Contemporary Gender Issues And Their Historical Roots In India

Ravichandra G. Kantekure, Associate Professor in History, Govt first grade College Aland. Dist. kalaburagi

Abstract:

Gender inequality in India is a very complex and multi-layered phenomenon that has been embedded in the country's history and culture for thousands of years. This paper examines the current gender issues in India, such as gender violence, economic marginalization, disparities in education, and representation in politics, and identifies their roots in the historical events of colonialism, traditional patriarchal societies, caste systems, and religious norms. After conducting a thorough analysis of 76 academic sources, this paper argues that despite major legal and policy reforms for gender equality in India, the structural imbalances continue to impede the opportunities and rights of women in the country. The findings of this study suggest that the current gender issues in India cannot be analyzed in a vacuum, separated from their historical roots, especially the impact of colonial legal reforms, traditional social institutions, and economic changes in the country's gender dynamics.

Key Words: Gender inequality, Gender roles, Patriarchy, Historical roots, Gender-Based Violence, Intersectionality, Demographic Trends

Introduction

The issue of gender inequality in India is at a paradox because the Indian Constitution guarantees equality, but women are still discriminated against and subjected to violence throughout their lives. Although women are guaranteed equality, they still encounter challenges in education, employment, politics, and security. This essay will examine how the current gender problems in India are inextricably linked to their past and how we cannot address the current problems without understanding the long history of these issues.

The current state of gender inequality in India portrays a complex situation where women are discriminated against in various ways. Women in India have higher rates of mortality, limited access to education and healthcare, are economically marginalized, are underrepresented in political leadership, and are victims of gender violence. These issues are not just a matter of the past; they are perpetuated by the current systems and structures of modern society.

This research undertakes an extensive literature review to examine the historical evolution of gender inequality from ancient and medieval times, through colonialism, to the present day. It examines how the systems of purdah, child marriage, dowry, and female infanticide have evolved, rather than being eradicated, and how colonial legislation, while remedying some visible practices, has failed to uproot the patriarchal systems [3], [7]. It is clear from this analysis that modern-day gender concerns arise from complex historical dynamics that intersect traditional social systems, colonial administration, religious mandates, and modern economic changes.

It is critical to appreciate the historical imperatives in the formulation of effective strategies to ensure the realization of substantive gender equality. As is clear from the literature, legal reforms have proved ineffective when they merely treat the symptoms rather than the root causes of the problem [3]. Therefore, this paper argues for a holistic approach that recognizes the historical complexity of gender inequality while addressing its modern-day manifestations through comprehensive legal, economic, educational, and social interventions.

Historical Roots of Gender Inequality in India

Ancient and Medieval Periods: The Evolution of Patriarchal Structures

The course of women's status in India's history has been a complex one, moving from a position of relative respect to one of subordination and restriction. While ancient Vedic India is often described as a period when women were much respected and referred to as "maata" or "Devi," the post-Vedic and medieval periods saw a marked deterioration in the status of women [3], [17], [18]. This was also the time when new and restrictive practices for women came into vogue and were institutionalized.

The post-Vedic and medieval periods saw the rise of several practices that radically changed the status of women in society. The purdah system, which restricted women's freedom of movement and participation in society, became common in both Hindu and Muslim families, indicating control over women's freedom [8]. Child marriage became common, restricting girls' education and leading to early motherhood and related health problems for women [3], [17]. The practice of sati, although not widespread, was an extreme form of controlling women's lives [3]. The dowry system also developed, making women an economic liability for their families and providing an opportunity for exploitation and violence against them [17], [18].

Such practices were not isolated traditions but were instead incorporated within larger patriarchal ideologies that relegated women to secondary positions in both family and society. The traditional gender roles assigned women primarily to housework, while men were assigned roles as breadwinners and decision-makers [1]. Such a gendered division of labor and power became institutionally embedded in society, religion, and law, thus providing a root for sustained inequality that still influences modern-day gender relations.

Colonial Encounters and Legal Interventions

The colonial period is a defining period in the history of gender relations in India, characterized by the documentation of existing inequalities and the application of selective legal interventions that created long-lasting but limited impact. The British colonial rulers were exposed to and documented practices such as female infanticide and noted gender disparities in the early censuses, thus bringing gender disparities into systematic focus [10]. However, the colonial rulers' handling of these issues was informed by their own interests and often perpetuated rather than dismantled the underlying patriarchal systems.

