

Abortion: The socio-cultural, religious and moral perspectives in the Indian context

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Abstract

On 10 August 1971, The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971 was passed by the Indian Parliament, a significant moment in the history of women's freedom. Even though the Act ensures legal protection for women in India to safeguard their freedom and health, women are still at serious risk of unsafe abortion, which continues to be one of India's most significant causes of maternal mortality. Around eight women die every day from complications associated with unsafe abortion. Since India is a multi-cultural and religiously routed country, interpreting laws is difficult. All major religions and cultural traditions prohibit abortion with strict exceptions. Progressive thoughts on humanity propose pro-choice and pro-life. The contemporary world gives more focus on human life, and it demands re-thinking and re-defining of abortion thoughts. This review article examines the Socio-cultural, Religious and Moral Perspectives of abortion in the Indian Context.

Keywords: Abortion, Women's Health; Abortion in India; Pro-Life, Pro-Choice; Abortion Laws; Religions on Abortion; Abortion Ethics

1. Introduction

The global population crossed eight billion on 15 November 2022. India is the largest populated country in the world, with 1,427,986,451 citizens, which is 17.85% of the world population (8,005,176,000) [1]. On the special occasion of reaching an eight billion population, Antonio Guterres, United Nations Secretary-General, said: "The milestone is an occasion to celebrate diversity and advancements while considering humanity's shared responsibility for the planet" [2]. As he said, the world must act more responsibly. The population explosion poses many challenges in various fields of human life. It draws our attention directly towards areas like fertility, pregnancy, abortion, birth, infant mortality, sex ratio, life expectancy, health and diseases, death, etc. [3]. Apart from these, social and economic factors, sustainable development, and environmental issues are also included [4].

The legal status of abortion varies among countries from strictly prohibited to broadly legal. Abortion is legalised in India through 'The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971' [5]. Every year, 73 million abortions take place in the world. 61 percentage of all unintended pregnancies and 29 percentage of all pregnancies end in abortion. Every year, around 15.6 million abortions are done in India. The studies reveal that 53 percentage of abortions in India are done in the private health sector, and 20 percentage are done in the public health sector. 27 percentage of abortions are done at home. Eight women die every day due to unsafe abortion [6].

According to WHO, there are 7.3 crores of abortions happening in the world every year [7]. Abortion is a multi-dimensional global issue which gets various opinions from different perspectives according to the cultural, ethical and legal considerations. The WHO sees abortion as a 'common health intervention.' 45 percentage of abortions are unsafe, and 97 per cent of them take place in developing countries. The lack of safe and affordable abortion care is a serious

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human rights and public health issue [8]. Since India is a land of diversity, the legal, social, religious, moral, and cultural dimensions strongly influence abortion.

The world population report (2022) [9] by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) reports that 67 per cent of abortions in India are classified as unsafe. It is the chief cause of maternal mortality in India. Because of unsafe abortion, around eight women die every day in India. The rate of unintended pregnancies in India is very high, as one in every seven pregnancies worldwide takes place in the country. The report says that unintended pregnancies and following abortions also affect the economy and overall development of the country. The report suggests that as education and economic levels rise, the number of unintended pregnancies and abortions decreases [10].

2. Socio-Cultural Dimensions

The various studies and published data reveal that the abortion rate is related to economic and social factors [6]. India has a patriarchal culture. There is strong male domination in decision-making in families, society, and even parliament. Even though women are vital in every part of the country, they don't share equal status as men. This is evident in families, castes, religions, and society. The discrimination women face in India is a reality, and it is evident in every aspect of life, like status, social and economic exploitations, education, poverty, and violence [11]. Women may face discrimination, violence, vulnerable situations, and even social exclusion when an unwanted pregnancy happens. So, they often try to terminate the pregnancy using drugs without a proper medical prescription. The increasing possibilities of this method are easy to access but unsafe and dangerous. Untrained chemists, midwives and other medical persons may create more troubles with their ignorance of the medical complications of pregnancy [12].

The issue of abortion should be viewed in a unique context of India. The literacy rate and value system of the country have a significant influence on people's decisions. Still, people have only a vague idea of a legal stand on abortion. Most of them think that abortion is illegal and immoral [13]. Despite abortion laws and awareness programmes, women have little knowledge about sex and pregnancy, contraception, and abortion [14].

In 1971, abortion was legalised in India and was widely misused. The earlier studies in India make clear that there exists sex-selective abortion after a sex-determination test. It constantly threatens the female foetus [15,16,17,18]. Women's socio-demographic status is another reason for abortion [19]. The death rate due to unsafe abortion is high in India. It draws attention to the need to raise health-related awareness among pregnant women [20].

3. Religious Views on Abortion

All major religions and their traditions forbid abortion and consider it a severe sin. The main texts of Hinduism, Hindu tradition and its culture severely condemn abortion. That is why abortion is not even a subject for discussion. Pregnancy destruction, foetus murder and miscarriage are defined clearly and distinctly. This distinction paves the way for more definite moral and ethical thoughts on abortion [21]. Hinduism views the foetus as "a living, conscious individual who requires and deserves protection." The literature of the religion refers to abortion as *garbha-hattya* (womb murdering) and *bhroona hathya* (killing the growing soul). The Rig Vedic hymn asks for 'foetus protection' [22].

