

# GENDER INEQUALITY: BASIC ISSUES AND REGIONAL PREJUDICES AMONG INDIAN COMMUNITIES

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Indian society is multifaceted to an extent perhaps unknown to any other of the world's great civilizations. Diversities of ethnic, linguistic, regional, economic, religious, class, and caste groups crosscut Indian society, which is also permeated with immense urban-rural differences and *gender distinctions*. The issue of gender inequality and regional prejudices can be understood in the overall context of the position that women occupy in our country. A general perception about the status of women is that they do not possess the same status, rather to say that it is not equal to that of men. Women have been considered to be one of the disadvantaged sections of society. The disadvantages could be observed since the birth of a girl child in general and in the specific spheres of socio-cultural regional practices in particular. The inequalities and prejudices have been formalized and institutionalised through the embarrassment of cultural norms and practices and this has led to gender disparity in all spheres of life. Consequently, it has further created an inequality of status between men and women (Ghosh 2007:109). We understand that the Constitution of India protects the right to equality to its citizens irrespective of caste class and gender. Cultural discriminatory practices against women are also not allowed by the state. Nevertheless, the granting of equality by the Constitution of India has not drastically altered the practices associated with gender inequality (Beteille 2002).

The present discussion explores the conceptual and empirical implications of the proposition that 'gender inequality is socio-culturally created and constitutionally negated'. Data gathered from secondary sources indicate that

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regional prejudices still prevail in our country based on gender inequality. Therefore, the article deals with various issues from different dimensions.

### **The Concept**

Gender as a conceptual term became popular during the last few decades and it has been generally used in the context of women's studies. Primarily biological differences between males and females have led to the issue of gender differences. Caplan (1987) clarified the meaning of gender and sex as, "sex refers to physiological distinctions, while gender is a cultural construct, a set of learned behavior patterns".

**The studies related to contemporary issues and regional prejudices in the context of women have been considered gender studies as well as the issue of the declining number of girl children to come under the category of gender studies.** Therefore, when we elaborate and analyze the concept of women from a broader perspective it could be overlapped with the term gender.

In view of the concise conceptual backdrop, it could be emphatically mentioned that the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women was adopted in 1979. Further, in 1993, the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna confirmed the notion that *Women's Rights were Human Rights*.

Therefore our forthcoming discussion will be focussed on the argument that the issues pertaining to women are not exclusive to women, rather there has been a paradigm shift, as women's issues are becoming social issues and political issues too with regional variations as well. Certain facts and figures become relevant to understanding and examining the issues of gender inequality and regional variations.

### **Conservative Vision**

Conservative thinking of most of the decision-makers and administrators, for long before and after independence kept women away from various fields. Progressive paths for women remain blocked for a long period. Delaying women's empowerment with a regressive outlook was a great loss. Education for girls and women was difficult in our country before independence due to the social structure. Reformists like Savitribai led the way in adverse conditions. Sawitribai started Pune's first girls' school in 1948. Entry of women continued to be banned into sectors like the armed forces. Girls were not allowed in Sainik schools. Many women would be forced to give up their jobs during pregnancy. Basic necessities like toilets were not provided.

With the passage of time, it was well thought that the nation's development is possible only if women's participation in every sector is encouraged. Consequently, the government brought about a change in mindset and opened all sectors to women. However, the issue of gender inequality and regional prejudice still remain the big challenges for the progressive path for women in our country.

