

# Women in Patriarchal Social Frame: A Rural Indian Scenario

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## The gender-bias

Every year on the eighth of March, known to be the International Women's Day, I open the front page of the newspaper to read statements that call for true equality of women with men. I plead silently: Don't tell us half truths about how much you love us; prove it by giving us our half, our half of respect as parent, our half of attention as daughter, our half of opportunity as worker. It is not about making us feel like a princess for a day. It is about treating us as equals for life. Women have been denied their half for far too long. This is the demand of the sophisticated women as well the rural women in their unspoken words.

The ground-situation is alarming. India is rich in heritage, poor in economy, intense in patriarchal philosophy, and low in attitudinal components. Owing to its hierarchical social structure, rigid casteism, discrimination, and differentiation on the basis of political or socio-cultural identities, a large block of downtrodden population has emerged prominently. Not only that, the deep gender bias prevailing in the cultural ambiance has made women the major victims of oppression.

In all societies women are treated as inferior to men, and the case of India is no exception. It is a global scenario. In this respect I would quote Neera Desai: 'Ideologically, woman was considered a

completely inferior species, inferior to the male, having no significance, no personality.... The patriarchal joint family, the customs of polygamy, the purdah, the property structure, early marriage, Sati or a state of permanent widow-hood, all these contributed to the smothering of the free development of women.' The situation of women is different from that of any other social group. Women are essential and irreplaceable and fundamental to human existence. Yet, in their economic, social and political roles they are marginal. It is precisely this combination of being fundamental and marginal at one and the same time that has been fatal to them. Within the world of men their position is comparable to that of an oppressed minority. Here, I bring in the concept of patriarchy.

Patriarchy seems to be the prime obstacle to women's advancement and development. Patriarchy, definitionally, is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everyone deemed weak, specially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over them through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence.

Oddly enough, patriarchal thinking shapes the values of our culture. We are socialized into this system—females as well as males—and most of us learn patriarchal attitude within our families. These are later reinforced in schools and at other

institutions that we visit. So patriarchy has gone deep down into our layers of collective consciousness prompting us to behave in a specific way.

Psychological patriarchy is the dynamic process in which one half of the human species is exalted while the other half is devalued. Both men and women participate in this flawed value system. As men are given more value, women are necessarily devalued. Hence, psychological patriarchy replaces true intimacy with complex covert layers of dominance and coercion, collusion and manipulation. One advantage of understanding the notion of psychological patriarchy is that we are freed from the misperception that men are the enemy. They are not. Friedan describes women's unhappiness as a problem that has no name. Women feel a sense of depression because they are forced to be subservient to men financially, mentally, physically, intellectually, and I would definitely say, emotionally. The feminine mystique is the idealized image to which women try to conform despite their lack of fulfilment.

### **The plight of women**

Women's empowerment is a burning issue all over the world, including India. Various international organizations like United Nations tend to make us alert about gender discrimination, inequalities between men and women. Discrimination towards men also has been an age-old issue all over the world. Thus, women's struggle for equality with men is a universal phenomenon these days.

In rural India, the main role of women is that of a domestic worker, or a worker in the field of agriculture. Due to their illiteracy, they consider themselves weak

and poor. As a result, they are exploited on a daily basis. In rural society they are treated as parasites and expected to keep themselves busy to help their husbands in various activities. They have no idea about their power and capability. This is a very negative sign for social uplift, economic development, and cultural enhancement. They do not know what is meant by human resource and the developmental role of women. They are totally off-guard regarding their personal self-esteem.

Provision for formal and functional education is needed for the following reasons: it would help them realize their ability, power, and potentiality. They would get self-confidence and take decisions on their own. An educated woman can play the proper role of an ideal mother and make her child a good citizen. In fact, the mother who has a solid identity of her own can automatically teach the children to follow her as a role model. It would empower the women to fight against discrimination and give them control over their own lives.

