

CONTEMPORARY MASS MEDIA AND GENDER JUSTICE

A Critical Analysis on Empowerment of Women in India

Kiran Prasad*

"There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing."

Swami Vivekananda¹

1. Introduction

From ancient times India upheld the ideal of motherhood. Vivekananda records the foundational reason as follows: "From motherhood comes tremendous responsibility. There is the basis; start from that. Well, why is mother to be worshipped so much? Because our books teach that it is the pre-natal influences that give the impetus to the child for good or evil."² Vivekananda's clarion call for women's empowerment continues to be the need of the hour. India has not only neglected this ideal but has perpetrated untold horror and injustice on its women folk.

Although discrimination against and exploitation of women are global phenomena, their consequences are more tragically felt among the women in the developing nations of the world. Poverty, ignorance, deprivation of

*Dr. Kiran Prasad is Associate Professor, Department of Communication and Journalism, Sri Padmavati Mahila University, Tirupati. She holds a doctorate in Philosophy and is author of *Philosophies of Communication and Media Ethics* and has edited/co-edited ten books. Her recent edited books include *Communication and Empowerment of Women: Strategies and Policy Insights from India*.

¹Swami Vivekananda, *My India: The India Eternal*, Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1996, 68.

²Swami Vivekananda, *Women of India* (Lectures delivered at the Shakespeare Club House, in Pasadena, California, January 18, 1900), Tenth Impression, Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math Printing Press, 1900.

the basic necessities of life, and the ever-growing pressure of transition from tradition to modernity – all combine to aggravate the inequalities that women in developing countries, including India, suffer to a great extent at which their existence is reduced to a continuous battle for survival.

2. Gender Inequality

The concept of gender refers to the qualitative and interdependent character of the position of women and men in society. Gender relations are constituted in terms of the relations of power and dominance that govern the lives of women and men. Thus, gender divisions are not fixed by biology, but constitute an aspect of wider social division of labour that is rooted in the context of cultural, religious and ideological systems prevailing in a society.³ Many terms have been used synonymously such as “status of women,” “female autonomy,” “patriarchy,” “sex stratification system,” “women’s rights” and “men’s situational advantage,” all of which implicitly refer to gender inequality. It is only recently that the “status of women” found its way into the Indian Population Policy documents.⁴ The traditional division of rights and responsibilities in many cultures, including India, places women in an inferior position socially, economically, legally and politically which can be changed by political and opinion-shaping influences. A complexity arises from the fact that gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts and intersects with racial, class, and regional identities. This complexity, especially in India, requires attention from policy framers and appropriate development interventions.

Gender inequality has to be examined in consideration with other forms of inequality defined by class, caste and religion. Women’s social class has a strong impact on their economic activities, access to agricultural land, employment opportunities, gender relations within the household, and intra-household resource distribution. Religious conflicts and a desire to establish religious identities have increasingly coloured

³Lise Ostergaard, ed., *Gender and Development*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, 6.

⁴Planning Commission, *Eighth Five Year Plan, 1992-97*, vol. 2, New Delhi: Planning Commission, Government of India, 1992.

gender politics among Hindus and Muslims.⁵ There is considerable variation in the social construction of gender in different parts of India, especially between the northern and southern regions, but only general patterns of gender inequality will be focused here to highlight the development and empowerment of women.

The Gender Equality Index (GEI) is estimated to measure the inequality in attainment on human development indicators between females and males. The GEI, at the national level was 0.620 in the early eighties, improving marginally at 0.670 in the early nineties. In general, women were better off in southern states of India than in the Indo-Gangetic plain, comprising mainly the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. India, however, is ranked 105 in Gender Development Index among the nations, according to the UNDP⁶ report, which shows that women in India have a long way to go to achieve gender equality.

