



Research Paper

Gender discrimination: A socio-cultural issue in Indian society.

Afsana Parvin

Assistant professor in Philosophy
Raipur Block Mahavidyalaya
Kharigeria, Bankura-722134

Abstract:

In every society there are socio-cultural issues that needed to addressed and tackled. If we have to preserve our social and cultural values then we must need to pay our attention on major socio-cultural issues like casteism, dowry, gender discrimination, drinking, drug addiction etc. Gender inequality has been a social issue in India for centuries. An action, ritual or attitude would be said to be gender discriminatory if those actions, rituals or attitudes irrationally discriminate between men and women. Finding the answer to the question of what is the root of this gender inequality, we find two doctrines, one is liberal and other is conservative. According to the liberals, the root cause of gender discrimination is the different environments allowed for men and women in the same society. According to the conservatives, gender inequality is natural and there is hardly any role of social environment. The real reason is hidden in the physical differences. In India the girl child is always treated unequally. For example, many parts of India, the birth of a girl child is not welcomed is a known fact. Gender inequality is morally unjust and unfair. As per 'human rights' -- Every human being has equal rights. If this ultimate moral demand is not met, the person becomes self-centered and selfish. Society becomes deprived, chaotic and misguided. This paper attempts to analyse and interpret the different reasons why gender inequality is still prevalent in society. It also attempts to address the need for social change and reform through a change in perspective and thereby personality of an individual in society.

Keywords: Gender, Inequality, Human rights, Discrimination.

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I. Introduction:

In every society there are socio-cultural issues that needed to addressed and tackled. If we have to preserve our social and cultural values then we must need to pay our attention on major socio-cultural issues like casteism, dowry, drinking alcohol, gender discrimination, drug addiction etc. Gender inequality has been a social issue in India for centuries. That in many parts of India, the birth of a girl child is not welcomed is known fact. It is known fact too, that discrimination starts from even before that girl child is born and sometimes she is killed as a foetus.

Gender itself is a serious misunderstanding word. The moment the word 'gender' is spoken, we mean the concept of weaker sex present in the society that is the female. Gender is a range of features used to differentiate between male and female and the masculine and feminine characteristics assigned to them. Sexologist, John Money, for the first time in 1955 the terminological distinction between biological sex and gender as a role. Previously the term 'gender' was not very commonly used to refer to the the relative status of men and women, it was used only grammatically. We should use the word gender as behaviour pertaining to each sex which is socially, religiously and culturally constructed. The word 'gender' refers to the different values, attitudes and behaviours that are attached to the roles of male and female by different social and cultural groups. For example, women cook and clean, men fly aeroplanes. Women take care of children and men are supposedly the bread earner in the family.

The World health organization defines gender as:"Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men, such as norms, roles and relationships and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed."

Wikipedia shows "Gender is there a range of characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between femininity and masculinity. Depending on the context, this characteristics may include biological sex, sex-based social structures (i.e., gender roles), or gender identity."

Actually gender is a socially and culturally constructed definition of women and men. Gender is determined by the conception of tasks, functions and roles attributed to women and men in the society.

Now we will know what is meant by gender discrimination. An action, ritual or attitude would be said to be gender discriminatory if those actions, rituals or attitudes internationally discriminate between men and women, and depending on irrelevant differences (that is physical differences) one group of them harms another group and exploits them. Gender discriminators are those who think that discriminatory attitudes, behaviours etc, centred on men and women are justifiable in the society.

Morally gender discrimination is unlawful and unfair as it harms people belonging to a particular gender such as depriving a woman of her ancestral property right, which is still the norm in many societies. This reduce their importance in family life which is morally inappropriate. Gender discriminatory attitudes, customs, behaviours etc can be observe in all the countries of the present human society. For this discriminatory behaviour generally we think that one who is doctor is a man and one who serves must be a woman. We can easily understand the difference between a man and woman just by looking hair dressing, gesture, posture, walking and talking. If no one follows this discriminatory system approved by the society, we cannot easily accept it. Sometimes we make fun of it and sometimes we take punitive measures. Thus gradually gender discrimination occurs throughout human society which is not actually sex difference but gender difference or role difference according to sex.

Finding the answer to the question of what is the root of this gender inequality, we find two doctrines, one is liberal and the other is conservative.

