



Identity of 'Single Woman' in India: A Narrative of Exclusion and Striving for Empowerment

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Abstract

With the onslaught of Globalization, identity of a person in India, which for long was defined mostly in terms of ascribed status (caste, religious community etc) are undergoing rapid transformation, as people are now enjoying the scope of choosing their identity as per their preferences, a phenomenon quite noticeable in case of Indian Women. Noble laureate Amartya Sen's assertion that people in a democracy should have the freedom to choose their identity almost seems to be a reality now in India. In a society where identity of a woman is defined in terms her relationship with her men folk, the data revealed by the 2011 Census that in India now, more than 3.6 crore or 7.4 per cent of women are having single status single seems astonishing as well as revealing of paradigmatic shift in Indian society. However, most single women, particularly in rural areas, are single due to breakdown of marriages and consequently face dispossession and insecurity whereas number of women single by choice, having access to education and employment, mostly in the cities, is also rising. Some prominent female politicians of India find their single status an advantage as they are projected as disinterested individuals sacrificing the bliss of conjugal life at the altar of public duty. Whereas the market is responding to the needs of the well-heeled single women by offering sops like special tour packages, the state is still lagging behind to ensure specific welfare and security measures for single women. National Forum for Single Women's Rights has been relentlessly trying to draw attention to exclusion faced by single women as even today, they are socially ostracized and forcefully deprived of economic rights. Based on rudimentary primary data and mostly secondary sources, I propose to undertake a normative study of the exclusion faced by single women as well as their striving for empowerment through constant engagement with state and society. The significance of the study lies in the fact that it explores some of the most fundamental premise of a democracy, freedom of choice, freedom to lead life according to one's own preferences, and to the critical issue of women's empowerment and probes how effectively they are being pursued in India. My objective is to highlight the constraints that jeopardize particularly single women's urge to live with honour and dignity and my purpose is also to suggest ways of overcoming obstacles and reaching the goal of freedom and fulfillment for these women. The study unravels an upcoming area of research as in a country rapidly undergoing transformation, where remnants of a feudal, patriarchal social matrix is still desperately trying to maintain its stranglehold on the lives of women whose situation are different from the bulk of their clan and where a swiftly globalizing economy and concomitantly modernizing society are opening new vistas of opportunities for these women, securing the identity of single women and their capacity building will be of seminal importance in coming days.

Keywords: Single women, globalization, identity, National Forum for Single Women's Rights, freedom, fulfillment.

Introduction

Ever since the introduction of the processes of Globalization and Liberalization in early 1990s, not just the economic edifice, but also social matrix of India are undergoing remarkable metamorphosis. Caste, ethnicity, religious community, kinship ties, provincial traits and similar other primordial factors have been instrumental in defining identities of people in India. Sociologists would say that identity have been more a matter of ascribed status rather than achieved positions for centuries in India. But introduction of a secular, pluralist democratic structure after Independence unleashed a process of modernization, and a rational, scientifically designed open to all system of education gave fillip to the process of social mobility,

allowing people, particularly members of marginalized communities a scope to acquire new position, new role, new identities. Amartya Sen's prudent observation that the identity of an individual is essentially a function of his or her choices, rather than the discovery of an immutable attribute almost seems to be a reality now as Indian democracy is maturing in a rapidly transforming milieu¹.

However, in Indian society where tradition even today is seriously invoked and patriarchal mores are deeply entrenched, identity of a woman, almost ubiquitously, has been defined in terms her relationship with her menfolk, as at all stages of lives. Amartya Sen, in the preface of his another magnum opus, 'Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny', began his

discourse with the enigmatic claim of Oscar Wilde, 'Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions; their lives are mimicry, their passions a quotation'. This observations remarkably hold good for India women, who for centuries, have lived with choice less identities of being someone's daughter, sister, wife or mother, whose body, mind and even destiny have been under the control of the iron fist of their menfolk. From Manusmriti, which depicted women as impure seductress, representing falsehood, lacking in intellect and hence, always to be kept under control of her male relatives, to a modern day preacher of Hindutva, who advised women to go back to kitchen, the abysmal tradition of deeply entrenched misogynist thoughts and ideas have always stymied attempt of Indian women to choose a distinct identity of their own. Discrimination faced by women in general in India gets multiplied in case of women without a male cohort, considered to be an anomaly.

