



ENDANGERING WOMEN'S CULTURE IN THE NAME OF EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

Bharat (India) is a land of diversity having its roots firmly ingrained in the culture and traditions. Women are considered as an empowering force who can carry the badge of both modernity and tradition with grace. A tendency to imbibe ultra-modernism in the name of empowerment and distorting the meaning of true feminism has jeopardized the true essence of women's demeanor. The objective of the paper is to identify the gap leading to such massive cultural change of women who held equal parameters as those of men. This article will provide a qualitative background of the issues and concerns of more divorce cases, lifestyle changes in women's perspectives, socio-economic influences of the west on women which has led to weakening of relationships at large.

Keywords: *Endanger, Culture, Women, Empowerment.*

Introduction

या देवी सर्वभूतेषु शक्ति-रूपेण संस्थिता। नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमो नमः॥

In Bharat, since time immemorial, women have been considered empowered and it is not a mere coincidence that in the Hindu pantheon three very crucial powers have been vested in the three Goddesses: Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Durga. Laxmi, the Goddess who entails with her the power of wealth and prosperity, in the modern era is regarded as the finance minister. Goddess Saraswati possesses within her the title of knowledge giver and is the embodiment of wisdom. Durga is considered as the epitome of power who triumphs over all evils. This is perhaps the unconscious acknowledgement of the versatility of flesh and blood/ mortal women in their real-life roles across cultures down the ages.

The ‘goldenness’ of the Aryan age is depicted in this verse of Manu Smriti: *yatra nāryas tu pūjyante ramante tatra devatāḥ* (3.56) “Societies where women are worshiped, for they are chaste and virtuous, the celestial gods are joyous.” During the ancient era, women’s contribution to society or family was revered and notably recognized. The tradition of choosing their own husband or practice of ‘Swayamvar’ was the privileged right and culture practiced during that time. Women were regarded as ‘Ardhanginis’ which meant having the same designation to her husband in every affair of life. Family was therefore considered as the primary unit of the society and woman the ‘soul’ of the family.

The oldest epic in existence, the Ramayana has also embodied the loftiest Hindu ideal of a woman in the character of Sita and is even worshiped as God incarnate. With the advancement in the later Vedic and Medieval era it was seen that the position, power, and status of the woman in the family had started eroding. Women’s personal autonomy was manifested in various practices such as purdah, early marriage, limiting educational opportunities, restricting access to information etc. Women as such had been vehemently oppressed and exploited and had to endure a lot of subjugation and exploitation at the hands of the society.

With restrictions, curbing the basic rights of women, empowerment gradually came into being and eminent educationists and reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda became the leading torch bearers advocating for women empowerment. Empowering any individual would mean giving the person a responsibility of taking control over one’s life. Post-independence saw a slow progress towards women empowerment though legislation towards equality were enshrined in the constitution. Over the last three decades women empowerment has been explicitly recognised by the Government of India and a lot of initiatives, policies and social welfare schemes have been implemented. As Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam had mentioned when we are empowering women we are leading to the development of good family, good society, and ultimately good nation. The world at large also took this grave issue in their stride and has also tabled legislations towards women empowerment. It is worth mentioning that the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDW) is one of the important initiatives of the UNO which promised to restore women’s right. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) 1976, has also underlined qualitative measures towards Women’s empowerment by focusing on developing a sense of self-worth, belief in one’s ability to secure a desired change and the right to control ones’ life. In the era of globalisation women empowerment has evolved as a multi-dimensional concept enabling her to realise her true potential and powers.

Women empowerment gradually took a fillip through UN Women (2011) which emphatically highlighted quantitative wellbeing through the concept of gender equality and income security. In the 21st century women empowerment ultimately shifted towards economics of life and revolved around materialistic pleasures in the era of neo-globalization.

New concept of women empowerment in the 21st century

Advocates of Women Empowerment have used different connotations, notions, and synonyms such as gender equality, westernization, modernization, privatization, liberation, urbanization, globalization, and neo-globalization encompassing a whole myriad of freedom rights and opportunities with no form of discrimination, exploitation, and victimization. For women, empowerment means independent decisions, increased control over one's life, participation in decision making on an equal basis with men. To understand women empowerment in the era of globalization greater value must be attached to the women and her role as an inevitable member of the society. Jawaharlal Nehru had once totally ascribed to the well-known remark of a French writer that the test of culture and civilization lay in the status and condition of its women.

