



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
 ISSN Online: 2394-5869
 Impact Factor: 5.2
 IJAR 2017; 3(7): 1112-1116
 www.allresearchjournal.com
 Received: 06-05-2017
 Accepted: 07-06-2017

Chandan Bharadwaj
 Department of Sociology,
 Patna University, Patna,
 Bihar, India

Being women, poor and old in the 21st century India

Chandan Bharadwaj

Abstract

The expressions such as, "Unequal", "Unwanted", "Discriminated", "Humiliated", and even "Outcasted" are especially well acquainted with a particular segment of the society which constitutes the half of Humanity. Yes, we are obviously talking about "the Women of India". Oppression of women in India has deep roots in religious and social practices. Abuse of women, insult of women, persecution of women, male dominance in the different walk of life, patriarchy and related issues can often be seen in popular media discussions on women. Women's position in society has undergone from moderate to significant transformations. Though, "Women's empowerment" in itself is a very ambiguous term. The term "Women's empowerment" is one of the most "politically-correct narratives". Well, the empowerment of women for the pride of men makes women just a third class citizen inside the home as well as outside home. The journey from womb to tomb of women is an oppression based life story and unfortunately, is the fate of the majority of women of India. The science of prenatal diagnostics has facilitated the start of oppression of girls/women right from the womb. Even for educated women, life at home and the life at work place is far from ideal. The story of the rural women is obviously extremely depressing. Women live often longer than men. They get married at a very early age in the Indian scenario. Due to male female age gap in Indian marriages, often women end up as the widow. Widowhood is historically most difficult thing for women of India. The scale of mental health issues of aged women is beyond imagination (and also due to the lack of scientific studies in this area), but their hardships, poverty lead malnutrition and diseases etc are visible to any sane person. The story of negligence, insult, abdication of aged women in holy cities like Vrindavan and other religious places are a matter of great concern. This paper is trying to explore the linkages between gender, womanhood, poverty, and aging in the Indian scenario.

Keywords: Women, poverty, aging, empowerment of women, and the struggle for survival

Introduction

Many expressions such as, "unequal", "unwanted", "discriminated", "humiliated", and even the expression like "outcasted" are well acquainted with the other half of the society, that is, "the Women of India". The Oxford University Dictionary of Sociology defines discrimination as, "An action or practice that excludes, disadvantages, or merely differentiates between individuals or groups of individuals on the basis of some ascribed or perceived trait"(Kohler-Hausmann, n.d.), although this kind of definitions itself are subject to never ending high-voltage discussions and debates (Sociology, 2014) [27]. Oppression of women in India is obviously linked with deep-rooted religious and social practices. The insult of women, abuse of women, persecution of women, the conscience of men, male dominance in all walks of life, the patriarchy in totality and many other issues can often be seen in popular media discussions. These kinds of thoughts and social practices have been questioned in the academic discussions and literature. Equally by numerous individuals, social groups and different institutions, from time to time, have raised their voices on the women's issues. Especially these women, men, and social bodies have fought on the issues related with atrocities against women. As a result, women's position in the society has seen moderate to significant change in recent years. The situation is fortunately changing at a faster pace these days (at the same time with some gloomy pictures).

The "Women's Empowerment" in itself is a very ambiguous notion. It does not leave any scope for radical transformational initiatives either from a legal or even from the societal side of social action. Hence, the idea of "Women's Empowerment" is one of the most "politically correct narratives" of politics and social discourses. That is why, it is widely used or we can even say that it is overused and often is an abused socio-political narrative.

Correspondence
Chandan Bharadwaj
 Department of Sociology,
 Patna University, Patna,
 Bihar, India

The upliftment of situation of women in the society and the social order is an essential need for the advancement of the general public (Forbes & Forbes, 1999) [8]. But, yet our male-ruled society didn't acknowledge that (with some lip-service). Even if men speak on these issues, they do it by their own orthodox mindset and own worldviews (which has undergone some changes in the recent years). Hence, the question mark on the "Agency" and "Structure" dynamics becomes inevitable while dealing with women's issues. No doubt, Indian society and culture is still very patriarchal and is suffocating for women because of men's so-called "protective mindset". This initiates a vicious cycle of protection, pride (the men's pride), suppression, discrimination, cruelty, women's harassment: mental, social and even sexual. All of them get juxtaposed in the domestic sphere in the form of domestic violence and atrocities (Forbes & Forbes, 1999) [8]. Well, "Change in women's life" for sake of "pride of men" can make women only a third class citizen inside the home as well as outside home whether it is work-place or any other place.