According to Buddhism, every Buddhist, monk, and layperson should follow *pancasila* (five moral precepts); the first of them is abstaining from taking life (killing). To Buddhism, life begins at the time of conception. So, abortion is considered as killing. Yet, Buddhism allows abortion as an exception in case of saving a mother's life [21]. Zoroastrianism, an ancient religion, also considers abortion an evil where an innocent person is killed [23].

Christianity considers abortion as murder. Church always stands against abortion [22]. The flow of Christian views on abortion is based on their Holy scripture, the Holy Bible and the words of saints and teachers of the Church. To Christianity, God is the author of life, and Adam, the first man, was created as the crown of all creations. According to Genesis 1: 27, "God created man in his own image" [24]. So, they believe that life is valuable and killing is a sin. The responsibility of all creations lies upon human beings (Genesis 1: 26-31). The book of Psalms 139: 13 says, "For you formed my inward parts, you knitted me together in my mother's womb." According to the book of Isaiah, "The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name" (Isaiah 49:1b). The story of Jesus also started from the womb of his mother, Mary (St. Luke 1). The Christian view could be summarised as life is precious from womb to tomb and should be protected [25]. The various teachings of the Church continue in the same spirit as those of the Holy Bible.

Islam religion condemns abortion and believes that it is forbidden (*haram*) based on the teaching of their holy scripture, the Quran. The sanctity of life must be kept. Many Islamic scholars teach that the foetus in the womb is a human life. The Quran says: Whosoever has spared the life of a soul, it is as though he has spared the life of all people. Whosoever has killed a soul, it is as though he has murdered all of mankind (Qur'an 5:32) [26]. Yet, there is an exception to abortion, where the mother's life is in danger. In that case, abortion should be done before the soul has been infused into the body [27]. The people who are involved in an abortion, the pregnant woman and her husband if he has the knowledge about it, and the doctor who helped her with the abortion would be responsible for that act [28]. It is a great sin to kill children for the fear of poverty. Holy Quran says (17:32): "Kill not your children for fear of poverty. It is We Who provide for them and for you. Surely, the killing of them is a great sin" [29]. Despite all traditional arguments, some contemporary Islamic scholars hold the view that abortion could be allowed in case of life-threatening danger to the mother, the baby's defect that can't be treated, pregnancy through rape and so on [26].

4. Moral Stand on Abortion

Abortion is a serious and controversial issue with various moral perspectives. It's a choice between the health and freedom of a pregnant woman and a life in the womb. When an unwanted pregnancy happens in India, it may be considered a woman's fault. Some people argue that every individual has a fundamental right to their life. As a result, they can decide on abortion, there must be a possibility for safe and legal abortion.

On the other hand, the pro-life perspective says that abortion is unethical and illegal. Life in the womb also has the same right, the right to live. In fact, from a moral perspective, it is very difficult to draw a conclusion or make a decision, as is the case with other issues.

There exists a dual thought on abortion: pro-life and pro-choice. Both terms are closely related to abortion but from two different perspectives of human life [30]. Collins Dictionary defines the term pro-life (adjective) as "supporting the right to life of the unborn; against abortion, experiments on embryos, etc." [31]. Pro-life activists speak from anthropological and ethical points of view. They argue that the biological terms 'zygote', 'embryo' and 'foetus' are the successive stages of the development of human life. Human life is seen as a single being from the womb to birth and to the tomb [32]. The pro-life concept was originated from a religious scenario but flourished and popularised quickly. Pro-life activists include the religious and conservatives and all other categories, such as feminists and atheists. Their works include reproductive health, foster care and adoption, human trafficking, racism, alleviating poverty and death from preventable disease, prison ministry, refugees, suicide, old-age problems and so on [30, 33].

The Oxford Learners Dictionary defines pro-choice (adjective): "believing that a pregnant woman should be able to choose to have an abortion if she wants" [34]. Pro-choice proponents believe that choosing when to have children is a fundamental human right and an individual's personal choice. They focus more on planned parenthood. They try to explain human life as different distinct stages of life, like fertilised egg, embryo, or foetus, and treat them separately. Pro-choice supporters argue that the rights of women should not be sacrificed for the rights of others [30].

Medical ethics in India are very complicated and closely interrelated with religious traditions and culture. Regional interpretations, folk traditions, and spiritual and social practices of ethnic minorities of the country are some influencing factors [35]. When we evaluate the issue of abortion, we have to consider the above-mentioned factors also.

5. Conclusion

From the evaluation of the literature and the current scenario, we come to know that people decide on abortion according to situational fear. The social stigma of society is being changed today in India. The decision on abortion is deeply rooted in one's own choice and influenced by social, cultural, religious and moral standards. The discussions continue on the various strange instances like rape and life-threatening situations of a pregnant lady. Every citizen should be aware of pregnant women's legal rights regarding abortion. Proper and effective awareness should be given to society at large, and women particularly. Recently, Indian movies such as Mimi and Sara's come up with abortion themes such as IVF, surrogacy and various problems related to it. They depict multiple views on abortions. Pregnant women should be free to take personal decisions of their own free will. Education and various awareness programmes will enable them to achieve this goal.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest among the authors

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