Numerous instances from our scriptures and literature bear testimony to this. And, though access to education and employment, particularly in post globalization era, are opening up new vistas for women in search of a life of dignity, battle against exclusion of women, particularly single women, is still far away from its coveted goal of women's emancipation. The concept of 'agency' of women as makers of their own lives, though strongly advocated by women's movement in post-Independence India, has not yet gained ground strongly. Women receiving education and training have moved ahead to become teachers, doctors, scientists and lawyers, but have not until recently defied their traditional roles of being dutiful wives and mothers, leaving vital decisions of their lives to their menfolk and living on their terms.

In this backdrop, the data revealed by the 2011 Census that more than 71.4 million women in India are single seems astonishing. However, 'single' status is heterogenic in nature. Most single women, particularly in rural areas, are single due to breakdown of marriages and consequently face dispossession and insecurity whereas number of women single by choice, having access to education and employment is also rising, particularly in urban areas. In a country where the institution of marriage is considered sacrosanct and a moral imperative, the presence of such substantial number of women, outside the ambit of holy wedlock, whether due to compulsion, or choice, calls for analysis.

Objective of My Study: My objective will be to present a narrative of various kinds of exclusion faced by these women, ranging from forceful deprivation of economic rights (rights to land, property, place of dwelling, livelihood) to even violent assault on right to live with dignity and on a lower plane, exclusion from social gatherings, derogatory, prejudiced treatment, affront to self respect and self-worth of women and the like. I will simultaneously highlight apparently perplexing phenomenon of some single women using their single status to their advantage while pursuing freedom, honour, happiness, pelf

and power and even political position. I will also explore how the State and market is responding to the growing presence of 'single women'.

Significance of the Study: The significance of studying the growing presence of 'single women' in Indian society can hardly be overlooked. This trend signifies a paradigmatic transformation of India's patriarchal social set up with deep seated gender bias against women. It also purports a new wave of women's empowerment as women are responding to the myriad challenges associated with their single status with growing confidence and contributing to the progress and modernization of the country.

Methodology

I have analysed data provided by the Census Report of the Government of India which can be taken as quite authentic. The study is empirical as well as analytical as various secondary sources like newspaper reports; reports of various women's forums and treatise of noted scholars have also been used.

Results and Discussion

According to 2011 Census data, the numbers of single women in India is now 71.4 million (2011 census), which at the time of 2001 census was 51.2 million, signifying an increase of 39% in the number of this category of single women. Women deserted by husbands, never married women, widows and divorcees are all encompassed by this category. This category of single women comprises 8.6 per cent of the total female population of India.

In rural areas, there are 29.2 million women who are widow whereas 13.2 million have never entered matrimony, quite astonishingly.

Urban areas present similar pictures. There are 13.6 million women who are widows followed by 12.3 million women who never got married. Almost 62% of total number single women of India reside in rural areas, numbering 44.4 million. Urban single women are outnumbered by their rural counterparts. Nevertheless, there has been a 58% increase in the numerical strength of single women, which in 2011 is 27 million and earlier in 2001 was 17.1 million.

Having 12 million single women, Uttar Pradesh ranks first among all Indian states in this respect. Majority of them never had a spouse. With 6.2 million, Maharashtra is in second position and with 4.7 million single women, erstwhile Andhra Pradesh comes third.

The numbers of women who were once married and now single are three times more than men having similar status. This is not just because of the fact that number of widows are more than number of widower. There are 1.6 million separated or divorced

men in India now but number of separated or divorced women is a much higher figure, 3.2 million². Number of women having a broken marriage behind them is twice the number of men having similar condition. This bears testimony to the fact that in a patriarchal society, men find it easy to get remarried compared to women. Though Census data does not reveal why women in increasing number are remaining unmarried, various reports of National Forum For Single Women's Rights (NFSWR), a Delhi based forum created to cause awareness as well as promote activism for protection of rights of single women indicate that in rural areas, exponential demand for dowry, caused by rising craving for consumer durables which globalization has brought to our doorsteps, and inability of parents of prospective brides to meet the demand is the principal factor. Failure of some girls to conform to traditional notion of beauty, fair, tall and so on, is also a noticeable factor³.

Another disturbing phenomenon is increasing number of deserted women, as men move out their community and native place in search of better earning opportunities, either to cities or even abroad, made easier by globalization, and often find new partners in their place of work. Deserted wives in rural areas, often illiterate or semi-literate, are either in the dark about such developments or even if they come to know, suppress this painful news from their relatives or friends, just to avoid humiliation and stigma attached to women deserted by husbands. Census data does not provide clear picture of number of deserted women. In urban areas, besides demand for dowry, unwillingness to settle in marriage where women apprehend abuse, lack of freedom, disrespect or absence of love, buttressed by their financial independence to support themselves are also emerging as viable factors.

