

Contemporary and Religious Perspective on Women: A Study (Part-I)

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The problems of women have assumed dangerous proportions throughout the world. If any study is made which aims at presenting the Islamic view about women, it needs at the same time the comparative study of the subject in order to ascertain the contribution of Islam to the betterment of position of women in the context of world religious phenomenon. Despite the unleashing of the stereotypes about Islam in the Western part of the world, in the U.S. women converts to Islam outnumber male converts by the ratio of 4:1. It is just a small example of the fact that Islam has so much to offer to our world, which is in great need of moral guidance and leadership. Ambassador Herman Eilts, in a testimony in front of the committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives of the United States Congress on June 24, 1985, said, "The Muslim community of the globe today is in the neighborhood of one billion. That is an impressive figure. But what to me is equally impressive is that Islam today is the fastest growing monotheistic religion. This is something we have to take into account. Something is right about Islam. It is attracting a good many people."

The problems involved with the issues of women are multiple and can be seen from various perspectives. Philosophers have defined the position of women, but with the exception of Pythagoras all of them have considered women below dignity and not deserving to be considered equal to man. For example, Democritus Thought ill of women, and did not desire children, because their education interferes with philosophy.¹ Hesiod

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declares "women merely a chattel". However, Pythagoras maintains: "Women as a sex are more naturally akin to piety." But Plato has some different notion about women when he says: "Friends should have all things in common, including women and children.... However some education is recommended for both".²

Nietzsche crosses over all the standards of decency when he described about the status of women that "Woman has so much cause for shame; in woman there is so much pedantry, superficiality, schoolmasterliness, petty presumption, unbridleness, and indiscretion concealed ...which has really been best restrained and dominated hitherto by the fear of man". He says in *Beyond Good and Evil* that "we should think of women as property, as Orientals do".

In the same way the position of women has not improved in the West, despite the orchestrated propaganda about the freedom of women and the abundance of feminist movements, which are spreading their circles throughout the world and spending enormous amount of money for bettering the image of Eve. When we take a historical view of the situation we come to know that in the early 19th century the legal existence of the wife was suspended during marriage; that is, the husband and wife were deemed to be one person — the husband. Enactment of the married woman's property Acts in the mid 19th century, as well as latter reforms, provided a wife with legal rights from which she was previously barred, including the right to own property, dispose her property, or, sue or be sued, sign contract in her name, and execute a deed according to her will.

Women were supposed to have been created to 'feel rather than reason'; Rousseau opposes the idea of providing women with the same education as men.

Wollecncraft depicts the picture of the pathetic situation of the affairs of women during the 18th century in the western milieu in these words, "Civilized women are so

weakened by false refinement, that respecting morals, their condition is much below what it would be were they left in a state nearer to nature".

She held that women like men were naturally rational but their inferior education often taught them to be silly and emotional. Education, she believed, should cultivate the natural reasoning capacity in girls. In the early 19th century, the vast majority of women throughout the Europe and the United States still had no legal identity apart from their husbands. She could not own property on her name. Both white women and African Americans were regarded as intellectually inferior and denied access to a decent education.

American Social reformer Elizabeth Cady Stanton addressed the New York State Legislature on February 18, 1860. While comparing the women with the black African Americans, who were being discriminated because of their colour, she laments that the women are worst sufferers than the blacks because of their sex. "The Negro skin and the women's sex are both *prima facie* evidence that they were intended to be in subjugation to the white Saxon man."³

She says further: "Terrible are the penalties we are now suffering for the ages of injustice done to women".⁴ "Undo what man did for us in the Dark Ages and strike all legislation" which has been made for women by him. She exhorts women to do away with all this ornamental and cosmetic legislation done in favour of women. She complains of the "listless inactivity" in favour of women "to enable man to "acquire the noble privilege of reason" stupid acquiescence", while as the women had to remain in the 'dust', never to rise again.⁵

According to her the women were supposed to have been created to feel rather than think and "their charms and weakness must obtain that all the power they obtain, or in other words they are just "sweet flowers that smile in the way of man".

Rousseau cautions in a different manner about the education of women when he says: "Educate women like men, and the more they resemble our sex the less power will they have over us".

Women were given suffrage, and in 1960's the Civil Rights Movement gained ground when African Americans struggled to achieve racial equality, women were inspired to renew their struggle for equality. Most enlightened thinkers had to say very little about the position of women held in society, and many of their followers assumed that the concepts of liberty, equality, and political representation applied only to men. John Stuart Mill's espousal of gender equality in the nineteenth century, *The Subjugation of Women*, published in 1869, was a plea for equal status for women in the areas of education, employment and political rights to vote.

Bertrand Russell also makes it very clear that women and men can not be given same education as the roles of both differ in the society. He says:

But the whole educational problem, where women are concerned, has been distorted by the desire for sex equality: there has been an attempt to acquire the same education as that given to boys, even where it was by no means good in itself. Consequently, women educators have aimed at giving to their girls such 'useless' knowledge as is given to boys of the same class, and have been bitter opponents of the notion that some part of female education should be technical training for motherhood.⁶

He advocates the theory that may not be very much liked by the westernized intellectuals, who see in the western thought the unbridled freedom coupled with no responsibility when it comes to the freedom of fair sex, especially the right of an enlightened woman not to opt for motherhood. He advises that girls should be taught to expect that one day they are likely to be mothers, and they should acquire some rudiments of the knowledge that may be useful to them in that capacity.⁷

