



John Stuart Mill's Views on Women and its Relevance for the Present Indian Women

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Abstract

John Stuart Mill's analytical and rational standings are indisputable. Mill's liberal credentials have been lauded by many liberal thinkers of the 21st century. The purpose of this paper is to magnify Mill's views on women and its significance in the globalised world of today especially with respect to the Indian woman populace. There are vast differences between the women of Victorian age and the contemporary Indian women in terms of cultural, political, legal and social realities. While on the face of it, the contemporary Indian women no longer face the same issues as the English women of the Victorian age, Mill's concept is still relevant and acts as a guiding light of empowerment for the Modern Indian woman. This paper highlights that if John Stuart Mill's concept of gender equality which was based on acquiring legal, political, marital and educational rights for the woman of Victorian age is applied in India then that would result in the betterment of the conditions of the contemporary Indian women.

Key Words: John Stuart Mill, subjugation. Indian women, emancipation

Introduction:

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) profoundly influenced the shape of nineteenth century British thought and political discourse. His substantial corpus of works includes texts in logic, epistemology, economics, social and political philosophy, ethics, metaphysics, religion, and current affairs. Among his most well-known and significant are A System of Logic, Principles of Political Economy, On Liberty, Utilitarianism, The Subjection of Women, Three Essays on Religion, and his Autobiography.

Mill's views on Women

John Stuart Mill's persuasive essay The Subjection of Women invoked the predicaments of women in the Victorian era. His rationale is so permeable that it invokes no opposition. But when Mill's essay first published, it triggered an impassioned debate. He was the first male philosopher to argue adamantly for the emancipation of women in Victorian society and for the recognition of their personal, legal and political rights. He took the unusual stance that women should be considered equal to men in all respects and given the same opportunities as men. In his essay entitled "The Subjection of Women", he

passionately discussed about his opinions regarding gender equality. "... the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes-the legal subordination of one sex to the other-is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other." "The anxiety of mankind to intervene on behalf of nature...is an altogether unnecessary solicitude. What women by nature cannot do, it is quite superfluous to forbid them from doing."

In this essay, Mill cites that it is a daunting task to achieve same sex equality. But he held a strong stance by iterating that men, historically, held the position of authority not because of the fact that many alternative systems have been tested and tried. They occupy the dominant position because that is the only system that has been attempted. Thus, it is erroneous to state that women are incapable of being in the position of authority. Mill's dissension is that it is impossible calibrate a system if we don't make an endeavour to try it. He counters by pointing out the historical foundations of subjection of women, that is, the conversion of "mere physical fact into a legal right." He stated that the opposition to female emancipation was driven by prejudicial and pre-modern law of force rather than on the concept of rationality. Mill goes on to explain that it is the law of force which has ruled mankind until very recent times, and that this is still a crude reality for women. He explains that it is difficult for women to protest against this rule because, unlike other subject peoples such as slaves, women are prevented from birth from opposing it because of the way they had been raised. Their minds have been enslaved from the beginning. He viewed that women are brought up to believe that their minds are very different from those of men and that they are unfit for any role except a submissive one. This serves the purposes of men who not only want a slave, but a willing one. John Stuart Mill said that many women are raised to have attitudes that accept the oppressive behaviour of men.

John Stuart Mill states, "I deny that any one knows or can know, the nature of the two sexes, as long as they have only been seen in their present relation to one another. Until conditions of equality exist, no one can possibly assess the natural differences between women and men, distorted as they have been. What is natural to the two sexes can only be found out by allowing both to develop and use their faculties freely."

Mill vouched for female emancipation and apprehended their sub human treatment. He goes on to explain the benefits of female emancipation and education from the utilitarian perspective. Mill argues that more people existing alongside one another on an equal footing means increased competition and this would lead to moral and intellectual development of individual as well as the society. Mill worked extensively to make people of his time realise that contribution of women is crucial for the progression of mankind. Mill pointed out at the English queens- Elizabeth I and Queen Victoria and also made a reference to the French patriot Joan of Arc and claimed that women can excel in any field if given a possibility. Thus female emancipation was highly propagated by Mill.

