
Research Papers



Bonus or Burden: A Daughter can't be a Son in India!

Veena Sharma
Research Scholar,
Department of English, HPU,
Shimla-171005

Abstract

Every Indian says that times have changed now as there is no difference between a son and a daughter. It is increasingly argued that a daughter is the biggest asset to her parents in contemporary times as it is she and not their son who keeps caring, loving and maintaining them till their sunset days. Also a girl is making her parents proud by excelling in the fields of sports, education, science and technology, and literature, and so on. Even the government of India and several political parties are not behind in eulogizing daughters. It sounds optimistic and it seems we are close to kicking off the age old male chauvinism. It all indicates that a gender sensitive social structure is coming up.

But the flip of the side unfolds another appalling fact when one gets shocked by the data on the skewed sex ratio, increased crime against women in the shape of molestation, rape, sexual harassment at work place, other sex-related crimes, dowry deaths, to name a few.

The present study examines the real status of women in the present Indian scenario, outwardly appearing just and fair. It poses a question that under such circumstances, can we still claim that daughters are going to be the first choice of parents in near or even distant future?

Introduction

The word gender sociologically refers to the socio-cultural definition of man and woman, the way societies distinguish men and women and assign them social roles. The distinction between sex and gender was introduced to deal with the general tendency to attribute women's subordination to their anatomy. For ages it was believed that the different characteristics, roles and status accorded to women and men in society are determined by sex, that they are natural and

therefore not changeable. Gender is seen closely related to the roles and behavior assigned to women and men based on their sexual differences. As soon as a child is born families and society begin the process of gendering. The birth of the son is celebrated, the birth of a daughter filled with pain; sons are showered with love, respect, better food and proper health care. Boys are encouraged to be tough and outgoing; girls are encouraged to be homebound and shy. All these differences are gender differences and they are created by society.

Gender inequality is therefore a form of inequality which is distinct from other forms of economic and social inequalities. It dwells not only outside the household but also centrally within it. It stems not only from pre-existing differences in economic endowments between women and men but also from pre-existing gendered social norms and social perceptions. Gender inequality has adverse impact on development goals as reduces economic growth. It hampers the overall well being because blocking women from participation in social, political and

economic activities can adversely affect the whole society. Many developing countries including India have displayed gender inequality in education, employment and health. It is common to find girls and women suffering from high mortality rates. India has witnessed gender inequality from its early history due to its socio-economic and religious practices that resulted in a wide gap between the position of men and women in the society.

The history of Indian patriarchy presents a variety of cruelties and barbarities. Phenomenon such as the sale and enslavement of women under one guise or another, involuntary and child marriages, concubinage, prostitution and swapping of wives, still take place in some communities. The rationale which accompanies that imposition of male authority euphemistically referred to as 'the battle of the sexes' bears a certain resemblance to the formulas of nations at war, where any heinousness is justified on the grounds that the enemy is either an inferior species or really not human at all. The patriarchal mentality has concocted a whole series of rationales about women which accomplish this purpose tolerably well. Margaret Mead puts it as: "Men have always been afraid that women could get along without them"(72) and therefore subordination continues.

The prevalent atrocities on girls and women project an apathetic attitude toward them. Every now and then a female foetus is found littered in the garbage, a female infant is found abandoned in the streets, most probably by her own mother under pressure from her husband, in-laws or some close relatives. Men raping girls as old as two years or even small and incest are extremely common incidents. Other incidents like honour killing are often the flashlight of news channels and national dailies. Having statutorily prohibited dowry back in 1961, it is a pity that our daughters continue to get murdered by their husbands and in-laws. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 2009, the number of cases of rape were 21397, of kidnapping and abducting women were 25741, of molestation were 38711, of sexual harassment were 11009, of importation were 48, and dowry deaths were 8383 in the nation. Also according to the Indian police, every year it receives over 2500 reports of bride-burning (Web 2011). Apart from these crimes, the most rampant kind of violence against teen girls is eve-teasing, which has been interpreted as 'little rape' in academia. And unfortunately, its onus is generally placed on the victim herself.