Review of related literature

On review of related literature a few insights related to the present paper has been put forth by the author. It is evident that the impact of globalization, modernization and westernization is gradually eroding the rich Indian culture that had been upheld by the Indian women who were considered as repositories of 'tradition'. In the present time the scenario has changed, giving way to western ideologies which have implicitly eroded values and culture endorsing narrow standards of life thereby creating a rift in the social structure.

The family regarded as the primary social unit was the worst affected. In western ideology family structure focuses on empowerment in terms of upholding individualism and this is not in connivance with the traditional value of the Indian family in terms of collectivism or socialism. So, this western culture has given a death blow to the traditional family structure in India^{1,2}. This shift weakens the strength of the family and destroys the societal support system. It intensifies social isolation, particularly decline in the family values that coexist with equal participation of both the male and the female members. In the traditional family structure, women used to do the household chores and men used to earn the money to run the family³. Works by Nussbaum (2000)⁴ and Sen (1999)⁵ discussed how globalization processes homogenized cultural norms, diluting indigenous forms of gender equity and amplifying gender disparities. Cutas and Smajdor (2017)⁶ suggests that nuclear family structure changed

the status of women in the family and disrupted the traditional support systems for women. Historically, responsibilities for care and support of the dependent members were given to women and they happily took the responsibilities⁷. whereas investigators like Ghosh (2011)⁸ and Das (2008)⁹ expressed that modern woman who work in high positions in the urban areas tend to delay their marriages and stay away from family responsibilities. The above investigators further mentioned that women don't want to be identified as the wife and mother, whereas those identities were considered most prestigious identity for the traditional women. This attitude led to a prominent growth in 'live-in relations' in India rather than the actual marriages¹⁰. There is yet another side of the story impacted by globalization where a cultural shift has been seen and women are initiators of filing divorce cases and breaking the social institution called marriage¹¹. whereas in traditional India divorce was considered as the dirtiest word stated by Gurumukh, 2003¹² in his research paper.

Yet another feature of the Indian society advocated against the consumption of alcohol and other addictions. As such women during the traditional times took the center stage and prohibited the male from entering addictive behaviors due to tradition and culture. The impact of globalization has rather taken a different turn, and women are now becoming forerunners and entering these vices as a part of fashion statement and are even overindulging in it¹³.

The other perspective of westernization has portrayed women as objects of pleasure, and this has given way to a consumerist approach in their lifestyle. As a result, women commodification is being clearly reflected in media and advertisements. This objectification/commodification of women degrades the identity of women¹⁴. There is a study by French (1992)¹⁵ where he remarked that westernization focuses on pornography and women bodies have been projected as commodities. It is further stated that even mild pornography degrades women and teaches people to see women through a "distorted and deforming lens". Furthermore, lifestyle change in married women has also impacted the traditional idea of family planning regarding increased exposure to media¹⁶. Additionally, women have moved towards processed food for themselves and their family members which has compromised on their health and nutrition¹⁷.

A few available and relevant research sources have been cited to meet the objectives of the study.

Objectives of the Study

The present study has the following objectives:

- To identify the cultural gap that has been endangered by women.
- To elucidate the concept of a 'modern' women.

- To see the impact of globalization and neo-globalization on women.

Defining a modern woman

Bharat's culture is woven with thin and delicate threads of culture, ethnicity, values, folkways, and mores. Women's role in society and family as a changemaker is worth mentioning. She is an epitome of shakti, the creator, the knowledge giver and most importantly who gives a refined shape to her surroundings. She is like that potter who moulds and gives a correct shape to get that perfect and unique pot. Her intelligence, beauty and knowledge know no bounds. Bharat's respect for women is diverse in terms of the position she holds in the family as a daughter, wife, and mother and this esteem gives her the wings to grow and fly. But the influence of the west has culminated in certain pros and cons and as such women, unable to withstand the diversity of cultures almost imbibed everything from the west. Empowerment in the modern times became a tool for women to step out, bounce back and compete not with themselves but with the male counterpart. Women must not try to be masculine but should always try to make a distinctive mark for themselves in the society and should live by example like Sarojini Naidu, Vijaya Laxmi Pandit, Indira Gandhi, Pratibha Patil etc.

A paradigm shift in prospects towards empowering women in the era of globalization has led to this cultural transformation.