The more the necessity of knowledge is understood, the more intelligent women will feel attracted to motherhood. At present, many highly educated women despise it, think that it does not give scope for the exercise of their intellectual faculties. This is a great misfortune, says Bertrand Russell, since they are capable of being the best mothers, if their thoughts are turned in that direction.⁸ However, at the same time Russell strikes an important note of reminder as:

.... The worst feature of the Christian religion, however, is its attitude towards sex – an attitude so morbid and so unnatural that it can be understood only when taken in relation to sickness of the civilized world at the time when Roman Empire was decaying. We sometimes hear talk to the effect that Christianity improved the condition of women. This is one of the grossest perversions of history that is possible to make.... Monks have always regarded women primarily as the temptress. They have thought of her mainly as the inspirer of impure lusts.⁹

Russell goes further and maintains that it is the claim of women to equality with men that has done most to make a new system necessary in the world today.. Equality can be secured in two ways: either by exacting from men the same strict monogamy as was in the past, exacted from women; or by allowing women, equally with men, a certain relaxation of the traditional code. The first of these ways was preferred by most of the pioneers of women's rights, and is still preferred by the churches; but the second has many more adherents in practice, although most of them are in doubt as to the theoretical justifiability of their own behaviour. And those who recognize that some new ethics is required find it difficult to know just what its precepts should be.

Even the religions have not done any good to the women. There are great differences amongst the historians with regard to the status accorded to women in Ancient India. The character of a woman has been a subject of contention from Manu to Jyotishwar.

On the one hand the Hindu scholars accord the highest respect to the women. They say, "yatra naryastu Pujayante ramante tatra devata", that is, "the gods abode there where the women are respected". But there are Hindu Religious Scriptures which suggest to the contrary.

For example, according to the *Rigved*, the foremost of all the four *Vedas*, women are not worthy of friendship, their hearts are like those of the wolves. (10-95-15).

"Women are the army of slaves and their armaments." (*Rigveda*-5-30-9)

"There is to be found in woman, *Shudra*, dog and cow, falsehood, sin and darkness." (*Shat Path Brahm*, 14-1-13)

"Women have no share in will or inheritance. Nor in the (recital of) Vedic mantras ". (*Boudhayam Dharm Sutra* 5-2-53 and *Manu Smriti*; 9-18)

"Woman is Anrit that is the incarnation Falsehood." (*Maitrayani Samhita*: 1-10-11)

"Women are lacking in strength. They have no share in property. They talk in a weaker manner than the obstinate." (*Tattriya Samhita*: 6-5-8-2)

Following are the traits of women as enumerated in *Anushashan Purv*: "Lying, working unthouhgftully, deep greed, impunity, mercilessness, stone-hearted".

According to *Ramayana*, *Amya Kand* (45:29, 30) women are seducers, naughty, tyrants and separators:

"In the religion of women, there is no god except the husband". (*Ram Charit Manhas: Bal Khand*: 125:27)

"No woman is worthy of listening to Ram Katha, for women are by nature less prudent, lack knowledge, unclean". (*Ram Charit Manas* (133:1-143:2)

"Woman is a torch leading to hell", Says Hem Chandra.

According to *Mahabharat's Anushashan Parv* "Women are liars". (19-6)

"Nothing else is worse than the women. They are the blade of a razor, poison snake and fire". (*Mahabharat's Anushashan parv: 28:12, 29*)

"There is hardly one *pativarta* (obedient to her husband) among hundreds or thousands of women". (*Ibid., 19:93*)

"Women deserve harsh treatment. They possess the deceitfulness of *Rakhasas* (evil spirits), *shamber*, *Namuchi* and others. They have a tendency to attract men toward them. The well to do therefore, are cautious in talking to them. The virgins however mislead all— whether well -to -do or not". (*Ibid. 38:16, 48:37-38*)

In the *Ayodhya Kand of Ramayana (47:4)* it is said, "The learned have written correctly about women's temperaments. Their cunning and deceit are not comprehensible and it is impossible to reach to their depth. One may even grapple with his shadow, but it is difficult to get the right clue of her conduct."

In the *Sudra Kand of Ramacharit Manas* it is said, "drum, fool, *Shudra*, animals and women ---they all deserve tyranny and oppression".¹⁰

Moreover a sense of slavery was inculcated in women from very beginning that she was called to do *Pativarta* (husband worship) as it was supposed to be her faith.

There are some more gray areas where Hindu women have found themselves vulnerable to all sorts of injustice. Following are few such examples:

1. The Hindu woman has no right to divorce her husband.
2. She has no property or inheritance rights.
3. Choice of partner is limited because she can only marry within her own caste, moreover her horoscope must match that of the intending bridegroom /family.
4. The family of the girl has to offer an enormous dowry to the bridegrooms' family.

5. If her husband dies, she should commit *Sati* (being cremated with her dead husband). Since today's law forbids *Sati*, society mainly punishes her in other "holy" ways.
6. She can not remarry.

The widow is considered to be a curse and must not be seen in public. She can not wear jewelry or colourful clothes. She should not even take part in her children's marriage! Child and infant marriage is encouraged.¹¹

People glorify the practice of *Sati* and it is believed that a woman who perished thus with her husband on his pyre was said to have become a *Sati*. To the Hindus, it was never felt that the act was barbarous. For instance, a passage from the *Upanishad* (scholastic epithets) refers to a prayer of a widow to god of fire that she is about to follow the *Sati* custom and that she may be able to bear the ordeal and reap the promised reward.¹²

Another Hindu scripture *Parasara Samhita* says, "She who follows her husband in death dwells in heaven for as many years as there are hairs on the human body –that is, thirty –five million years."