### **Domestic Violence**

The phenomenon of domestic violence is widely prevalent but has remained largely invisible in the public domain (Nawal and Sharma 2013). The argument has been formulated on the basis of a news report that appeared in a national-level newspaper. It is regarding the documented cases, which were collected from twenty-eight different State Legal Service Authorities (SLSAs) of our country and compiled by the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA). The data was collected during a period from 25 March 2020 to 15<sup>th</sup> May 2020 (during lockdown because of COVID-19). The purpose of the compilation of the cases of domestic violence was to provide legal aid to those who were in need during the lockdown period. The report shows that Uttarakhand was at the top with 144 cases followed by Haryana with 79 and Delhi witnessed 63 cases of domestic violence (*Times of India*: 5, May 18, 2020, Jaipur). The incidence of domestic violence will be justified further in detail, along with the other relevant facts and figures, in view of gender inequality and regional prejudices during the forthcoming discussions.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Sociologists have shown their interest in re-interpreting the issues of gender inequality. S.L. Sharma (2000), while analyzing and reformulating women's empowerment approach, wrote that 'for all practical purposes, the concern for gender equity has graduated to the level of a policy objective. More importantly, it has begun to dominate public discourse overshadowing vital concern for other kinds of inequalities such as castes and classes. Sharma further argues that 'this is proof enough of the agility of gender concern today'. Furthermore, the discussion in the following pages is mainly focussed on the data related to sex ratio and regional variations that could be elaborated in the context of gender inequality and regional prejudices in India.

### **Sex Ratio and Regional Variations**

According to census 2011, there were 933 females per 1000 males in India. Further, the census data revealed that there were 946 females in rural areas while in urban areas it was recorded as 900 females per thousand males. The child sex ratio was 927. One more significant piece of data which draws our attention is that in Kerala the ratio was 1058 females per 1000 males while in Haryana the ratio was 861 females per 1000 males. For analysis, the data have been categorized (with the difference in the age group of 0-15 years) as under:

- ▶ On the basis of census data (2011) the sex ratio was 914 girls per 1000 boys in the age group of 0-15 years. In fact, this ratio remains the same as a decade ago for the same age group.
- ▶ Further, the rural-urban difference is sharpened in view of the sex ratio. As per census data, there were 920 females per 1000 males in rural India in the age group of 0-15. While there were just 900 females per 1000 males in urban areas. Similarly, the sex ratio of 7-15 age groups was 911 girls per 1000 boys.

- ▶ The difference in population of the two sexes between 0-6 years of age was 919 girls per 1000 boys. **Usually, discrimination against girls is measured by this child-sex ratio.** Obviously, the imbalance of the sex ratio reveals the issue of preferences (Agnihotri 2000).
- ▶ Highest sex ratio in India as of July 2024 Kerala 1084, Tamil Nadu 995, Andhra Pradesh 992. Lowest sex ratio in India Haryana 877, Jammu and Kashmir 883, Sikkim 889.

**The issue which draws our attention is the issue of regional differences. As we see the difference in sex ratio in rural India in comparison to the urban area, it becomes a matter to be pondered upon.** It can be interpreted that in rural India literacy rate is lower than in urbanites, however, male-female ratio is comparatively better in rural areas. It has been argued that traditional thinking and preference for male children remains the same in both areas. However the knowledge of advanced techniques is comparatively less accessible for the rural people. At the same time in urban areas, people are aware of the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technique Act (PC PNDT) 1994, which prohibits sex selection, before or after conception, however, pre-conception sex selection has been rising (Deshpande:2013). Because of the violation of the Act in urban areas, the number of female foeticides rose and the number of girls per 1000 boys declined (*Times of India*, Jaipur September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013 page 9). These data clearly indicate the regional variations and strengthen the logic related to gender inequality. To delineate the relevant aspects and issues further discussion is based on some more significant facts and figures from different areas.

### **Reasons for Declining Sex Ratio**

The declining sex ratio in India can be attributed to several factors (Piyush:2024), including; cultural preference for male children leads to sex-selective practices, more male births compared to female births, female infanticide being illegal, it still occurs in some regions, preference for males leads to sex determination test potential pregnancy termination, challenges in implementing laws against sex selection, some couples opt for smaller families if they have a male child, economic pressure due to dowry can lead to neglect of female children, imbalance can lead to difficulties in finding suitable partners for men, resulting in social issues.