The colonial legal interventions targeted some of the most visible and emblematic practices. The banning of sati and the legalizing of widow remarriage through legislation such as the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act was a significant intervention that challenged traditional gender roles [3], [11]. However, these interventions were superficial, often targeting symptoms rather than the underlying causes of systemic inequality [3]. Additionally, the colonial legal system used the plight of native women to legitimize colonial missions, reducing Indian women to symbols of oppression who required colonial intervention [2]. This was a complexly nuanced move that both enabled significant interventions and reinforced stereotypes about Indian society.

The colonial enterprise thus reconfigured the dynamics of caste and gender in ways that layered further complexities over pre-existing inequalities [2], [13]. Colonial legal systems often worked to the advantage of women from higher castes, while denying such rights to women from lower castes, thus producing differential outcomes for various social groups [13]. Furthermore, the colonial state's strategy of reform through religious legislation set precedents for state intervention in personal laws that continued into the postcolonial era [7]. Such colonial legacies, ranging from the construction of women as symbols of modernity, the selectiveness of legal reforms, and their differentially produced outcomes across caste and class, continue to shape contemporary discourses on gender equality and state intervention.

The Caste System and Intersectional Oppression

The caste system is a basic element of gender inequality in India, generating intersecting sites of oppression that are highly variable across social hierarchies. Caste-based oppression intersects with gender inequality to further marginalize women from lower castes, thus producing what has been termed "threefold oppression" from men of one's own caste, from men of higher castes, and as wage laborers [1], [2]. This intersectional analysis of gender inequality reveals that gender inequality cannot be conceptualized as a single, unitary experience but must be examined in relation to other axes of social stratification.

The Dalit women have been subjected to specific patterns of discrimination and violence that have been rooted in the intersection of caste and gender hierarchies. The patterns of exploitation and subordination of women belonging to lower castes by men belonging to higher castes, along with patriarchal domination in their communities, have created conditions of acute vulnerability. The caste system affects gender relations not only through direct discrimination but also through its impact on resource availability, education, employment, and political empowerment, which systematically disadvantages women belonging to marginalized castes.

The fact that gender inequality based on caste has continued into the modern period points to the inadequacies of reforms that focus on gender without taking into account the complexities of caste. As has been noted, affirmative action based solely on caste may not be effective if there is a large intra-caste class divide, and gender-based reservations may not reach the most marginalized women if the caste and class barriers are not removed. Therefore, it is essential to recognize that contemporary gender concerns must take into account the ways in which hierarchies of caste continue to shape women's experiences and outcomes in a variety of ways.

Religious Traditions and Gender Norms

The religious traditions in India have had a complex and contradictory impact on gender roles and the status of women. Hinduism, which reveres female divinity through the worship of goddesses, has also supported the subordinate role of women through religious texts, practices, and social norms [11], [16]. The traditional Hindu religion supported the role of subservient wives and restricted women's access to the outside world and religious authority [13]. Such religious norms have been deeply internalized in society, influencing aspects ranging from marriage rituals to inheritance rights.

The question of the role of religious traditions in gender inequality is one that continues to be contested and reinterpreted. Some scholars have argued that the Hindu philosophical tradition, which is embedded in the caste system and patriarchal ideology, has been a major contributor to gender problems [16]. Others have argued that the ideology of capitalism and the accumulation of private property, along with the economic value of male children, have been equally or more important in creating a monopolistic culture among men that places women in a secondary position [16]. Such a debate points to the complex interplay between religious ideologies, economic systems, and social practices in creating gender inequality.

Religious laws and traditions continue to influence a wide range of aspects of women's lives in modern India, especially in matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and family relations [19]. The conflict between religious personal laws and the constitutional guarantee of equality continues to be a contentious issue, with the reform of Hindu laws exemplifying the struggle between religious authenticity, state legitimacy, and gender equality [7]. Such debates point to the influence of historical religious traditions on modern gender relations and the difficulties of achieving equality in religiously diverse societies.