Sati was originally a *Kshatriya* (upper caste Hindu) custom. Soon after 1000.A.D, the Brahmin (supreme Hindu caste) families also began to follow this custom because they felt that they should not be outdistanced.

V. N Datta in his book *Sati: Widow Burning in India* says maximum number of *Sati* cases reported are from Bengal (A northeastern state of India). He points out that this could be attributed to the wife having right to inherit husband's property in Bengal. *Sati* is seen mostly in few states of northern India. However, Hindutva (the extreme Hindu religious ideology) forces are propagating that *Sati* originated during the medieval Muslim periods (Mughal rule).¹³

This heinous practice is not only still prevalent in India, but venerated by several sections of Hindu society. The following stories are very instructive in this regard.

On 11th November 1999, Charnshah 50, wife of Manshah Ahirwar, 55, a Dalit farmer, committed *Sati*, the news of the "*Sati*" spread faster than the blaze that engulfed her and people immediately begun converging on the spot. About 2000 people had gathered at the site till evening on that day.

In the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh, it was not such single occurrence, but had witnessed about 25 such episodes, in which women burnt themselves on their husband's pyres in as many years.

Javitri Devi of Jaari, a small village in Banda district, is one of the prominent ones. A huge temple was built in 1979 in her memory from the money collected in the impoverished village, which did not have even a dispensary. Rameshwar Prasad, the temple's priest, is reported to have said on the occasion that on an average, 15 people used to visit the "*Sati mandir*" and during Navrati thousands turned up to "seek blessings from the *Sati Mata*".

Several such *Sati mandirs* and *chabutras* dot the region's landscape, which has few other essential amenities. A city corporator Kusuma Kushwaha said on the occasion: -"Being a widow is perceived as a disgrace, while *Sati* culture is glorified," who added that in this situation it should not be surprising if any one commits suicide or *Sati*.

Bundelkhand has a tradition where a couple visits a *Sati* temple immediately after their marriage and the bride promises the *Sati Mata* she will stay with her husband throughout her life and there after do "as you did".

"What is amazing that even educated people in the region find nothing wrong with such customs? Anil Upadhayaya, former principal of a part of a degree college and a local historian,

defended Sati while he said, "All this is part of our tradition and customs" and condemned the government for interfering in "voluntary Sati".

A local politician Jeevan Lal Chaurasia, a BSP leader from the region demanded that the people be allowed to worship the spot where Charan Shah died and called upon the police to "stop interfering in religious faith of the people"

In 1986 in the Deorala village in Rajasthan's Sikar district, an 18-year-old widow Roop Kanwar burnt herself to death on her husband's funeral pyre as a frenzied mob applauded. Thakur Onkar Singh Babra, a retired IAS officer in Jaipur said: "In Rajasthan Sati is as glorious as braving death in war."¹⁴

Sati (Suttee) means literally a chaste and virtuous woman. However, gradually it came to be applied to the practice of burning women along with their dead husbands, thus establishing their virtue beyond doubt. It is regrettable that even scriptures were laid down praising self-immolation of a woman on the funeral pyre of her husband as the only meritorious course that a virtuous woman could follow. Not only would such a woman enjoy eternal bliss in heaven along with her husband, but also her action would expiate the sins of three generations of her husband's family, both on his father's and mother's side, the scriptures suggest.

Such hopes and encouragement's both to the victim and her natural protectors produced the inevitable consequences, every year thousands of women suffered a terrible cruel fate in the name of religion and pioussness. Cases are on record when the women fleeing from the first touch of fire was again forcibly placed upon the funeral pyre.

To prevent such incidents, the male relations often took care first to cover the widow with wood, straw leaves and then forcibly holding her in place by means of bamboos before setting fire to the pyre. At the same time, drums would be beaten so that

the people would not hear the desperate cries of the widow on the pyre.

Before the Mughal period in India, the intelligent and cultured people did not protest against the inhuman custom. Akbar wanted to stop this practice, but failed.

The British rulers also failed miserably on this front as it is being considered a sacred sacrifice by a wife for her dying husband as per the religious traditions. Despite several legislations on this account only a few "people acted as per regulations, but the majority disregarded it".

It was found that in Calcutta the number of *Sati* exceeded more than 500 each year. The Government was unable to stop this obnoxious system and could only wait for gradual enlightenment of Indian opinion for the abolition of *Sati*. The right of a Hindu wife to reside separately and claim maintenance was given statutory recognition properly by the Hindu Marriage Women's right to separate residence and maintenance Act, 1946.¹⁵

Apart from *Sati*, child infanticide, which has become now a permanent feature of Hindu society. What makes it more appalling that like *Sati* it is also glorified on the religious basis.

Historically speaking, "Infanticide" was a long established practice of the Hindus. They would throw a child into the Ganga – Sagar (the place where the River Ganga entered into the Bay of Bengal) in fulfillment of religious vows. It was a custom when a childless woman prayed for children; she would take an oath to offer a child to Ganga-Sagar if she could become the mother of more than one child. The female child is considered profane in modern enlightened India also much to the consternation of the pre Islamic Bedouin Arabs.