The growth of women's education in our rural areas is very slow because they are kept in the narrow world of their familial and agricultural activities. This obviously means that, by and large, women-folk of our country remain illiterate, weak, backward and exploited. Moreover, education is not available to all equally. Gender inequality in education is reflected in the literacy rate among women, as per 2011 census. In 2011, the literacy rate for men was 82.15 per cent, but for women it was 65.46 only. Gender-wise literacy rate reveals the fact that in rural condition in 2011, it was 77.15 per cent for men, while for females, it was 57.93 only. In the urban setup these rates are slightly higher, being 88.76 for men and 79.11 per cent for women.

Swami Vivekananda wanted Indian women to have a kind of education that would make them fearless in the tradition of Sanghamitra, Lila, Ahilya Bai and Mira Bai. He reminded his countrymen that ancient India had produced women philosophers and scholars like Maitreyi and Gargi and might produce similar characters again with proper education being imparted to women. Fourier, among the early socialists, was an ardent advocate of women's liberation and sexual freedom. In a well-known passage, he wrote, the change in a historical epoch can always be determined by the progress of women towards freedom, because here, in relation of women to men, of the weak to the strong, does the victory of human nature over brutality is most evident.

Bevel, another socialist, pointed out that woman was the first human being to have the taste of bondage. She was a slave before the slaves existed in the world. Unless women are made to take an independent part in public service, it is no use talking about full and stable democracy.

### **Programmes and policies**

In India, rural women constitute nearly eighty percent of the female population. The development programmes for women in rural areas in recent decades have recognised the role of organization and identified strategies for women's empowerment. The rural women's organizations are the mechanisms for restructuring and re-distributing power and have utilized pressure groups for influencing opinion or bargaining on behalf of rural women. The launching of the community development programme of 1952 was a landmark in the history of India. It adopted a systematic integrated approach to rural development. Agriculture, animal husbandry,

public health, rural industries are some of the sectors that received special attention in the framework of the programme.

Five thousand national extension service blocks were created under the community development programmes by the end of the second five-year plan and the momentum was maintained throughout the third five-year plan by creating a series of developmental schemes. The contents of these programmes were aimed to strengthen the rural base of the economy and uplift the women's life conditions.

The sixth plan accepted the poor rural women to be the targets of rural development strategies. Their specific problems were identified and the special constraints that used to obstruct their access to available assistance and services, taken into account. These included lack of training to develop their awareness and skills, lack of information and lack of bargaining power, low occupational choices, low level of participation in decision-making, inadequate availability of expert guidance for socio-economic activities, little monitoring of women participation in different sectors, wage discrimination, inadequate application of science and technology to remove drudgery, and low health and nutrition status.

Modernity has resulted, no doubt, in a growing flexibility and change in the gender roles of women and men. But the lot of rural women has remained, by and large, unchanged. Discrimination on the basis of gender, caste, class, ethnic identity continues to impact their health and access to health care. The women still have little control on the resources and important decisions related to their lives.

In rural India, early marriage and child-bearing affect women's health adversely.

About twenty-eight percent of girls in India get married below the legal age and have early pregnancy. These have serious repercussions on their health. The average maternal mortality ratio at the national level is 540 deaths per lakh in child-birth. The rural maternal mortality rate is 617 deaths of women aged between fifteen and forty-nine years per lakh. In most cases the deaths occur from preventable causes. A large proportion of women is reported to have received no antenatal care like one tetanus toxoid injection and supplementary iron or folic acid tablets for hundred days as recommended by child health care programmes. Institutional delivery is also lowest among women from the lower social economic strata, particularly in the rural setup.

In the context of structural discrimination, lack of education results in lack of job opportunity. There are, moreover, lack of access to nutritious food, negative attitude of health professionals and social care-takers, and low wages in the sector of unorganized labour. For the same work women labourers get ten per cent of the amount received by their male counterparts as wages. The battered self-image is reinforced by the weaker physiology and the psycho-biological make-up of women seems to render them, in the eyes of the employers, useless members of a workforce. It is stressed all too often that in the early stages of social development man's physical superiority gave him power over nature, while women were accorded menial task involving maintenance of hearth and home. They were mere possessions in the custody of men. Walker maintains that as a result of such social discrimination, the attitude of passivity in women takes the form of fatalism. The idea of helplessness

being interiorized very early in life, woman's self-assessment revolves around the basic belief that she is the weaker sex and has always to look to men for her maintenance.

