



**SOCIO-POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT:
CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND PATHWAYS TO EQUALITY**

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ABSTRACT:

The importance of the question of women's empowerment lies in the fact that the movement for women's liberation is gaining ground all the world over. The movement, started in the West in the early sixties, has grown so rapidly that the United Nations declared the years from 1975 to 1985 as a Decade of Women's Emancipation. The U.N. also organized conferences on women. The first conference was held in Mexico City in 1975. This was followed by the 1980 conference in Copenhagen and then in Nairobi in 1985. The biggest Women's Conference in the history of the U.N. was organized in Beijing in September, where some 48,000 women from 180 countries assembled to discuss their rights and the discrimination against them. The main thrust of this conference was poverty and violence against them. Though these conferences failed to achieve

much, they did succeed in heightening the consciousness of women about their rights.

The radicalism of the women's liberation movement has much in common with the other movements of the period such as Black Power, student unrest and the Hippies' rejection of contemporary culture. But the movement for women's liberation has outlasted all the movements. Its organization has emerged and a genuine attempt is being made to develop a theory of "Feminism" to guide its politics... The literature of the movement has also progressed in its claim to universal significance and its demands for a revolutionary transformation of society.¹

Keywords: *empowerment, liberation, movement, emancipation, discrimination, feminism, revolutionary.*

1. Introduction

The question of the status and role of women in society has long been of interest to thinkers, scholars, writers and public figures. Many academic and artistic works have been written on the subject.² Much has been said about them. They have been vilified; they have been glorified; they have been derided; they have been admired; they have been hated; they have been adored; they have been feared; they have been respected. Still, women are shrouded in mystery.

2. India's Position

For us in India, the voices of women's liberation often sound weird and cacophonous. Nevertheless, India cannot remain unaffected by the influence of the movement in view of the spread of democracy, female education, urbanization, modernization and the revolution in information technology. It is why several steps have been taken at various levels in India for the empowerment of women.

(a) Constitutional Provisions

The Constitution of India guarantees equality before law and equal protection of laws to women along with men (Art. 14). The State will make no discrimination in any matter at the disposal of the State against any citizen on the ground of sex [Art. 15(1)].

Again, according to Article 16, (1) “there shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment in any office under the State” and (2) “No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth or any of them, be ineligible for... any office under the State.” There is also a provision for equal pay for equal work for both men and women [Art. 39(d)]. The State shall also secure suitable employment for men, women and children so that their health is not undermined. Besides, Article 15(3) allows the State to make special provisions for women and children.

(b) Governmental Steps

The Government of India has taken various steps in recent years for the social, economic and political empowerment of women. They are as follows:

First, one-third of posts have been reserved for women in urban local self-governing institutions.

Second, in 2001 a national policy has been declared for women's empowerment.

Third, in 2002, according to the 82nd Constitutional Amendment, compulsory and free education has been provided for children up to the age of 14.

Fourth, domestic violence legislation was enacted in 2005 to prevent oppression of women within the four walls of the family.

Fifth, the “Protection of Sexual Oppression Bill in the Working Place” was introduced in the Lok Sabha in 2010 for protecting women from sexual oppression in offices and working places.

Sixth, there is a bill waiting for enactment for 33 percent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha and state legislatures.

Seventh, by the 73rd Amendment Act there is a provision for reservation of seats for SCs and STs at every level of Panchayat. The seats are to be reserved for SCs and STs in proportion to their population at each level. Out of the reserved seats, one-third have to be reserved for the women of the SC and ST. Out of the total number of seats to be filled by direct elections, one-third have to be reserved for women.

Moreover, in the field of literature the question of women's status and role is very freely and fearlessly expressed in the present time. From the 1970s, women's movements have been gaining ground in India, and women activists and commissions are raising their voices against women's oppression in any form such as domestic violence, dowry death, etc. Despite all these constitutional provisions and measures taken by the government, the position of women is still lamentable.

From all these provisions it is quite clear that women's rights are certainly human rights.

3. Strategies for Women's Emancipation

The present paper is based on the hypothesis that the position of women in any society depends on four structures: production, reproduction, sexuality and socialization. Hence, women can be emancipated by removing the shackles which these structures impose upon them.

Position of Women in the Structure of Production

3.1 This section starts with the assumption that the mode of production is the fundamental determinant of social structure; that “what individuals are depend on the material conditions of their production”;³ that “social relations are closely bound up with productive

forces”;⁴ that those who control the means of production control those who do not; that those who control your purses must control your will. In fact, as Aristotle says, “property is a mirror which reflects myself to me...” The Bible also says that just as a man cannot pass through the hole of a needle, so also a poor man cannot go to heaven.