Infanticide was and is spread among the Jats, Rajputs and Mewats in central and western India. Here, the ruthless dowry system compelled the parents to kill girl children, while infants, by refusing to give them proper nourishment, or sometimes by

even poisoning the nipples of the mothers' breasts. The British Government officers tried their best to stop this inhuman practice, but failed.¹⁶

In 1800, the subject was first introduced to the notice of Mr., Duncan, the then Governor of Bombay, by the Minister of the Nawab of Surat, one Kripa Ram, who reported that among the Rajas of that class, the birth of a daughter was considered as "disgraceful", the newly born daughters were accordingly "put to death". Though the practice was not general in all the subdivisions of their tribe, in several places "they did stone-heartedly kill them".¹⁷ Again, in 1804, in a conversation with a daughter of one of the Guikwar Princess of Gujarat, he incidentally ascertained the fact that the caste of Jhareja Rajputs in Kach (Cutch) "did not bring up daughters." At the same time, a native of Kach said, "it is notoriously known to be established practice among those of the Jhareja tribe of Kach and neighbouring district of Kathiawar not to bring up their daughters, but to put them to death at birth".¹⁸

Once more in 1806, a private messenger from Rajkot, the capital of Kathiawar, unequivocally admitted, "daughters were never brought up in his master's family." All these, and the incidental intimations were distinctly corroborated by Captain Seton stationed in Mandavi, who after due inquiry, positively testified that "every female infant born in the Raja's Family, whether of Rani or lawful wife, was immediately put to death at birth".¹⁹

Anti-infanticide works in the Peninsula of Kathiawar proved to a great degree unsuccessful, notwithstanding the engagements which were contracted by Jadeja chiefs of that province in 1807 with Col. Walker (who was appointed by Mr. Duncan who commenced his job in 1808) to abstain from the commission of the crime.²⁰

From the report to the Resident at Baroda dated 20th June 1817, the lives of only 63 female infants had been saved in the course of ten years. It seems extremely disproportionate to the number which must have been born within that period.²¹

According to the information by Captain Ballantrine, in the Talooka of Drappa which contained four hundred Jhareja families, there was not a single female child in existence, and that in no family had more than one female child been preserved, demonstrated the deep-rooted prevalence of this horrid custom.²²

As late as 1841 in one of the districts out of a population of 122, only 7 were females. In 1939, exactly 25 years after the original treaty was formally signed, it was established that infanticide was still practiced among the Jharijas of Kach to a lamentable extent.²³

"Nevertheless, even till today, the girl-child in many parts of India, rural, and urban, is born into a culture which idolizes sons and mourns the birth of a daughter. Actually, the girl child often does not even get life. Clinical tests like amniocentesis, originally devised to detect genetic abnormalities are misused by families in urban regions to detect the sex of the foetus and if the foetus is female, the cost of the test covers the subsequent abortion.²⁴

In semi rural areas, such as Salem or Usilampatti districts of Tamil Nadu, parts of Bihar and Rajasthan, in "resettlement colonies" in Delhi and Thana District where technology is not advanced and readily available for the killings, female infants are quietly murdered by strangling, abandoning, starving, drowning or poisoning. That is the reason why sex ratio in India, excluding Kerala, according to the 1991 Census, is 927 females for 1000 males.²⁵

Due to this, inexplicable crime, there are townships in India which rarely receive a *baraat*. The *Times of India* carried the following story in the year 1999:

It's not as if Devra hadn't seen *baraats* that went out of the village. So, when it received one earlier this year, history was made. It was the first in 110 years. For a century and 10 years this remote village in Barmer district of Rajasthan did not receive single *baraat*. And simply because it was ensured that no girl born in this village survive after birth. A girl child does not live here very long. In fact, she is killed immediately after birth--- either drowned in a tub of milk or fed *affeem* (opium) or simply smothered with a pillow.²⁶

In condemning the discriminatory nature of the scriptures of Hindus, Hari Keshavji observed that it was the absence of any work of law or philosophy urging the necessity of instructing female children that had led to the apathy of the women in India. The key of knowledge was denied to them, leaving them unable to read or write. He remarked that attempts might be made to "rescue her from the state of degradation to which a barbarous custom of the country has subjected her".²⁷

The orthodox society brought a number of objections against female education, ranging from absence of any injunction in *Shastra* in favour of equal education for males and females. The *Shastra* argument was the typical nineteenth argument when it came to seeking any change in existing customs and practices.²⁸ Keshavji' citing evidence from the ancient texts, clarified that even *Manu*, was against women having the privilege of reading the Veda.²⁹

There are several other issues that are related with the women in the Indian context. There have been many attempts at the governmental and civil level for improving the position of women in Indian context. Since the traditional treatment meted out to women was from all standards barbaric there were several attempts to improve the status of women in India by legislation and reformation.

In this regard the five important acts, namely, the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, the Hindu Adaptation and Maintenance Act, 1956, the Minority and

Guardianship Act, 1956, the Dowry Proposition Act, 1961, and the Sati Prohibition Act, 1987, are the major laws passed by the Indian parliament since independence that have affected the position of Hindu Women.³⁰

The *devadasi* system can be sighted as one glaring example of exploitation of women on the name of spirituality and religious devotion. In the early medieval period the temple was considered to be the abode of gods and that the young women who dedicated their selves to various temples had, therefore, to be employed to give company to the gods as wives and concubines. In other words, they had to serve the desires of the priests, the interpreters of god's wishes on earth.

