

The Paradoxical Status of Women across India in comparison to other Asian Countries : An Umbilical Cord Relationship

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The status of women in India when contrasted and compared to their counterparts in other Asian countries is reflective of persistent constraints despite their progress in recent years. Gender Equality and empowerment stories are engulfed in the tentacles of social norms and patriarchal values. The discriminatory practices across West Asia as compared to India seem to be painted with the same brush and the quantitative indicators of women's progress established by international organizations offer somewhat incomplete stories which are divorced from the ground reality. It is unfair to make cross national comparisons between India and other Asian countries because socio economic disparities amongst countries is so wide that such generalized equations lead to contradictory implications. The paradoxical nature of what is- and what appears to becomes to the forefront not by the few elitist minds that represent the country on international forums, but through a visit to ground zero where feminism is still groping in ignorance and darkness and subjected still to the wrath of Man. While India may fair well in comparison to some Asian countries, a lot needs to be done in the health sector, education as a tool of

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empowerment and socio-economic development through proper policy planning and implementation so that bottlenecks and barriers that fuel gender differences can be overcome.

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1. Introduction

“Shradha” The Indian woman is a paradox. She poses a pathetic figure in Indian history. Barring the early Aryan Period, where she enjoyed due respect and status, her position has undergone a steady deterioration that has impaired her identity and relegated her to an inhuman, inferior and loathsome place in the Indian society.

Even today her smiles are crushed-her dreams usurped. When she is born she brings ill luck to her family. Her innocence is kept under parental subjugation her adolescence ravenously stared at and her youthful pliancy and beauty duly gifted to her husband. The ever increasing graph of female infanticide and feticide clearly reveals the Indian psyche which hates the frail daughters and longs for brave sons. Even today in some unreported corner of India, she screams in a paroxysm of fear and excruciating agony as the ravenous flames leap up to devour her tortured body. She yells, beseeches, but her heart rendering entreaties for mercy with all their anguish are too feeble to wake a callous, sleeping society. She screams one last time, and then, a liberation from a life of misery by a final torture at the hands of a tormentors- And mind you all this happens in a nation which believes in the maxim that a nation that worships women is the abode of GOD! I quote *Manusmriti* (para 3/46) “*Yatra Naryastu Pujyante, Ramante tatra Devata*”.

2. Indicators of Women’s Status : A Rosy Canvas or Blinkered View

If I were to compare the status of women in India with those in the other Asian countries, the findings are equally paradoxical. The women in Asian countries too, are clothed in a veneer of equality but under the facade lies the appalling reality. The myriad of legislations that embellish the pages of law books are like the scintillating jewels that adorn a woman – their extrinsic charm is belied by their intrinsic hollowness. With all their refulgent splendor they serve no practical purpose. Justice remain as alien to the women of the other

Asian countries, as to the women in India. This, by no means indicates that women in these countries are not progressing.

The opinion of experts is divided on whether the condition of women in India and other Asian countries is actually improving or deteriorating. Those favouring the path of progression argue that access to better resources, be it in the health sector or education has increased their autonomy and power. It has immensely benefitted their general well being. But the condition can neither be generalized for India as a country nor for all countries that constitute Asia. The expansion in education opportunities, vocational training programs and enhancement of academic qualification has brightened the prospects of women across many South Asian countries. Similarly, programs like right to education in India have been a silver lining amidst dismal darkness in Indian villages where even today such access is denied. We also have countries like Cambodia and Laos where the women folk pose a pathetic figure in the struggle for women's liberation. But again there are countries like Brunei, Thailand and the Philippines where there are more female graduates than males and the rates for Vietnam and Indonesia are almost equal. This however this cannot lead us to generalize the overall scenario and overlook the gap in development between rural and urban India or in countries across Asia. We have to bear in mind that any apparent advances in women's situation in the name of development can be illusory or offset by a deterioration in other aspects of women's status.

3. Political Liberation : Reasons to Cheer or Veneer of Deception

The lack of women in political power is also indicative of status of women in relation to men. This is as true for India as in other Asian countries. The political ideologies are wrought with discrimination, intimidation and oppression. The progressive thinking may talk of rights, entitlements, freedom and equality –but the fact remains that the gender bias and patriarchal roots have rendered our politics as rotten as a termite stricken piece of wood. Talks of political mainstreaming coupled with tall claims of 33% mandatory reservation for women in politics in India guaranteed by the 73rd and 74th amendments of the constitution are nothing but a facade. The condition of stubborn gender inequality is indicated by women

representation in parliament from a high 30% in Nepal to a dismal 6% in Sri Lanka which is definitely not substantive enough for decision making and challenging the patriarchal backlash in Asian countries. What is even more demoralizing is that the careers of women aspiring to carve a niche in the political area is cut short by the male dominated society. Institution like the “*Khap Panchayat*” in India is an absolute challenge and spells doom of any claims of development. Talks of political reawakening, stream of consciousness of political right are off-shots of conflicting reports that offer a blinkered view. It questions the very notion of political empowerment.

