

# A critical analysis on gender discrimination in British India

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**Abstract:-**Women are the pillars of every society, they are nearly half of the world population. So, it has been rightly said that the true yardstick to analysis the development of society mostly depends upon favorable conditions being provided to women of any society. In India gender discrimination prevalent not only in modern society, it also prevalent in ancient time. In British period Indian women also faced many types of discrimination in the society. They were deprived from basic needs like education, good food etc. Women were not having freedom in any field of life. As daughter, she lived under the strict supervision of her parents, after marriage they lived under her husband and after the death of her husband, they lived under the supervision of her son as well as society. To describe changing position of women during British period, it is essential the knowledge of situations in which society Indian women lived.

**Keywords:-** 1.Women 2.Gender discrimination, 3.Son preference, 4. Patriarchal society, 5. Education, 6.Violence, 7.Health issues, 8. Social customs.

**Introduction:-** The study of feminine is gaining the higher deliberation all over the globe. Gender discrimination means disparity between men and women in different field of life. It may be prevalent in social, political, economical, cultural, or legal aspect of life. Among human beings inequality is very common feature.<sup>1</sup> But in India gender discrimination is deep rooted from the time of traditional society. They were deprived from many facilities like education, political participation etc. Many customs were imposed on them like sati pratha, pardah, restriction on widow remarriage, early marriage, female infanticide, dowry etc. Women never remained independent. They confined to home mainly. They were happy with their domestic career. They were first required to serve the meals to their husbands and other elders members of the family and then ate themselves. While they walked, they had to follow their husbands as a respectable distance. A good wife was expected to dedicate herself spiritually and physically to her better half. His gratification was her ultimate goal. The husband were sacred for their wives. No knowledge, no pilgrimage, no yajnas or havens, no happiness, no devotion to Gods could equal the pativrata or the sanctity of wedlock.<sup>2</sup> If sometime a wife was violated her duty towards her husband, a wife was disgraced and after death, she entered the womb of a jackal. Thus ideologically a women was regarded to be inferior to the male. Socially, she was kept in a state of subjection. She was denied her rights as well as suppressed and oppresse.<sup>3</sup>

**Gender discrimination by son preference:-** From ancient times in all patriarchal societies the birth of a girl was generally an unwelcome event.<sup>4</sup> Same position was also in our selected period. Daughter were not valued as sons. Sons were considered a permanent economic asset of the family.

Sons did not migrate to another family after marriage like daughters, they lived with their aged parents. There was no doubt, women had potential military value but it was considered that males defended themselves and community from the enemies and they could offer value able co-operation to their families. It was common gender discrimination prevailed in India.

There were many local proverbs that showing son preference than girls, like as

‘Meehn aur bettya te kaun dhappya sai.’<sup>5</sup>

(who can be satisfied without rain and sons. For agriculture purpose both are necessary.) In that period labor requirements, and the high mortality rate, it considered no safety to have only one son.

Ek ankh ka ke sulakshana, Ek poot ka ke spoota.<sup>6</sup>

(one-eyed man can hardly be called lucky, so also a man who has only one son.)

Another proverb maintain the gender discrimination:

Chohra mure nirbhag ka, Chori mure bhagwan ki.<sup>7</sup>

(Son dies of unfortunate person and daughter dies of fortunate person.)

**Patriarchal Society:-** Most of India had strong patriarchal custom during our study period. It was the custom when inheritance passes from father to son. Men hold the authority over female family members and inherit property and title. Daughter had to move with their husbands to their in-laws homes. A Muslim woman inherited a definite share of her husband's or father's share of property with an absolute right to dispose it. Unlike her Hindu sister she retained the right after marriage. Mahr was another safeguard for her, while a Hindu woman had no right to the property of her husband's parents. A Hindu woman was entitled to maintenance besides movable property. Thus, women were led to a position of despondency in every sphere of life. They became home bird.<sup>8</sup> So patriarchal society of India also suppressed women. It was also a form of gender discrimination.