Discriminatory practices and social evils related to women in India are unparalleled to any country of the world. The journey from "womb to tomb" is a journey of oppression and exploitation. There is an unwritten-untold fate of women; a depressing and distressing fate of women of India and also of women of Indian subcontinent (Vatuk, 1998) [28]. The science of prenatal diagnostics has facilitated men to use scientific techniques as well as social norms, customs and social traditions together to keep oppressing attitude alive even in this so-called developed modern scientific age. After simply identifying whether the fetus is male or female, the choice to choose a child's fate of survival automatically fell into the hand of men/the male patriarch. By simply spending few bucks men can surpass even the God and it happens only in India/Indian subcontinent (under all circumstances it is higher than all other nations of the globe). Fortunately or unfortunately if a girl gets the chance and privilege of getting birth male-female discrimination in upbringing, nutrition and parental love and care starts in majority houses of Indian Subcontinent. Growing up as a girl can be a beautiful and cherished experience only for few educated or sometimes even uneducated family who grow up their child as a pampered baby/child. For the majority of the girl child, life is tough and they learn it at very early stage of their life. Child abuse, child labor, child trafficking, sexual exploitation by the in-laws or in a worse scenario in by organized criminal syndicate/s, is a well-known fact. Even for an educated woman, life at home and life at workplace is far from being ideal.

Under all this distressed living conditions, getting old, aged, weak, sick and unwanted is a painful (extremely painful) process, especially for the woman folks of Indian Subcontinent (Gupta, Dasgupta, & Sawhney, 2003) [11]. When a woman reaches the stage of the senior citizen (the age which has been declared by most of the developed nations of West and even by the United Nation the age of senior citizen), women of India and neighborhood countries, often face abject negligence by their families and traditional social norms and traditions. Women live often a longer life (as per available data from census and other records) than men and they get married at a very early age in Indian scenario, hence, they often end up as a widow also. Widowhood is historically the most difficult thing for women of India.

Earlier there was the frequent practice of "Sati" in India. If someone gets spared from becoming "Sati Mata", then the never ending cycle of insult, negligence, meager food, malnutrition, diseases and even abdication at Vrindavan or any other religious shrine in the different part of India used to be the known fate for the majority of women of India. As, the practice of "Sati" has been abolished and hardly heard now a days, but the stories of neglect, poverty, malnutrition, diseases, and abdication at various religious shrines and other religious places of different states of India are usual affair in India. The issues related to mental health of elderly and especially of the aged women are largely unknown or are limited in number. Information from rigorous scientific research on aged people is very little because hardly it has been focused either by private or govt. agencies. Though some limited initiative would have been taken by some individuals or agencies which are never going to fulfill the much-needed exhaustive research in this area.

The malnutrition of whole life, over-working for whole life, the cycle of the poor health and with no education or very poor education of an average Indian woman, hardly leave them capable enough in any sense in old age to face hardship and difficulties be it emotional or psychological or financial or physical or even final abdication by the family (Arber & Ginn, 1991) [1]. The reality of average Indian aged persons and especially of aged women (the poor-aged women) in the rural areas, at different religious shrines, railway stations, and in the holy Vrindavan city is unimaginably distressing. The holy Indian city of Vrindavan which is infamous among educated elites because of the abdicated old women, especially the widows, force us to think about what is going on in this 21st century India when we have reached till moon and Mars through development in science and technology and the Indian Nation claims to be one of the most important players in different world affairs. The great Indian sycophants of the great Indian culture and traditions, often argue that the problems of the elderly or the old age persons in India were not that serious earlier as per their belief/also a popular belief in society at large. Earlier because of the low number aged person/senior citizens in the society in those days (the reason behind this may be due to the high mortality rate in those glorified historical periods of Indian Nation) and also as children used to be excessively obedient and caring (according to the believers of glorified Indian historical traditions), the families used to take care of the aged/elderly persons sincerely and diligently not with the sense of responsibility but because of their "Sanskars".