2. Contemporary Mass Media and Empowerment of Women in India

a) Silencing Women

Before empowerment of women can be achieved it is necessary to enable them to give voice to their experiences and for society to understand them as human beings and respond to them with sensitivity. With nations (including India) boasting themselves as nuclear powers, "space-age countries" and "information societies" it is unthinkable that people of any country would burn its women alive (for dowry), except in India. The soaring crime-rates in the country and violence against women are proofs of a battleground where women utter a silent prayer at the end of the day if, at least, they are physically alive. The pain of women is rarely raised in this country which has the long revered tradition of *Shakti* worship (worshipping the Goddess as the ultimate form of Godhead); in reality India has sentenced its women to a fate often reaching a point of no return. Communal riots can render even the slumbering politicians to rise and make an effort (even though it may not be genuine) to score a point or two

⁵Sonalde Desai, *Gender Inequalities and Demographic Behaviour*, New York: The Population Council, 1994, 7.

⁶UNDP, *Human Development Report 2001*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

over it. The large-scale violence against women, however, does not seem to touch the representatives of the people (almost half of their electorate being women) who remain oblivious of the plight of women. It is even more shocking that, of late, several *panchayats* (especially in North India) have begun to award punishments to women such as approving their sale to criminals, gang rape, excommunication from the village (along with their families) and social boycott by the community. It is a serious question whether such local bodies can be true instruments of political empowerment, as presently they seem to be emerging as instruments of oppression and discrimination against women.

Women are under great social control and scrutiny which has restricted what they can say, and where and to whom. Cultural mores in almost every social set-up determine women's socialisation in no uncertain terms. This has an important bearing on their ability to communicate. Women are forced to express their subordination through 'feminine' words, voice and syntax. In this context, Ardener conceives of women as a "muted" and men as a "dominant" group in relation to language, meaning and communication.⁷ In patriarchal cultures, men determine the general system of meanings for society and validate these meanings through the support received from other men. These meanings, regarded as correct by men, have evolved out of male experiences and the concepts and vocabulary arising out of it are quite different for women to contend with and express themselves in.⁸ There are several words in almost every language to describe women who are in disrepute for whatever reason. For instance, to be a prostitute is to be stigmatised for life but the men who are the clients (or, even, prostitutes themselves) do not suffer in the least from social mores or sanctions that continue to bestow status on them. They enjoy immunity from stigma and abuse; it is strengthened by the fact that there are no words to describe such immoral men. There can be *other women* in extra-marital relations but no *other men*.

⁷Edwin Ardener, "Belief and the Problem of Women," in Shirley Ardener, ed., *Perceiving Women*, London: Malaby, 1975.

⁸R. N. Kiran (alias Kiran Prasad), *Philosophies of Communication and Media Ethics: Theory, Concepts and Empirical Issues*, New Delhi: BRPC, 2000, 98.

Spender documents the silencing or threatening of women by the application of deviancy labels.⁹ Women, particularly knowledgeable, who question or rebel against patriarchy are called aberrations, unnatural, unattractive, unisexual, unnaturally sexed and man-haters. The victimisation of women through rape and domestic abuse or other forms of violence – implicit or explicit – restricts women's activities in all spheres and underlines all aspects of human communication. Germaine Greer called for a revolution of women based on co-operation for wrecking the stereotyped images cast on them by men and asserting themselves as persons with individual identities.¹⁰

India claims the promotion of scientific temper and women's empowerment (2001 being the Year of Women's Empowerment) as some of their important social development goals but all the television channels have serials portraying *only women* as evil spirits, witches and ghosts. It is not shocking to hear that even in the 21st century India is still "witch-hunting" in the countryside. The revolution in new communication technologies has unleashed a very brutal assault on the psyche of the youth enamoured by sexual images let loose over the Internet and satellite channels. The misinformation campaigns on the media, subtle and very obvious at times, have made the path of women's empowerment a very difficult and thorny one. Future communication policies must address women's rights as central to development if India's position must improve on the human development index.

b) Images of Women in the Mass Media

Women have mainly stayed within the private spheres of the home, with men going to work in the public world. The public/private division gains credence in mainstream communication theorizing of which is often divided into the study of interpersonal communication highlighting areas of male/female intimacy, sex roles, role playing, friendships, body image, empathy and healthy interaction, styles of listening, perception processes, self-concept and identity and mass communication – concerned with issues such as competition, producers and consumers, technology, political power, audience, content, history, institutions, persuasion and

⁹Dale Spender, *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them: From Behn to Adrienne Rich*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.