**Gender discrimination and education:-**In terms of education, health, social justice, women were discriminated against men from long times history. Education plays a important role in improving the possibilities the growth of human being. During the British period there was little interest in the education of girls as comparatively boys education.<sup>9</sup> The popular belief that if a girl is taught to read and write her husband will die soon. During that period widowhood was a curse. So, it was considered that to lead a happy life girls should prey for their husband's long life instead of causing his death by getting education. Child marriage also was a hindrance the girls education. So illiteracy was a root cause of all types of discriminations. Before the time of independence of India female literacy rate was less than 10 percent. In 1881, female literacy rate was 0.35% and comparatively male 8.1%. In 1891, female 0.42% and male 8.44%. 1901, female literacy rate 0.6% and male 9.8%. In 1911, female were at 1.0% and male were 10.6%. In 1921, female were at 1.8% and male were at 12.2%. In 1931, female were 2.9% and male were at 15.6%. In 1941, female were 7.3% as comparative male 24.9%, and in 1951, female were at 8.86% and male's literacy rate was 27.16%.<sup>10</sup>

So, large literacy gap within the education of male and female was the example of gender discrimination.

**Gender-based violence:-** Gender based violence like rape, sexual assault, abduction, kidnappings, insult to modesty, cruelty by husbands and their relatives, custom of dowry and with many other crimes were practices on women. It was showing the high degree of gender inequality in India. There is major example during partition of India, when women were sexually contaminated by men of other communities, the ravaged bodies of the women became envelopes to carry the message of conquest from one group of men to another.<sup>11</sup> During the phase of partition of India, violence, rape and abduction of women and painful inscription of nationalist slogans on the bodies of women made sudden appearances. According to the news of 'The Tribune' by the west Punjab women being restored to India, who were not saleable.<sup>12</sup> After later 'The Tribune' gave more information that how Sikh and Hindu women were being exhibited in the market of Peshawar and Banu.<sup>13</sup> So gender-based violence was very common in Indian society at local and national level.

**Health Issues:-** There was a big gender discrimination by the health facilities to man and woman. According to the census report of 1911, "the girls were usually insufficiently clad and less trouble was taken to protect them from heat and cold as compared to boys. During the illness of female children, no notice was taken unless the ailment became serious, while the slightest indisposition in case of a boy upset the whole family and the best available medical assistance was summoned."<sup>14</sup>

**Gender and decision making process:-**We shall take a brief survey of the position of women in public life during our selected period. Women hardly figured in it down to the beginning of the time. This was not easy, for women were for a long time unable to get the benefit of the western education, which was mainly responsible for creating a new social and political unconsciousness. Mrs. Anandibai Joshi, Pandita Ramabai, Mrs. Ramabai Ranade and few other ladies courageously proceeded with the work of female emancipation. Lady workers in public life began to become more numerous during the British period. In the beginning they were mostly engaged in tackling the problems mainly related with their own sex, like female education maternity welfare, widow remarriage, the abolition of the purdah custom etc. In the Gandhian period from about the time the Non-Co-Operation movement of 1920, they began to figure in the political movement. Many of them distinguished themselves at platform speakers, went to jail in the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 and Quit India Movement of 1942. Mrs. Sarojini Naidu adorned the chair of the Indian National Congress, which was then the highest honor for the Indian women.<sup>15</sup> Though, during Gandhian era women's organization within the political parties participated actively in the cause against colonialism. But once freedom was won, the women's wings were more or less marginalized. Then women's organization were seldom women with the backing of male political activists. Women's involvement in nationalist struggles changed their lives but they were denied to equal opportunities to shape the state, they achieved constitutional and legal rights. Right to vote became into existence but their representation in the parliament, political parties and other decision making program remained low even after independence and after the Indian constitution came into force in 1950.<sup>16</sup>

**Gender Discrimination Through The Social Custom:- Sati:-** In India women exploited through the social custom on the name of family dignity. Sati was one of them. It was an old largely defunct custom, in which the widow was immolated alive on her husband's funeral pyre. Although, the act was supposed to do a voluntary on the widows part, it is believed to have been sometimes forced on the widow. It was abolished by the British in 1829. There have been around forty reported cases of Sati since independence.<sup>17</sup> Sati was practiced throughout the district of Calcutta Division. 90% of the total cases reported for the Presidency occurred in the nine jurisdictions of Calcutta Division and the above mentioned areas of East Bengal, UP, and Bihar.<sup>18</sup> Though, Sati Pratha was a action taken after Islamic invasions but, it considered a type of gender discrimination.

