

Gender Discrimination in India: An Overview

Dr. S. Chelliah & Dr. K. V. Dominic

Abstract

India as everyone knows is the largest democracy in the world and we Indians are proud of it. Equality, fraternity and liberty are the basic principles of democracy. Though our governments, both Central and States, are elected by the people, can we call the country a democratic in the strict sense of the word? No. There is gender discrimination as well as class segregation at a very high rate. Though we call India a secular state, it is unlike the Western secularism and the country has evolved more a religio-centric one. Religions are the main culprits of gender discrimination. And they are fed and supported by politics of our country. This paper aims at portraying the plight of Indian women marginalized and tortured by the religious, political patriarchy.

Keywords and phrases: gender discrimination, Swami Vivekananda, Gandhi, patriarchy, female literacy, dowry system, crime against women, purdah, female infanticide

The term ‘gender’ is defined as ‘either of the two sexes (male and female), especially when considered with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones.’ The term is also used more broadly to denote a range of identities that do not correspond to established ideas of male and female. Sex and gender are different. The term ‘sex’ is defined as ‘either of the two divisions, male or female, into which persons, animals, or plants are divided, with reference to their reproductive functions.’ Gender inequality is the discrimination shown to women by men. It is a product of the patriarchy and women are assumed and treated as inferior and weaker to men in mental and physical power. It is a global phenomenon, but compared to the West and other developed countries, gender discrimination is very high in India.

India as everyone knows is the largest democracy in the world and we Indians are proud of it. Equality, fraternity and liberty are the basic principles of democracy. Though our governments, both Central and States, are elected by the people, can we call the country a democratic in the strict sense of the word? No. There is gender discrimination as well as class segregation at a very high rate. Discrimination to women was found in all the ages of our country though it was very less in the pre-Vedic era. This paper aims at finding out the causes and effects of gender discrimination.

Let me begin the paper by sharing the views of Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi on women and gender discrimination. Swami Vivekananda preached: “The best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women. . . There is no hope of rise for that family or country where there is no estimation of women, where they live in sadness.” (*The Complete Works*, vol. 7, pp. 214-15) Swamiji spoke on another occasion:

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“When people are discussing as to what man and woman can do, always the same mistake is made. They think they show man at his best because he can fight, for instance, and undergo tremendous physical exertion; and this is pitted against the physical weakness and non-combating quality of woman. This is unjust. Woman is as courageous as man. Each is equally good in his or her way. What man can bring up a child with such patience, endurance, and love as the woman can? The one has developed the power of doing; the other, the power of suffering. If woman cannot act, neither can man suffer. The whole universe is one of perfect balance.” (*The Complete Works*, vol. 2, pp. 25-26) Being a spiritual man, Vivekananda emphatically exposed the vice of sex discrimination: “Soul has no sex, it is neither male nor female. It is only in the body that sex exists, and the man who desires to reach the spirit cannot at the same time hold sex distinctions.” (*The Complete Works*, vol. 4, p. 176)

Quotes of Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of our Nation is dearer to us than any others. He shared his views on gender discrimination through his weekly journal *Young India*: “To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then, indeed, is woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her, man could not be. If nonviolence is the law of our being, the future is with woman. Who can make a more effective appeal to the heart than woman?” (“To the Women of India,” *Young India*, Oct. 4, 1930) See how vehemently he condemned gender discrimination through *Young India* in 1921: “Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, so shocking or so brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity to me, the female sex, not the weaker sex. It is the nobler of the two, for it is even today the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge.” (YI, 15-9-1921, p. 292) Gandhi was bold enough to blame Shastras and Smritis for discriminating women. He wrote: “Legislation has been mostly the handiwork of men; and man has not always been fair and discriminate in performing that self-appointed task. The largest part of our effort in promoting the regeneration of women should be directed towards removing those blemishes which are represented in our Shastras as the necessary and ingrained characteristics of women. . . We will feel ashamed of the stray reflections on them in our Smritis, and will soon forget them. Such revolutions have occurred in Hinduism in the past, and will still take place in the future, leading to the stability of our faith.” (Gandhi, *Speeches and Writings* 424)

