child within the country has an equal opportunity in life. This does not
mean the negation of the right to private property. It simply implies the recognition of an identity of response to primary needs and the claim of each citizen on the social dividend (WRPE: 118).

It is clearly the intent of the NPC to reassure the captains of industry that the Indian state, once it comes into being, will continue with a system based on private property. Yet the very next paragraph of the document begins with the now familiar phrase of the SCW, ‘so long’ as the system ‘of private property’ continues:

So long, however, as the very foundation of society is based on a system of private property, women cannot claim equality with man unless she has the same rights as men to hold, acquire, inherit and dispose of property (ibid.: 118).

As part of the NPC, the SCW is an essential component of the story of the Congress drawing an agenda for the nation as the state-to-be. Significantly, the determination of the SCW on its basic stance on ‘property’ was much firmer than on issues like ‘marriage’, ‘divorce’ and ‘religion’.

VIII

A defence of marriage, family and ‘religion’

Returning to the issue of marriage, the SCW disapproves of the idea of the ‘sanctity of marriage’ and writes that in ‘the new social order that we are planning, it will therefore be the State which will lay down and enforce the law of marriage and for the State, therefore marriage will only be a civil contract’ (WRPE: 153). But this is followed by:

This however, does not mean that religion will be a taboo or that the State will not recognize any marriage which is not performed under the civil law of the State. It only means that, for the purposes of protecting the rights and enforcing the obligations of the parties concerned who enter into marriage, the State will not recognize any marriage which is not performed under the civil law of the State (ibid.: 153).

This clarification about the relationship envisaged for the still unborn Indian nation-state and religion suggests that the SCW was responding to reservations that were probably being raised at that time, and an attempt is made to introduce a caveat that all religions are not to be dismissed, but only those which are ‘doctrinal’:

The domination of religion—the doctrinal religion—has done much harm to the individual in the past and continues to harm him today
wherever such domination still exists. With the growth of a rational outlook on life such a domination is bound to go (ibid.: 153).

The remedy for the ‘diversity of laws which exists today is a common civil code including inheritance, marriage and divorce laws, which should be optional to begin with but universally enforced’ within a ‘reasonable period of its passing into Act’ (WRPE: 217).

The addition of the word ‘optional’, even if it is only to begin with, reflects the kind of opposition such moves were generating. The SCW itself bears witness to the dissenting voices. A Note\(^4\) on this subject states that ‘considerable discussion took place on this resolution’ (WRPE: 229), and that a great deal of disagreement was expressed (ibid.). The other issues on which differences were expressed were on resolutions on divorce,\(^5\) on property rights for women\(^6\) and on recognition of the rights of the illegitimate child.\(^7\)

A sharp schism divides what the SCW overtly set out to do—the ‘drastic recommendations’ (WRPE: 32) to bring in the new social order—and what it eventually does. The shift does not appear in the text as a retreat, but only as an adjustment for a transitional period:

The change from what is old and established to something new and untried always contains an element of danger. *This fact is very evident in*

\(^4\) ‘Mr. Shuaib Qureshi expressed his disagreement with it. Mr. G.M. Sayed was of opinion \([sic]\) that the Civil Code would be made compulsorily applicable to all, and that there should be no option about it. Some other members were in sympathy with this view, but they felt that, under the existing system, it was preferable to make the applicability of the Code optional. The representatives of the Sub-Committee stated that their members, including Begum Hamid Ali and Begum Shah Nawaz, were in favour of an optional Civil Code. Mrs. Zarina Currimboy and Mrs. Ismail also expressed their agreement with this view’ (WRPE: 229).

\(^5\) The resolution stated that ‘divorce shall be available at the option of either party, subject to such conditions as may be laid down by the law in that behalf.’ One of the notes attached states that: ‘In this connection the question of *mehr* in Muslim Law must be considered, without prejudice to the principle laid down.’ In another note Messrs. Shuaib Qureshi, Syed Mahmud and Nazir Ahmed add: ‘This shall not affect the Muslim personal law, according to which the two parties to a marriage contract could, as the law stands even now, have, as part of the contract, equal rights to divorce. As to the right of maintenance of children, that too is fully safeguarded under the Islamic Law’ (WRPE: 230).

\(^6\) The ‘State should follow a policy to assure women the same rights as men.’ And again we have a note by the same gentleman that this should be without prejudice to Muslim personal law (WRPE: 231).