**Feticide:-**Female infanticide is prevalent in much longer history in India. There was a great deal of difference in the male -female sex ratio at not only in Haryana but all over Punjab.<sup>19</sup> The British administration described this difference to a distant past, before the annexation of Punjab, when female infanticide had been practiced extent.<sup>20</sup> Girl child have been known to be killed by rubbing poison on the mother's breast, by feeding infants with milk of erukkam flower or oleander berries by using sap of calotropis plant, paddy grains, giving sleeping tablets or by simply burying the girl infants alive. Law banned this heinous practice in 1870.<sup>21</sup> In Punjab the birth of girl child was considered as misfortune. During our selected period many communities in Punjab like Kshatris, Bedis, Sodhis, Jats and Muslims Sayids, the girl child was done to death (infanticide) by many types of ways like, someone the girl baby was buried with a little gur (brown Sugar) in her mouth and batti (corded roll of cotton) placed in her hand. The following couplet was recited as she was laid down:- "Gur khayeen, puny katteen, ap na aayeen bire nu ghateen." Sometimes infant was put into ghara or earthen pot and buried alive in the ground. The mother starved the child to put an end to the innocent life also.<sup>22</sup> M.B.Fuller stated, "The girl child from the movement of her birth to her death undergoes a continuous life long suffering as a child wife, as a child mother and very often as a child widow."<sup>23</sup>

It was also considered that girl's place in the home, but not in the world of men. In some parts of India, it was a tradition to greet a family with a newborn girl by saying, "The servant of your household has been born." A girl could not do anything but felt inferior when everyone around her, told her useless than a boy.<sup>24</sup> Gender discrimination also prevailed in Islam in Pre-Islamic society. Whether Arabian or non-Arabian was not much better than a commodity. She was sold and purchased like the animals and mercilessly killed at the time of birth.<sup>25</sup> They unwelcomed birth of a baby girl instead of a baby boy although, Quran criticized the behavior of people towards it.

#### Gender Ratio in India, 1901-1951

S. no.	year	Gender Ratio F/M Per 1000	Gender Ratio M/F Per 1000
1.	1901	972	1029
2.	1911	964	1038
3.	1921	955	1047
4.	1931	950	1053
5.	1941	945	1058
6.	1951	946	1057

Source : Census of India 1901-1951.

So India is the country where female were less in number as compared males due to the gender discrimination.

**Child Marriage:-** Child marriage was another evil practice that made the life of girls miserable. They were married in very early age between eight to ten. If they were not married in early age, the honour of the family was lowered.<sup>26</sup> 8 or 9 was the usual marriageable age of girls at the advent of the British rule. Early marriage prevailed in the lower section of the community, and working on the data of the census of 1921, the Age of Consent Committee of 1929 computed that about 39% of girls were married before the age of 10. The census of 1941 and 1951 showed that percentage of girls who were married before the age of 14 was 17 and 14 respectively.<sup>27</sup> In many parts of Punjab, child marriage was confined only to those who had pretensions to social superiority. If the parents delayed marriage of their daughter on any reason then it became difficult to find a suitable match for her afterwards. Suitable match for her afterwards. Due to the early marriage, the girls were becoming the mothers by the age of fourteen and fifteen.<sup>28</sup> Early motherhood created many health problems and became the cause of death. According to District Hoshiarpur Gazetteer, there was hardly any women in Punjab who was either married or widowed by the age of twenty five.<sup>29</sup> During the British period child marriage was prevalent among Muslims, Sikhs but it was extent in large among Hindus.<sup>30</sup>