### **Rationale of the Facts and Figures**

For analyzing the pertinent issues some relevant figures and facts would add to establish a paradigm related to the incidents of gender discrimination and regional inequalities in our country. The population data released by census authorities of India based on sex, male and female reveal that two-thirds of India's population is in the age group of 15-64, which is 66 percent of the total. Census data shows that the rate of illiteracy is still higher among women. Higher Positions and status of women are also an issues of gender inequality, which need to be discussed in detail.

If we talk about professional education then we come to know that the gender ratio at the prestigious IITs is around 80 percent male and only 20 percent female. Girls make up 26 percent of new entrances at four southern IITs, above the national average of 20 percent (TOI November 13, 2023). IITs are creating leaders of tomorrow. So, a lot of these women who will graduate from the IITs will go on to occupy the top echelons – the country will see many women CEOs, and several top bankers will be women. In spite of better education and professional training, 23.5 crore females are away from work force. Indian business schools are prioritizing gender diversity by admitting more women to their flagship programs, reflecting a broader trend in corporate India. Efforts to enhance classroom dynamics and prepare students for diverse workplaces are also underway (Economic Times: June 27, 2024). Overall, nearly 40 percent of students across the PGP batch at the top six IIMs (Bangalore, Ahmedabad, Calcutta, Indore, Lucknow, and Kozhikode) are women. Specifically, IIM- Ahmedabad has 24.7 percent female representation, IIM Indore 27.6 percent, and IIM Calcutta 36 percent. The push for gender diversity reflects a broader industry trend toward inclusivity and balanced representation. Feeding in business schools is provided by engineering colleges. In fact, there are less number of female candidates in engineering colleges; hence the number of female students would be less in business schools too. Though there are 4.7 crore **working women** in India on the basis of the data, the representation of women in the Indian judiciary is “abysmal” (Indira Benerjee: PTI 10 March 2022). The under representation of fair gender in decision-making positions in public life could be highlighted as the Supreme Court since its inception in 1950 has seen only 11 women judges. A report of the National Sample Survey (2016) showed that there are fourteen percent of female entrepreneurs in our country. According to the Global Women Entrepreneurs Leaders Report (2015), India ranked 29<sup>th</sup> place in female entrepreneurship, while the U.S.A. stands in 1<sup>st</sup> place.

The informal sector in our country has been providing job opportunities to around 90 percent of the total population including women. However, women still earn less than men even involved in similar kinds of work (Rajora 2010).

The personal life of a female, during middle age also happens to be a looser, for instance, they have been becoming mothers. In some cases due to the non-availability of maternity leave, she has to leave her job also. There could be many more figures and facts that provide enough evidence regarding gender inequality and regional variations. Some of these are being placed under for further discussion.

### **Discrimination Against the Girl Child and Women**

- ▶ Field studies have shown that female feticide is responsible for the skewed sex ratio at birth (Rajani Palriwala DU field studies in 2000). It is a matter of fact that besides all efforts the practice has not stopped in many areas of the country it still continues behind the curtain. It has also been observed

that in case of failure in female feticide, the phenomena of discrimination against girls, which begins as sex-selective abortion in urban or more prosperous areas, continues even after birth. Negligence towards the living girl child is also a very common practice among some of the families irrespective of the socio-economic status, in several parts of the country. Such kind of discriminatory practices could be seen in the distribution of food and items of sickness. If resources are limited sons get preferential treatment over daughters. The male child is taken wholehearted care of treatment during sickness and provided all kinds of food items while the female child is ignored. Because of such malicious treatment in some families, most of the girls face stiffer health challenges (anemia) and become the victims of infections.