Now some mythologies had to be invented providing sanction to all these requirements. Accordingly, we find mythological evidence regarding the *devadasi* system in the Gupta period. The mythology says after the destruction of the Yaduvamsis in the course of the Sutra Sangrama several thousand wives of Lord Krishna were abducted seduced and defiled by the *dadas* and consequently they became prostitutes. These fallen women once asked the sage Dalbya about their duties (*dharma*) they were advised by the learned sage to accept prostitution and live in the state capitals and in the temples.³¹ They were told that kings and princes were like their husbands, and on payment they could satisfy others also. Interestingly, these women were asked to bestow special favour on the Brahmans if they go to them on Sunday for the purpose of satisfying their sexual urge.³²

The aristocratic lovers of Badami, Ajanta, Ellora, Deogarh, Nachna, etc., indulging in *madhupana* (drinking of wine) or enjoying music and dance attended by women with chauris or wine jars, certainly betray the Feudal outlook of the age. Radakamal Mukherjee opines that the deeply erotic motifs verging on obscenity in the early medieval period indicate to some extent an exaggeration of an old tendency which can be

traced from Yaksinis of Mathura and Sanchi down to the *apsaras* and *nayikas* of Khujuraho and Orissa.³³

A marked feature of the sculpture of this period is *mithuna*, or erotic motif. The panels and the inner pillars of the temple of Konark in Orissa contain human figures in attitudes of sexual embrace. The walls of the temple seem to have been carved with profuse illustrations in stone of the *Kamasutra* that can be imagined. More or less the same features are visible in the Viratesvara Siva temple at Sohagpur (in the erstwhile Rewa State), the famous Khujuraho temples of the Chandallas, and certain other temples in Mahakosala.³⁴

In many temples from Dwarka to Jaganath Puri in Orissa, and at Bhoram Deo and Pali in Mahakosala, such carvings were in use during the reign of both the Saiva and Vauisnava families of kings who were the patrons and builders of the temples.³⁵ The Black Pagoda at Konark in Puri is famous for such erotic carving.³⁶ Some *Puranas* recommend even the purchase of beautiful girls for dedication to the Sun temple.³⁷

The practice of polygamy in the Hindu society was extended to include not only the wedded wife but also illegal wives and concubines. As a result a dancing girl who was not very rigid about having contact with a single man was not looked down upon; they were believed to be '*Nitya Sumangalies*', or who never get widowhood. Girls were initiated into the system with a marriage ceremony in a temple, and were wedded not to a boy but to a sword or a god and *Tali* was tied around their neck in front of the idol of the temple by an elderly women or by some men and sometime by a priest of their caste.

A girl was not a *Devdasi* by birth but by circumstances. For instance in order to obtain a safe delivery the expectant mothers of various castes would often dedicate their child if it happened to be a female one, to 'the service of god'.³⁸ The scenario of this kind has been presented by one writer thus, "Their figure is slender

and very elegant, and their movements, one and all, are graceful. The eldest of them is not more than sixteen to eighteen years of age. As soon as they attach themselves to temples in which they are entertained and where their charms bring good revenue to the priest...."³⁹ Abbe Dubios in first quarter of the 19th century says: - "It is not an uncommon thing to see even sacred temples converted into mere brothels."⁴⁰

The study of the *Devdasi* system of princely state of Mysore from 1610-1910 leads us to conclude that a noble practice of fulfilling the vows and dedicating children to 'the service of god' that had taken root in the State and had grown into an important social and religious custom in the 18th and 19th centuries later degenerated into mere prostitution in the beginning of 20th century due to reasons beyond the control of the *Devdasis* and to be abolished by law as it had become a rampant social evil.⁴¹ However the system still lingers in certain quarters demanding further reforms.⁴²

In modern India the crimes against women are still quite prevalent on a large scale. A survey has revealed rampant child prostitution in Ernakulam, Thiruvananthapuram and Kozhikode cities of Kerala. Children even below the age of 14 are involved in the trade. While 40 to 45 percent of them are boys, girls comprise 55 to 60 percent. Again at least 53 percent of them end up pregnant, with 32 percent of them resorting to abortions in hospitals. In Ernakulam, street children confessed to aborting pregnancies using pills under instructions from adult prostitutes or peers, or using herbal medicines. Around 27 percent admitted to use of oral contraceptives.

In a National Commission for women (NCW) Commissioned Study conducted in five states (Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh) selected from the five different zones of the country, as many as 47 percent women admitted to have faced sexual

harassment and related problems at the work place. "Often the person harassing women employees is the boss himself." Says women's rights activist Ranjana Kumari.

The reasons for this harassment indicated are that about 40% women complained ego problem of male colleagues, as a cause leading to harassment. Among 1205 victims, 3.72 percent complained of sexual obsession around 1.06 percent pointed out widowhood, 1.77 percent separation from their spouse, 6.38 blamed the media, 1.24 percent pornographic material and the rest mentioned miscellaneous reasons.

According to new surveys the crime rate against women has risen disproportionately. As against 34,175 cases of molestation recorded in 2005, the number has gone up to a whopping 36,617 in 2006. One report reveals that in the country, one woman is raped every 32 minutes, murdered every 22 minutes and molested every 15 minutes. 19,348 cases of rape of women were put on record in 2006 alone.

When sexually harassed at the work place, what did the women do? As many as 40 percent ignored it. The rest either reported it to their superiors and colleagues, or, the police. A minority protested themselves.⁴³

The second religion born in India is Buddhism. Even this religion did not do anything substantial to improve the status of women.