Mill compared woman's subordination to man to that of a slave to his master. He considered women's role as a kind of domestic slavery to the family. The only difference is that the woman's master not only wants her labour but also her emotions. The master wants to bind her nature, education and sentiments so as to have an absolute control over her. A woman is never allowed to develop naturally as they have been guided by men throughout their lives. Thus, her true nature has been always repressed. Mill vociferously outlined the insidious effects of constant companionship of an uneducated husband or wife. Mill stressed that with the emancipation of women, the relationship between a husband and wife would be cordial as then both will be able to connect with each other at an intellectual level. John Stuart Mill attacked women's status in the marriage, which he saw as a kind of a legal bondage. All property and any income derived from marriage belonged to the husband, even if the wife had brought the property to the marriage. Mill also acknowledged physical abuse in the marriage. Mill advocated for a marriage contract based on equality before the law and the division of powers in the home and for this he sponsored Married Women's Property Bill (1868). Mill raised the issue of women's suffrage and stood for political equality of women. He presented arguments to cement his proposal. He viewed that as women make up half of the population, thus they also have a right to a vote since political policies affect women too. He theorises that most men will vote for those MPs who will subordinate women and maintain their dominance, therefore women must be allowed to vote to protect their own interests.

"Under whatever conditions, and within whatever limits, men are admitted to the suffrage, there is not a shadow of justification for not admitting women under the same."

Relevance of Mill's views for the present Indian women

The status of women in modern India is sort of a paradox. If on one hand she is at the peak of ladder of success, on the other hand she is mutely suffering the violence that is afflicted on her. The Indian Constitution accepted universal adult franchise without discriminating against individuals based on caste, religion, creed or gender. The constitution makers, from the very beginning, vouched for granting suffrage rights to women. The Indian constitution enshrines in Art.14, 15, 39(a) (d) and (e) that the state shall ensure a just social order for women based on equality and dignity. In spite of all the external inducements, India which is the sacred land of Sita, Savitri and Damayanti, it has been found that women are being seduced, tortured, enjoyed and betrayed. Despite Constitutional guarantees and legal protection there is an increasing trend of violence and offenses against women.

Women have always played a pivotal and crucial role which has been either veiled or devalued in society and history. If we analyse the demographic structure of India then it clearly depicts the crude realities of gender inequalities persisting in India. According to the Population Census of 2011, it was revealed that the population ratio of India 943 females per 1000 of males. Neglecting the demographic inequalities, India is home to 586 million women, or slightly more than 17% of the global total. India has 173 million girls below the age of 15, about one-fifth of the worldwide total. It is estimated that if women were to

achieve the same workforce participation rate as men, the country's gross domestic product could rise dramatically.

When we talk about women's condition in economic sector then according to the report of United Nation India Business forum it was analysed that women in India represent 29 percent of the labour force, down from 35 percent in 2004. More than half of the work done by women in India is unpaid, and almost all of it is informal and unprotected. Women are not well represented in most sectors. Though they comprise almost 40 percent of agricultural labour, they control only 9 percent of land in India. Women are also shut out of the formal financial system. Nearly half of India's women do not have a bank or savings accounts for their personal use and 60 percent of women have no valuable assets to their name. It is unsurprising then that at 17 percent, India has a lower share of women's contribution to the GDP than the global average of 37 percent.

Literacy rate of women in India accounts for 65.46% as compared to men which accounts for a staggering 82.14%. Females constitute about half of country's human resource but lack of education snatches their chance to be a part of the progress and development of India. This means our pace of progress is less than what it should be. In addition, women face great physical insecurity. The rate of crimes against women in India is increasing. With the increasing incidences of rapes, dowry deaths, female foeticides, domestic violence, physical and mental torture, Indian women face an uphill battle to gain equality in this patriarchal society. Research finds out that in Indian society women still face subconscious biases, violence and a general treatment of a second-class citizen by the society.

Mill's relevance in this Indian society is crucial as he advocated complete gender equality in every sphere. In the personal sphere, Indian women have faced inequalities from the very beginning. Be it in the form of female foeticide or preference for male child. Mill's belief that the concept of law of force creates division between the genders from their birth itself is apt as far as the conditions of gender inequalities in India are concerned. Women have been advocated to play a weak and submissive role from the very beginning.