According to the liberals, the root cause of gender discrimination is the different environments allowed for men and women in the same society. In every society, children are brought up in different environments according to their sex and in that way children become aware of their respective gender roles and gender inequality in the society. For example, on birthdays a son is given a toy motor car, gun or aeroplane etc and the daughter is given a doll, cooking utensils, cosmetics etc. Children's textbook also depict different images following the general role such as a picture of a father wearing suit-boot and going to the office while a mother is busy with cooking in the kitchen. Through this type of socialization process, people accept social discriminatory ideas and programs about men and women. The inequality between men and women is not natural, it is an artificial creation of our society. That's why morally this gender discrimination is unfair.

According to conservatives, gender inequality is natural and there is hardly any role of social environment. The real reason is hidden in the physical differences. Men and women will play different roles according to their physical constitution and disposition, meaning that discriminatory attitude or custom are not unjust or inappropriate according to this doctrine.

Now we will discuss a social history about Indian women. Then we can understand the issue of gender discrimination in India. Women had been faced difficulties for several centuries. We will try to draw a picture of how the social status of women has risen and fallen at different times in history. We have divided the period into three major ages i.e., ancient, mediaeval and modern. Status of women during the ancient age is presented under four sub-periods listed below:

- i) The vedic period
- ii) The period of epics
- iii) The period of Jainism and Buddhism
- iv) The age of Dharmashastras

Position of women in the vedic period:

The earliest source about ancient India is the Rig-veda. The period between 1500-1000 BC is supposed to be the early Vedic or the Rig Vedic period. Although we cannot say with certainty that in this age women had equal rights with men. From the available sources it is clear that liberal attitudes and practices related to women existed during this period. Women could participate in religious and social activities. They had the freedom to choose the life partner of their choice for marriage. Marriage was not compulsory for them. Many Vedic women spend their entire lives in education without getting married. And the number of unmarried women was not less. Daughters were not unwelcomed in family. Women could participate in vedic studies. A widow was permitted to marry for second time. Rig Veda it is said about women that women will only give birth of a child and will be a follower of a husband. However, it cannot be denied that women had special place at that time.

Position of women in the Epic period:

It cannot be said that the outline of the society of the Ramayana- Mahabharata era was very simple. Although, it is seen that in the social environment at Ramayana women were only husband's followers. It is not that they did not have the ability to express their own views, but it cannot be said that the social status of women was very certain. Because in many cases women have been used as consumers. In addition, Sita's repeated ordeals prove that the society of that time was not very sympathetic towards women. Where there is such a situation of women in the royal family, so we can guess what was the situation of ordinary women. In the Mahabharata, however, independent thoughts and distinct mentality are found among women like Kunti, Gandhari, Draupadi, yet the full freedom of woman was not recognized in the society of that time. According to the Mahabharata's Anushasana episode women had to practice religion even if they were completely dependent on husband. The main religion of women was to serve their husbands and families.[1]

The period of Jainism and Buddhism:

Jainism and Buddhism came about around the sixth century BC. Both the religions came in the form of religious reform movements. Jainism and Buddhism developed as a separate religion from Hinduism. Jainism was against the 'Varna order' of Vedic religion. If we discuss the status of women in Jainism, we see that a large number of women from different backgrounds join the monastic order and achieved remarkable success as ascetics. If we talk about Buddhism we will see that Buddhism was a kind of religious revolution in Indian history. In the time of Buddhism many women took part in religious discourses and many of them composed verses, known as 'Therigatha'.

The age of Dharmashastras:

During this time women are excluded both economically and religiously. Education was not allowed for women and they had to depend on men for survival. This kind of thinking that women are inferior to men was born at this time. So women were gradually thrown into a world of ignorance and despair. The two most important authoritative law codes at this period were 'Manu samhita' and 'Yagnavalkya smriti'. The 'Manu samhita' contained a universal provision on the social life of the Indians. From the fifth chapter of the 'Manu samhita', the social status of women at that time can be known. Manu said about girls that marriage is there only culture. The age of marriage continues to decline because the sooner the only culture, the better. The door of education for women was completely closed. Since marriage at an early age there is no question of a women's own will. Marriage is become like a process where father giving the daughter and the husband receiving it. Therefore, giving and receiving is the main goal of marriage. So women became just an object which is given and received. She did not learn to think independently because the opportunity to think was cut off. It is said in the 'Manu samhita' that women will be under the care of her father in her childhood, and under the care of her husband in her youth and when her husband dies she will be under the care of her son. [2] Under no circumstances should a women try to live apart from her father, husband or son. [3] Finally it can be said that the position of women in the age of 'Dharmashastra' was absolutely down.