¹⁰Germaine Greer, *The Feminist Eunuch*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1971.

policymakers. Interpersonal communication study is, thus, the "small world" approach dealing with relationships among individuals (in which women figure) and mass media study is the "big world" of communication structures, technologies and policies that deals with significant political issues (in which men figure prominently).¹¹ This paradigm has led to further segregation of men and women and deepening of gender differences in life experiences.

The essential mandate of all feminist communication research is to "invent approaches to allow us to hear the meanings of women on their own terms, including their observations of the structures that constrain them."¹² An important initiative is women's mobilization in communication as in the Women's Feature Service of the Inter Press Service, a wire service that gathers and disseminates news about women to more than 800 clients in 80 countries.¹³ The expressed agenda of the service is to "influence public policy for a more holistic development planning and implementation."¹⁴ In India, given the enormity of illiteracy, especially, among women, radio and television exposure is considerably higher than print media. The electronic media offer women entertainment and information in a homebound environment. The tremendous popularity of television and its ability to reach a vast audience, with illiteracy being no barrier, led to the idea of using television as a channel for information dissemination on social development among several governments or administrators. From the eighties television began to be used to promote development oriented messages among the Indian population. There was, however, no exclusive focus on women's problems and their development. In the absence of a comprehensive media policy in India, television content emphasising entertainment has grown to such an extent that today all television channels are oriented towards commercialisation with not even a semblance of public education or service. Though television in India began with the avowed goals of education, modernisation and

¹¹*International Encyclopedia of Communication*, 1989 edition, s.v. "Feminist Theories of Communication," by Cheri Kramarae, vol. 2, 160

¹²Brenda Dervin, "The Potential Contribution of Feminist Scholarship to the Field of Communication," *Journal of Communication* 37 (1987), 112.

¹³Anita Anand, "Communication for Women in Development: The Experience of Inter Press Service," *Development* 2 (1990), 77.

¹⁴Anand, "Communication for Women in Development," 77.

development, today's satellite channels have done more damage to the cause of women's development by regressing to highly negative values that impede women's empowerment.

c) Families on Television

Television programmes have made use of cultural stereotypes to reinforce subservient role models for women that are major obstacles in changing social prejudices and traditions affecting women. The soap opera genre, or tele-serials as they are popularly called, projects the joint-family system as an ideal one and an institution to be protected (by women) when in reality its prevalence is diminishing and nuclear families are increasingly in vogue. These joint families are mainly upper middle class, mostly belonging to the higher castes with business as their primary economic activity. Women in these families are there just to serve their tense spouses engaged in business wars and conflicts. The joint families seen on television are not the happy, harmonious ones but full of intrigue, disharmony and on the verge of breakdown affecting relationships between spouses and other family members. These family set-ups are the sites of oppression, violence and great distress for women. It is ironical that despite the tyranny of such joint families, women are projected as mainly responsible for the ills and disharmony plaguing the family. They are portrayed as idle, scheming and wicked bent on destroying family values and traditions. In reality, strangely, the converse is true with women engaged in never ending household and outside work with little respite or leisure.