\(^7\) The resolution reads: ‘There should be no restrictions made either by law or custom between children born in or out of wedlock.’ Mr. A.D. Shroff did not agree. Mr. Shuaib Qureshi recorded his dissent as follows:

Such claim should be confined to

\((i)\) the parent of the child;

\((ii)\) in case of a child born out of lawful wedlock, to maintenance, parental care, and education, but would not affect the law of inheritance.
the realm of women and requires special care on the part of the planning authority so that the new measures adopted are effective and do not become obstacles in the way of advance. We have, therefore, referred in our report to such a period to bridge the gulf between existing conditions and what might seem at first glance to be drastic recommendations for the future ((ibid.: 312, emphasis added).

Changes in the status of women are seen as a threat to the social order. It is but natural therefore that the proposals of the SCW for altering the terms of marriage and property rights, and the role of religion are hedged in by so many caveats.

An interesting comparison can be made between the language used in the carefully worded caution regarding the ‘drastic recommendations’ and the arresting melee of images which capture the vision of the new woman and man. The spirit of optimism, progress, enlightenment and equality, images of the brave new order, ‘of man and woman, comrades of the road, going forward together, the child joyously shared by both’, ‘a reality’ which cannot ‘but raise the manhood and womanhood of any nation’, are tangibly present in the WRPE (ibid.: 33). The new times are special times, where all ‘superstitious beliefs’ will be abandoned in the ‘new social order’ in which the ‘searchlight of reason’ (ibid.: 153) would be shining.

On the other hand the language used when deliberating on the constraints on implementing the recommendations is matter-of-fact, pragmatic and cautious. The actual recommendations are straightforward but their substance is diluted both by the subsequent elaboration of specific recommendations, and by the repetition of the phrase ‘transitional period’ (or words to that effect) in reference to the phrase ‘before the new measures actually come into effect’.

For instance, we have a long explanation about the actual intention of the proposed marriage reforms:

In advocating divorce, our desire is not to break up the home but to make marriage more happy, and, therefore, more stable. If we turn to the evidence of writers like Pammie Halle, Beatrice and Sidney Webb and others, we find that even in Russia where the experiment of divorce under easy conditions was tried, it has resulted actually in strengthening the bond of marriage. It does not follow therefore, that by conceding the right of divorce to women the State will be undermining the foundations of marriage, and, therefore, of society. It will rather, we think, help to make the foundation more secure (WRPE: 164).

This is a far cry from the view that, with the state taking over certain responsibilities, the twin institutions of the ‘family’ and ‘private property’ would be rendered ‘as unnecessary as they are objectionable today’ (ibid.:}
240); or that 'private property is the root cause of many inequalities' (ibid.: 118); or that 'in planned society the basic unit would be the individual'.

It is relevant to mention the dissent note of Miss K. Khandwala to support our point on the eventual centrality which the WRPE accords to the institution of the 'family' and 'private property' for, as she herself states, the only reason which prompted her to write the note is 'that the Authors of the Report have departed materially from the general basis agreed upon in the Sub-Committee meetings when that body decided on the fundamental issues or principles which were to guide us in preparing our Report' (WRPE: 232).

IX

Conclusion

The WRPE is self-evidently about the role women would play in a planned economy. Contestation within the WRPE, however, arises not only on the question of 'the role of women' but also regarding the very concept of a 'planned economy'. The major turnabout within the WRPE on the issue of private property (Section VII above) discloses that, notwithstanding the stated emphasis on 'planned economy', the nation-state is set to pursue a market economy. Likewise, the substantive emphasis is on working class women, as 'instruments of labour' (ibid.: 199), but the ideological stress is on the rights of the bourgeois woman 'to hold, acquire, inherit and dispose of property' (ibid.: 201) apart, that is, from the general thrust on the unfettered development of the individual (Section IV above). This is a fundamental contradiction so far as the socialist perspective is concerned, for political economy understands 'private property' as 'the product, the result, the necessary consequence of alienated labour' (Marx and Engels 1984: 89, emphasis in original).

The retreat of the socialist perspective and the hegemonic establishment of the national liberal model has to be understood at both a theoretical level as well as in the immediate context of the political struggle within the NPC between the 'socialists and near communists' and the 'hard-headed big businessmen' (Nehru 1966: 419) over the path of development which the Indian nation-state was to adopt.