Gandhi was totally opposed to gender discrimination. He did not like Indian society's preference for a boy and a general neglect of a girl child. In fact, in most cases she is not allowed to be born. If born her survival is not ensured. If somehow she survives she is subjected to neglect. She does not get respect and the status she deserves equal to that of a boy. Gandhi described discrimination against women as an anachronism. He said: "I fail to see any reason for jubilation over the birth of a son and for mourning over the birth of a

daughter. Both are God's gifts. They have an equal right to live and are equally necessary to keep the world going.”

Gandhi called women as the noble sex. He said that if she is weak in striking, she is strong in suffering. Gandhi described; "Woman as the embodiment of sacrifice and ahimsa." He further states: "A daughter's share must be equal to that of a son. The husband's earnings are a joint property of husband and wife as he makes money by her assistance.”

Gandhi prepared a primer for the children for a primary school. This primer or *Balpothi* is the form of a mother teaching the child. In a chapter on housework the mother asks her son: Dear Son, you should also help in the housework as your sister does. Son answers: But she is a girl. I am a boy. A boy plays and studies. Sister says: How come I also like to play and study? Brother: I do not deny that but, dear sister, you have to do housework as well. The mother: Why should a boy not do house work? Son: Because the boy has to earn money when he grows up, therefore, he must study well. The Mother: You are wrong my son. Woman also makes an earning for the family. And, there is a lot to learn in housework--house cleaning, cooking, laundry. By doing house work you will develop various skills of the body and will feel self-reliant. In good housework, you need to use your eyes, hands and brain. Therefore these activities are educative and they build your character. Men and women, both need to be educated equally in housework because the home belongs to both. (Quoted in Patel)

Having expressed the views of two greatest souls of our country let me now hunt out the basic causes of gender discrimination. How has this evil attitude got into the Indian minds? Though our country is a secular state our secularism is unlike the Western one and it promotes religions and religious feelings among the people. It has now come to such a worst stage that our people's primary concern and feelings are religious. Communal and religious feelings give way to national and patriotic feelings. The purposes of the practice of a religion are to achieve the goals of salvation for oneself and others, and (if there is a God) to render due worship and obedience to God. Religious leaders, priests, sanyasis and pujaris are esteemed high in our country and their words are more accepted than even one's parents. Patriarchy reigns supreme in all religions and rituals and ceremonies are conducted by men. Thus, clergy assume themselves as superior to laity. Instead of promoting world peace and happiness each religion professes itself as the best in the world and propagates the message that salvation is possible only through it. Scriptures and holy books were inscribed by men, and women had no role in it. Principles, commandments, rules and regulations were formulated by men and the male superiority complex led them to consider women as inferior and it deteriorated to such a level as considering women as consumer products. It is an irony that even women accept themselves as inferior. It is the religions and the religious leaders who injected this venom of inferiority feelings among women. If they will, the priests of all religions can very well remove gender discrimination from all societies because their words

are precious and acceptable to the laity. But they won't, because they will have to share their power and positions with women and refrain from exploiting them.

Since religions are vote banks, the political parties in our country feed them and support with money and legal concessions. Even leftist parties are no exception to it. Candidates for local bodies, assemblies and parliaments are decided by the political parties on the basis of religion and community.

Some societies regarded women as the root cause of all evil and responsible for downfall of men. Women had a decidedly inferior status and were totally dependent on men. Women were confined to the family and remained under legal and customary subjection of their husbands or other male family members. Customs and practices like female infanticide, child marriage, purdah (veil), dowry, polygamy, sati, repeated pregnancies, permanent and pathetic widowhood, illiteracy, wife-beating and verbal abuse made life of common women very hard. (Kaushik)

Based on the most recent UN data, India's population is 1.37 billion. Sex Ratio of India is 107.48, i.e., 107.48 males per 100 females in 2019. It means that India has 930 females per 1000 males. In absolute terms, India has 48.20% female population compared to 51.80% male population. India is at 191st position out of 201 countries in terms of female to male ratio. Among Asian countries, India is at 43rd position out of 51. Isn't this a shameful and shocking reality of our country which is supposed to be a developing nation and one of the emerging superpowers? This unpleasant sex ratio is a result of sex-selective abortion, childhood neglect of girls and infanticide. Preference of son over daughter is the main reason for female infanticide. Another major reason is dowry system which makes daughters an unaffordable economic burden.