Housewives and women of every hue and nature can be seen on television adorning lavish sets (common in cinema) dressed in heavy designer wear and jewellery (even while engaged in the kitchen). The television serials *Kusum* (Sony, 9.00 pm), *Kasauti Zindagi Ki* (Star Plus, 8.30 pm) and *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* all have women who plot and scheme against others in the family while all that the men do is to act like dummies. The regional channels in South Indian languages catering, especially to the women of the South (who are considered to be better empowered than their sisters in the North), portray women as satanic creatures out to break their kin's families (even if it means competing for their own sisters' husbands). Bigamy is an exception in Kerala, but the regional channels, Asianet and Surya, extensively use bigamy, extramarital affairs, children born outside wedlock and women as prostitutes in the

storylines and plots of their television serials. These themes have formed the mainstay of a series of soaps titled *Stree* (women) in Malayalam and other South Indian television channels. Such projections mislead people to believe that these conditions are universal and widespread in Kerala society when in reality they are isolated cases. One of the major reasons for this trend is that these serials are adapted into several other regional languages (especially Tamil and Telugu) and cultures wherein such situations exist on a greater scale. The financial success of such serials on one television channel urges the producers of rival television channels to use them to make profits in their own languages. It seems incredible that women are that powerful in real life to be able to harm others extensively let alone their ability to save themselves from perilous situations. It must, however, be borne in mind that women shoulder the major share of burden of family life often under stressful and difficult situations with little support from their husbands and other family members. It is important that television programmes give a more balanced and positive picture of family life, so as to be an instrument of education and social uplift.

If the soap operas have been able to spawn a host of female villains on one extreme, at the other end are the mute, all suffering and self-sacrificing 'door-mat' women. In all the television serials women are the central characters, be they the tormentors or the victims while the men do nothing but just seem caught in a web of unfavourable circumstances. Television culture has produced breed of weak, indecisive men ensnared by sexy women when in reality men play an active role in oppressing women in various ways, including subjecting them to physical assault, rape, pushing them into the sex trade and even abandoning them. Women who resist these men, by word or deed, are regarded as having committed a serious crime and unfit to continue in a marital relationship. Indeed, media culture continues to repeat stereotyped negative characters, which further depresses the women's cause rather than energising women through strong and independent characters for charting a positive course in life.

d) Women and Social Life in the Mass Media

Girl children and young women are under great social scrutiny and control from early years. They are expected to express their feminine nature through voice, syntax and role to gain social approval. All male members are to be treated with the utmost deference and husbands never to be

addressed by first name in most states of India. Women are impressed upon to cultivate an emotional and sentimental outlook and take responsibility for the quality of interpersonal relationships rather than having a rational or independent outlook. Women are seen in the midst of situations wherein their partners are unfaithful and involved in several sexual liaisons. Such situations are projected, however, as of their own making rather than the irresponsible and immoral behaviour of their men. Even more unbelievable is to see women characters on the small and big screen not only condoning their licentious men but also reassuring them that they could go ahead with extramarital affairs with their (wives') full approval.

The media places a high premium on marriage and motherhood for women but fatherhood is a value of no consequence, and needs little responsibility. Subjecting women to beating is most acceptable if they dare to express their views, especially if it meant going against the husband or his family. Women who decide to go against rigid family and social norms put their lives on trial. Indeed, the media's message to the women of India is that "silence is golden." Researches show that in male female gatherings, men talk more and interrupt more than women. It is telling that men's talkativeness and interruptive tendencies are not among men's stereotypes about male interaction.¹⁵ The general inequality in communication being unfair to women, it can also have consequences for men. They frequently admit that they don't know what women are talking about and this is in part from the tunnel vision that comes from total acceptance of the dominant definition of reality. Women, when permitted and encouraged to speak for themselves and by themselves, bring forth their reality in their language. The communication of diverse realities in the mass media would empower a shift in values beneficial to women at many levels.¹⁶

e) Women and Print Media Culture

Newspapers often cover women's problems drawing the attention of policymakers to issues requiring immediate attention such as the adverse sex ratio, infant and maternal mortality, crime against women and the effects of poverty on women and their families. This coverage, however,

¹⁵Karmarae, "Feminist Theories of Communication."