In the rural setup, gender bias in its various forms prevents hundreds of millions of women from obtaining education, health service, child care and legal aid needed to escape from poverty. Although women toil longer and contribute more to the family income than male family members, they are viewed as unproductive in familial context.

The common image of woman as one lacking in courage, submissive and docile makes her an easy target for violence. Rape, sexual harassment, murder, wife beating, female infanticide, dowry deaths are common in the everyday life of the rural women in India.

### **Women's education**

The lack of education results in the lack of self-reliance. Vivekananda said, educate your women first and leave them to themselves. They then will tell you what reforms are necessary for them. This ideal, however attractive, is hard to be implemented in the rural culture. It is estimated that about 850 million people in the world are illiterate out of which fifty per cent live in India and particularly in the rural sector.

According to the fourth educational survey, ninety-five per cent of the rural population in the plains of India have access to primary school within one kilometre of their habitation. Middle schools are available to 70.8 percent within three kilometres from their habitation but commuting to distant schools does pose problems for girls. There are only a small number of schools meant exclusively for girls. Parents in rural areas are very reluctant to send their daughters to co-educational schools. Moreover, in most

schools teachers are male. Despite the government policies, the proportion of women teachers continues to be low. Provision for accommodation for women workers including teachers is far from satisfactory. A large number of rural schools lack facilities such as proper building, adequate number of teaching rooms, drinking water, and specially, toilet for girls. With illiteracy comes non-realization of constitutional goals of social justice and equal opportunities for men and women. Various principles in favour of equality are enshrined in the Preamble of the Constitution, but none of them are followed in the rural cultures of India. Policies to extend the benefits of social welfare programmes and formal and non-formal education to women have failed to bridge the gap between men and women, which, incidentally, was identified as the main task by the National committee on Women's Education in 1958. The appeal was made by Jawaharlal Nehru who said that, in order to awaken the people, it was the women who had to be awakened. Once they are on the move, the country moves and, through the women, children who are the future citizens are brought into the picture.

The members of the downtrodden minorities in rural India hold an attitude of negativity towards girls. The uplift of women is just not a matter of consideration there. Women are regarded as passive members in a social system that confers on them a subordinate status. It is feared that education might embolden the women to question the authorities. The net result is a culture of silence that ensures subservience and rules out the possibility of protest.

Similarly, the problems of women's condition have become an area of silence within contemporary socialism. None of the different developmental projects has yielded the desired result. Programmes have been planned and implemented but none of these work properly. Assisting the women to determine their own goals and strengthening their participation in the developmental process have remained distant dreams. So violence against women has continued and resulted in female infanticide, infant mortality, caste migration issues, domestic violence, dowry death, rape, khap panchayat, sati, child marriage and honour killing that are regularly reported in our newspapers. The launching of programmes definitely had some positive bearings, but not to the extent of altering the scenario of atrocities, adversities, and inestimable suffering of the downtrodden rural Indian women.

### Concluding remarks

The list of psycho-social issues of the downtrodden women is quite long and heavy with psychological dark patches. The unwritten laws of a hierarchical social order, discrimination and stiff gender-bias and enormous economic deprivation subject the women of rural India to thankless drudgery. They cry silently in the absence of protest, and bear injustice with dried eyes and great muteness.

Is it not the right time in the glorious twenty-first century to lend serious attention to the problems of our women and express concern for them to alter the scenario and make their lives more liveable? Would we think? Let us hope... ■

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\* The paper is based on a talk delivered at the Institute as Sukhmandan Bhagat Memorial Lecture on 21 March 2017 by Dr Nilanjana Sanyal, Professor of Psychology, Calcutta University.