Son versus Daughter

Son preference in India is a well-documented phenomenon. Its implications for skewed sex ratios, female foeticide and higher child mortality rates for girls require research and policy attention. For more than hundred years, the Indian census has shown a marked gap between the number of boys and girls, men and women. This gap, which has nationwide implications, is the result of decisions made at the most local level—the family. Common wisdom is that the preference for sons is motivated by economic, religious, social and emotional desires and norms that favour males and make females less desirable. Parents expect sons but not daughters to provide financial and emotional care, especially in their old age; sons add to family wealth and property while daughters drain it through dowry; sons continue the family lineage while daughters are married away to another household; sons perform important religious roles; and sons defend or exercise the family's power while daughters have to be defended and protected, creating a perceived burden on the household.

Traditionally, once an Indian woman leaves her father's house, the husband assumes responsibility and property rights over her. This leads parents to [marry girls off early](#), before developing her own personal will. Girls are taught to suppress their identity and opinions to cater to their new family. Such attitudes have been passed down from generation-to-generation, permeating into the very support systems that are meant to help women. An independent woman is considered bad and a dependent woman is considered good. As a result, so few women stand up for themselves because they don't know where to turn. Even if they speak out, men rarely get blamed and if a woman has no financial means, she cannot survive on her own.

In India, women's lives are shaped by customs that are centuries old. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent. Even today when girls are outshining boys in every sphere, people continue to long intensely for sons. Parenting a daughter becomes a daunting task to educate and find her an employment, at the same time expecting from her a behaviour that does not put her parents to public shame. The daughter carries on her head all the burden of family honour while her brother enjoys a complete immunity. While a middle class parent brings up the daughter

just like a son, she is repeatedly not allowed to accompany her class-mates to trip, because of the fears that are multiple. A daughter has to meet the frenzy of her parents and brother on having been seen with a male friend, while her brother is not objected to at flirting with several girls at the same time. Nobody deters him from indulging even in free sex because that does not hurt him anyway. Whereas enjoyment of sex has altogether different consequences for girls.

Women have always had lower status than men in India, but the extent of the gap between the sexes varies across cultures and time, some arguing that it is inversely related to social evolution. As Alan Wolfe rightly observes in "The Gender Question" in *The New Republic*, "of all the ways that one group has systematically mistreated another, none is more deeply rooted than the way men have subordinated women. All other discriminations pale by contrast" (27). Our culture is ruled by masculine hegemony, a strongly patriarchal hold. Men enjoy more power, prestige, and wealth than women do. Men have more direct track to power and success. Work is also gendered: males occupy almost all of the highest positions in both the public and private sector, while women tend to be concentrated in clerical, nursing, and service positions.

This is so because our society, like all other historical civilisations, is a patriarchy. The fact is evident at once if one recalls that the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office, and finance— in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of the police, is mainly, if not entirely in male hands. As the essence of politics is power, such realization cannot fail to carry impact. The authoritative control is of male manufacture.

Discrimination between the Sexes

An Indian woman mostly is not allowed to have her say in important matters particularly, to defend her choice, to take personal responsibility for her own decisions, whether she becomes a stay-at-home mom or the top class professional. Obstacles are placed in the way of women's choices, including the decision to own a gun or to run a business out of her home. The opening of civil discourse on issues of vital interest to women, such as conception and abortion is never done. The ancient regime will not advocate the removal of discriminatory laws because those laws constitute their hard-purchased victories. Patriarchal ideology is based on a class analysis that makes

women a separate and politically antagonistic group. This politics of rage will scream all the louder because it sees that no one is listening. And it will take years to heal the devastation it has wrought. Kate Millet aptly suggests that the domination of women by men is "sturdier than any form of segregation, such as class, more uniform and certainly more enduring" (24-25). This stratification of society on sex lines has brought inequality among men and women in their status position, which has resulted in an inferior ranking of women vis-à-vis their male counterparts.