In the political context if we specifically focus on gulf countries- the status of women in gulf countries witnessed a whiff of fresh air as these countries ratified various international conventions and human rights instruments committing to secure equal rights of women. Key among them is the ratification of the Convention on Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women. Two Gulf women already appointed in the UN, Ms. Thoraya Ahmed Obaid from Saudi Arabia, is the UNFPA Executive Director, UN Under-Secretary General.

In most Gulf countries women held ministerial position, Sheikha Lubnaal Qasimi, as an economics and planning minister. Dr. Masuma Al Mubarak was appointed as minister of planning and administrative development. Sheikha Ahmad Al-Mahmoud, took office as the Minister of Education. Dr. Nada Haffadh the Health Minister in Dr. Fatima Al Balooshi, In Saudi Arabia, Six women are advisors to Majlis Al-Shura, a 150 member national consultative council appointed by the King. This is a step towards women’s public participation that could serve as the basis for appointing women as members of Majlis Al-Shura and more appointment in public positions. King Abdullah, has made public statements in support of increasing women’s role in public life and many legislations were created to open more economic opportunity for women in the last four years.

The higher political leadership in the Gulf play a major role in supporting women to attain their rights and improve their status and role in the society. The Constitutions of all the six Gulf countries, states lays down all the Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles for women. Women are primarily employed

in education, health care, and civil service jobs. However, with the enlargement of private sector and with more chance for employment in that sector, changes in status of women has been developing, where more and more women working in that sector. In Saudi Arabia, the kingdom's labor ministry recently set up a working group to study how more private sector jobs could be created for women. Female in Gulf States compete not only with citizen male but with Non Citizen male who constitute a large percentage of labor force in these countries.

So progress on bridging the gender gap in social indicators has been impressive in Gulf Countries, mainly because of heavy public sector investments in education and health sectors, from which women have benefitted significantly. The status of women varies from nation to nation and has evolved differently in many countries, but it is fair to say that in recent years, achievement is evident and sustained in the Gulf countries. Though traditions keeps Gulf women at times away from the "focal point" of cultural, political and financial circles, but step-by-step, women of all ages have been playing a greater role in all aspects of society, enabling the creation of further opportunities for the younger female generation. The past three decades have witnessed steady progression and development. According to ministry of commerce, approximately 29.734 businesses are owned by women, an increase from 29.453 in 2003. In addition, females own more that 10% of the bank mutual funds.

4. Economic Liberation : A Silver Lining or Grounds for Germination of Untold Woes?

If we talk of the impact of economic development on the autonomy, resources and well being of women across Asian countries, the picture again offers shades of grey in some area while some countries are rainbow bright. There is a stark contrast in status of women as compared with men. One view regards our species' ancestral way of life-hunting and gathering as an Eden for women. In that setting women's economic and social contributions typically were as important for survival and as highly valued as mens' and the genders often lived harmoniously as equals (Draper 1975, English 1972, Friedl 1973, but compare with Collier and Rosaldo 1981).

In the last three decades, there has been a marked shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development. In recent

years, the empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women for their participation in labour force and economic activities.

The women's liberation movement in Asia was a feminist movement that took off in 1960's with aim to seek economic liberation for the women in Asia. The objective was to redefine women's relation to family. However, there were particular challenges that made the economic liberation different for different countries across Asia.

Economic development, however, does appear to affect the situation of women in many Asian countries, or at least is contemporaneous with changes in their status. For example, the enormous disparities in education and employment between the northerly countries of South Asia and the other countries can be attributed at least in part to the disparity in incomes between sub regions. A majority of the changes in women's status associated with development have been positive. Both in comparisons between richer and poorer countries within the region and in comparisons over time within a single country, development goes along with an improved educational status for women, both absolutely and relative to men; with a movement of women out of unpaid family employment into remunerative work; with an older age at marriage for women and a narrowing age difference between spouses; and with improvements in women's health and longevity improvements that in some instances are suggestive of decreasing nutritional or medical discrimination against girls.

Development, however, especially during its early stages, is no guarantee that women's position will improve. Studies show much slower improvement in most of South Asia than in most of Southeast and East Asia, where incomes have risen more substantially (Karen Oppenheim Mason's Report-Is the situation of women in Asia improving or deteriorating SEPT 1995).

It is said that times have changed and so has the status of women across Asia. Economic, social and political developments in India and West Asia have brought with them profound changes in the position of women. In general the condition of women has improved with social and political change that favours equality and individual rights. At the same time cultural tradition, especially

those related to family life continue to have a strong influence on the status of women in India as well as West Asia.