- ▶ Among high and middle-class families milk is provided to a male child, while the female child is ignored. The families where non-vegetarian food is cooked, their girl child is prohibited from eating meat, fish, and even eggs. Particularly in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh girl children are advised for dieting (to eat less). Generally, female members and girl child of the family take their meal after eating of the male members in the family. Male children enjoy the freedom to roam around, to eat sweets, and fruits, and they are permitted to spend their pocket money, while restrictions have been imposed upon the girl child for such activities (Mathur 2008).
- ▶ In rural areas of Punjab, family members are more sensitive to the health of the male child, while comparatively health issue of the female child is not preferred. More expenditure is being made towards the clothes of the male child in comparison to the girl child.
- ▶ Indian society with a long history of co-existence of various culturally heterogeneous groups provides an interesting case for a comparative study of the impact of son preference on the reproductive behavior in four major religious communities- the Hindus, the Muslims, the Christians, and the Sikhs (Gupta 2003). Haryana there is a strong preference to have a male child considering the notion that a male child would be an economic resource and would be old age help of the future, while a girl child would be an economic burden (Malhotra 2012).
- ▶ Girl child in rural areas is forced to be involved mainly in domestic work like; cleaning, dusting, cattle grazing, preparing dung cakes, and many more. In some families girl's child is considered a heavy burden no leisure time for her even sometimes treated as a bonded labour, slave and servant. It has been observed that in many areas of Maharashtra girl child is trained to perform domestic work and they are trained to make Bidi at their residence, while male child is sent to school for education.

### **Women Harassment**

Indian women are credited with having resisted patriarchal oppression for more than 2000 years (Tharu and Lalita 1993) and still have been observed in different forms. In contemporary India many kinds of harassment along with sexual harassment have been observed as a very common phenomenon. Occurrence of such incidents at work place has been increasing. There are different kinds of unwanted activities which have been included in the category of sexual harassment like; unwanted sexual attention, its behavioral forms include visual (leering), verbal (sexual teasing, jokes, comments or questions), unwanted pressures for sexual favors or dates, unwanted touching or pinching, unwanted pressures for sexual favours with implied threats of job-related consequences for non-cooperation, physical assault, sexual assault, rape/ gang rape

- ▶ On the basis of a survey conducted by some institutions in ten big cities; Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Pune, Guwahati, Jalandhar, Kolkata, Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, and Luckhnow, it was found that ‘the incidents of sexual harassment at workplace have been occurring frequently’, as being reported by women, but 69 percent victims do not lodge any complaint in this regard. The reasons behind not making a complaint are; fear, non-reliability in the process of the complaint, lack of knowledge, and the satire made/remarks passed during sexual harassment. (Rajasthan Patrika: January 6, 2017).
- ▶ The case of harassment has also been observed with female students of engineering colleges and universities. A study conducted by the Department of Sociology UOR interviewed 250 female students (member of any Social Networking Site SNS 100 per cent) the study shows that female students were increasingly becoming victims of cyber bullying. It was found that the girl students made some common mistakes while using social networking sites. They share real name and surname (90 per cent), posting cell phone numbers (9 per cent), residential address and name of the educational institutes (98 per cent), post pictures of self/family. The main reason of becoming victim of harassment was found in the information shared by the female students, because of that they were easily entangled in the net of harassment. Online stalking (65 percent) and fake identity profiles became simple tasks for the criminals. Further consequences were also pointed out in the study. Major effects of Cyber Bullying could be noticed among female students as; low performance, reduced social participation, and depression. (The Times of India: 3: September 17, 2013, Jaipur).
- ▶ According to the National Crime Records Bureau of India, reported incidents of crime against women increased by 15.3 percent in 2021 compared to the year 2020.

**#ME TOO**

While discussing gender inequality and contemporary issues the phenomena of #ME TOO cannot be ignored, rather it should be discussed at length right from its initiatives in the past. It was Tarana Burke an African, born in New York who initiated the campaign. She happens to be a civil rights activist and initiated the campaign in the year 2006. Tarana herself was the victim of rape twice in her childhood. When Tarana listened about the similar incidents of rape from other victims then she said, ME TOO, soon after the campaign was initiated under the same banner. Gradually the campaign spread globally. Those women who had been the victim of rape in the past could not share, and kept mum, because they wanted to maintain their modesty of concealment. They were not willing to open up, rather always hid the happening with one or the other reasons. They also gained courage to follow Tarana, without any hesitation and found an opportunity to share the incident which they could not tell immediately came forward in front of media and joined the campaign. The aim of joining the campaign was to expose the persons who committed rape whether in recent past or long back. A fear of #ME TOO gained worldwide popularity. Therefore credit goes to Tarana Burke for this campaign. (**Tarana Burke, Book, Here the Light Enters: The Founding of the Me Too**).