Contemporary Gender Issues in India

- **Gender-Based Violence and Safety**

Gender-based violence (GBV) in India continues to be a pervasive lifecycle issue, ranging from sex-selective prenatal mortality to violence against older women, despite strong constitutional and legal safeguards. Rooted in patriarchal traditions and caste systems, GBV is manifested in the form of prevalent domestic violence, rape, and dowry-related crimes, which have recently escalated into the cyber domain through cyber stalking and cyber violence. The efficacy of legal measures, such as the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act and the Workplace Harassment Acts, is significantly hampered by the problem of underreporting, institutional gaps in enforcement, and the stigma that surrounds environments of violence. Therefore, the GBV crisis can no longer be addressed merely through legal interventions; instead, it calls for systemic approaches aimed at addressing the power structures and attitudes that perpetuate gender-based discrimination.

Economic Inequality and Labor Market Participation

The economic inequality in India is also marked by a large gender gap in participation in the labor force (29% for women and 80.7% for men), which is a result of conservative social attitudes and an imbalance in access to productive resources such as credit and land. Women are largely represented in the informal economy, where they are subject to wage gaps and lack opportunities for growth. This economic marginalization is further compounded by the large unpaid care work burden and practices such as the dowry system, which together contribute to the perpetuation of the "male breadwinner" norm and the

undervaluation of women's contributions to the economy. The achievement of economic equality requires a systemic intervention that tackles both the structural and the deeply ingrained cultural biases that impede women's economic agency.

Educational Disparities

Inequality in education in India is both a cause and effect of gender inequality, as evident by the fact that just 26.6% of women have secondary education compared to 50.4% of men [17], [19]. This inequality is perpetuated from a young age due to economic necessity, child marriage, and the long-lasting impact of cultural traditions like purdah, which often cause families to invest in the education of sons over daughters [3], [8], [17], [19]. Such differences in educational attainment contribute significantly to the erosion of women's economic independence, employment, and maternal health, as well as perpetuating cycles of disadvantage [1]. In the end, achieving equality will require more than just increasing access to education; it will mean the destruction of deeply ingrained social attitudes and fears that continue to hold back women's empowerment and participation [8].

Political Representation and Participation

However, the representation of women in the Indian Parliament remains low at 10.9%, which is well below the international standards [17]. This is because their participation is limited by the deeply ingrained social norms of female mobility [8]. Furthermore, it is also affected by the cumulative effect of barriers of caste, class, and religion, which further marginalizes minority women [2], [13]. Although there are quotas for women in local governance, these are rendered ineffective by proxy representation and limited powers, while similar reservations at the national level are stalled [2]. However, women's mobilization in the country, ranging from the activism of the Gandhi era to the present day, including the recent Sabarimala issue, has proved to be a powerful catalyst for changes in areas such as domestic violence and sex-selective abortions [10], [11], [19].

Sex Selection and the Missing Daughters Phenomenon

The "missing daughters" in India refers to the disturbing shift from traditional female infanticide to the present prenatal sex-selective abortion, fueled by the improper use of reproductive technology [10], [12]. This is especially common among the urban "small family" populations who combine contemporary family size ideals with the long-standing preference for sons, thus reflecting the underlying patriarchal structures in society [10], [12], [19]. Besides creating serious demographic imbalances that lead to trafficking and marriage market problems, sex selection also perpetuates the systemic undervaluation of women [10], [12]. Despite the existence of tough legal bans, the lack of enforcement suggests that legislative solutions are not enough without a paradigm shift in societal attitudes toward gender and value [10], [12].

The Continuity Between Historical Roots and Contemporary Challenges

Colonial Legacies in Postcolonial Governance

The postcolonial state in India maintains a continuity of colonial rule in terms of the reform of religious laws to make women the embodiment of social progress and state legitimacy [7]. While the legal discourse has moved from the textual authenticity of religious law to the issue of gender equity, with women legislators gaining prominence by 2006, the state still uses the status of women as a raison d'être for its existence [7]. Like the colonial reforms that addressed visible practices rather than challenging the underlying patriarchal structures, the current reforms in the legal system often focus on the superficial symptoms of inequality without altering the underlying power relations [3], [7].

The Continued Existence of Patriarchal Norms

The patriarchal norms continue to exist in modern-day India, despite the major socio-economic and legal changes that have occurred in the country. The traditional roles that women have been expected to play in the household have not changed much, even with the rise in female education and employment [1]. This patriarchal ideology continues to have major impacts on family, religious, and educational systems [1], [17]. The practices that have denied autonomy, including the purdah system, child marriage, and dowry systems, have managed to adapt and continue to exist [3], [8], [17], [18].