The mediaeval period (500 AD-1500 AD):

The mediaeval period proved to be extremely frustrating for Indian women. During this time the social status of women deteriorated further. The mediaeval India could be call a dark age for women. When foreign conquerors invaded India they brought their own culture with them. In this age women were the only property of their fathers, brothers, husbands and no importance was given to their own will. Such thoughts enter the minds of Indian people and they started treating their woman like this. There are another reason for the decline of Indian women's dignity and independence that is, the Indians wanted to protect their women from the barbaric invaders. As polygamy was among them, they took any women for their choice and took them to their 'Harem'. For this the practice of veil was introduced to protect Indian women. [4] The woman in this period were not allowed to move freely and this led to the further deterioration of their status.

Women in modern India:

Women in modern India have been largely influenced by reform programs. The economic and social structure of Indian society underwent a number of changes during the British rule. Significant progress has been made in education, employment and social rights in eliminating gender inequality.

After the devotional movement Christian missionaries become interested in educating girls. The hunter commission in 1882 emphasized the need for women's education. In the nineteenth century women in India had various obstacles such as-child marriage, selling women for the purpose of marriage etc. Then the situation

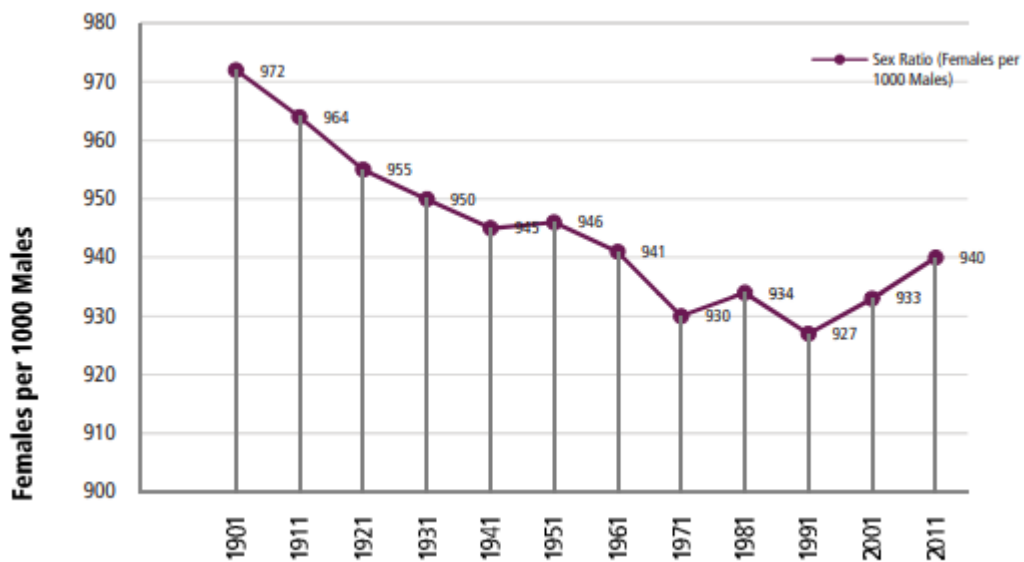
changed a bit. Some generous man were born and women gained some opportunities through the efforts of those men.

The current status of women in Indian society:

Even today, in Indian society, woman has to face gender discrimination at all levels. A daughter is still a burden to parents. There is still a lot of pressure on girls in our society to give birth to a son if they can't, they are supposed to be failures. The world has been revolutionized by exceptional women in almost every field from wrestling to business.

But today despite such progress most of the girls in Indian families are neglected. The birth of a baby boy is celebrated in full swing and the birth of a girl is celebrated with despair. The sex selective abortion of female foeticide continues to be practiced in spite of Prenatal Diagnostic Technique Act of 1994. As a result, decreasing the balance in child sex ratio in India.

Figure 1: Sex ratio in India: 1901-2011



Source: Census, Government of India (various years)

And this inequality continues in every aspect of society whether it is education, health care, participation in any field, girls are always the victims of inequality. Gender inequality in India has been a consequence of girl's educational backwardness. Educating a girl child is still considered a waste because she is bound to marriage and one day she leaves her father's house. For example, many teenage girls take care of their siblings instead of going to school or playing because of their social structure. As a result of gender inequality female literacy rate is 65.46 percent while male literacy rate is 82.14 percent.