3.2 An important condition of the subjugation of women throughout history has been the denial of access to resources of income, such as land. Because of the prevailing pattern of male ownership and control of such resources, the status of women has been one of dependence on men. This dependent status is then legitimized by means of ideologies which claim that the subordinate status of women has a grounding in the orders of nature.⁵

3.3 Despite the steps taken since 1960 to reduce gender-based inequality, it is estimated by the United Nations that women worldwide contribute 66 percent of hours worked, earn about 10 percent of the world's income and own only one percent of the world's property. In the U.K., fewer than 4 percent of the members of the boards of major companies are women. Even though women gained the right to vote in 1918, only 20 percent (about 127) of the members of Parliament were women in 2006. In Japan, women have to leave employment and return to the home on getting married, becoming pregnant or reaching the age of 30. In Islamic states, women are required to wear the veil (burka) and conform to other social codes. Even in progressive Scandinavia, where women have made the most significant breakthroughs in political representation, women constitute only one-quarter to one-third of the members of national assemblies.⁶

3.4 In India, though gender equality is guaranteed in legal ownership of property, it does not lead to de facto control over it. There is a gap between legal and traditional prejudices and actually existing power relationships; most of the South Asian women face difficulties in exercising their legal rights in landed property. Therefore, hurdles against women gaining control over resources occur not only at the legal level, but at the social and cultural levels as well.⁷

Moreover, despite the fact that the President of India is a women, the representation of women in Lok Sabha is 13.6% and in Rajya Sabha is 14 to 17%. Besides, their representation in I.A.S. and I.P.S. has reached a historic high of approximately 41% in recent recruitment batches. Thus all contemporary and historical societies are seen to be characterised by patriarchy, that is, the dominance of men and subordination of women.

3.5 The exclusion of women from productive structure has warped their personality over the centuries. Describing its impact on women, Costa writes, “As it cuts off all her possibilities of creativity, so it cuts off the expression of her sexual, psychological and emotional autonomy... never had such a stunting of the physical integrity of women taken place, affecting everything from brain to uterus. Participating with others in the production of trains, a car or an airplane is not the same thing as using in isolation the same broom in the same few square feet of kitchen for centuries.”⁸

Hence the first premise for the emancipation of women is that they must be self-reliant and they must solve their own problems by themselves. Since it is the bread-earning capacity of men which gives them a dominating position, so when women will have the power of making their own living, they will no longer be dominated by their male counterpart.

Moreover, women will get full freedom even in marriage when they will earn bread for themselves. The dominance of man in marriage is simply a consequence of his economic predominance and will vanish with it automatically.

Furthermore, their employment in public industry bring them into contact with the outer world that would give domesticated women the urge and ability to rebel against their oppressed status. Besides, contact with the public sphere would broaden their outlook, remove their isolation, and make them more cultured and independent. Thus the price of liberty is not “eternal vigilance”, but “eternal work.”⁹

4. Women's Position on the Structure of Reproduction

4.1 The status of women is determined not only by their role in productive structure, but also by their role in reproductive structure. Reproduction includes such work as child-bearing, cooking, cleaning, nursing and other personal services to help family members safe and happy.

4.2 In India, the sole purpose of a wife is to bring forth a son: “putrārtha hi striyah.”¹⁰ Both husband and wife are called “Dampati”, which etymologically means “joint ownership”. Wife is also called “Bharya”, which means one who gives birth to a son, and the son is supposed to pave the path to heaven for his father: “Ya Prasute Sa Bharya”. This reproductive work is so important in India that if no son is born within twelve years of married life, the husband becomes free to marry another woman.¹¹ It is why, while the birth of a son is celebrated, the birth of a daughter plunges the family into gloom; people rejoice at the birth of a son and grieve

at the birth of a daughter. They even think that the birth of a son entitles one to a place in heaven.

4.3 Women's confinement to reproductive function has several serious consequences.

First, it has created the division of labour between man and woman for child breeding. It makes man the bourgeois in the family; “the wife represents proletariat.”¹² It is because of women's role as mere instrument for breeding children that they are degraded, enthralled, and made the slave of man's lust.¹³

Second, the bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production.

Third, petty house-work crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades woman, chains her to kitchen and nursery and wastes her labour on barbarously unproductive, nerve-racking and crushing drudgery.¹⁴

Fourth, women wear themselves out with trivial, monotonous and time-consuming house work. Their continued engagement in the petty house work makes their spirit shrink, mind dull, heart-beat faint and will slack.¹⁵

Sixth, a society that considers women as commodity either for sensual pleasure or for servile jobs, is bound to breed violence, hatred, terrorism, tragedies, fear and death.