It is worthwhile to ponder on the fact that we are one of the worst in terms of worldwide gender equality rankings. In India women are discriminated and marginalized at every level of the society whether it is social participation, economic opportunity and participation, political participation, access to education or access to nutrition and reproductive health care. A significant few in the society still consider women as sex objects. As already discussed, gender disparity is high, crimes against women are increasing and violence against women is all time high and in most cases go unreported. Dowry related problems and death is increasing and is profoundly manifesting in the urban population. Workplace harassment of women is another phenomenon which is rapidly increasing as more women join the workforce. Early age marriages are still taking place in large numbers and the number of girls going to school is abysmally low particularly in rural areas. Moreover majority of the girls who join the school drop out by the age of puberty to get married and live a life of drudgery. Female foeticide and infanticide is starring the nation as one of the biggest social crises. All this is happening despite the fact that there are number of programmes and policy initiatives that is being run by the government and other bodies. It is time to ask the question whether we are moving in the right direction and where are we in terms of the paper actions and the actual ground realities.

The problem in India is that the society never seriously worked on the premise of gender equality from a long-long time. Atrocities and discrimination against women is a way of daily life in Indian society. There is an attitude which still prevails in India where women are considered to be only worthwhile of household activities and managing the children. The veil system, child marriage and dowry are testimonies to this truth. Women have never been part of the mainstream society in India and they are still considered as a

great liability. The latest headcount or census figures for India have confirmed the worst drop in the number of girls in comparison to boys since the country became independent and this calls for nothing short of a national response from the government and policy framers. One of largest enumeration exercises in the world, the Indian Census 2011 results show that among children up to the age of six, the number of girls to 1,000 boys reduced to 914 girls to every 1000 boys, a drop from 927 in 2001. Thus the census records this as the lowest since the country's independence in 1947. The practice of littering baby girls [in dumpsters](#) still continues, they are also buried in clay pots or poisoned. Across the country there is a 47 percent excess female child mortality, girls aged 1 to 4 who are dying before their life expectancy because of discrimination. In the north, specifically the wealthy state of Punjab and neighboring Haryana, the excess female child mortality is 81 and 135 percent respectively, according to [India's National Family Health Survey](#). Action Aid India executive director Sandeep Chachra bitterly remarks on India Census **Results:**

This confirms our worst fears. Something that we and many others have been warning about for several years now, it is a shame for the entire country. It is time to move away from patchy responses and look at the larger picture to evolve a stronger strategy to change the status quo. (New Delhi, 2011. Web 2011)

In Indian parliament and assemblies women have never represented more than 10%. Most of the women workers in India are outside the organized sector. Administrators, managers, professionals combined together and technical workers on the other hand are the lowest at 2.3% and 20 % respectively. Now these figures give the real truth of the actual mentality of the society which has restricted women, marginalized women and discriminated against women quite openly. Can we achieve women empowerment in India with these alarming and dismal figures?

Majority of women in India are poor, uneducated and insufficiently trained. They often end up in the daily struggle of managing an ill equipped family and are not in a position to propel out themselves of the oppressive and regressive social and economic conditions.

Looking through the lens of hunger and poverty, there are seven major areas of discrimination against women in India:

Malnutrition: India has exceptionally high rates

of child malnutrition, because tradition in India requires that women eat last and least throughout their lives, even when pregnant and lactating. Malnourished women give birth to malnourished children, perpetuating the cycle.

Poor Health: Females receive less health care than males. Many women die in childbirth of easily prevented complications. Working conditions and environmental pollution further impairs women's health.

Lack of education: Families are far less likely to educate girls than boys, and far more likely to pull them out of school, either to help out at home or from fear of violence.

Overwork: Women work longer hours and their work is more arduous than men's, yet their work is unrecognized. Men report that "women, like children, eat and do nothing." Technological progress in agriculture has had a negative impact on women.

Unskilled: In women's primary employment sector - agriculture - extension services overlook women.

Mistreatment: In recent years, there has been an alarming rise in atrocities against women in India, in terms of rapes, assaults and dowry-related murders. Fear of violence suppresses the aspirations of all women. Female infanticide and sex-selective abortions are additional forms of violence that reflect the devaluing of females in Indian society.

Powerlessness: While women are guaranteed equality under the constitution, legal protection has little effect in the face of prevailing patriarchal traditions. Women lack power to decide who they will marry, and are often married off as children. Legal loopholes are used to deny women inheritance rights.