According to National Crime Records Bureau, one woman is raped every 20 minutes in India. Consequently #ME TOO has been articulated as a feminist lexicon. Rather it is very commonly stated that we are entering a new era in the feminist lexicon. A noticeable change could be observed particularly towards the women at work place and the message is that women are not looked upon as sex opportunities at these places. A public opinion came in vogue that sexually charged work environments must be frowned upon. High profile men from the media and entertainment industries were being accused of systematic physical harassment and molestation. In our country women initiated to write new chapters for the country where traditionally they have been taught to walk away from rather than call out sexual predators. What will be the lasting impact of #MeToo be? Are men thinking about how to behave around women?

**Efforts to End Prejudices and Women's Empowerment**

Optimistic phenomena in favour of women indicate that the efforts could produce satisfactory results. We may find several narrations, in ancient history as well as in modern history, about the efforts made in past and present (Jain 2014). A popular quote from Indian literature, "यत्र नार्यस्तु पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवताः" (मनुस्मृति 3/56) reminds us about the dignity, honour and respectful status of women in ancient past. Whenever there were attacks against the dignity of women, social reformers came forward to protect the women rights to sustain gender equality and made efforts to eradicate the social evils. The goal has been oriented towards women



empowerment. Consequently the country has been marching ahead to achieve the fruitful results. In support to satisfactory efforts, made so far in contemporary India, a few examples could be referred.

In India women entrepreneurs have been recognised as chief executives of big companies. Out of 100 super companies of our country, 66 companies are being run by families, means women have an active and responsible role to take care of the key functions of the company. In the year 2019 there were 13.7 per cent female directors of these companies. While there were 4.6 per cent female directors in 2013. Most of them were daughters from third or fourth generations. Female were found a step ahead from male in context to educational qualification. Female directors were more educated in comparison to male directors. Data reveal that there were 73 per cent male directors possessing Post graduate degrees while 78 per cent female directors had Postgraduate degrees. The indication is very clear that the end of gender based inequality in our country could be seen, though it has begun in high profile families; however we cannot deny that the overall impact would not spread towards the low profile areas too. Of course women are being empowered irrespective of their class or creed. It could have been made possible by several other efforts like; special schemes initiated by state and central government, the role of NGOs, and the role of government officials.

#### **Some of the Significant Instances of Women's Empowerment**

- ▶ All women are discriminated against by personal laws of all religions. Gender equality and gender justice is not a religious issue; it is a socio-political and legal issue of the country as a whole. Efforts are being made to end certain common practices imposed upon women in the name of personal laws. Progressive thinking started prevailing among the women themselves and they have come forward against the discriminatory customs and beliefs of their own communities.
- ▶ Fighting for the right as an initiative by women is also indicating a step against gender inequality and in favor of women's empowerment. It was reported that women workers in the textile sector are fighting for the right to sit and take toilet breaks. Those on shop floors have to punch in or sign a register before taking a bathroom break. They have to ask for permission before they go to the bathroom. Obviously, the reason behind such an advisory was to achieve the targets. The targets they have to meet in a day are impossible so if they take a minute more, the supervisor starts shouting and abusing. Right to health and right to dignity are violated. The women come from poor backgrounds and need the job. So they learn to swallow the humiliation whether it is sexual harassment or minimum wages. (Times of India: October 3, 2016).