Well, as an alternative analyst one may think that when the majority of old age women because of their widowhood and unquestioned-unchallenged practice of "Sati" etc were already out of the scene (were forced to die early unnatural death) in that possibility, yes, it can be said that on those glorified days of great Indian culture, the problems related to the elderly-aged person were not so serious. But again, fortunately, or unfortunately things have changed, isn't it?

The increasing human expectancy over the years has resulted into substantial increase in the number of older persons in almost every country (United Nations, n.d.). The demographic changes of western countries have somewhat different trend than the demographic changes of developing world countries. India and other south Asian nations are also undergoing through significant demographic changes (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population

Division, n.d.). Though the demographic curve is currently showing demographic dividend trend for India and the neighboring countries but the number of senior citizens has also increased rapidly due to numerous reasons (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, n.d.). The large human expectancy is showing its effect in developing world like India also. There is substantial increase in the number old persons and especially the

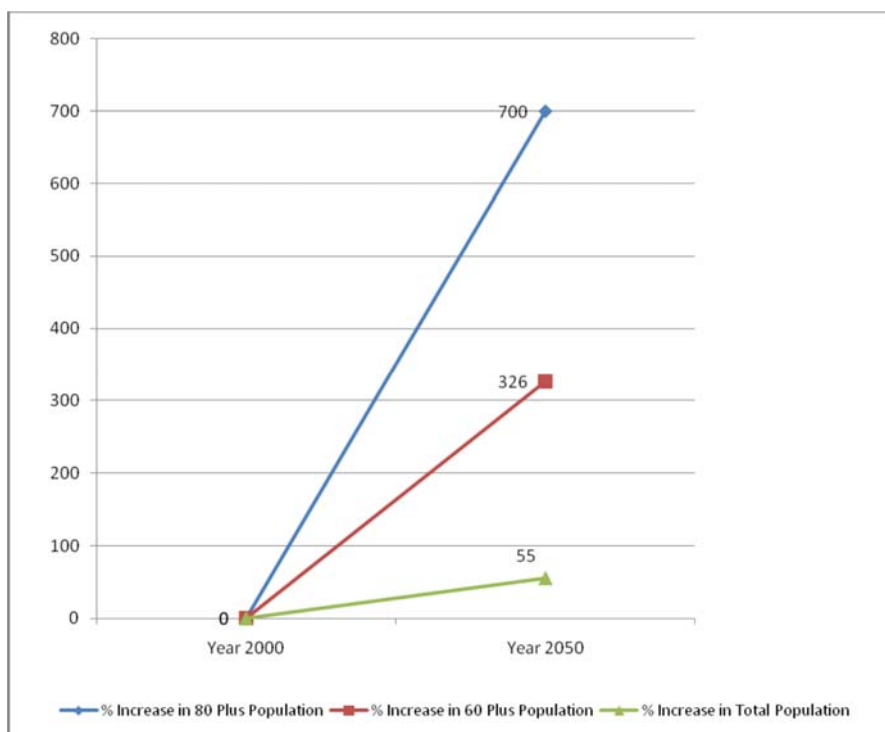
number of aged women is showing a different trend than others. The demographic profile depicts that in the year 2000-2050, the overall population in India will grow by 55% whereas population of people in their 60 years and above will increase by 326% and those in the age group of 80+ by 700% - the fastest growing group (see table and graph)

Years	Total Population (millions)	60+ (millions)	80+ (millions)
2000	1008	76	6
2050	1572	324	48

Source: World population Ageing: 1950-2050; Department of Economic and Social affairs, Population Division, United Nations. New York.2002

The 1/8 th of the Worlds Elderly Population lives in India (United Nations, n.d.). Most of them will never retire in the usual sense of the term and will continue to work as long as physically possible. Inevitably though the disability to produce and earn will decline with age. The absence on savings will result in sharp declining in living standards that for many can mean destitution (United Nations, n.d.).

Therefore this is the challenge of old age income security in India. As a result of the current ageing scenario, there is a need for all aspects of care for the Oldest Old (80+ years) namely, socio economic, financial, health and shelter (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, n.d.).