Feminist Politics in India

There is an equally important question of law itself and of the Indian women's movement's relationship with the state and legislation. It was noted that India has a remarkable range of pro-women legislation. The 1980s, especially, saw extraordinary legislation. But these laws ultimately created despair because they meant so little in practice. As Flavia Agnes points out:

If oppression could be tackled by passing laws, then this decade would have been adjudged a golden period for Indian women... Almost every single campaign against violence on women resulted in new legislation. (1991 presentation)

Srimati Basu points out that to invoke law

is to invoke the state. Furthermore, law alone cannot effect changes in cultural practices without widespread state intervention (23).

To be a woman— a wife, a mother, an individual— in India means many things. It means that you are the store-house of tradition and culture and, in contrast, a volcano of seething energy, of strength and power that can motivate a whole generation to change its values, its aspirations, its very concept of civilised life. Women in Indian politics have always negotiated these two extreme poles: as the unsexed equal or the highly feminized goddess or queen. Such negotiation has allowed a small but significant group of women to aspire for high offices within the political establishment. But women on the whole have attained little democratic representation, either in numbers or in terms of their specific gender interests.

Since the 1920s a few women have been on a quest for a feminist politics outside the political mainstream. In the 1920s and 1930s, in the first wave of a feminist movement, women's organizations were able to draw both on the benefits of modernity (from colonial rulers and male Indian reformers) and from the idiom of "Indianness" constructed in the nationalist discourse. Female segregation and seclusion offered opportunities to build women's collectives that rejected male tutelage but accepted traditional patriarchal gender roles. This social feminism allowed a remarkable hegemony of elite women to speak for all Indian women from a united platform. The involvement of many of these women in the freedom struggle tied their demand for women's rights to nationalist movements to produce a uniquely Indian feminist nationalism with that had three important consequences. First, nationalism implicated female activists in a singular cultural Indian identity based on a new patriarchy. Second, the cause of women's rights was advanced but hitched to a state-led nation-building discourse in independent India. And third, women became vulnerable to the many competing discourses that constituted the nation-state.

In the 1940s the growing involvement of women in diverse social and political movements broke down the essentialist construction of "Indian women." Neither women's organizations nor nationalists (say, in the Congress) could continue to speak of (or for) "Indian women." The loss of hegemony hindered women's organizations' quest for equality but helped many other women seek new gender identities beyond narrow caste or class constituencies and the limitations of social

feminism. The "petition politics" of the 1930s had outlived its efficacy by the 1940s. After independence, female activists were marginalized because they avoided the political arena for behind-the-scenes activities. At the same time, the ideas that replaced social feminism had nothing to offer activist women— none of them even had an agenda against patriarchy. Thus women's concerns and ideas were not incorporated into the various struggles they joined, either against the Raj or for social and economic justice before and after independence.

The second wave of feminism emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Women's organizations set up at this time did not make a bid for hegemony. These were autonomous groups, joined not through the structure of formal association but through informal networking, local leaderships, an emerging feminist press, and an intensification of multivoiced exchanges. This panoply of organizations represented women from all classes, castes, communities, and locales defined by, if anything, a common commitment and a language that is more leftist than liberal— a situation not very different from that in most European feminist movements. This movement can make no singular claim to represent all Indian women, but it has, collectively, a national profile and presence. The various all-India campaigns launched by women engendered a cultural radicalism in which a broad range of issues and a multiplicity of voices could be articulated. This is an Indian women's movement with a difference. The common commitment and language of this movement grew out of an engagement with violence against women. In the 1980s feminists drew attention to the facts and consequences of violence against women themselves.

Even as feminist intervention has expanded our perception of the field in which violence is perpetrated against women, intractable differences have emerged within feminist ranks on the place of the women's movement and feminist politics in India. The controversy over the Uniform Civil Code is, at one level, a battle between (Hindu and Muslim) men who relish their rights in the family and the community based on their "ownership" of women. At another level, female activists are no longer on a universal trajectory of "rights" and are uncertain about the possibilities of the women's movement offering a secular space outside the structures of community. The exigencies of the political situation— fundamentalism and ethnic conflict— preclude

concentrating only on issues of interest to women or a feminist perspective on all issues of importance.

To be viable, many argue, feminist politics must address the many competing class, caste, community, and ethnic struggles for justice and equality. The fissures within the women's movement sit uneasily with the move by the state to reserve seats for women in the legislature. Women, properly speaking, no longer exist as a constituency. Perhaps that is why the move to reserve seats came from the government rather than from the women' movement. And yet, while many feminists have written against reservation in the popular media, effective opposition to the bill has come from male parliamentarians and on the demand of separate representation (sub-reservation) for OBC and minority women.