**Widowhood:-** The condition of widows in India was woeful. They were not permitted to marry again but as men were allowed to marry after the death of his wife even men married many in different situations. Widows were not permitted to carry long hair or wear colored cloths and ornaments. They were considered very unfortunate and were made to do the ordinary menial jobs in the family. Widow remarriage in high caste Hindu families was not permissible in Bengal. Widow remarriage was widely prevalent among the non-Brahmins of Maharashtra.<sup>31</sup> Due to child marriage there was another serious problem for the unfortunate girls in the male dominated society that was the girls became widow at very young age. According to the census of India (1921) there was about 2,835 widows under 10 years of age and 8,963 under the age of 15 and 26,400 under the age of 20. There were about 3.0% Hindu widows, 1.7% Sikh widows and 0.3% Christians widows.<sup>32</sup> Census of India shows that some cases were very sad that one cannot help shedding tears when confronted with a lovely, innocent child widow, when she was just one year old and no second marriage.<sup>33</sup> Though the Hindu widow's Remarriage Marriage Act was passed in 1856. But in spite of the act, remarriage did not make much progress.<sup>34</sup>

**Purdah:-** The women were tortured physically as well as mentally in their own homes. The women were treated as slaves and idiots. The women were made to put on purdah.<sup>35</sup> Purdah was encouraged among Muslim women generally for two reasons.

- (1) To protect women from evil forces.
- (2) To keep aloof women from maneuverings of all sorts. This spread to even middle class woman of Hindus during the rule of Muslims.

In the beginning the purdah entered the families of feudatories and noble, and then it gradually spread among higher class in northern India. The Muslim influence weak in the south and so the purdah found no general acceptance there. It got a footing only in a few ruling



families.<sup>36</sup> Purdah custom considered bad custom which made the life of one woman very miserable. District Gazetteer, Multan, 1901-02 caught the spirit behind the custom of purdah as

Ander Baithi Lakh Di' Bahar Gayi Kakh Di.<sup>37</sup>

( A women in her home is worth a lakh, outside she is worth nothing)

This evil was more extended among the Muslims. But the middle and lower castes both among the Hindus and Sikhs did not go for it. Hindu and Sikh women simply covered their head and face which called ghunghat Karna and they wrap their head with odhani. Customs like Purdah pratha and child marriage curtailed the school life of the girl child. Due to these customs and other rules of societies they were not expected to earn their livelihood after being educated. So their education was considered useless. So in these circumstances women were unable to proved themselves.

**Dowry:-** Dowry system was prevailed among all communities of India. But it had become a great problem to the poor people of India. Dowry was also considered the main cause of the gender discrimination. Sometimes even the suitability was disregarded by the parents at the cost of a rich dowry. However the nature of dowry varied according to the social and economic status of the concerned families. In ordinary families the amount of the dowry was a huge problem of life. It was a voluntary gift of pure affection and presented no impediment in the settlement of the daughter's marriage till the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But in the next 50 or 60 years that amount of the dowry had begun to Assume scandalous proportions. A good education, a lucrative appointment, or a good footing in a learned profession improved enormously the social and economic position of a youth and made him immensely attractive as a son-in-law. Thus he naturally acquired a high price in the marriage market. There were no such factors in the Pre-British Period, when society was mostly agricultural and governments appointments were not so lucrative as they are at present.<sup>38</sup> Due to the dowry system many innocent maiden committed suicide or murdered. Dowry System was also proved for gender discrimination because due to this custom poor parents preferred baby boy than girl. A marriage with dowry, which had all the religious connotation of being meritorious, could also spell a rising insecurity for women., for it came to be increasingly premised upon a social ethos that degraded women and measured their marriage ability to the amount of material goods they could bring with them.