Urbanisation

The industrial revolution paved the way for urbanization, which led to disintegration of joint families giving way to nuclear families with drastic changes in the life of a woman. One of the major ill effects of urbanisation is over consumption of alcohol. This major shift in the lifestyle change has coaxed women to break all barriers and plunge into new avenues. Earlier substance abuse was not in trend and not a regular activity but presently this has been regarded as a stress buster in rural as well in urban areas. An increase in the psycho-social maladjustment is raised adding onto several types of mood disorders, mood swings, alcoholism, conduct disorder and leading a poor lifestyle is noticed. Nowadays, women working in call centres in odd hours has led to create a negative impact on their health and safety^{18,19}. Increased self-dependency and excessive liberty practiced by women have led to less involvement in the family which has disrupted the family as an institution. Urbanisation gave way to globalisation impacting both the family and women at the large.

Globalization

Globalization is viewed as an offshoot of capitalism and modernity which has adopted new forms and practices. Women are regarded to be the crucial facilitators to bring in progress and

development. They have been provided with innumerable opportunities and have been added as a great power towards economic growth. They act like catalysts in bringing about transformational changes in economic, political, and social spheres which have resulted in new modes of sustaining social relations. Bharat is considered to be that luscious tree whose roots are ingrained in culture, values, and ethnicity. But unfortunately, the leaf of this tree is turning yellow and pale due to disintegration of culture and values. Globalization is paving way for a darker side where we see the constant influence of feminism, influx trade, and ultra-modernity which has led to erosion of values. Women at large have played a major role play in depletion of these strong values which once were a benchmark of Bharat.

The constant reminder for women to be on the same page with men in civil and political rights participation has led to egalitarianism. Though the number is negligible the society has seen some empowered women. Mention may be made of women occupying highest offices of President, Prime Minister, Lok Sabha Speaker, and leader of the opposition etc. In the corporate sector we see Indra Nooyi, Arundhati Bhattacharya paving the way towards modernity yet holding onto the roots of culture, ethics, and morale. But the darker side of the story is women are still prone to face dowry deaths, domestic violence, and exploitation. The system of dowry which was an age long cultural practices still prevails and that perpetuated oppression, torture, and murder of women^{20,21,22}. Despite the importance of women empowerment lying at the heart of the Millennium Development Goals it is seen that six out of ten world's poorest people are still women and girls and less than 16 % of the world's parliamentarians are women. Though the Government of India has tabled the Women Reservation Bill, and 50% reservation has been successfully passed. Still its long-term impact needs to be seen and understood.

Globalization brings interconnectedness and integration among different cultures, governments, nations, regions, and communities. We have global access to television and media which makes the world a global village. The input of such technology has brought in awareness in the status of women. Women are getting recognition as far as the basic rights of liberty and equality in the areas of social, cultural, and economic spheres are concerned.

The alignment towards rights has led to manipulation of beauty, making it a booming industry. The beauty standards in India are becoming narrow and conforming to more international standards due to the westernization process²³. The modern society has a certain preference and bias towards fairness and whiteness. The society's beauty ideal of 'fair is beautiful' is a perfect example of colorism in society²⁴. The historical image of women was depicted as a curvy hourglass figure and even some extra fat in the stomach area, the modern ideal is dominated

by slim and sleek figures. When it comes to clothing our tradition embarks upon sari, salwar-kameez and a dupatta but the modern women prefer wearing the so-called modern clothes which goes with the identity of slim figure. Fanon, (1967)²⁵ has rightly pointed out that colonization has led to major increase in the inferiority complex due to the burial of local and cultural ethos.

The present media is regarded as a mere pool of manipulation where everything is fictitious, which shows us that there is no relation with reality. In the Indian context, the massive entry of electronic media and communication technology has challenged the traditional modes of cultural expression. There has been a shift towards 'buying culture' both in urban and semi-urban areas. Even rural India has entered this fray and has reached an all-time high and are now identified as an inevitable part of global market than ever before. The influence of market, media commodification and consumerism have turned the table towards social status. It is estimated that apart from the affluent minority (around 10 percent) of Indian industrialists, businessmen and rich peasants, the middle class today constitutes 25 % of Indian population^{26, 27}.