In some recent reports of NFSWR, it has been observed that Single women in villages have to wage a tough battle of survival continuously as society takes a prejudiced view of them. Widowed women residing with their in-laws are forced to follow outdated religious practices and social norms, and are forcefully deprived of any kind of material or emotional pleasures. Single women are discriminated against, deprived of fair share of food, clothing, and medical attention, rest, are often abused physically, deprived financially, denied access to resources. The forum has pointed out that there are many households which are practically headed by single women where women take sole responsibility of their children how they do not receive social benefits since ration cards or other documents do not show them as Head of the families. "In Jharkhand, for example, tribal women cannot own land in their own names, and we are fighting to change the law," said Suhagini Tudu, secretary, NFSWR. Even when women possess legal documents establishing their right to land, actual possession remains a non reality⁴.

Widowed and unmarried women are also victims of various physical abuse, even rape, and in most of the cases, members of their own family or neighbourhood are the perpetrators. Since

they are not 'taken', are not under the protective shield of a male companion, they are considered to be easily 'accessible'.

Material exclusion and physical violence apart, single women face social ostracism and psychological harassment as well. While even today, presence of widows in joyous occasions like marriage are considered ominous, those who have never married invite disparaging observations like 'not enticing', 'unlucky to not have found love and companionship', 'incomplete without the glory of motherhood', of 'loose moral', 'a rebel' who dares to threaten established social norms, and so on. Even if a single woman proclaims that she is single by choice, her judgment is questioned and unsolicited advice or warning like 'who will look after you in old age' comes her way.

However, thanks to the relentless struggle of organizations fighting for the rights of single women, and the persistent effort of these women themselves to live with honour and dignity, the spectacular progress made by many single women in fields of education, culture, sports, and even traditional male bastions like science, defence forces and so on, who have devoted their time and energy to nurturing their talent and pursuing excellence and as a derivative of greater awareness about the torture and trauma women face in oppressive marriages, perception of singlehood is changing. Celebrities like actress Susmita Sen have adopted children despite their single status, setting a new trend in our metros, enabling women to secure motherhood without wedlock.

Forum members have demanded that government should draft special policy for single women and pension meant for widows should be extended to never married women as well⁵. In 2012, the then Planning Commission, as segments of various government programmes to be launched by twelfth Five Year Plan, proposed special amenities for those single women who have taken conscious decision to stay single. "So far the recognised categories of single women are widows and divorcees. Member of Planning Commission Syeda Hamid told The Hindu that the statuses of single women who are single by choice need to be respected. She expressed the need to place single women at the centre stage instead of putting them away under the family category. She reiterated that besides the Ministry of Women and Child Development, other Ministries and States will be persuaded to introduce in their schemes a distinct gender component⁶. Though the present dispensation has not given effect to these proposals, Balika Samridhi Yojna, undertaken by Central Government and similar such schemes by state governments. (Kanyasree in West Bengal) provides incentives to girls pursuing higher studies and postponing marriage. Nevertheless, specific scheme for matured single women are missing.

Adequate representation of women in Indian Parliament is still a mirage as the bill proposing reservation of 33% seats for women is still hanging fire. The declining sex ratio of the country, increasing crime and violence against women, and their

marginalized status in education, employment, health sectors and the like explain such poor participation of women in parliamentary politics. ⁷However, single status of some prominent female politicians in India, who have reached the top, mostly by virtue of their sheer grit, determination, hard work and focus on their objectives, have been a morale booster for many single women aspiring a career in politics. Given the apparent contradictions in India's social mores and values, Bramacharja (perception of celibacy) in men and women dedicated to public service is glorified, respected and taken as a benchmark of their altruistic performance. Single female politicians like Mayawati and Mamata Bannerjee have used their single status to their advantage, projecting themselves as selfless individuals who have sacrificed the bliss of conjugal life at the altar of public duty. Single status has been an important ingredient of the charismatic appeal of Ms. Mamata Bannerjee, the mercurial politician of West Bengal, who has recently taken up the mantle of Chief Minister ship of Indian state West Bengal for the second time in 2016, riding high on the overwhelming victory of her party Trinomool Congress which she created and has steered so far almost single handedly. Her firm conviction about the ability of virtuous women to transform a world of evil has been infinitely inspiring for women aspiring to live a life of purpose, to make a mark⁸.