**Divorce:-** Divorce was not a common feature among Hindus and Sikhs, because Marriage was considered sacred trust.<sup>39</sup> As one of its natural consequences society began to hold that a girl could be given in marriage only once. To divorce one husband and to marry another, because the marital life was not happy, began to appear as a grossly sensual procedure. Society therefore held that even if the husband were a moral wreck, or were grievously ill-treating his wife, the latter could not claim any relief by the way of divorce.. It may be pointed out that the Roman Catholic Church also holds the same views, as it regards marriages as indissoluble.<sup>40</sup>

In Punjab even in all over India, person could, however severe all connections with his wife if she did not give birth to a male child or was suffering from some dangerous disease or was unchaste. This was tantamount to divorce and it was practiced in the plains. In the hills, however the marriage ties were loose and the right to divorce both the wife and husband was recognized

custom. The divorce could be obtained at any time in the Simla and Kangra districts. The essential part of the divorce in the hills was payment of cost of marriage to the husband if wife sought the divorce.<sup>41</sup> But in Islam, marriage was nothing more than a civil contract, made by mutual consent between both man and woman and hence it allowed divorce to both the partners by repeating thrice in the presence of two witnesses, "I divorce three" The wife could dissolve her marriage by obtaining a judicial decree or with the consent of her husband.<sup>42</sup> Thus the process of divorce in India was also a example of gender discrimination in itself.

**Polygamy:-** Polygamy was another evil which shows gender discrimination prevailed in India in our research period in large extent. The girls were married at a very early age and the child wives were under the domination of the husband and mother-in-laws. If the girls showed independence of spirit, the threat of second marriage used to cow her down.<sup>43</sup> Polygamy was a luxury beyond the means of the poor. A rich man can support several wives; a poor man finds it difficult to maintain one. The main reason, for the occasional occurrence of polygamy even among ordinary classes was the great anxiety that was felt for the preservation and continuance of the family. For offering the prescribed oblations to ancestors so as to secure their continuance in heaven, a son was absolutely necessary, and so society permitted the husband to take a second wife, if the first one was barren.<sup>44</sup> Polygamy was more practiced among the Muslims, Because Muslims were allowed by their religion to have four wives. According to Punjab census report of 1911, " The first thing a Mohammedan will do, when he can afford a luxury is to marry a second wife and if means permit, he will very soon go to the full limit of four."<sup>45</sup> In most cases was taken when their first and second wives grew old.<sup>46</sup> But there was ordinarily no polygamy amongst the common man except the Rajas, Princes others. But polygamy had become a notorious practice among the kulins of Bengal and the Brahmins of Mithila.<sup>47</sup> Thus polygamy was a evil prevailed in India. THE birth of this evil was also related to gender inequality.

**Devadasi:-** The institution of Devadasi, a class of women who dedicated themselves to the life long service in temples may be traced back centuries. Although it was a good institution earlier on it had degraded to nothing but prostitution. An Act was passed in 1925 which extended to the Devadasis the Section of the Penal Code which made traffic in minor girls a criminal offence.<sup>48</sup> Prostitution became rampant. To arrange melas or nauch parties which dancing girls became a symbol of status. It was very common that girls dancing in temples. Society never worried the habit to be beneath the dignity. So dancing girls became mere things of luxury.<sup>49</sup> During the British rule the number of prostitutes and dancing girls increased very fastly in Punjab. They were generally belonged to Mohammadan religion. But the government did nothing to stop the evil practice. Infect, the government issued licenses to prostitutes who were living within cantonment limit of Lahore, Amritsar and Ambala. In the whole of Punjab there were 5,557 prostitutes according to census of 1911.<sup>50</sup> It was also a fact that only belonged the lower classes of women were forced to adopt this profession as a last recourse were to be found among these unfortunates girls. The royal support eventually succeeded in making the this evil custom general and popular. The modern Hindu public opinion is badly opposed the association of dancing girls in temple. Up to the time of Independence custom devadasi has disappeared from India. But we can understood that women were considered only the things of entertainment.

Finally we can say that the bias in favour of boys was also universal, whether Hindus or Muslim or Sikh and whether urban or rural. Women discriminated against the men in terms of education, health and social justice. Education played a very important role for improving the possibilities for women's growth. Cultural norms, values and customs were also very important in determining the wife's life choices, physical and mental well being. To improve the status of Indian women in the society, it was very important that linkages between the culture, women's education and health. There was a good correlation between gender inequality and status of women and their roles in the society, because they were disproportionately poor, they were not empowered and bounded by strains of productive work like birth of children and other household chores and community duties.

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