Here are some statistics regarding gender discrimination and atrocities. Millions of girls go missing each year and as per UN Population Fund for Asia, over 170 million girls are missing in Asia alone. The proportion of women who completed five years of primary schooling in India and were literate was 48%, much less than 92% in Nepal, 74% in Pakistan, 54% in Bangladesh.

India ranks low in global indices of female literacy as well. African countries Rwanda, Ethiopia and Tanzania all rank higher than India. India was ranked 38th among the 51 developing countries for female literacy. Daughters are not educated because parents think that it is a wastage of money and they have to be married off paying good dowry at an early age. The concept of the Indian societies formulated by the patriarchal system is that women are created for household work and for serving men. Thus, women are destined to lead a prison life of house, rearing children and serving men through food and sex. Gandhi believed that lack of education and information was the root cause of all the evils against women. He believed that education is therefore necessary for women as it is for men. He believed that

education is essential for enabling women to assert their natural right, to exercise them wisely and to work for their expansion. He thought that low level of literacy among women had deprived them of socio-politico power and also the power of knowledge. He stood for proper education for women as he believed that after receiving education, they become sensitive to the glaring inequalities to which they are subjected. (Kaushik)

Dowry system is another curse of the Indian society. Dowry deaths are deaths of married women who are **murdered** or driven to **suicide** by continuous harassment and torture by their husbands and in-laws over a dispute about their **dowry**, making women's homes the most dangerous place for them to be. Dowry deaths are found predominantly in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Iran. Twenty-one dowry deaths are reported across the country every day. The conviction rate, however, is less than 35 per cent.

I composed a poem on the curse of dowry system which was published in my first collection of poems *Winged Reason* in 2010. The poem is entitled "Laxmi's Plea". Let me read it:

Laxmi's Plea

Rekha's wedding today;
my youngest colleague
junior by ten years.
To be or not to be;
present or absent;
a terrible trance!
Auspicious occasion;
jocund jolly hall;
a fish out of water;
I can't slither there.
"Laxmi, when is your wedding?"
"Laxmi, you alone remain."
Can't bear these arrows;
heart full of such arrows;
bleeding day after day.
It's none my fault
single at thirty three.
"Laxmi looks very handsome."
"She is a lamp to any house."
A lamp destined to burn out
under a hot pot.
Plenty of proposals;
appeared with tea

before many young men.
None complained my looks.
“What’s the dowry?”
A stumbling block to all proposals.
Father died when I was ten;
mother bed-ridden with cancer;
a thatched house in five cents;
an elder sister married off.
My meagre salary two thousand
hardly meets our food and medicine.
I have pricked my bubble of dreams;
let none dream for me.
Leave me alone;
leave me single.

Gandhi believed that the custom of dowry turned young girls into mere chattels to be bought and sold. He called this custom pernicious as it lowered the status of women; destroyed their sense of equality with men and defiled the institution of marriage. (Bakshi 175) To curb the venomous dowry system he advised every parent to educate their daughters so that they refuse to marry a young man who wanted a price for marrying and would remain spinster than to be party to the degrading terms. He suggested that a strong public opinion needs to be formulated against dowry and such young men who soil their fingers with such ill-gotten gold should be excommunicated from society. He advocated change in education and also stressed the need of taking recourse to radical measure like organizing youth movements and offering satyagraha against those perpetuating the custom. (Gandhi, *Woman’s Role in Society* 32)