4.4 It may be said that sex is a biological and ineradicable difference between man and woman, and therefore biological difference means that man and woman must have different social roles and positions. This implies, quite simply, that biology is the destiny of woman. Hence woman can attain her fulfilment only in discharging her natural reproductive function. But in the eloquent expression of Simone de Beauvoir, it may be replied that “giving birth and suckling are not activities, they are not natural functions, no project is involved, and that is why woman found in them no reason for a lofty affirmation of her existence — she submitted passively to her biological fate.”¹⁶ A child “does not take her out of her immanence”;¹⁷ she shapes his flesh, she nourishes him, she takes care of him. But she can never do more than create a situation that only the child himself as an independent being can transcend. When she lays a stake on his future,¹⁸ her transcendence through the universe and time is still by proxy.¹⁹

4.5 It is thus clear that unless and until women are freed from what Firestone calls “the tyranny of reproduction”, they will not be emancipated. They can regain their transcendence and attain their status as a “subject” only when child bearing and house-keeping cease to be

individual maternal burden and become a social responsibility. What women require is not only formal equality, but economic and social equality.

5. Women's Position on the Structure of Sexuality

5.1 The position of women depends not only on productive and reproductive structures, but also on the structure of sexuality. Sexuality includes such things as love, marriage and sexual intercourse. According to Plato, “Love is instinctive reason, the passionate longing for a good not yet achieved.” Love is man's name for the emotional element in social relations. It makes one human being. Since love between man and woman is a social affair, it is superstructure which is rooted in the substructure of the mode of production. With the change in the mode of production, there is change in the nature of sexual love. It is why, to slave-owning Greek culture belongs platonic love; to feudal, romantic; and to capitalist, passionate love.

5.2 Sexual love prevailing in modern times is open to several serious objections.

First, it has reduced social relations to the cash nexus, emptied of affection. Hence the modern corporate capitalist world is suffering from the starvation of true love. This is manifested in such pathological forms as neurosis, hate, perversion and unrest.

Second, it lacks tenderness, because tenderness can only exist among human beings, but in modern society all relations appear to be between a man and a commodity. Though the relation between the man and his dog is unpleasant, yet at least it is tender. But human relations in modern society are based on the payment of cash. Even marriage can be escaped by suitable cash compensation.

Third, capitalist passionate love, characterised by worth and liberty of each other, is today like a flower which is being stripped of its petals one by one. Besides, a woman's virtue is her sexuality. She is specially made for man's delight. Being a source of sexual pleasure, women must be beautiful and pleasing in man's eyes. It means that women are treated as object and not as a subject.

Fourth, the aesthetic ideal of modern women oscillates between the conception of “brood man” and of “dolly” sexuality. It has become a sport, Popular proverbs such as “man is the hunter and woman temptress” and “the man who has no choice goes to bed with his wife” bears testimony to the fact how widespread the conception of sex as a sport is. It is why Tolstoy says,

“The emancipation of women lies not in colleges and not in parliaments, but in the bedrooms.”²⁰

5.3 The modern institution of marriage is open to several objections.

First, marriage represents one half of the sexual life, prostitution the other half. To quote Bebel, “Marriage is the front and prostitution is the back of the medal.”²¹

Second, marriage in modern society is either arranged by parents or the boy seeks his wife from his own class. While the first gives rise to heterism on the part of the husband and adultery on the part of the wife, the second is merely “a wedded life of laden' boredom.”²¹ Thus marriage without love debases women.

Third, as marriage is decided by the class position of the participants, it is reduced to a marriage of convenience. This marriage of convenience often turns into the crassest prostitution — sometimes on both sides.

Fourth, the sexual intercourse is the most intimate relation to which neither men nor women are totally indifferent. Personal beauty, intimate association and similarity in inclination arouse desire for sexual intercourse between sexes.

Finally, marriage in modern society is arranged and decided by economic considerations. Bride and bridegroom are appraised not by their personal qualities, but by their possession. Thus the relation between wife and husband is not the relation of two partners; it is rather a relationship between man and commodity. It is why marriage in modern society is based on the capitalist notion of “purchase,” “sale” and “free contract”.

5.4 Likewise, the institution of prostitution, the women of pleasure, the means of satisfying the beauty lust of men, shows the degenerated condition of modern society. It demoralizes men far more than it does women, for, in nine out of ten, a long engagement is practically a preparatory school for conjugal infidelity. Modern men, “not content with having wives and daughters of their proletarians at their disposal, not to speak of common prostitutes, take the greatest pleasure in seducing each other's wives.”²²

Moreover, the institution of prostitution is a living proof of women becoming a piece of communal and common property. Furthermore, prostitutes are not only the poor victims of want and seduction; they are also the living symbol of exploitation — one directly attacking the physical body.

