

## **Relationship Between Culture And Gender Inequality In India**

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**Abstract:** This paper throws light on the role played by culture and traditions specifically of Hindu religion in legitimising the subordinate position of women in Indian society. Along with presenting a brief account on the status of women from ancient times to contemporary situation, the sex-gender binary has also been explored. How a child after his birth socialised to behave in a certain way on the basis of his/her sex has been noted. This process of socialisation is based on the age old customs and traditions which are discriminatory in nature. The male child is taught to be strong, dominating and aggressive in nature and henceforth assigned laborious work to do for managing the finances of house. On the other hand, female child is taught to be sensitive, loving and caring and therefore assigned to manage household work, child nurturing and motherhood related responsibilities.

**Key words:** status of women, culture, traditions, marginalisation, legitimisation, sex, gender

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Date of Submission: 30-09-2017

Date of acceptance: 14-10-2017  
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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Women form nearly one half of the population of human society. Since the inception of human society on earth they have given equal contribution in maintenance and sustenance of the human society through the means of procreation, socialisation and management of household chores. But despite of this fact the role played by women; and women themselves are also described as inferior to men. Moreover, nearly all the religious texts of the world ordain unequal status to men and women. It is perhaps because of the fact that these religious texts connote two different things. Woman, as a sex category, means biological being whose body make-up and attributes are different from that of a man. In terms of a gender category, a woman is a social being who, from social and cultural point of view, is expected to behave in a certain manner which make them look inferior to men. In other words, as sex category, they are distinguished from men on the basis of their biological reproductive attributes. This distinction is given social blend when their roles are described in accordance with the socio-cultural values (Narta, 2001: 193). The reason that their body is anatomically different from a man such as men are more muscular and taller than the women they are considered belonging to the weaker sex. There are many reasons which shape such kind of thought process among the people of our society. Among the various marginalised sections of the society women are considered as the most vulnerable. They suffer from multiple disadvantages such as:

1. Of being culturally and socio-economically marginalised.
2. Sharing the gender based inequalities and subordination.

Women are denied access to power and socio-economic status which is generally given to men. The responsibility of household work is expected to be fulfilled by women only. No matter how great a woman's achievement in the field of sports, corporate sector, science and technology, or business, the society still expects from a woman, by virtue of her gender, to take up the responsibility for fulfillment of all the household chores. The socio-economic, cultural and religious factors combine to produce a psychological belief system that considers a woman weaker than a man and due to this reason they are given a secondary position in every aspect of the society. To explore these issues concerning women there is a need to discuss some basic facts concerning the vulnerable situation of women. The challenges faced by women have their roots in both traditional sources and contemporary changes.

### **II. POSITION OF WOMEN IN INDIAN SOCIETY**

From ancient times Indian women have been seen as the responsibility of other, whether as daughters, wives, or mothers. This was captured in the prescriptions of Manu, the law-giver, writing around the beginning of the Christian era: "She should do nothing independently even in her own house. In childhood subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her husband is dead to her sons. She should never enjoy independence" (Basham, 1967: 182). As mentioned by Altekar (1938), women enjoyed more freedom in the early Vedic period i.e. from 2500-500 BC as compared to the later period. Moreover many women chose to

adopt celibacy. The condition of women deteriorated in later Vedic period. It was during this period that upper caste women were preoccupied with rituals. Many religious scriptures mentions about the declining status of women. Aitareya Brahmana states, "The son is a boat of salvation, a light in the highest heaven. A wife is a comrade but a daughter misery" (Thomas, 1964: 58).

Gautama Buddha, although a revolutionary in many respects but he also considered women inferior to men, a nun could never advance to the level of the male brethren (Basham, 1967). Buddha's approach to women's roles was revolutionary relative to Hindu tradition (e.g., he allowed women to become monks and considered them capable of aspiring to spiritual perfection), but he also prescribed a greatly inferior role for them in the samgha (religious order), where they were forbidden authority and leadership roles. When his favourite disciple Ananda asked him why women should not be given the same rights and rank as men in public life, the Buddha replied, "Women, Ananda, are hot tempered; women, Ananda, are jealous; women, Ananda, are envious; women, Ananda, are stupid" (Schweitzer, 1936: 95).