¹⁶Kiran, *Philosophies of Communication and Media Ethics*, 100.

is very limited with the rest of the space occupied by cinema actresses, models, video jockeys (*veejays*) and the rich and their hobbies. Many of the women's magazines are devoted to fashion, glamour, beauty ads and aids, weight reduction, cookery and how to sharpen 'feminine instincts' to keep men and their in-laws happy. There are very few articles on career opportunities, health awareness, entrepreneurship, legal aid, counselling services, childcare services and financial management. Print media must focus on women achievers in diverse fields to inspire young girls and women and there is no dearth of such great women in our country.

f) Women in Advertisement and Music Industry

Advertisements on television have a new type of woman, who is selfish, actively aggressive, sexist, abusive, insensitive and a hormone-driven female chauvinist.¹⁷ Strangely, these models are used for exclusively male products. For instance, in the Rupa Underwear advertisement, the man has lipstick marks all over his bare body when he strays into a women's rest room – symbolic of mass female molestation. In a similar vein, the VIP advertisement has two young women playing 'Peeping Janes' spying from a balcony on a man who is unsuspectingly moving around in briefs at home.

The women in television advertising are obsessed with beauty and are seen toiling away to improve their appearances seeking every available cosmetic aid to catch the attention of men. For instance, even a toothpaste advertisement (Close Up) has a man hugging a book on "Physical Chemistry" staring at the girl – his gaze reaching her chest. There are women washing a never-ending stream of dirty clothes, dishes, floors and toilets with solicitous men advising them on what the best cleaning agents are. The world of business, banking, finance and automobiles are the exclusive preserve of male models with women in the background.

The music industry has begun a new onslaught on women's dignity and right to privacy with the lyrics, dialogues, scenes touching dangerously low levels of degradation and sexual abuse. Such music albums are highly popular among the youth and can easily mislead them on sexual relations, leading them to take sex and women very lightly. The recent music videos "*Kaliyon Ka Chaman*" was gently seductive while "*Kaanta Lagaa*" was a blur of G-strings, porn and tantalising

¹⁷Kanika Gahlaut, "Out of the Box," *India Today*, November 25, 2002.

choreography and held the top position in the music popularity charts for over six months. The music video had a skimpily dressed young girl gaining entry into a nightclub and goes on to tease her boyfriend by dancing with a porn magazine tucked in her low waist jeans. In a strong reaction to media's portrayal of women, Nirmala Samant Prabhavalkar, former Mayor and Chairperson of Maharashtra State Commission for Women said: "The media, which today includes video and pop albums, are increasingly becoming gender insensitive to the gender issue. The entire issue is being overlooked as it is considered a taboo or restrictive of individual freedom."¹⁸

The Indian Broadcasting Federation (IBF) recently submitted a compendium of "do's and don't's" for satellite channels, the code coming after 10 years since satellite channels invaded Indian homes. The code looks into news, entertainment, films on television (films on sex and nudity to be strictly scheduled after midnight) and radio, and is binding on all satellite channels.¹⁹ The IBF dropped 14 liquor advertisements adhering to the advertising and programme code. Strangely, however, despite several complaints of negative and obscene projection of women on the big and small screens, the government declined to ban any television channel, teleshow or film on this count.²⁰ The government that harps so much on traditions, ancient values and women's dignity takes no steps to forestall the deliberate denigration of women in mass media. If the government takes a bold step in ensuring a more positive media projection of women, it would be a significant policy measure in the direction of women empowerment.

3. Implications for National Communication Policy for Women's Empowerment

Communication and information are important resources to be strengthened and shared to raise community awareness and action on various developmental issues. Community forums of rural poor and

¹⁸Cited in Sangeeta John, "Bawdy Tones" *The Week*, June 15, 2003.

¹⁹Anuradha Raman, "IBF Draws up Do's and Don'ts Code for Satellite Channels," *The New Indian Express*, January 17, 2003

²⁰"Government Not to Ban Any TV Show, Film," *The New Indian Express*, April 10, 2003.

women must be represented in various mass media councils and bodies so that their concerns and problems find expression. The just demand of the right to information campaign to release all development project details through the mass media and other channels to the people must be accepted as it will establish the right of ordinary people, including women, to protest against corruption, monitor use of funds and become part of governance. The contribution of women's movements as people's initiatives for human development must be given due regard and acceptance as expressions of an awakened and participative community and not repressed as anti-establishment forces. All development programmes must incorporate a module on communication skills, information processing and management to empower local communities to become knowledge centres.