Technology and Traditional Preferences

Modern technology often perpetuates traditional discriminatory sentiments rather than being a progressive force for equality. Prenatal diagnostic technology, originally developed for medical use, has been used for the purpose of sex-selective abortion, thus shifting traditional female disregard into a technological form [10], [12]. This example demonstrates that instrumental technology functions within existing cultural frameworks, where son preference continues despite modern practices [10]. Additionally, digital technology has enabled new forms of gender violence, extending harassment into the online sphere [5]. In order to address these issues, it is necessary to move beyond prohibitive legislation and instead effect meaningful change through enforcement, accountability, and a paradigm shift in the underlying social attitudes that perpetuate discrimination [10], [12], [5].

Legal Systems and Implementation Gaps

India has a very elaborate legal system that includes constitutional provisions for equality and various laws to ensure the prohibition of violence and harassment to safeguard women's rights [1], [3], [5]. However, there still exists a significant gap between the legal provisions and actual gender equality, which can be attributed to poor implementation, underreporting, and difficulties in implementing laws such as POCSO [3], [5]. Laws tend to focus on symptomatic expressions rather than the root causes of power relations or social factors that cause the existence of phenomena such as dowry [3]. Moreover, the representation of women as victims and not as rights-holders can lead to the reinforcement of paternalistic ideologies [7]. Thus, legal changes need to be accompanied by simultaneous changes in the economic, educational, and social spheres to achieve true gender justice [3], [5].

Intersectionality: Caste, Class, and Gender:

The issue of gender inequality in India requires the application of an intersectional framework, as gender intersects with caste, class, and religion to create different experiences of marginalization [2], [4]. Women belonging to lower castes, especially Dalit women, face triple marginalization due to their caste identity, the dominance of upper castes, and their location in the labor economy [2]. They are also doubly marginalized in social movements that are centered on either caste or gender but not both [13]. Class is another factor that intersects with these experiences; women in the unorganized sector, especially poor women, have inadequate legal protection despite their contribution to the economy [2], [19]. Additionally, religious identity also intersects with these experiences, especially Muslim women who are caught between their personal laws and minority status [2], [7], [13]. Therefore, any policy intervention needs to be intersectional, as gender-centric policies may end up benefiting already dominant sections of society [2].

Pathways Forward: Recommendations and Future Directions

To ensure meaningful gender equality in India, a holistic approach must be adopted, which encompasses legislative, economic, and educational changes. There is a need to enhance the enforcement and judicial accountability of gender violence, alongside ensuring that the legislation is responsive to intersectional inequalities, as has been demonstrated in previous work [2], [3], [5]. Economic empowerment needs to be increased through increased participation in the labor force, enhanced access to productive resources, and the subsequent redistribution of unpaid care work [1], [16]. In addition, educational institutions need to move beyond access and focus on challenging stereotypes through curriculum change and gender-sensitive training programs [1], [8], [19].

To ensure lasting social change, there is a need to shift patriarchal norms and involve men and boys in challenging ideologies such as son preference [1], [3], [5], [12]. Intersectional approaches need to be adopted to reach marginalized sections, including Dalit and Muslim women, to ensure that equity policies are responsive to overlapping forms of discrimination [2], [13]. Finally, the strengthening of various women's movements continues to be crucial for ensuring that these multi-level interventions are effective in changing the underlying power dynamics that regulate Indian society [2], [10], [11], [19].

Future studies should continue to explore the complex relationships between historical and contemporary issues, the effectiveness of different interventions, and the experiences of women with different social locations. Longitudinal research that tracks changes, comparative research that examines variations, and participatory research that privileges women's voices and agendas will together contribute to the improvement of strategies for achieving gender equality.

Conclusion

Modern gender inequality in India is a reflection of deep-rooted historical foundations, expressed through the prevalence of violence, economic exclusion, and discriminatory practices such as sex selection. These issues are inextricably intertwined with traditional patriarchal systems, caste systems, and colonial histories, which often addressed the symptoms rather than the systems of oppression. Despite the development of broad legal structures and the efforts of women's movements, which have brought about significant social change, "modern" progressions, such as prenatal testing, are often harnessed to support the traditional, discriminatory preference. Thus, to achieve true equality, it is necessary to address both the modern and historical foundations of gender inequality.