The status of women deteriorated considerably during the post-Vedic period (c. 500 BC-500 AD) when Puranic Hinduism gained momentum in an effort to reinstate Hinduism over Buddhism. Upon marriage a wife effectively became part of her husband's property and caste laws were rigidly enforced (Thomas, 1964: 218). Child marriage started gaining prominence which resulted in the decline of female education as girls married so early. During this time, Sati system that is self-sacrifice of a widow on his husband's pyre was a common practice. This practice was in predominance wherever Brahmins were in majority such as Northern India.

Then during the time of Muslim rule, Purdah system was imposed on women. This was responsible for total seclusion of women from the public sphere. While it may have been adopted by Hindus partly to protect their women from Muslim captures, it was also considered a mark of "respectability and high breeding" (Altekar, 1938: 207).

After that the British rule in India had both negative and positive impact on the position and condition of women. Among positive measures abolition of Sati system in 1829, sanction of widow remarriage in 1856 and reforms of female education in 1850s must be accounted. Among the negative measures most prominent was the expansion of dowry system. Moreover, due to poverty and economic compulsions prostitution also flourished during this time.

Thus, historically religious norms have been very important in defining the appropriate gender behaviour of men and women. Many moral norms of religious groups are gender-specific (i.e., separate expectations for women and men). Religion shaped norms pertaining to sexual behaviour (e.g., treating women's extramarital sexual activity as a more serious violation than men's). It influenced norms of physical activities, entertainments, drink, and dress (e.g., a 'good' woman was expected to be more thoroughly covered, veiled, or screened from view than a 'good' man). Religion also legitimised gender distinctions in work roles, home responsibilities, child-care responsibilities, education, marriage responsibilities, and legal status (McGuire, 2012: 132, 133)

It was after independence that women were given equal rights as per the Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy of our Constitution which came into effect on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1950. Other important legislations which came to improve the status of women were: The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, The Hindu Succession Act of 1956, The Prohibition of Dowry Act of 1961, The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1978 and many more. But unfortunately all such measures and policies had limited impact on gender equality and female empowerment in India because of certain cultural constraints. It is due to this reason that dowry, early marriage, preference for male child, female feticide is still prevalent in Indian society.

### III. CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

Various positive developments took place to achieve greater gender equality. Most important among all is increasing the marriageable age for girls from 15 to 18 which facilitate them to achieve greater education levels. People started having nuclear families due to which women of the house need to spend less time in reproductive and child care activities as compared to previous scenario.

Government has taken numerous initiatives to ban customs and traditions which contribute in exploitation of women. Some of them have been mentioned in the table below.

<b>Banned/censured customs</b>	<b>Description (dates indicate when banned/censured)</b>
Gauna	Ritual associated with 'child marriage' when a girl is sent to her husband's place to consummate their marriage only after her first menstruation. (1970)
Chauthi	Custom of bringing a newlywed bride back to her natal home on the fourth day after marriage for a short period of time. (1995)
Samdhin bhent	Ritual exchange of gifts between new in-laws at a marriage. (1971)
Gotraj vivah	Levirate: the practice of a widow marrying her deceased husband's unmarried younger brother. (1971)

Sauth	Bigamy (1975)
Child marriage	To be stopped gradually and changed so that the girl is at least 16 years old and the boy 18, fines to be imposed if flouted. (1970)

**Table 1:** List of customs and traditions banned by the government (Natrajan, 2012: 69).

The customs of child marriage and gauna were banned in order to increase the limit of marriageable age. This will in turn give them opportunity to avail education and employment which will contribute in making them independent and women will not be seen as a burden. Then the customs of chauthi and samdhin bhent used to create financial pressure on the parents of girl. They were banned curb such financial and mental pressure. Sauth and gotraj vivah were banned in light of their being very regressive and exploitative in nature. All such customs were part of traditional mindset in which women were seen as a commodity of exchange and occupied a subordinate position as compared to men. Therefore, it was very important to move away from such cultural practices for the progress and development of society.