Finally, the existence of prostitution in modern society reveals how women are degraded, made into a sexual object and plaything for the male ego. This is the sure sign of degeneration not only of women, but also of society which allows prostitution to creep into it.

5.5 It is thus clear that unless women attain equality and freedom in sexual structure, they cannot be emancipated. For this to happen, the ideal relationship between man and woman, or husband and wife, should be based on love and social sense.

6. Women's Position on the Structure of Socialization

6.1 The fourth structure on which the position of women depends is the structure of socialization. Socialization is the process of induction into the cultural milieu of society. This means that nurturing, right training and conducive environment play an important role in shaping the character of the individual.

6.2 However, here a distinction may be made between gender and sex. Although the terms “gender” and “sex” are often used interchangeably in everyday language, the distinction between them is crucial to social and political theory. In this context, the term “gender” is used to refer to social and cultural distinction between males and females, while the term “sex” is used to highlight biological, and therefore ineradicable, differences between men and women.

6.3 The subordination of women has been fundamentally justified on the grounds of the biological difference between men and women. It is often said that “biology is destiny” of the individual. Racism is a good example of this, as is the caste system, because both ideologies are based on the assumption that certain groups of people are superior by birth, and are born with characteristics such as greater intelligence and special skills that justify their power in society. Biological determination has been one of the most important legitimizing mechanisms of women's oppression over the centuries. It is on the basis of this biological determinism that different societies identify a certain set of characteristics as feminine and another set as masculine. Such epithets as “Frailty, thy name is woman”, or “Women's strength lies on their tongue”, or “Leave wailing and complaining to woman, men must have determination”, or “Why are you crying like a woman?”, or the stirring line of Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, “Khoob ladi mardani woh to Jhansi wali rani thi”. “Women are the half-finished men”, or “Women's blood is not so red as is that of men.”

It may, however, be argued that there is no necessary correlation between the biology of men and women and the qualities that are thought to be masculine and feminine. It is the

process of socialization or nurturing that tries to establish and perpetuate certain differences between sexes. Thus gender-specific qualities — for example, bravery and confidence as masculine and sensitivity and shyness as feminine — are produced by a range of institutions and beliefs that socialize boys and girls differently. As Simone de Beauvoir puts it, “One is not born, but is made a woman.”²³

6.4 Thus different processes of socialization generate between men and women, subjugating women to men. To quote Vinoba Bhave: “Men consider women to be housewives, or the object to be enjoyed... Man has decided that woman should not be given any freedom.” Vinoba further says, “Men have shackled the hands and feet of women. They have pierced their noses and their ears. If God had so willed, could He not have created women with holes in her noses and ears? But this has been the work of man!”

From childhood, women are taught to be submissive, yielding and accommodating rather than become independent. They are taught to be selfless and live for others. This is insured at all levels of socialization by all the agencies of socialization. As a result women become a non-entity. Their capabilities are not allowed to develop. Consequently their human capacities wither and starve.

6.5 It is thus clear that subordination of women arises, not from the unchangeable biological differences, but from social and cultural values, ideologies and institutions that insure material and ideological subordination of women. The nature of women is not different from that of men. Human nature and character are shaped by circumstances in which individuals live. If they appear so, it is because they were denied rights and training of their talent and skills. Nurture is more important than nature. They are as bright and gifted as men and, given the same education and training, they may reach any height.

Conclusion

Thus for the emancipation of women, it is necessary to regard them as human beings, for the soul is unsexed. The inequality, oppression and subjugation that women suffer corrupt both men and women. Human society cannot progress if half of its population remains backward. The degree of emancipation of women is the standard by which the progress of humankind can be judged. Men would be debased if they exercise dominance over women. To keep women in subjugation is to debase one half of humanity without any consideration for the future of humankind. To quote Vivekananda, “That country and that nation which do not respect women have never become great, nor will ever be in future.” Manu rightly declares:

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That is, “Where women are respected, there the God’s delight; and where they are not, there all works and efforts come to naught.”

However, a note of caution may be struck here. To the ultra-modern woman, an extremist on the question of woman's liberation, womanhood is of no consequence. To her, imitation of the opposite sex in dress, in modes of life and even in moral aberration is the highest pinnacle of freedom for woman. The extreme form of modern radical feminism portrays men as “the enemy” and proclaims the need for women to withdraw from male society, a stance sometimes expressed in the form of political lesbianism. Such an extremist view of women's emancipation will not be acceptable to India, which has a different history, tradition and culture of its own.

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