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Human Gender Equality
First Need of A Fair And Just Society

1. Problem

A number of UN reports say that more than a quarter of women worldwide are violently abused in the privacy of their own homes. The assaults on women by their husbands and male partners are world's most common form of violence.

In the US, often called the crime capital of the world, the rape, muggings and road accidents account for more than other hospital admissions. The third world graph of women's abuse stands very high, going upto 80 percent in certain conditions.

The children of battered women too suffer in consequence. A mother, who is a victim of domestic violence, is twice likely to have a miscarriage and four times more likely to have a low birth-weight baby. Her children are more likely drop-outs of school and become violent in their turn. One disturbing feature of research, the UN reports point out, is the possibility of a link between domestic violence and progress towards equality for women as measured by closing literacy gap between males and females.

According to the reports, the risk of violence rises when male partners feel that their traditional position of superiority and control is being challenged. They state that the problem is as difficult to solve as to measure the battering that takes place in the privacy of homes. Friends, relations, neighbours and authorities are reluctant to intrude and victims themselves voice fewer complaints and have less recourse to law than victims of other violence.

Many victims, the reports remark, come to accept beatings as an inevitable accompaniment of women's inferior status in home and society. Conditioned from birth to esteem themselves only in terms of their ability to serve and satisfy others, many women respond to violence by looking first, to their own failings, blaming themselves, justifying their attackers and hiding the "marks of their shame", the tears and bruises. Often self-esteem will sink so low that the victim will isolate herself from friends and family and from the knowledge that she deserves better.

However, the reports note that attempt is being made in more and more countries to bring this problem into open and to expose the cause. In Latin America alone, there are over four hundred non-governmental organisations specifically concerned with violence against women.

In India, the crime against women has more than doubled in the past one decade and reached alarming proportions, with a crime against the fair-sex being committed every five minutes, according to Crime Records Bureau of the Home Ministry.

Most of the cases of atrocities on women are reported from the rural areas where the literacy level is absolutely low and the women are unaware of their rights. Several victims do not lodge a complaint fearing ostracism. Tribal and dalit women generally become soft targets of oppression.

The worldwide abuse of women, as mentioned in UN reports, denotes that the fair-sex is mistreated or wrongly handled by the male sex. And the crimes against women mean that the existing law is being violated by a part of the male gender to satisfy its sex hunger.

Though sanctioned by the then prevailing morality and prescribed by the law of those times, the inhuman treatment of women by men has been a persistently recurring phenomenon throughout history. In the heydays of slavery (roughly between BC 2000 to the beginning of the Christian Era), women were openly sold as chattels in various regions of the world. Even after the decay of the slave order, the destitute women continued to form a part of the bonded labourers. Under the feudal serfdom (from the beginning upto the 1800 AD), the status of women was raised to the level of semi-slaves with men enjoying the right to marry as many women as they could afford and the feudals entitled to have hundreds or thousands of concubines in their harems.

With the rise of machine industrial order (19th century to the mid-20th), woman in Western Europe secured certain basic rights, the principal being the right to equality between man and woman. Later, with the entitlement of these rights to the women in the rest of the world, they became

universal. Still most of these rights remained on paper, particularly in the non-Western countries and to a certain degree in the Western countries, due to the backward state of woman's consciousness and man's reluctance to part with his centuries old gender privilege.

In the post-second world war phase, there has been a continuous movement, led both by women's bodies and other democratic organisations, to secure woman's due rights in practice, as guaranteed by law and to provide the remaining ones still denied to her. Under the cold war conditions, it could not, despite repeated demands, become an issue of world agenda. But, in the post-cold war period, the question of gender equality, despite increasing crimes against women, has been theoretically as well as practically accepted as one of the most important priorities of the human society.

Has the problem of human gender inequality been a natural state of human species, arising from man's superior mental and physical disposition in relation to woman? Or does woman's dependence on man proves the former's inferior calibre? The facts do not subscribe to any of these propositions.

The historical facts amply demonstrate that the human organisation, as characterised by the methodolgy of food-gathering for its sustenance and survival in its earliest phase, was basically managed by the great matriarch in relation to human progeny, lineage, security and day-to-day living. This system of matriarchy, i.e., a from of social organisation in which the mother is recognised as the head of the family or tribe and the descent and kinship are traced through the mother instead of the father, prevailed for hundreds of thousands of years. The remnants of this system can be still found in Ladakh, Kerala and North-East (in India) where the descendants of certain tribes are known after the names of their given mothers. It was only much later that matriarchy was replaced by patriarchy, i.e. a social system that is dominated by man or in which the father or the eldest male member is recognised as the head of the family or the tribe and the descent and kinship are traced through the male line.

The recent historical experience further proves that the women, with the achieving of a degree of equal rights in certain social sectors (political, economic and artistic), have proved equal to the task and, at times, even excelled the menfolk—thus breaking the age-old myth of male superiority and female inferiority in all walks of human life.