Sometimes the Pali term used to denote women is "Matuama", which means 'mother folk', or 'society of mothers'. As a mother, woman holds an honourable place in Buddhism. The wife is regarded as 'the best friend' (*paramaskha*) of the husband. At first the Buddha refused to admit the women into the Order, but later he was persuaded by the entreaties of Ananda and founded the Order of *Bhikkunis* (nuns).⁴⁴ Buddha has several times "pointed out natural tendencies and weaknesses of women in general."⁴⁵ He also pointed out the social and psychological

differences that exist between men and women.⁴⁶ This was shown in the manner in which he was realistic in his observations. He stated that it is the women's duty to look after her home and her husband.⁴⁷

Some caustic comments have been made in the *Tripitaka* about women's wiles and behaviour and in *Samyutta Nikaya* many of their redeeming features have been mentioned also.⁴⁸ The establishment of the *Bhikkuni Sangha*—the Order of Nuns—in the fifth year of the Buddha's ministry was short lived and in Sri Lanka flourished till 1017 A.D. in the reign of King Mahinda IV and after that it disappeared and was not revived. Though the Order of Nuns was introduced into China by Sinhalese nuns, and it still exists there as well as in Japan. However, in the Mahayana tradition they occupy a subordinate position which is by no means at par with the monks.⁴⁹

The monks have chosen a way of life which included celibacy and renounce the worldly life and keep away from married life voluntarily to "avoid various worldly commitments" in order to maintain peace of mind and to dedicate their lives solely to serve others in the attainment of spiritual emancipation." Such statements show the negative approach of Buddhists to women. Buddhist monks don't solemnize a marriage ceremony.⁵⁰

It is striking that there is no report on Buddhism when the topic is women's work and changes in family life aside from one cryptic statement by Barnes: "women appear to be no more highly regarded or better off than in many non-Buddhist societies. This is a disturbing incongruity." But Buddhism, even in its earliest period, rarely addressed questions of family life. In all, a monk is required to conduct himself in accordance with about two-hundred- twenty rules, which govern his ordinary comings and goings, but a nun is obliged to observe in principle "five- hundred rules." Although in actual fact the extent Vinaya of six ancient Buddhist schools list between two- hundred-ninety and three-

hundred eighty rules for nuns and not five-hundred, nuns' lives are definitely more closely regulated than those of monks. The harshest regulations imposed on the female members of the order are the "eight chief rules *gavydhamma*", which require each nun to treat every monk as her senior and superior; that she go regularly to the community of monks to seek instruction but never instruct or admonish any monk herself; and that all the sisters' formal ceremonies be carried out in the presence of monks as well as nuns, including the setting of penances for erring nun.

Some women's spiritual communities, such as the *dasasilmatawa* in Sri Lanka, enjoy their current independence. If they were to formalize their community into an order (*sauIgha*), they would have to be governed by the traditional monastic rules, this would put them under the nominal domination of monks. Also the *dasasilmatawa* prefer to seek their spirituality through radical withdrawal rather than catering to the lay community and its modern penchant for reforming society through social work. Along with the *dasasilmatawa*, many Buddhist monks have not supported the ordination process for women.

This lukewarm attitude of the Buddhism towards the issues of women can be appreciated by the following dialogue between Buddha and Ananda. For example, when Buddha was asked by Ananda, "How shall we behave toward a woman? He answered, "You must avoid seeing one." "But if nevertheless we see her, what shall we do?" "You shall not talk to her, Ananda." "But if we nevertheless talk with her, what then?" "Then you must be very watchful over your self, Ananda."⁵¹

Nuns were strongly dependent on the male fellows in the Buddhist Sangha congregations.⁵² However, there was no possibility of getting Nirvana for a person having any relation with the women. The Buddhist text *Guhyasamaja Tantra* says, "You should freely immolate animals, utter any number of falsehoods, take things do not belong to you, and even commit adultery."⁵³

Buddha did not "humiliate" women but "regarded them as weak by nature". It is not the condition of the Indian women where religion is dominant in almost all spheres of life.

Even in the so-called liberal and enlightened environs of the west, the condition of women is worse. Moreover, the ideals of Feminists were not realized even in the western context. Every one knows that the days of standard—issue—feminism are over.

Indeed Mrs. Margaret Thatcher gave the world to understand, as far back as 1982, that the battle for women's rights was largely won. True or not, yesterday's feminists are certainly out of job. More perhaps because newer models have come into the market and no one wants to remember what old style feminism looked like. Germaine Greer and Kate Millet are out of fashion and in the latter's case; this has taken the form of monotonous penury and abject despair. Millet was celebrated in the 1970s for her ground breaking best seller *sexual politics*. A feisty 37 year old when she burst upon the world with her analysis of women's oppression, she wrote of patriarchy, for instance, as "a governing ideology without manipulation, which the male is free to exploit." In her 60s now and eight books and one mental breakdown later, she is half forgotten by the world, her books out of print and with the certain knowledge that publisher's editors regard her as obsolete on account of more recent feminist scholarship. Recently, she wrote for a magazine about life as an unemployable 'celebrity', despite being a scholar with respectable credentials and a name that is instantly recognizable to aspiring women of generation ago.

Time has moved on and Ms Millet's plight probably illustrates the misery of those who were famous the day before yesterday. After all the feminists of the 60s and 70s did not pay endless homage to those who had gone before, to suffragette sisters like Emmeline Pankurst and Feminist writers like Mary

Wollstonecraft, who said the unswayable at a time when women were meant to be "struck regularly, like gongs."