The destiny of widows in our country is very pathetic. India is home to an estimated 40 million widows - approximately 10% of all women. Ageing women are more vulnerable than men. Without any financial security or welfare infrastructure, many of them are abandoned in Vrindavan- where they live off charity while they wait to die. Farmer suicides, communal riots, terrorist attacks, road accidents etc. increase the number of widows in our country. I wrote and published a poem entitled “I am an Indian Young Widow” in my fifth poetry book *Cataracts of Compassion* in 2018. Let me quote from it:

I am an Indian Young Widow

I am an Indian widow
Cruel destiny made me so
at my prime age of twenty nine
With neither notice
nor any prior hint

he left me and our little ones

 Alas I have to row all alone now
 And sea has become more violent
 No glimpse of any terminus now
 With none to help from both our families
 how will I survive with my little ones?
 I who opposed practice of suttee
 can now find sense behind its concept
 Hellish is the life of an Indian widow
 Tragic and nightmarish if she is young
 Patriarchy doesn't allow her to survive
 Eagles fly over her wherever she goes
 When she craves for love and sympathy
 society rends her bleeding heart
 shooting arrows of repulsive words
 Curses hurl on her from in-law's house
 Burden for her parents and brothers
 Looking at her husband's photo
 whines often for deserting them
 Pleads him to take with him
 In fact she rows not for saving her life
 but to save her children from being drowned.

Another major chain of Indian women is that they have no freedom in choosing their dress. Their dress code is decided by the patriarchy, particularly religion. Men have the freedom to wear any dress they like but they dictate the attire of women. Gandhi regarded purdah as inhuman and immoral, for it impeded the march towards swaraj (self-rule) by restricting women. (Bakshi 174-175) It denied women freedom as well as free gift of God like light and fresh air. It also crippled the free movement of women; interfered with their advancement and their capacity for doing useful work for the society. It weakened instead of strengthening morality for it did not help in preserving chastity as chastity is not a hot-house growth and cannot be superimposed. (Gandhi, *Woman's Role in Society* 22) It cannot be protected by the surrounding wall of purdah. It must grow from within and must be capable of withstanding every temptation. Men must be able to trust womenfolk as the latter are compelled to trust them. He believed that the veil generates the feeling of insecurity in women and results in deterioration of their health. He appealed to public in general and women in particular to tear down purdah. (Gandhi, *Women and Social Injustice* 96) He was sure that abolition of purdah would lead to mass education for both men and women and would help women in gaining strength and becoming an active participant in the struggle for swaraj.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau of India, reported incidents of crime against women increased 6.4% during 2012, and a crime against a woman is committed every three minutes. In 2011, there were greater than 228,650 reported incidents of crime against women, while in 2015, there were over 300,000 reported incidents, a 44% increase.

Extreme poverty and lack of education are also some of the reasons for women's low status in society. Poverty and lack of education derives countless women to work in low paying domestic service, organized prostitution or as migrant laborers. Women are not only getting unequal pay for equal or more work but also, they are being offered only low skill jobs for which lower wages are paid. This has become a major form of inequality on the basis of gender. ("Gender Inequality in India")

According to the Deloitte report titled "Empowering Women & Girls in India for the Fourth Industrial Revolution", 95 per cent or 195 million women are employed in the unorganised sector or are in unpaid work. Women are discriminated in the labour sector with regard to the wages. They are paid lesser than the wages of men even if both are doing the same quantity of work. Among the majority of the poor people in India women are the bread earners of their families. They have to do all the domestic activities and then go for work in factories, estates, and other workplaces. Men, husbands and sons, either live idle or squander the money they earn through labour. Many are addicted to liquor and drugs and they beat and torture the women and children in the houses out of intoxication. Some even steal the hard-earned money of the women for their drink.

Discrimination to women in sports and games is more visible in our country than the West. Spectators are very less for women's games. Cricket, as you are aware, is the most popular game in our country. Players of our Indian Women Cricket team get very less remuneration compared to the men. They have no sponsors at all while the leading men players of our country earn millions and millions of rupees every month. I have composed a poem on this discrimination and published it in my third collection of poems entitled *Multicultural Symphony* in 2014. The name of the poem is "Women's Cricket World Cup 2013". Let me read it.