Despite of these positive developments there are number of enduring cultural constraints which prevent these developmental measures from translating into true gender equality. A study based on data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), 2005-06, found that 45% of women aged 15-24, including from both rural and urban areas, were married before the legal age of 18, and 20% of these had a child within their first year of marriage (Raj, Saggurti, Balaiah, Silverman : 2009). While gains in female school enrollment and literacy have been substantial over the past decades, overall adult literacy remained at 74% in 2011 and the gender parity index for literacy was 0.80 (Registrar General of India: 2011). Although female illiteracy has come down over the past century but number of females who are illiterate increased over time. During 1900 only 0.69 per cent of female population was not literate i.e. 100 million women but in 2001, 230 million women are illiterate. Therefore, if seen in absolute numbers, the illiteracy level has almost doubled despite of increase in literacy rate.

The practices such as foeticide and female infanticide which became more prevalent during contemporary times are considered most inhumane of all acts. Despite of legal actions such as Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994 and awareness campaigns in support of girl child, sex selective abortions are still on rise. This indicates towards the preference for male child. The main reason for continued liking over the centuries, among people for male child is importance he gets in performance of many customs and rituals. Due to the societal set up introduced by our traditional culture the concerns regarding the lineage and inheritance are so deeply entrenched in our minds that they influence, to a greater or lesser extent the fertility behavior, including sex selective abortion.

This has been noticed that even after increased schooling levels and increase in age of marriage, young married women are restricted in their ability to put their education into practice. They mostly stayed home and did domestic work. Their mobility outside the domestic sphere is limited by the traditional customs. Moreover when they are allowed to take up the jobs outside home, then also the responsibility of household work lies upon their shoulders only. The culture and traditions which have their roots in the past still legitimises the gender stratification directly which means through religious laws and indirectly which refers to rituals and symbols that reinforce ideas of women's inferiority.

#### **IV. LEGITIMISATION PROVIDED BY CULTURE**

On the basis of above mentioned evidence of position of women in Indian history it can be said that the fundamental principle of Hindu social organisation is a closed structure to preserve land, women and ritual purity within it. A handful of Brahmans (more specifically, the priestly class) has imposed various customs and rituals which talks about preference for a male child and superiority of male in our family and society. The main religious reason for son preference is based in the Hindu belief, more prevalent among India's higher castes that only a male child can give the appropriate oblations for the soul of a deceased parent (Das Gupta: 2003) and if these are not performed by a male descendant, the ancestors will be tormented in the afterlife (Patel: 2007). Such beliefs have also been found among other religious groups in India, including the Sikhs (Das Gupta: 1987) and the Muslims (Murthy: 1996) as mentioned by Vlassoff (2013). Along with doing so they have interpreted the religious scriptures in a way to maintain male dominance in all the social and religious affairs.

As mentioned by Arjun Dangle in his book *Poisoned Bread*:

A tradition is born and lives on the strong foundations of thoughts and principles and it is these thoughts or principles, which enrich or sustain a tradition. The base a tradition gets is subject to the then existing social system and the sum total of the conditions. The established class always tries to establish a convenient tradition that does not damage its vested interests. The weak groups in society are tied to this tradition. In fact all our traditions so far, whether religious, social, literary or cultural, have been imposed on the majority by a handful (Dangle, 1992: 261).

Culture of any society is a complex whole consisting of knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs and other capabilities and habits acquired by a man as a member of society (Taylor, 1968: 527). Over time it must be taken into consideration that these elements are subject to modification. These are causal by dynamic forces within the society on the one hand and the continuous process of social evolution, the changes also become inevitable as culture itself is not a static entity but a process by which a given social group or social class learns way of thinking, feeling and acting on the other hand (Brown, 1968: 536). While the transmission of cultural elements from one generation to the next provides it continuity, the processual aspects keep on adding as well as eliminating the essential and non-essential components respectively (Kroeber and Kluckohn 1952: 81, quoted in Singer 1968: 528)<sup>1</sup>.