The so-called 21st century has revolutionized women's involvement in the media. Her image in the media is being projected as mere sexual objects. There is increased use of cosmetics and artificial surgeries which is used just as a tool of persuasion. They are falling into the clutches of eating disorder and depression by just commodifying their body as sexual objects. The national boundaries of culture have gone for a toss due to the immense involvement of information and communication technology the serials or sops shows on television portrays women being trapped and pleased by material pleasures. The advertising sector is not left behind too. Women are in posters, hoardings, pamphlets objectified as sex objects which is impacting their integrity and dignity at large. Indian women are going by the same ethos and swayed completely by this artificial representation. The influence of social platforms like Facebook, Instagram, You Tube give a view of a greener world. Women are tied in the intricate web relationships to make a deep emotional connect and as such she disconnects and alienates herself with her family. A conscious approval on skin texture, negative body image, and unrealistic photoshopped content has made women a tool just to get maximum approval or likes from the users. Muchlenkamp and Saris-Baglama (2002)²⁸ write that 'girls understanding of the importance of appearance for women in a patriarchal culture may contribute to feelings of fear, shame, and disgust that some experience during the transition from girlhood to

womanhood, because they sensed that they are becoming more visible to the society as sexual objects.’

The following are some of the practices and trends in the present time impacting the women in the society:

Uprooting the marriage institution

Modernization theory predicted that the great diversity of family behaviours found in non-Western countries would converge towards the Western nuclear model under the influence of industrialization and urbanization^{29,30,31}. Women are inspired by the western influences and beliefs and are endorsing such schemas which according to them is leading towards ultra-modernity. The role of education, economic stability and employment has opened the doors of more divorce cases in India. Women have failed in “the articulated rules of partner selection have become muddled with the espousal of new ‘modern’ values of ‘love’ and ‘choice’. There is a shift in culture due to urbanisation, advancement in technology, socialisation which has blurred the traditional values. The institution of marriage was considered to be a unison of two families and moreover of two identities. In today’s world it isn’t a matter of concern whether it is arranged or love marriage but silently the culture of divorce is being accepted and has become the modern norm. A trend that has been witnessed in the present time is that women are turning out to be competitors. It is evident that 1.1 % women are divorced in India and majority of them belong to the urban population³². A rise in ego and a sense of rivalry and sense of superiority is seen. The potent factors which have led to more divorce cases in Bharat once known as the land of tradition and culture are as follows:

Extra-marital affairs

Extramarital affairs involve the infidelity in the form of physical, emotional, mental of anyone who is married^{33,34}. Women are driven by both lust and intimacy. Women still believe that they are charmers and have this seductive quality present in them which would make them venture out and have own prescribed set of values. The over stimulation of media depicted through movies, documentaries, serials has created an impulsive desire in women to go by the trend and remain fickle minded.

Live - in relationships

Dharma marriage is considered as a universal tie till eternity. A country which is proclaimed to be the richest and fertile on the foundations of culture and values has become downtrodden. The wave of modernity is now considered to be a personal or private affair for the modern women. Just by getting away with personal commitment, a bond of contract with its own stated

rules and regulations is the corner story of every woman indulging in live-in with their partners. The concept of a live-in relationship was recognised in *Payal Sharma v. Nari Niketan*³⁵ by the Allahabad High Court, where it is observed by the Bench consisting of Justice M. Katju and Justice R.B. Misra that, "In our opinion, a man and a woman, even without getting married, can live together if they wish to. This may be regarded as immoral by society, but it is not illegal. There is a difference between law and morality." A modern woman would prefer opting for a live-in relationship rather than taking up the responsibility of a married life.

Nuclear set-up

Today the concept of a family that stays together, eats together, prays together and lives together is considered conservative. Around 88% of urban population live in a nuclear setup. The credit for breaking of a joint family rest with urbanisation and modernisation. Better educational opportunities for women have paved the way and made them forerunners as decision makers and, in many cases, negatively impacting the patriarchal family structure. Nuclear family also gives her the power not to be pressurized and work and live at her own free will.

Alcoholism/ Club Culture

A tectonic shift has occurred in our society where we see the roles have reversed bringing in more consumption of alcohol by the modern women. They are becoming more assertive in the choice they make due to the assertive financial freedom, increased demand in workforce and the ability to choose their own recreation and utilise their leisure hours. A study by the Community Against Drunken Driving (CADD) in 2020 revealed that about 35% of the participants, aged between 18 and 25, were women. Similarly, the Global Drug Survey 2019 pointed out that nearly 26% of women in India consume alcohol, a significant increase from previous years. The frequency of club culture has increased in the urban areas³⁶. Urban women are also getting attracted by this clubbing and pubbing culture. Though adequate empirical evidence is not available, yet the present society is heading towards this western ideology of clubbing and pubbing. This is considered absolutely normal in the present times and is a phenomenon towards growing gender equality.