Women's Cricket World Cup 2013

I.C.C. Women's Cricket World Cup 2013

Played in cricket crazy land of India

Opening match at Brabourne ground, Mumbai

Indian lasses meeting West Indian lasses

Live telecast from Star Cricket

What a shame! Empty galleries!

Had it been men's world cup

galleries full and thousands ticketless outside

Why such discrimination to women's sports?

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Why such double standards to women's feats?
Had it been women's beauty contest
or fashion show with minimum dress
the stadium would be full
even if tickets are very high
Dear my brothers in India and abroad
let's appreciate and promote
our sisters' talents and skills
rather than looking at them
with vicious hungry eyes.

We have so far examined the impact of gender discrimination in our country. As I have stated earlier this unhealthy attitude and practice have been there throughout all the ages of India. We naturally expect a change or reformation in the society after our independence.

Being a democratic country, the Constitution was formulated in such a manner ensuring equality for women. But even after 73 years of independence what is the position of women in our country? In the 17th Lok Sabha 2019 there are only 78 women representatives out of the total number of 542, with a low percentage of 14.6%. Out of the 236 Rajya Sabha members only 26 are women, just 11%. The Women's Reservation Bill or The Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill, 2008, which proposes to amend the Constitution of India to reserve 33% of all seats in the Lower house of Parliament of India, the Lok Sabha, and in all State legislative assemblies for women is still a pending bill in the Parliament of India. No doubt, the male parliament members of both the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha are opposing the bill's implementation. Women representation in the State legislative assemblies is also very low and nominal.

Thus, it is very clear that as long as patriarchy rules supreme in our country women will never get justice. Unless women fight against this male supremacy by boycotting elections and resorting to Gandhian ways of satyagraha this gender discrimination will never disappear from India. I am winding up my paper with an extract from my poem "International Women's Day" published in my first collection of poems *Winged Reason* in 2010.

"International Women's Day"

Woman is the game!
Birth to death,
an instrument of lust
and hot-selling sex.
Her very birth ill omen:
an unwelcome event.
No guilt in foeticide;
foeticide is matricide;

no life without mother.
Sexism in childhood;
priority to her brother;
her food, his leftover.
Chained in kitchen,
she rarely goes out.
No toys, no plays;
always envies him.
Mum and dad love him;
she gets only reproaches;
beat her very often.
Seldom educated;
hence no employment,
and always dependant.
No choice of her partner;
her individuality
scantly respected.
Born to be dictated;
tyranny everywhere:
slave to her husband,
servant to her in-laws.
Bears the burden of birth;
lives for her children.
Dawn to dusk,
blood turns sweat.
Her love never returned.
Has no place in politics:
councils, assemblies, parliaments,
she has little or unheard voice.
Religions also dishonour her:
she has no right
to enter her Father's abode;
no place in clergy.
She is always the Other.
Patriarchy is his product;
he dictates the world;
dictates even God,
and corrupts religion.
He writes scriptures,
makes sexism predestinate.
Venerable is woman,
for she is your mother;

she is your sister;
she is your wife;
she is your guide;
she is your teacher;
she is your nurse;
and above all,
she is your angel.

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Biodata of the Resource Person



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Thodupuzha, Kerala, India - 685585. He was born on 13 February 1956 at Kalady, a holy place in Kerala where Adi Sankara, the philosopher who consolidated the doctrine of Advaita Vedanta was born. He has authored/edited 38 books including two short story collections and ten books of poems—six in English and one each translation in French, Hindi, Bengali and Gujarati. He is the Secretary of Guild of Indian English Writers, Editors and Critics (GIEWEC) and Editor of two international refereed biannual journals--*Writers Editors Critics* (WEC) and *International Journal on Multicultural Literature* (IJML). PhD researches are in progress on his poetry. He can be contacted at prof.kvdominic@gmail.com Website: www.profkvdominic.com