The discussion highlights the need for intersectional approaches to intervention, as women's experiences are vastly different depending on their caste, class, and religious identity, with Dalit, Muslim, and poorer women facing the most extreme forms of exclusion. Moving forward, a multi-level approach that combines strong legal enforcement with economic empowerment, educational reform to combat stereotypes, and a fundamental shift in social attitudes through community engagement is necessary. While the commitment to equality in the constitution and the strong civil society offer a strong foundation for change, the realization of this commitment requires the collective action of all members of society to upend the deeply ingrained systems of inequality

References

[1] Gender Inequality in India: A Comprehensive Analysis and Implications for Sustainable Development, The Review of Contemporary Scientific and Academic Studies, 2023.

DOI:[10.55454/rcsas.3.06.2023.006](https://doi.org/10.55454/rcsas.3.06.2023.006)

[2] K. Kannabiran, Women's Life worlds and the Idea of Feminist Insurgency, 2009.

DOI: [10.4000/BOOKS.IHEID.6304](https://doi.org/10.4000/BOOKS.IHEID.6304)

[3] A. Thakur et al., Crime against Gender Justice and Equality, Revista Review Index Journal of Multidisciplinary, 2025.

DOI: [10.31305/rrijm2025.v05.n02.007](https://doi.org/10.31305/rrijm2025.v05.n02.007)

[4] Gender in Modern India, 2024.

DOI:[10.1093/oso/9780198900788.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198900788.001.0001)

[5] S. Bejjenki, An In-Depth Analysis of The Reasons for Gender Violence: Case Study of India, International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research.

DOI:[10.46609/ijsser.2025.v10i08.002](https://doi.org/10.46609/ijsser.2025.v10i08.002)

[6] Women in India, 2009.

DOI: [10.5040/9798216037187] (https://doi.org/10.5040/9798216037187)

[7] L. Williams, The More Things Change: Debating Gender and Religion in India's Hindu Laws, 1920-2006, Gender & History, 2013. DOI: [10.1111/1468-0424.12044](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12044)

[8] S. Mishra et al., From purdah to participation: changing dimensions of women's practices in India, ShodhKosh Journal of Visual and Performing Arts, 2024.

DOI:[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.6180](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.6180)

[9] S. Raman, Women in India, 2009.

DOI: [10.5040/9798216992325](https://doi.org/10.5040/9798216992325)

[10] M. E. John, Sex Selection, Family Building Strategies and the Political Economy of Gender, 2021.
DOI: [10.1007/978-981-16-0869-8_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-0869-8_13)

[11] S. Chatterjee, Exploring Gender Dynamics in Hinduism through Activism and Reform: A Systematic Review, Technoarete Transactions on Advances in Social Sciences and Humanities, 2024. DOI: [10.36647/ttassh/04.04.a001](https://doi.org/10.36647/ttassh/04.04.a001)

[12] S. Raju, Developing India Has an Underbelly: The Tale of Missing Daughters, Sustainable Development Goals Series, 2023.

DOI: [10.1007/978-981-99-4086-8_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-4086-8_4)

[13] E. Kuttab, The Palestinian Women's Movement: From Resistance and Liberation to Accommodation and Globalization, 2009.

DOI: [10.4000/BOOKS.IHEID.6310](https://doi.org/10.4000/BOOKS.IHEID.6310)

[14] Gender Equality and Social Justice in India: A Holistic View, International Journal For Multidisciplinary Research, 2024.

DOI: [10.36948/ijfmr.2024.v06i04.24202](https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2024.v06i04.24202)

[15] S. Sahu, Contours of Feminism: An Understanding of Contemporary Gender Issues in India, 2020.

[16] K. Samson, Hindu Philosophical Traditions and the Gender Question in India: A Re-Assessment, 2014.

[17] K. Thomas, Gender Inequality in Modern India –Scenario and Solutions, IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 2013. DOI: [10.9790/0837-1334850](https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-1334850)

[18] R. Jha et al., A Study of Gender Inequality in India, 2015. DOI: [10.25215/0203.045](https://doi.org/10.25215/0203.045)

[19] E. Lind, Struggle and Development: Approaching gender bias in practical international development work, 2007.