But this does not mean that there are no differences in the two sexes. Differentiation is the very essence of every type of existence. It exits even between one male and another. In that sense, men and women have certain characteristics, which are not basically exclusive but mutually transferable and, like every thing else, under constant change and transformation.

Then what constitutes the reason for the male-domination in human society? The underlying reason seems to be the social division of labour, which at each given stage in history, arises from a given scientific-technological mechanism. As long as the social division of labour of the food-gathering technology operated in society, women continued to occupy the top position. But when the social division of labour of the hunting technology attained the upper hand, the woman, then having less physical strength than man, was relegated to the secondary position. In this division of labour, while men, undertook to manage the political, economic and cultural matters, the women were entrusted with the task of running household affairs and the rearing of children. The same situation continued under the following two sets of the social division of labour, i.e., the pastoral and the agricultural. Only the industrial division of labour again brought forth the conditions enabling women to come out of the household confines and alter the broader social spectrum. Corresponding to the needs of the social division of labour, man conceded certain rights to woman. But, even then, under the influence of the remnants of the classical gender orthodoxy, he continued to violate them in practice.

The post-1945 scientific-technological revolution and its related social division of labour—which demands a new global partnership of all human beings in order to deal with the worldwide challenges (i.e., environmental pollution, over-population, poverty, cooperation in oceanic and space research, ethnic disputes, rich-poor conflicts, majority-minority differences, etc.)—has transformed the question of restoring gender equality into one of the top-most concerns of mankind. That is why every international and national human organisation has been opting for undertaking this task.

The immediate cause of the recent abuses against women rests with the corporate politics of power and economics whose protagonists use all means—money, muscle power as well as all retrogressive phenomena (including that of natural female-inferiority)—to generate mass backing for their given

political agendas or given commercial products. All this has given further boost to the criminalisation of politics and the commercialisation of economic living, one of whose clear manifestations is the increasing abuses and crimes against women.

The afore-mentioned facts demonstrate that the new role of women has arisen from the newly-emerged social division of labour. It is not out of any generosity, compassionate feeling or sudden realisation of any foul play that man has become a votary of gender equality. All the classical ethical codes—religious, cultural, political or economical—have treated woman as a second class human being by ascribing to her subsidiary qualities as compared to man. Even now, the issue of gender equality is somewhat reluctantly accepted as the essential need of the newly-emerged reality.

Being a basic relation, both at the individual (i.e., family) and the collective (i.e., society) levels, between the two human sexes, the issue of gender equality demands an urgent solution. The sooner it is done, the better for our social advance. Delay, procrastination and social obstructions will only harm the human cause. If we are to build a happier and healthier social life, woman has to be provided her rightful place in society. Hence, any agenda of its solution requires a worldwide discussion and action. Here are a few suggestions for consideration.

2. Approach

The problem of gender equality is an issue of establishing an equal relationship (social, political, economic, cultural, etc.) between men and women. That alone is, and can be, the first principle of a just social order. Also, it is the most important issue of the development of human resources, which motivate and then, in their inter-action with natural resources, facilitate and stimulate progress in human society. It, therefore, demands that the issue of gender equality be considered as a relation of partnership between two equal partners. This will actualise the creative potential in the two sexes. It is wrong to present it as an antagonistic relation in history. Because the human species could not have developed under a conflictual relationship between the two sexes.

Only under a kinship connection which creates a feeling of cordiality and affection between the husband and wife and among the family members, the human species can grow and flourish. Historically, it has, in fact, been a relation of domination-subordination between man and woman. To overstate it as a confrontationist issue, “battle of sexes” etc., would be irrational and unhistorical.

3. Needed Initiatives

(i) Social empowerment of women by the ending of the patriarchal system and the adopting of the principle of recognising parenthood, descent and dynasty in the joint names of father and mother.

(ii) Economic empowerment of women through a statutory provision, stipulating the joint ownership of husband and wife of all the family property—both immoveable and moveable (including membership in any enterprise, bank, co-operative society, etc.).

(iii) Political empowerment of women through 50 percent reservation for them from the lowest to the highest level of political institutions (from the local bodies to the parliament) for 20 years. Twenty percent out of this reservation to go to those below the poverty line.

(iv) Cultural empowerment of women through the providing of proper education, health-care, effective role in population control and environmental management, free education and medical-care, to those below the poverty line by changing the old value-system and norms which devalue women’s capacity and status (holding woman as inferior to man, tying her only to home work, man as the sole breadwinner, etc.), raising the marriage age, the positive portrayal of woman in media and society, etc.

(v) Promoting the public awareness of the problem of gender equality.

4. Sum Up

The above-stated features are needed not only for gender equality, but also for the development of a fair and sustainable society which removes not only man-woman inequality, but also the entire series of social distortions, that is, those between the rich and the poor, landowners and landless, whites and blacks and above all between man and nature.