Source: World population Ageing: 1950-2050; Department of Economic and Social affairs, Population Division, United Nations. New York.2002

The debates related to old age persons abdicated women and mentally ill individuals left either on their fate or on the grace of the fate/destiny maker were also emerged seriously on several occasions like in different proceedings of the constitution making process (Constituent Assembly debates on old, weak and mentally sick persons). In the constituent assembly and further deliberations forced the makers of the modern Indian state to introduce special provisions for the elderly, weak and especially for those who are also part of the same humanity but are out of any humanitarian umbrella of kindness, like thousands of poor old women living in cities like Vrindavan etc.

Many constitutional provisions were made, especially through constitutional provisions, either through making

obligation for the state or even by imposing duties on the citizens (who are otherwise capable) to bring in some improvement in the situation of poor and old persons of this country(Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, n.d.). The article 41 of the Constitution directs the state to take care of old age persons through special means and mechanisms. Article 47 directs the state to take care of nutrition and health care of weak and uncared persons of the country. Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has been empowered to take care of the weak and aged persons who have been abdicated by their own blood and blood relatives (Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, n.d.). The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 has been passed by the Parliament to

ensure need-based maintenance for parents, senior citizens, abdicated old age men and women for their welfare as a compulsory duty of the state (Press Information Bureau, Government of India, & Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, n.d.). This act ensures that every district of the country must have one old age home, well equipped with health care facilities, lodging and boarding facilities which can take care of at least 150 old age persons. It further, ensures several legal obligations on the part of adult children who are physically and financially capable, to ensure proper care of their own aged parents as a legal compulsion (failing which may lead to severe legal repercussions).

Besides these constitutional and legal provisions, few organizations (though, very few organizations) have taken some initiatives towards the improvement of the standard of life of these abdicated poor old women (Sulabh International, n.d.). Sulabh International is one of them. Some years back, the Supreme Court of India took a notice of the plight of widows of Vrindavan and advised the National Legal Service Authority (NALSA) to contact NGOs like Sulabh International for helping the abdicated widows of Vrindavan. These NGOs mainly Sulabh have taken up many initiatives to uplift the conditions of widows living in Vrindavan. The women were earlier mainly begging on different religious sites situated in the Vrindavan city in order to make living for them. Sulabh started giving them monthly help of Rs 1000 initially and later increased the amount to Rs 2000 (Sulabh International, n.d.). Now, they have started some vocational and educational training of these women as well. But, are these helps and initiatives sufficient enough to change the destiny of majority of poor old women of the country?

Conclusion

The family is the main source of all kind of emotional, mental and social security for almost every person at all places of the world. Indian family system is traditionally known to be very possessive and caring in nature. It takes care of girls and women in more careful manner. The aged members of the family get respect, love, and care because of the religious duty of all grown-up male and female members prescribed through religious texts. But, later, these religious norms and rules became so stringent and oppressive, especially among women, that the practice of "Sati" etc became a prominent feature of Hindu Social Order. In northern areas sufferings of women was much more than their southern fellows (because of prevalent practice of Sati in northern India). Indian women (in Hindu order) were deprived of any inheritance as per religious and social norms. The extreme form of patriarchy and patrilineal-patrilocal form of residence became one of the major reasons for the oppression of women. The condition of widow women who had almost no right to his husband's property (before the post independent introduced constitutional provisions) and she was made totally dependent (financially as well as for care giving) on her in-laws. Verbal, mental and even physical abuse of aged widow women in the majority of rural households was a common scene. Remarriage of any widow in Hinduism was commonly looked down. Even if any remarriage used to take place, even then the condition of remarried widows were never so good. Widows were commonly accused of being the cause of her husband's death and other

unfortunate things in the family. Tribal life has been a different story. Also, the condition of those women who went into the fold of Islam or Christianity changed to the certain extent. But, the life of Hindu widow remained in the pathetic condition even in the 20th century and it is continuing even in the 21st century. Some changes have taken place because of the rise in the education level of women as well as in society in general. The constitutional provisions and the legal frameworks have also helped them. But, the scene present in different religious sites, especially in the cities like Vrindavan, Kashi, Mathura etc gives an extremely gloomy picture and the distress widowed Hindu women is overwhelming for any sane human being. The need of the hour is to take immediate action through changing legal positions of widow Hindu women by making a change in the Hindu Family laws or even by making the existing laws more stringent. Social change can only be brought by changing the mindset of general masses. Change in the consciousness of the general public, even those who are living in the remote inaccessible rural areas is a must for bringing-in concrete and substantial change in the life of aged poor women of this country.

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