The National Policy for Empowerment of Women²¹ aims at stopping violence against women, and removing demeaning, degrading and negative conventional stereotypical images, and to use the mass media to portray images consistent with human dignity of girls and women. The policy will also involve private sector partners and media networks to ensure equal access for women, particularly in the area of information and communication technologies. The policy would encourage media to develop codes of conduct, professional guidelines and other self-regulatory mechanisms to remove gender stereotypes and promote balanced portrayals of women and men. Specific policy measures also include widespread dissemination of information on all aspects of legal rights, human rights and other entitlements of women, through specially designed legal literacy programmes and rights information programmes.

The National Policy for Women's Empowerment (2001) also focuses on gender sensitisation measures through training personnel of executive, legislative and judicial wings of the State, with a special focus on policy and programme framers, implementation and development agencies, law enforcement machinery and the judiciary, as well as non-governmental organizations. Other measures of the policy include:

²¹Department of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Human Resources Development, *National Policy for the Empowerment of Women*, New Delhi: Government of India, 2001.

- (i) promoting societal awareness to gender issues and women's human rights;
- (ii) review of curriculum and educational materials to include gender education and human right issues;
- (iii) removal of all references derogatory to the dignity of women from all public documents and legal instruments; and
- (iv) use of different forms of mass media to communicate social messages relating to women's equality and empowerment.

The policy also aims at implementation of international commitments on empowerment of women such as the CEDAW, Convention on Rights of the Child (CRC), International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and such other instruments. International, regional and sub-regional cooperation towards the empowerment of women will continue to be encouraged by the policy through positive human networking, sharing experiences, exchange of ideas and technology, networking with institutions and organisations and through bilateral and multi-lateral partnerships.

A multi-dimensional and integrated approach should be adapted to the women's empowerment programme to reinforce the benefits of health, nutrition, education and livelihood components. Property rights of women must be ensured and strengthened to safeguard their interests when in crisis. Economic empowerment alone may not be a sufficient condition for women's empowerment. Raising levels of awareness about public policy, encouraging women to express their perspectives, confidence and self-esteem building measures, stress management and capacity and skill training must all complement economic empowerment if women of India must step into a more secure future towards empowerment. Freedom of communication will be an important resource and the key for self-expression of women's choices in their development and empowerment. Women's solidarity to ensure this freedom for the female members in their own families and community will significantly influence the future empowerment of women in India.

4. Conclusion

The mass media have long been hailed as the watchdog of society and this tradition enjoins on them social responsibility for mirroring and guiding

the process of social change. Contemporary mass media under various pressures (mainly economic) have become commercial channels and no longer reflect social problems or aspirations of the people, and women in particular. The media revolution and explosion resulting in an increase in the number of print media (newspapers and magazines) and television channels have not resulted in diversity of news presentation and analysis. Despite phenomenal growth in media infrastructure and technological advances, content creation is neglected and media values skewed to cater to an elite class. The citizens, both men and women, who constitute media audience, must act as pressure groups and monitor media performance in gender sensitive issues. The mass media enjoy freedom of expression guaranteed by the Indian Constitution, and equal right to all citizens is a fundamental right enshrined in this Constitution. The media must, therefore, regard its role as fundamental in supporting the progress of women and assist them in their march for a better social status and quality of life. The government must introduce suitable mechanisms in the nature of a Task Force and media forums to monitor media performance to stem the tide of negative and unjust portrayal of women in the mass media. The Media Performance Task Force (akin to the IT task force) must come up with a vision document that outlines practically achievable and realizable goals; to begin with the mass media must stop the endless scenes of violence against women and portray them in a dignified manner. To begin with, the Media Performance Task Force must create a generation of sensitive media professionals who can sustain women's development and ultimately help achieve the larger vision of a just society that accords equality before the law without preference for anyone merely based on gender.