This class project is incorporated within the national project and the state is deemed instrumental in its realisation. The state supposedly represents the will of the entire nation. Glossing over both historical specificities as well as class and community inequalities, the state comes to be thought of as the nation itself 'absorbing the entire society' (Gramsci 1971: 260).

In this state-centric vision of the WRPE it can be argued that women were subsumed within the more privileged categories of the citizen and of class. I would stop short of such an assertion, for to my mind the WRPE does break out of the gender-blindness which characterises liberal theory.
It questions the persistent tendency of much of modern theory to dehistori-
cise the private sphere, celebrating male entry into the public sphere and
condemning women to remain in the ‘timeless universe’ of domesticity and
doomed to ‘repeat the cycles of life’ (Benhabib 1987: 86). By acknowledging
the ‘home work’ done within the house (WRPE: 200) as well as by arguing
for recognition of women’s labour as a ‘separate unit of production’ and
not as ‘a corporate part of the family work’ (ibid.: 199), the entire set of
public/private dualisms—the dualisms of universal/particular, political/
apolitical, economic/familial, instrumental/expressive, formal/informal—
are challenged. To this extent the socialist perspective informs the liberal
discourse.

While the liberal and socialist perspectives inform the WRPE theoretically,
they do not contain all other ideological tendencies. The colonial
subject’s ambivalent relationship to the West is not easily dismissed. This is
apparent in the rhetoric on women ‘conserving the spiritual attributes of
the Indian Nation’ (ibid.: 32–33) and the fears that ‘cheap imitation’ may
‘render her useless for the great tasks of motherhood and nation-building’
(ibid.: 33).

It is in this strand of the WRPE that the most explicit patriarchal
resistances surface. The WRPE clearly retreats from its initial views on the
issues of marriage reforms, of divorce (WRPE: 164), of the adoption and
maintenance of children (ibid.: 230), and of the role of religion in the
making of laws (ibid.: 227–31). Not surprisingly, these issues all pertain to
the private, domestic sphere. In the section on the analysis of labour, the
WRPE breaks the public/private dichotomy. In the discourse on family
reform this dichotomy is reaffirmed.

I have two possible explanations for this. The first is that the identity of
‘Indian womanhood’, resting on the attributes of motherhood and other
qualities connected with domesticity, is class-based. The working class
woman is seen entirely in terms of production (as in the seventy-two pages
on ‘Economic rights’). Not so the middle class woman. While the need for
her economic independence is recognised (WRPE: 105), her responsibility
to ‘create a cultural environment in the home for the proper nurture of the
children’ and not ‘merely to cook, wash and attend to the needs and
comforts of the family’ (ibid.: 104) is emphasised to improve the low
standards of life in the country (ibid.: 104). These differential role expecta-
tions draw attention to the ways by which class is itself gendered.

The second explanation for the selective gendered analysis of the public/
private split can be traced to certain limits to the production paradigm,
even if production is taken to be both ‘production of things’ and ‘produc-
tion of life’. Recent feminist philosophy has asked whether ‘the concept of
production, which is based on the model of an active subject transforming,
making and shaping an object given to it’ can adequately comprehend
traditionally female activities such as child-rearing and care-giving, ‘which
are so thoroughly intersubjective’ (Benhabib 1987: 2). The WRPE attaches great ‘national’ significance to these activities (ibid.: 104) but thereby also reifies them, alienating them from the subject.

This raises the question whether the woman as subject has any presence in the WRPE. The word ‘subject’ has a dual meaning—as the signifier of the individual who has subjectivity, and as the signifier of one who is under the authority of another. Poststructuralist theories have stressed the coincidence of these meanings. I would, contrarily, emphasise the subject as the site of agency—potentially resistive but also implicated in domination.

Both facets are visible in the WRPE. Significantly, all the twenty-seven members of the SCW, including Chairperson Rani Lakshmi Rajwade, were women. The disparate views, the patriarchal resistances, the ‘drastic recommendations’, the eugenics view, the contestation and the eventual hegemony of the liberal model in the eventual analysis have to be attributed to them. Since I do not see the theorisation of hegemony as contradictory to the theorisation of resistance (they are in fact part of the same project), I would not hesitate both to acknowledge the hegemonic project of the WRPE and yet to argue that the other resistive strands within the WRPE open up a new space for the woman’s question, even if the possibilities thus opened up are foreclosed in the text.

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