Figure 2 :

Census year	Total (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
1951	18.33	27.16	8.86
1961	28.30	40.40	15.35
1971	34.45	45.96	21.97
1981	43.57	56.38	29.76
1991	52.21	64.13	39.29
2001	64.83	75.26	53.67
2011	74.04	82.14	65.46

The literacy rate in India 1951-2011(census of India)

But without education women's lack confidence or knowledge to make their own choice and are encouraged or forced to marry early. Early marriage forces girls immature motherhood. It profoundly affects a girl's life, not only shorts her educational potential but also complicates her health and harms her psychological well being.[5]

Thus gender-based discrimination in education is both a cause and the consequence of a wide-range inequality in society.[6]

Statistics Still tell the story of female foeticide, child discrimination and gender bias—

- 42% of married women in India were married as children according to District Information System for Education-DISE-3
- 1 in every 3 child brides in the world is a girl in India-UNICEF reports this.
- India has more than 45 lakh girls under 15 years of age who are married with children. Out of these, 70% of the girls have two children, according to census report 2011.

To reduce gender inequality and to encourage women's empowerment the Government of India along with the states has adopted various policies programs and plans. Some of the notable initiatives are Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas(DWCRA),National Mission for Empowerment of Women(NMEW), Kishori Shakti Yojana (KSY), ladli Lakshmi Yojana, Apni Beti Apna Dhan, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Kanyashree Prakalpa, Balika Samridhhi Yojana (BSY), Swayamsidha Mahila Mandal Programme,Rashtriya Mahila Kosh(RMK) and many others.

But despite these efforts gender discrimination still exists in our society.

II. Conclusion:

In 1950, the constitution of India was introduced. The constitution of India not only declared that men and women are equal, but also states that there should be not discrimination between men and women. If self development is Human Right, then it can be said that the rights of women in Indian society are completely neglected. The words such as 'women's liberation', 'women's rights', 'women's freedom' in a large number of communities outside the handful of rich families in our country are meaningless. It is clear that there is a physical difference between men and women but it will be unfair if we discriminate between men and women in our society then it violates human rights. As per 'Human Rights'—every human being has equal rights. If this ultimate moral demand is not met, the person becomes self centered and selfish. Society becomes deprived, chaotic and misguided. We need to change our mind set in order to destroy the prejudices prevalent in the society.

Society has a mind-set about what boys and girls will wear, how they will live, who will do what and what they will not to do. At the beginning of the article I mentioned different types of mindsets in the society. However, we will discuss one more example in which we can see what kind of mindset society has created. A girl learns cooking from her mother as she knows it's her job. It is very normal for women to know how to cook. The cooks in Big hotels are mainly men but the society teaches us to think that cooking is only the domain of women.

We need to create a world where a girl celebrate their birth as girls and have equal rights with their male-counterpart. First, we have to change your mind-set and this is not any type of blame game where men are to be blamed for this type of social attitude. We should not blame men for this condition. Irrespective of gender, everyone needs to change their mind set to change this condition of women in the society. Because a woman in the society also says that cooking is a girl's job and she does not need to study much. Entire society needs to change the perspective towards women. And for that we need to change the perspective of every person in the society. Change in perspective requires a change in thinking at the beginning. Thought is the root of all changes of perspective. Now we will discuss how it works. Every thought create a feeling or we can say feeling has got manifested from thought. Many feeling together of a particular situation develops one's over all attitude towards the situation. For example, my attitude towards the position of women in our society starts with my thoughts, then feeling and then attitude. As will my attitude so will my behaviour. What attitudes towards women, I will speak about women according to it. That means attitude came into action. Now any action repeated a number of times creates a habit. All my habits put together form my personality. Thoughts of a person creates the personality of the person.[7]

So we can change our personality. If the change in the personality of each of us can bring about a change in the perspective of society. Because every personality together creates the perspective of the society.

So our each and every thought about women has to change and then the perception of the society about women will be changed. Then there will be an equality between men and women in education, health and participation in any work.

Swami Vivekananda also wanted to reform such a society from within. Instead of reformation of any custom or ritual in the society, he felt the need to reform society by developing the full entity inherent in the individual. The whole society should float in the tide of change of mentality. Attempts should be made to mentor children at all levels of education. So that men and women can enjoy the pleasures of the world and can get equally whatever good opportunities are there. In the time crisis and though vows they must be side by side and find solution to their various problems.

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