- ▶ Space, Military, Industry, Engineering and technology and alike are generally perceived as male dominated professions in India. The perception has started changing women have accepted the challenges and not merely preferring these professions rather they have been performing remarkably in these areas too. A study conducted by IIT Bombay found that more than 22 per cent of students who were currently enrolled in engineering and technology courses were women. Posts for in the armed forces were opened for women officers.
- ▶ Empirical studies clearly indicate that companies with more women in decision making positions tends to perform better in terms of financial results. The myth created on the basis of gender that only male could perform better because of their potential but this kind of myth showing gender inequality have been negated.
- ▶ A recent Booz & Co study calculates that if India's women and men were to be employed equally, the country's GDP could grow by 27 per cent. London Business School's research again indicates that equal gender representation can help unlock the innovative potential of teams. Gender balanced teams those with a larger representation of women are known to better possess and apply the skills of persuasion, motivation, flexibility, quick assimilation of information an eye for detail that are all hall marks of productive and innovative teams. It is now market imperative for companies to hire and retain female talent to ensure that their business remain relevant and competitive.
- ▶ Efforts have been made to end anti-women rituals, religious practices and customs in Hinduism, Islam, Sikhs and Christians since long back (Bal 2006). In contemporary India still there are big challenges as far as the construction of gender and religious base identities are concerned. However seriousness could be experienced at ground level to march ahead with optimism. The best examples regarding this issue are of *Haji Ali Dargah* in Mumbai and *Sabrimal* temple in Kerla. It was considered as the fight for equality ending gender bias and constitutional right. Consequently women and men getting unrestricted equal access right Entry of Women at Haji Ali Dargah in Mumbai Times of India: November 30, 2016) and the decision of Supreme Court regarding Sabrimala in Kerla (2018).
- ▶ One significant discourse may be made on the issue that despite girls have proven their calibre in every field, including those traditionally considered a man's domain, yet discrimination against the girl child remains a big social evil and a challenge for any government. A unique effort in this regard seems relevant and should be mentioned; the ***Mukhyamantri Rajshree Yojna, Ladli Behna Yojna*** started by the government of Rajasthan, Madhyapardesh and Maharashtra stands out as the most unique and thought out intervention to tackle the problem of gender inequality.

- ▶ One of the biggest beneficiaries of *Swach Bharat Abhiyan* has been girls and women of our country. Toilets in schools helped reduce the dropout rate.
- ▶ There are many more agencies whose contribution in highlighting the issues of gender inequality and regional discrimination cannot be ignored. In this regard the Indian cinema has also been playing a remarkable role by producing certain movies focussed at gender equality, dignity of women and specially a significant role of police in cases related to crime against women. The movie- “**Pink**” has touched the issues ranging from gender equality, respect for women and role of police in cases related to crime against women. With an aim to sensitise cops on issues related to violence against women, then additional director general of police M.L. Lather (Rajasthan) in a letter to all SPs have recommended to organise special screening of Bollywood movie Pink. The decision was taken so that police could understand the sensitive matters such as gender sensitivity and police’s approach towards incidents of crime against women (Times of India October 10, 2016).

### Conclusion

Discussion made so far clearly conveys that issues related to gender inequality and regional prejudices are endless. Similarly a number of efforts have been made to end gender inequality; still lot of scope would always remain. The changes have been occurring according to the nature of social milieu. In rural area the intensity of gender based bias and prejudices are thick whereas the sex ratio is lesser, in comparison to urban areas. The gap in sex ratio is higher in urban areas but gender based bias and prejudices are apparently lesser. The situation is contentious. Rather to say that a drastic change has been observed in the life style of young female in metropolises. Most of the female youth and young working girls could be seen around big malls, coffee houses, bar shops, beetle shops even in the streets while smoking, gossiping with their male companions. The transformation could be observed with certain constraints. However, divisive perceptions towards Indian female still continue. Therefore it would be more significant to notice that the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been a century of dramatic changes, with pulls and pushes of transformation, influencing the conventional roles of not just women, but simultaneously of men as well. A just and equal atmosphere can be created in case all abide by the theme of **International Women’s Day (8 March 2019)**, which suggests to ‘Think Equal’, ‘Build Smart’ and ‘Innovate for Change’.

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