Those times are past, but feminism still has much unfinished business to attend. Admittedly, it is no longer to do with getting the vote, the right to work the freedom not to have children. But there are other battles won by five beautiful and brainy women who recently modeled pantyhose and stocking in the U.S. The women were not models, but bankers, brokers and Wall Street traders and they say that it is a woman's right to be sexually attractive anywhere she chooses—including the workplace. American women are outraged by the call for equal rights to take one's clothes off! As well they might be, faced with this doubtful pre-millennial feminist milestone.⁵⁴

The unfortunate results owing to the unbridled approaches of the feminists, are alarming. Melanie Philips says:

Mention feminism to most people and the reaction will probably be one of faintly amused indifference. Some men may be irritated by feminist rhetoric some women might feel their agenda in a little extreme form has not been grasped.

Feminism has become an unchangeable orthodoxy which drives forward the whole Programmes of domestic social policy in Britain. Yet, this orthodoxy is not based on concepts of fairness and social solidarity. It is based on hostility towards men.⁵⁵

The unbalanced and unjustified campaign started by the feminists has resulted in a very unfortunate backlash from the men.

The American social scientist Murry Straus and Richard Gelles reported from two large national surveys that husbands and wives had assaulted each other at approximately equal rates, with women engaging in minor acts of violence more frequently. Elsewhere, they found more wives than husbands were severally violent towards their spouses. Moreover, there is now considerable violence from women than men. "... In other words, as women have become independent of men, they have

also become more violent towards them-because men have become dispensable."

Another under-reported fact is that most violence against children is committed by their mothers, not their fathers. A once noted feminist Germaine Greer opines about the fate of her idealism: "I did not fight to get women out from behind the vacuum cleaner to get them onto the board of Hoover."

A famous novelist D. Nesting says for the same reason, "Men seem to be so cowed that they can't fight back, and it is time they did." She calls the feminist women activists as "the most stupid and nasty women."

Camille Pagila, a famous feminist, says that after indulging in the campaign of "Spittle 'n' Knitting needles" against men, the feminists have already lost their cherished objectives.

The first—ever all—women convention on women's rights attended by 300 delegates ended in Seneca on July 1848, with demands for universal Suffrage and social in discrimination against them.

On the other hand against the claims of the feminists the condition of women was not improved in any appreciable way by any standards. The following comparative study of the reports about the condition of women in the West from March 8, 1857 to March 8, 2000 supports our view, which show that after decades together the fate of women is same as in medieval times rather than worsened. Thousands of workwomen came on the roads in protest against exploitation perpetuated by the mill owners of March 8, 1857. They were forced to work 18 hours a day without any relaxation. More than one million men and women took out various rallies in Austria, Denmark, Sweden, and USA on March 8, 1911, demanding right to; vote, public posts, work, commercial education and equal opportunities. Dozens of women's rights groups organized rallies and protest

marches in New Delhi on March 8, 2000, protesting against poverty and violence.⁵⁶

But a look at their present position indicates that they have not undergone drastic change since 1848. Because they do two-thirds of the work, earn one-third of the income, and own one-hundredth of the property. Male members spend their total income for the survival of the family as against partial contribution by their wives. Some five hundred fifty million women are living below the poverty line the world over. Female illiteracy is one-third more than male illiteracy female dropout rate is higher.

Violence against women is on the rise. The ratio of women is on decline in comparison to men. Not only married women but also spinsters undergo abortions. In the metropolitan cities of India, various hospitals are open to conduct abortions for students at cheaper rates. In Western countries, the condition is worse. The table shows that 54.5 percent of abortions are conducted upon women aged below 30.

In US the ratio of abortions according to the respective age groups as follows:

Ratio of Abortion	Age-group
8.8%	15 – 17 yrs
11.5%	18 – 19 yrs
32.8%	20 -24 yrs
21.4%	25- 29 yrs
14.4%	30 – 34 yrs
7.5%	35- 39 yrs
2.3%	40 and above

<u>Status</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Separated	7.2
Divorced	9.4
Married	18.4
Widowed	0.9
Unmarried	64.4

According to a study published in a British medical weekly *Lancet*, single mothers are 70 percent more likely to die prematurely than women who live with their husbands. According to the UNICEF, the relatives commit about 60 percent rapes. The three fourth of the food throughout the world is produced by women and there is about 60% work force consisting on women folk but the income of women is as low as 10%.

At every 57 minutes a rape takes place, every 7 minutes a case of eve teasing is reported, every ½ month a bride burning takes place, at every 36 minutes a kidnapping of a woman takes place. Now the crime rate against the women has increased from 5.7 to 7.0, while as the conviction rate has decreased. Because of the infanticide there are 923 females for 1000 men. The death rate has been recorded as 5.8 females and 5 men, while as infant mortality has been 39.12 men and 52.1 women. The literacy rate, as in 1981 is 48% men and 19.55% women, and now it is 38.35%. Among all the sufferers women are about 75%.⁵⁷

According to a report issued by Britain's Home Office, there are average 6,000 rapes and 18,000 indecent sexual assaults against women in England and Wales every year. The true figure is closer to 3, 00,000 as per unofficial sources. In America, a total of 95,770 rape cases were registered in 1996. Accurate statistics on rape have always been difficult to compile because many women are reluctant to lodge complaints against their attackers for fear of public censure of the victims rather than the criminals.

In India, Delhi has become the unsafe city for women. It topped the nation in respect of rate of kidnappings and abductions of women and stands fourth in case of rape in 1998. Madhya Pradesh topped the list of registering as many as 3,354 cases of rape in 1998 followed by Uttar Pradesh 1,605, Bihar 1,421 and Delhi 423. These are those who mustered courage to report the incidents to the police. Last year, a petition was filed in the Delhi High Court, disclosing that nearly 26,000 minor girls were missing all over the country.