The definitions of maleness and femaleness are culturally established. On the basis of these definitions, a group develops and encourages certain social differences between men and women. The society expects and encourages little boys to be more active and aggressive than little girls; little girls are expected and encouraged to be more polite, passive, and nurturing. In socialisation, males and females are taught their culturally assigned gender roles- the social group's expectations of behaviours, attitudes, and motivations 'appropriate' to males or females. Historically, religion has been one of the most significant sources of these cultural definitions of gender roles; and religion has been a potent legitimisation of these distinctions (McGuire, 2012: 128). Despite of the fact that both men and women belong to same official religion, the religious duties assigned to women are very different.

Carol Vlassoff, faculty member of University of Ottawa, Canada, in her research work 'Gender Equality and Inequality in Rural India' presented a survey (of Gove village in Maharashtra) of socio-economic factors and cultural beliefs which are responsible in subjugation of women. As told by her, despite the diffusion of progressive attitudes among all groups, caste and religious differences in social and economic empowerment prevailed among village women throughout the study period (Vlassoff, 2013: 91). Unfortunately, many reforms in the public arena, such as women's greater employment and mobility, often fail to penetrate traditional gender relations in the domestic sphere (World Bank, 2012b). The scope of education is limited by pretending it as a means for securing a good husband and as enhancing their roles as future wives and mothers, rather than as a means of increasing opportunities for self-fulfillment and employment. In her work she also presented the argument according to which it is not found evident that the social and economic empowerment of women will lead to reduced preference for son in rural areas.

Vlassoff through her study of the position of women in Gove village indicates towards their improvement over the three decades of the study. This is evident from the changing attitude of the women/people (of Gove village) from traditional to modern viewpoints as shown in the table below.

<b>Approval of</b>	<b>1975 (N=70)</b>	<b>1987 (N=91)</b>	<b>2008 (N=86)</b>
Dowry (No)	45	78	93
Choose own husband (Yes)	37	28	65
Girls not marrying (Yes)	40	22	52
Man's remarriage if no sons (No)	58	64	79
Inter-caste marriage (Yes)	13	26	33

**Table 2:** Modern attitudes, adolescent girls, 1975, 1987 and 2008 percentage distributions.<sup>ii</sup> N indicates towards total number of respondents.

The increasing awareness among people to move away from the meaningless cultural attitudes is held responsible for this change. Thus education should not be seen as an only prospect to get a good husband. Instead education should work as a means of spreading awareness about the utility of old cultural beliefs in today's societal set up. The women who were able to gather courage to stand against dowry and child marriage; and not marrying at all prove that they have adopted modern attitudes and their position has improved substantially. Therefore these changes in attitude of people play a major role in changing the gender norms of the village.

In a study in Tamil Nadu that examined the reasons behind the widespread preference for one boy and one girl it was found that boys were desired for economic and social reasons, whereas girls were valued for affection and emotional support, household help and maintaining a good family name (Diamond-Smith, Luke, McGarvey: 2008).

For understanding the division of roles and attributes of both the gender one need to explore the sex-gender binary. Though both the words are most randomly used in inter-exchangeable way but both have different meanings. As told by prominent feminist writer Judith Butler the common way of using the terms 'sex' and 'gender' is that there is an assumption of a given biological fact of sex as something fixed in the body which is later on given meaning by social gender. Butler used the metaphor 'it is as though sex is the body and gender are the clothes which comes later' to describe the difference between sex and gender. The biological difference

between a male and female body is known to be the 'sex' of a person. Gender refers to the socio-cultural factors which instruct us to behave in a certain masculine and feminine way based on our sex. If a person is born with a male body he is expected to have more muscular power, strength, logic, integrity and passion while if a person is born with a female body she is expected to be more affectionate, patient, loving, caring and sensual without realising the fact whether one is willing to accept that trait or not. This differential treatment of both the sexes is so deeply integrated in our culture and traditions that mere birth of a person decides about his/her behaviour for complete lifetime. Women are not weak or have subordinate position because they don't have muscular strength. This notion has been proved wrong at every now and then. Moreover, achievement and excellence of women in all the fields like sports, science and technology, martial arts and defence proves that women can also attain muscular power and strength if given proper opportunity and environment.