Single mother

The social shift in gender roles may have contributed to an increasing parental separation and single parenthood in society. According to recent statistics, globally, 320 million children under 17 years of age have been found living in single-parent families, and specifically in the Indian context, approximately 2.3 million children live with single parents³⁷. Women are heading the family institutions and lifestyle changes have occurred drastically. Thanks to the eruption of

industrialisation, urbanisation, modernisation in making single mothers a viable concept. So, we really need to introspect to see this sea change in our society.

Conclusion

Women must not try to be masculine but should accept their feminism with grace and dignity. Masculine societies focus on power, wealth and assets as opposed to the feminine which focus on non-material benefits. Similar masculine- feminine corollaries would be facts versus feelings, logic versus intuition, competition versus cooperation, growth versus development, products versus relation, boldness versus subtlety. There are some cultures which may be masculine- value oriented and others more feminine oriented. In India the patriarchal agenda to bring in any reform was redefined giving an elevated status to the women in society. Women have an overarching edge over men as far as their biological entity is concerned. So, it can be affirmatively said that women are powerful and empowered in their own rights. Yes, they were ill-treated, debarred from the basic rights but still they outshone as 'shakti.' In the article, entitled 'the Position of Indian Women' appeared in The Tribune, Lajpat Rai highlighted a different conception of womanhood in Bharat. The distinct culture of India was sought to be emphasized by rejecting the polemic of 'inferiority- superiority' which marked the western understanding of the relationship between the sexes, as having never existed in India, or rather in ancient India. In the Aryan India, according to Lajpat Rai, 'man is treated as man and woman as woman, without any stigma of inferiority on the latter'. Indian women are constantly forging a fight to be the so called 'progressive' and 'modern' a trend of being 'empowered' by adopting western culture in its entirety in this era of neo globalization. The era of neo globalization has made women the victims of the glamorous world. Being treated as commodities to lure men is to be rejected vehemently by the so-called progressive women. Let me give an example of an advertisement of 'Kellogg's muesli,' where the man is reluctant to let go off his wife and calls her back on flimsy excuses. This seems to delight the woman who sees it as a triumph of a newly acquired proportion as a result of eating Kellogg's cereal. This very fact she that she wants to stay slim seems to be a result of a desire to pander to the male gaze. Women, too, have to change their mindset and carve out an identity for themselves by understanding that they have not been created to appease or lure men. Susan Brown Miller has also expressed that the patriarchal society has bound woman and that her sexual appeal is considered to be man's sexual property. The modern or the progressive woman has to rise against this age-old tradition and mindset and not succumb to this kind of sexual degradation and humiliation. The glittery persona which a woman is trying to behold in terms of aligning herself towards modernity,

materialism, being highly individualistic is creating a disharmony with our cultural values and norms. The society undoubtedly calls for a radical change and in no way can we negate women empowerment. But any change that is not leading to positive cultural transformation cannot lead to universal growth. What is expected of women is to retain her image of a positive cultural ambassador. The beauty of a woman lies in encapsulating the combination of the best of both tradition and modernism. Adopting the best features of globalization women should avail more opportunities towards enhancing their capacities by being pillars of their family and the society at large. Modern women should not follow a different orbit that does not correlate with the countries value and culture. As it is rightly said ‘where the women go, the culture goes.’

The essence of the paper is therefore to introspect and address the deteriorating social and cultural fabric of the society. Women themselves have to be change makers and break the age-old barriers and prejudices to create a society of equals. “Respect for women is a prerequisite for the success of countries in the modern world. In the dynamic 21st century, no society can flourish with half of its people sitting on the sidelines, with no opportunity to develop their talents to contribute to their economy or to play in the lines of their nation”³⁸.

Growth models, strategies, legal system, state, media, education, technology needs a rigorous analysis. A firm belief that she is no more under subjugation and that she can stand for her own rights, will help her grow and cherish her dream as a homemaker and ultimately as a nation builder.

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