It is very unfortunate that even in Muslim countries the literacy rate of women is very low. While Albana tops the list with 63%, Lebanon with 58%, followed by Comoros with 52%, Brunei with 50%, Kuwait and Malaysia with 48% each, Indonesia with 45%, Turkey with 43%. Egypt and Bahrain with 29% each, Iran with 26%. Among the countries that have the lowest literacy rate are Chad, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Niger, Mali, where the literacy rate is as low as 1%. The countries that have low literacy rate include Afghanistan with 4%, Pakistan with 6%. Thus the educational scenario of the Muslim countries is not satisfactory.⁵⁸

In Muslim countries majority of girls do not get primary education. Except only four countries—Albana, Brunei, Comoros and Lebanon, the female literacy rate is less than 50 percent.⁵⁹

Yusuf al-Qardawi rightly mentions some very crucial issues related to women in Muslim countries. He says:

The problem of women in the Muslim world is that men are careful to maintain their grip, so they would not allow female leadership to emerge. Men impose themselves on women's meetings, as they exploit the shyness of reticent Muslim women and never allow them to take command of their own affairs. This way, no female talents are given chance to prove themselves in the pursuits of the Islamic Movement or to be seasoned by experience and struggle and taught in the school of life by trial and error.

While talking about the special treatment, which Islam has given to the women, he says:

The rule in worship and religious learning was participation and that there never existed in Islam a *masjid* that has been reserved to women alone and not visited by men. Women attended the sessions in which the Prophet taught Muslims the Religion. They also participated in (or at least attended) the *Juma'* (Friday), the *Eids* and congregational prayers together with men. They asked questions about minute female matters without being prevented from learning the Religion by their shyness, as Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) herself said. The books of *Sunnah* abound in questions that were directed to the Prophet (peace be upon him) by women, including those asked by women themselves and those asked by women on behalf of all women, as the women who said: "O Messenger of Allah, I have been sent to you by women."

Women asked the Prophet to allocate a separate day for them, so that they might have the time and privacy to ask whatever they liked without being inhibited by the presence of men. This was another privilege given to women besides the public lessons they attended together with men.⁶⁰

(Note: This article is likely to be concluded in the next issue of this Journal)

References and End Notes

- ¹ Russell Bertrand, *Education*, Unwin paperbacks, London.1985, p. 89.
 - ² The speech is included in *History of Woman Suffrage* (1881), edit, by Cady Stanton etc p. 3.
 - ³ *Ibid.*, p. 5; Marry Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1791)
 - ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.
 - ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.
 - ⁶ Bertrand Russell, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.
 - ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 144.
 - ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 145.
 - ⁹ Bertrand Russell, *Why I am not A Christian*, Rutledge, London 2000, pp. 28-29. May be it is due to the encouragement once given to permissive tendencies in Europe by philosophers like Russell that London school children are swapping prostitutes pornographic cards. The problem is also with British Telecom which estimates the annual cost of removing taped cards from phone boxes at 250,000 pounds (\$380,000). It is said it removed an average 13 million cards from those boxes every year. (*Times of India*, 9/7/2000).
- On the other hand the over dose of sexual media programmes has resulted in other problems like low fertility rate. Though the fertility rate has dropped from about 6 in 1950 to 3.4 in mid 1999 but it has not reached the replacement level of 2.1. The high fertility is attributed to early marriage, 19.5 years, lack of spacing, 45.2% of births of order 3+ in last years, low female literacy.
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 - ¹¹ Refer to *Asian Age*, Sep. 25, 1995.
 - ¹² *Mahjubah*, Vol. 18. No. 6(1870), September 1999.
 - ¹³ Wilson's Collected Works 11, pp. 295-6.
 - ¹⁴ Razeena Ayesha, Institute for Studies on Women, Kerala, India *Mahjubah* Vol. 18, No. 9 (183), December, 1999.
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 - ¹⁶ Saroj Kanti Majumdar, *Ideas and Ideals of Great Personalities of India*, P. M. Bagchi and Company, Calcutta, 2000.
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- ¹⁹ Parliamentary Papers, pp. 395-96, 377; Cooverjee Rustomjee Mody, Prize essay against Female Infanticide (Bombay, 1849) -p. 598.
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- ²¹ Sulochana Krishnamoorthi, *Discovery and suppression of Female Infanticide in Western India (1800-1855)*, IHC, 1999, Aligarh, 2000, pp. 592-594.
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- ²³ *Ibid.* pp. 409-410.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 410, John Wilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-09, proceedings, *op. cit.*, p. 594.
- ²⁵ Selections, *op. cit.*, p. 196.
- ²⁶ Sharmial Joshi, "A Precarious Life." *Femina*, 40th Anniversary Issue, July 1, 1999, pp. 284-85. Proceedings, *op. cit.*, p. 597.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ September 17 issue of the *Times of India*, The story by Yashwant Raj.
- ²⁹ Reeta Nillesh, Reflection on two prize winning essays on female education in western India in the early nineteenth century, IHC: Proceedings 60th Session, 1999, Aligarh, 2000. *Ibid.* p. 487.
- ³⁰ Hari Keshavji (1804-1858) served as clerk in the Government Engineering Institution upto 1829. Essay by Hari Keshavji on "Female Education in India", in *OCS*, Vol. ix, No.4, 1838, p. 133.
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- ³³ *Matsya Mahapurana* (Hindi. tr. by R.P. Sastri, Tripathi), *Prayag*, Ch. 70, p. 187.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 189.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 133.
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- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 133.

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