Women have been devoid of freedom in personal sphere as well as in marital sphere. Marital rapes, a reality of the Indian society, have been neglected by the Indian lawmakers. Domestic abuse, which is in physical and mental forms, though recognised by the lawmakers, is still very prevalent. One reason given for the prevalence of this abuse is that it has historically been acceptable for a man to beat his wife. John Stuart Mill said that many women are raised to have submissive and weak attitudes and also are taught to accept such oppressive behaviour. Female victims of abuse often feel that they are inferior to men and that anger is not a reaction that is acceptable for them. Therefore, they often use denial as a way of dealing with anger, which can lead to depression, guilt and psychosomatic illnesses.

Women are entrusted with the duty of raising a child thus maternal leave was advocated by the legislatures throughout the world. But Mill believed that this responsibility of child rearing takes away the financial independence of the women as they have to leave their jobs. Mill advocated that both men and women should be equally responsible in child rearing. Thus, Indian lawmakers should also accept the concept of paternity leave. This would enable both men and women to equally participate in the well

being of the child. Many countries such as Sweden, New Zealand and many more have reaped the benefits by accepting and normalising the concept of paternity leaves.

John Stuart Mill was adamant that women should be a part of countries' workforce. He believed that if women are also involved then that would result in the development of the country to a great extent. Lack of women in the workforce is a stark reality in India. But steps should be initiated by the civil society and the government to ensure the involvement of women in the development of the Indian economy. The economic impact of achieving gender equality in India is estimated to be US\$700 billion of added GDP by 2025. The IMF estimates that equal participation of women in the workforce will increase India's GDP by 27 percent. More than half of India's women don't have mobiles, and 80 percent don't use them to connect them to the internet. It could create US\$17 billion in revenue for phone companies in the next 5 years if women who didn't have phones had it. Globally, women make or influence 80 percent of buying decisions and control US\$20 trillion in spending. There are also social benefits to empowering women. Women spend 90 percent of their income on their families, and economically empowered women boost demand, have healthier and better-educated children, and raise human development levels. Mill opined that religious subjugation of women have further incremented gender inequalities. Religion, traditions and customs have played a huge role in the establishment of the patriarchal society in India. Religion and traditions, instead of condemning gender discrimination, are generally bullied into defending it. An instance in Kerala exemplifies it. Bishop Franco Mulakkal is being prosecuted because of the allegations of sexual abuse by the nuns in the church. The church's response to this was ousting the nuns who stood against the Bishop is not only curious but also regressive to say the least. He raised concerns regarding the use of religion and tradition as the basis to further extend the phenomenon of gender inequality. He believed that restrictions that are forced on women have no rationale behind them. This is true in the case of the Indian society as well. Be it Triple Talaq, tradition of Halala, female genital mutilation or the restrictions on the entry of women, who are undergoing menstrual cycle, in Temples and many more. Women have faced innumerable restrictions in the name of religion and traditions.

Mill vociferously advocated for gender equality women in the education sector too. He believed that if women are educated then that would eradicate many societal stigmas. In India, many women don't receive the education. This is because parents do not consider girls as earning members of their family, as after marriage they must leave their parents' home. Hence their education is just considered as wastage of money, as well as time. For this reason, parents prefer to send their boys to schools but not their girls. Lack of education means lack of awareness. Illiterate women are not aware of their rights. They know nothing about initiatives taken by the government for their welfare. Illiterate women keep on struggling hard and bear harshness of life, family and even their husbands. It also restricts their option to be financially independent. The manipulation of the idea of gender roles in the modern-day India is depicted by the Indian television as well. Where, the storyline depicts that an amoral woman is mostly a woman of career, and who has a mind of her own, and the ideal woman is depicted by a character. She can take being slapped by her husband and is dependent on the male members of her family in all spheres of life.

Conclusion

John Stuart Mill had advocated rights for women to inculcate gender equality in every arena. Though times have changed but still Mill's thoughts on women are relevant for the contemporary Indian women. The concept of marital equality is absent in India. The law of force still dominates the Indian patriarchal society. Indian women are still a silent spectator to all the oppression and humiliation that they face. Wife beating and mental abuse have been continuing though strict laws and policies have been initiated. Women are expected to inculcate qualities like sacrifice, submissiveness, tolerance and many more. They are still expected to take male guidance before undertaking any activity and also accept the irrational religious and traditional norms. Financial dependence and lack of education has further deteriorated the conditions of Indian women. Though, Mill's concept was based on the Victorian age and was meant to be applicable to a different culture and in a very different time, but his concepts on political, legal, personal and marital gender equality are still valid in the contemporary Indian scenario.

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