As mentioned by Mary Wollstonecraft in her classic text 'Vindication of the Rights of Women' in 1792 the entire process that went into making a woman different from a man is criticised. Wollstonecraft explains in her text that women are brought up with the teachings from their early childhood that they belong to a weaker sex. Unlikely, men are brought up with the thought process that they are having the capacity for rational thought and political action.

In this direction, for the first time in 1950s, some of the American psychologists and sociologists highlighted the sharp contrast which prevails between the biological notions of male and female. It was argued by them that the biological characteristics of a body is not an important matter of concern- what really mattered is how such a person is socialised by their family and by society more importantly.

## V. CONCLUSION

In our society, for interpretation of Indian culture, women play an important role. Regarding the notion that 'what constitutes a culture' most of the practices which are considered as cultural practices pertained to women's mobility, control of sexuality, for example, child marriage, purdah, sati, the social death of widows. The most contradictory or better to say the most objectionable fact even in today's society is the fact that the power of a female is derived from attributes of motherhood and virginity instead of fertility or sexuality. A man's virginity and purity is never taken into account for participation in any ritual. The traditional set up guides the women about the rewards of higher status which she can receive in her next life if she obeys the rules and fulfill the requirements of a woman. In most of the cases, religion links some or the other spiritual rewards with the fulfillment of gender based obligations. Such kind of imagery and symbolism definitely plays an important role in influencing how a woman feels about herself. It is quite obvious that by participating in such culture and traditions they start perceiving themselves to be inferior and impure. The people are socialised as per a certain way of thinking regarding gender roles, that's why they feel guilty if they fails to fulfill these expectations.

It is the Brahmanical priestly class which serves the main purpose legitimizing the inferior status of women by interpreting the religious scriptures in a way they gave best benefit to them. It is this religious group which chooses certain elements of their age old culture and tradition for applying to people's lives today while some other elements of their culture and tradition become irrelevant or forgotten. Therefore, we should always keep in mind that our ways of looking back at the past must be changed with both new evidence and new perspectives. There is an urgent need to again build the complex relationship between present day religious beliefs and practices to the age old traditional beliefs and practices.

For a life of dignity and respect there is an urgent need to understand the true meaning taught about the equality in our religious scriptures and giving equal status to everyone. The legitimisation provided by our scriptures regarding the lower status and subjugation of women need to be revisited. By birth, every individual is equal and it is their choice of work and not their sex at the time of birth which becomes the basis of evaluation. The age old culture and traditions which have lost their utility in this era of development and technology has robbed the dynamism from Indian society and paved way for subjugation of women in the name patriarchal system.

We have a Constitution with Article 15 which deals with the Right to Equality. But the Constitution also contains articles dealing with other categories of rights, like the Right to Freedom of Religion, as embodied in Articles 25-28. And the question can be asked that "Can a State which proclaims opposition to discrimination based on sex... permit religious personal laws, which affect the life of women in a basic manner" ( Desai, 1994: 41-49)? It is this dilemma which needs to be addressed to find the solution through which can address the confusion created by religious scriptures regarding subordinate position of women.

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**Notes**

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<sup>i</sup> As mentioned in Narta, Pratibha, 'Dynamics of Social Structure and Culture', Anamika Publishers, New Delhi, 2001. pp- 158-59.

<sup>ii</sup> Vlassoff, Carol (2013) *Gender Equality and Inequality in Rural India: Blessed with a Son*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. pp-131.

IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

Swati Sharma. "Relationship Between Culture And Gender Inequality In India." *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)* , vol. 22, no. 10, 2017, pp. 30–35.