The debates over personal laws and reservation of seats for women, the latter more clearly than the former, represent competing claims to speak for women. But communities (of caste, community, or ethnicity) are inescapably gendered in their occupation and location even as they assert their presence within and against the nation. The nation-state and the discourse of citizenship, on the contrary, allow women to figure as unmarked subjects and to invoke their rights and entitlements. The women's movement alone can expose the "gender markings" of the woman in the process of invoking her rights and entitlements, and building an emancipatory politics on that basis.

Thus there is an urgent need to redefine feminist political agency— to allow for the possibility of secular political collectives to which women can belong not by ascription, but by voluntary participation. In other words, to rebuild the fragmented constituency of women. But the solution may not lie in a revitalized national women's movement, particularly in the current context of economic fragility and political instability. There is already the contours of a women' movement, actual or potential, in the impressive networking capacities of autonomous groups and the mobilizing potential of left-led women' groups. We need to recognize the importance of women' associations at the local and regional levels without retreating into the irreducibly local. The developing and strengthening of local institutions is also necessary, and seems to dominate women' movements in the late 1990s. The question is how to mobilize these institutions for a transformative

feminist politics— that is, to ensure that these localized struggles face and accommodate the challenges posed by community and caste politics without allowing them to displace gender concerns.

Empowering the Indian Women

To initiate measurable actions at ground level, education of women should be given top priority and female literacy programmes need to be enforced across the country particularly in rural areas. Further to improve the socioeconomic conditions women need to be trained and better equipped for taking informed decisions. The real change will be only visible when social attitudes and norms change. Here inclusive programmes involving the men are the need of the hour. This will be helpful for working out adjustments and sharing of gender based specific performance or tasks which are currently overburdening the women to no end. Unless we improve the ground level living standards of women in India we might not be able to influence their empowerment in any other possible way. members who objected to these measures set out their views in minutes of dissent. Phulrenu Guha, a veteran movement activist, argued that:

Women are an integral part of society. The provision of reservation... will only serve to reinforce the separate identity of women rather than promote their representation and integration with the rest of society. (355)

Various issues that need to be addressed for improving overall conditions of the women in India include making access to affordable cooking fuel for rural women, providing safe drinking water, sanitation, increasing decision making capacity among women, providing equal wages as that of men, ending their exploitation, improving the political participation of women, eradicating poverty among women, increasing the security of women who are engaged in agriculture as daily wage workers, providing affordable healthcare and nutrition and managing the risk of unwanted pregnancies, HIV infections and sexually transmitted diseases.

It has to be understood that unless we change the basic social attitude which cultivates gender inequality and gender bias we would not be able to achieve much in terms of women empowerment in India. The many laws and many amendments that have been made are to be carried out forcefully to end the discrimination against women and empower women in all aspects of life.

Gender equality is also enshrined in Indian constitution and constitution empowers the state to end the gender based discrimination against women. There is no doubt reservation of seats in local bodies and municipalities and another law is being envisioned for reservation in parliament. But the sad part is that all these laws and amendments have become toothless as the fundamental problems lies in the attitude of the society which is highly biased against women. Now what is the solution? The only solution is for women to come together as a unifying force and initiate self empowering actions at the ground level. Let it happen even if it is at a slow pace initially but it must happen despite however small the initial steps might look like. So the connection is very clear. Once we work towards self empowerment through small number of infinite actions, we become aware of the ground realities and then we can think about taking further recourse towards changing the mindset of the society which fosters gender inequality and bias.

When we talk about women empowerment in India the most important aspect that comes into the mind is the attitude of the society towards women. Women are still considered as burden and liabilities. They are also considered as properties. These kinds of attitudes give birth to the evil of violence against women. Women empowerment in India is not possible unless violence against women is eradicated from the society. National Commission of women was created in 1992 and Convention of Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was ratified in 1993. Apart from the laws and policy formulations the violence against women can be only tackled through attitudinal change that need to take place in the family, in the society and the female members of the society as well. Only this attitudinal change and proactive action against violence by every single individual will help in galvanising the slumbering structures of the government and society towards further concrete steps and action. Unless society accepts gender equality as a fundamental principle of human existence all efforts will only partially bear results. Because one is not born a woman— a weak sex, but is made one by society (De Beauvoir 2). Gender sensitisation and gender training is primary need of the hour. The struggle of gender equality should be carried at every level and it should overcome the barriers of caste, class, race and religion.