Many women, outside the realm of politics, having quality education and accomplishments, are also using their single status to their advantage, as they are devoting more time and energy to their career, and also getting involved in social work. Traditional notion of marriage as an institution which creates scope for satisfying biological needs of grown up men and women within socially and religiously approved framework, giving legitimacy to children born within wedlock, and based on socially defined role of men as provider and women as nurturer is undergoing sea changes, especially in urban setting. Entry of women in paid employment is causing role reversal and search for love and desirable companionship in marriage are taking precedence. Single women, particularly those by choice, are successfully challenging the entrenched notion of a happy life for a woman, which, until recently, was equivalent to the blessings of companionship, security and status within the contours of holy matrimony and subsequent glory of motherhood. That singlehood may not be a compulsion that it means more freedom and space and does not necessarily connote distressing loneliness and dismal insecurity, are gradually seeping in Indian psyche.

Cultural constructed ideas of misfortune or abnormality associated with singlehood are gradually waning and as many single women are climbing up corporate ladder or making a mark as doctors, teachers, lawyers, entrepreneurs, or actresses, particularly in the urban setting, the market is responding to their needs in various ways. Customized good and services like all women tour package, special place at restaurants, home loan on sharing basis with other single women, so that they can also afford to buy apartments at localities where price are high and

within the reach of only couple with combined income are some innovative trends designed to satisfy needs of single women. A media personality recently pointed out that escalating spending power of single women is now targeted by advertisements on TV. Independent, financially secured women are prodded to buy jewelries not just for marital purpose but just to look good and feel good.

The Draft National Policy For Women 2016, very recently released by the Central Government for deliberation and discussions before final policy making has tried to articulate a comprehensive vision of women's empowerment in this country and has taken specific note of the rights and requirements of single women. It postulates, 'Efforts will be made to strengthen the existing supportive social infrastructure for women especially the vulnerable, marginalized, migrant and single women'. It also lays stress on the imperative 'To recognize special needs of single women including widows, separated, divorced, never married and deserted women. A comprehensive social protection mechanism will be designed to address their vulnerabilities, create opportunities, and improve their overall conditions'⁹. This is a welcome development and an outcome of persistent campaigning by bodies like NFSWR.

Recommendations for Further Research: Though the Government has acknowledged the growing presence of single women in Indian society and has drafted a blue print for the targeted empowerment of these groups, given the patriarchal moorings of our society where gender discrimination is deeply entrenched, policy makers in tandem with researchers must work relentlessly to identify different kinds of hardship faced by different categories of single women in rural and urban setting which are quite disparate, and carefully draft requisite policies needed to overcome these constraints. Further study is also required to find out what kind of special privileges should be accorded to these women so as to enable them to move forward, how to tap their productive potentials for national development and what kind of institutional mechanisms should be put in place to make policies effective and sustaining.

Conclusion

Single women are steadily overcoming a patriarchal society's regressive attempt to impose only one identity upon all women, that of married women having a male protector and provider and curving out independent space for themselves where they can live with honour and dignity. This journey towards empowerment has been possible, not only due to the rebellious courage of women who have refused to settle down in marriages where they felt absence of respect, freedom and compatibility, but also the perseverance of those who faced hardship and infinite challenges while walking out of oppressive marriages, or who, after being deserted by men, have negotiated with myriad challenges of life to live alone. Education, work and employment in a globalizing India have given women new identities. This is indicative of a society where stranglehold of

traditional customs and mores are giving way to the loud proclamation of new aspirations and ideas. Returning to Sen, he observed that in a modern, open society, people, as members of various social groups and by virtue of being involved in different activities, have multiple identities and should have the freedom to choose a defining one¹⁰. Single women of India are choosing to be accorded recognition as independent women entitled to social security and other privileges in their own right.

Rabindranath Tagore in his poem *Urbashi*, depicted the mythical character of *Urvashi* as a woman of supreme beauty and talent, whose pursuit of excellence was beyond the gendered notion of a woman's typical role in society as a wife or a mother. One hopes that like her, single women of India also, shedding all inhibitions, and coming out of the veil of imposed identity, will keep striving for freedom and fulfillment, for having a new identity of being complete in their own selves.

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