5. Education : A Tool of Empowerment or Gimmick

Until recently, in most West Asian countries and in India , few women attended secondary school or university, and even fewer worked outside the home .Over the past 50 years, the number of women who complete primary and secondary school has improved drastically. The proportion of women attending university, although much smaller, is also growing. More recently, women have started taking up paid employment in greater numbers, particularly in the manufacturing, clerical and service sectors. Over the past 50 years, women's life expectancy has improved across West Asia and India, overtaking men's life expectancy in nearly all West Asian countries .Yet, sadly, during early childhood, girls are still more likely to die than boys in these regions. They also point to the prevalence of sex selective abortion.

Primary school education is nearly universal in most countries of Asia as in India – both for boys and girls. Women's enrollment in secondary schools has increased manifold since the 1960's throughout the region and the gender gap in secondary school enrollment is gradually disappearing.

In spite of these advancements in the field of education women in West Asian countries, Iraq for example, continue to be threatened and attacked for not complying with strict codes of behavior ,including dress codes. Authorities have failed to accord women adequate protection against violence, including violence by family members. Iraq ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in August 1986.Still, Women's rights abuses remain common across West Asia with the threat to women and minority groups looming large. The unstable security situation in West Asia has made women particularly vulnerable. As violence spreads across the region women's mobility and access to public sphere has drastically reduced.

An interesting study hints that an extra year of primary education encourages girls to marry later, have fewer children, are less likely to experience violence and increases eventual wages by 10-20% (Source : Council of foreign relations). Hence be it India or

other Asian countries what is needed is a high state budget for secondary education to combat high dropout rate.

6. Development and Progression : Reality or Facade

It should also be kept in mind that as societies become wealthy and demographically modern, new problems for women arise to replace the old ones. Increasing women participation through measures to increase social, economic and political equity, and broader access to fundamental human rights, through improvements in, work and education may pave the way to improving the situation on ground.

According to the data, the average percentage of female participation in all six south Asian countries is 19.2% which means one fifth of total labor force are female. However it varies from one country to another- where the highest is in Qatar and the lowest in Oman. Also, women are concentrated in government jobs which represent more of job security and higher income.

The scene back home in India is quite the same. It has said that times have changed and so has the status of women in India. She's dreaming a new world. There is Kiran Bedi the bold intrepid police officer, Bachendri Pal the audacious adventurer, Radhika Nanda, Indira Gandhi, P.T. Usha, Kalpana Chawla, Sushma Swaraj, Pratibha Patil and a host of others. But can a handful of Kiran's and Kalpana's boast of changing the whole scenario? No, definitely not. If you really wish to see the position of women in society, go into the heart of Indian villages and it is there that you will see suppressed femininity groping in ignorance and darkness and subjected still to the wrath of man. The fact of the matter is that women - be they from West Asia or India - are like the moon - they shine but depend on MAN their sun for life.

Among the most prevalent western stereotypes about Muslim countries are those concerning Muslim women – doe eyed, veiled, and submissive, exotically silent, gauzy inhabitants of imagined harem closeted behind, rigid gender roles.

Many Americans have a certain image of the average middle east woman - she is subdued, covered from head to foot, keeps her head bowed and knows her (lowly) place. But times are changing. Media coverage of the recent uprisings in the region has shown women who don't look particularly subservient. They have been on

the frontline in the protests against the corrupt government in Egypt, Tunisia and now in Libya .

In spite of all these scintillating facts, the actual scene is not as rosy-Neither for India nor for the women in West Asia.

7. The Road Ahead : Matching Missions and Visions with Reality

The sad and sorry story tracing the status of women across Asia, India being no different, is that the rights of existence and survival are not accorded voluntarily. Women have reached their present position after much force and struggle. It took the shortage of manpower during wars and pressure of economic needs and requirements of industrial developments that forced women to get out of their homes- to work, to learn and to struggle for livelihood- to run her race of course side by side with man. Despite the swelling mantra of Women Empowerment and proliferation of gender sensitive approaches in India and most other Asian countries the advancement in the status of women has been snail paced and deceptive.

There are a raft of development activities, micro finance programmes, mandatory reservations for women in all these countries, yet there is a lack of durable progress. What is needed is fresh thinking, fresher strategies and a total revamping of the patriarchal mindsets that has clipped the wings of the creator. The plagued and prejudiced mentalities need to shed off the paradoxical garb of equality till it becomes a reality and ceases to be a facade.

In most parts of India and Asia as a whole, development appears to have a salutary effect on the situation and status of woman. Women tend to seek solace in the fact that their condition is a shade better than what it was twenty-thirty years ago. We can only hope the rural India and countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan and most other South Asian countries with strong patriarchal traditions experience further economic growth, modernization, better education, employment and health opportunities.

The conclusion is that women across the globe constitute half of humanity and if half of humanity to suffering and if sufficient and concrete measures are not being taken to solve this problem we have not only failed but failed miserably in our concern for women.

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