To reemphasize once again, women's

empowerment cannot take place unless women come together and decide to self-empower themselves. Self empowerment should be all round in nature. Once this happens then we can think about galvanizing the system towards the direction of better health facilities, nutrition and educational facilities for women at a very large scale. Self empowerment can begin by addressing day to day issues faced by individual women and tackling them with a mindset of improving the overall living conditions of women at every level and strata of the society. A movement has to be build which awakens the individual self in each and every woman for creative and generative action. In this regard progressive and resourceful women in the society need to come forward to help their less privileged sisters in as many ways as possible. This shall help us sow the seed for real women empowerment in India.

This envisions the rise of Indian womanhood in a true sense that is the rise of the 'essence' of womanhood in the physical, mental, intellectual and the spiritual planes. It calls for the beginning of a campaign for the true rise of women in all spheres of life for the restoration of the balance in nature. Somewhere we have to make a beginning and it's always better if we make the initiation at our own self. We can strengthen this mass movement for the rise of womanhood by bringing about the necessary changes in our own life as felt by our inner self. Further we can transmit the new thinking to others who care to listen. A small step today will definitely lead to a giant leap tomorrow. Elaine Showalter strongly held that women in order “to rescue themselves from becoming a synonym of inferiority must build their identity” (187). The issue of the discrimination boils down to the role of women in India. Should they continue to play an inferior role and be treated as second class citizens? The final answer depends upon Indian women themselves. Fight or face injustice!

Conclusion

With an extremely unsafe environment for women, coupled with a highly commercialized celebration of sexual activity, often symbolized as a fundamental right, daughters shall continue to be either the second or no choice when parents have to remain at work, leaving the children at the mercy of a society that is extremely promiscuous. While we appear to be western and modern in physical appearance and having technological standard of living, we find ourselves pulled back by the age old

mindset that we have inherited from our cultural tradition which sees the daughter not as a gift but a root of rift in the family. Beyond the human tragedy, this discrimination stunts India's growth at precisely the moment in history when the nation is rising toward real global influence.

A welcome sign for women must be posted on the door of patriarchy. They are mothers, mates, daughters and friends. It is folly to solve a human problem without consulting and co-operating with one-half of the species. What is needed is attitudinal change. Empowerment is envisaged as an aid to help women individually and collectively to achieve prosperity on their own or, at least, to reduce gender gap considerably. Empowerment would also enable women to perform certain social roles which otherwise will be difficult to perform. Let women be treated as individuals. Yes, they are willing to be a good mother, good wife, a good daughter, but let them also be accepted as a good partner and not viewed as competitors. In pursuit of making India a great nation, we must work towards giving women their much deserved status. In order for these solutions to be effective, India must become more conscious of its cultural belief system.

Works Cited

1. Agnes, Flavia.. Presentation at Indian Association of Women' Studies Conference, Kolkata, 1991.
2. Basu, Srimati. "She Came to Take Her Rights." Indian Women, Property and Propriety. State University: New York Press, 1999. Print.
3. Chachra, Sandeep. "India Census Results." Qtd. New Delhi, April 1, 2011. <<http://www.actionaid.org...pdf>>.
4. De Beauvoir, Simone. The Second Sex. 1949. Rpt. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1972. Print.
5. India's National Family Health Survey (NFHS), 2011. Web 2011. <<http://www.infhs.com/index/pdf.file>>.
6. Mead, Margaret. Male and Female: The Classical Study of the Sexes. Quill: Harper Collins, 1998. Print.
7. Millet, Kate. Sexual Politics. 1970. Rpt. London: Virago, 1977. Print.
8. National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 2009. Web 2011. <>.
9. Showalter, Elaine. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." Critical Inquiry 8(1981): 181-205. Print.
10. Wolfe, Alan. "The Gender Question." The New Republic 6(1998): 27-34. Print.