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A Study of Ethical Issues Related to the Problem of Abortion

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Abstract : *The topic “A Study of the Ethical Issues Related to the Problem of Abortion” is an important contemporary social issue of philosophical concern in modern times, more so when moral and ethical considerations have become secondary and money making has become the primary motive. Abortion has been practiced almost in all societies for a variety of reasons. Various causes of abortion are unwanted pregnancy, financial crunch, lack of proper health and sex education. It is believed that 6 to 8 million induced abortions take place every year in India, which is alarming and needs to be checked. There are a number of ethical issues related to the problem of abortion. Is abortion morally wrong? Does the foetus have a right to life? Can abortion be equated with gender discrimination? With the aim of discussing these issues and finding solutions to the*

problem of abortion, an interface discussion with the help of an interview schedule was held with some eminent doctors of Patna and civilians. According to doctors, abortion is morally justified when there is a health risk or when pregnancy is the result of rape. But according to civilians common people, abortion is morally wrong and this practice should be stopped. Almost all major religions of the world prohibit abortion as it is against the commandments of God, or against the principle of procreation. In order to control the problem of abortion, there should be strict implementation of laws, implementation of proper health and sex education from primary stage of study.

Keywords: *Abortion, Ethical Issues, Philosophical concern, Justification, Gender discrimination.*

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Introduction:

The problem of abortion is an important issue and is a matter of philosophical concern in modern times. It is believed that 6 to 8 million induced abortions take place every year in India which is alarming and needs to be checked. An abortion is the ending of pregnancy by removing foetus or embryo before it can survive outside the uterus. An abortion that occurs spontaneously is known as miscarriage. It may be caused purposely and is then called an induced abortion, or less frequently “induced miscarriage”. Induced abortions are divided into legal and illegal abortions. Usually a therapeutic abortion carried out to save life of the mother is legal. An induced abortion is carried out in case of an unwanted pregnancy for a variety of reasons. Having discussed

the different kinds of abortion, we can list some of the causes as follows:

- Degradation of moral values.
- Unwanted pregnancy.
- Lack of proper health and sex education.
- Gender preferences for children.
- Population explosion.

Significance of Study:

The practice of abortion in its basic form is as old as human civilization. Abortion is widely practiced, nearly all cultures and societies have tried to control and regulate it because of social norms, moral convention, or religious taboos. Most of philosophers and thinkers, including religious thinkers who consider that abortion is morally wrong and should not be encouraged.

The findings of this research project will create awareness among the people regarding the ethical issues related to abortion and help in stopping this practice in future.

Objectives:

The present study aims:

- To discuss the ethical issues related to abortion.
- To find out the different causes of abortion.
- To find out those exceptional cases in which abortion can be justified.
- To know the views of doctors and the civilians regarding the practice of abortion.
- To find out ethical solutions to control this practice.

Methodology:

- Data for the project are collected from different medical centres and hospitals; both government and private; through interface discussions and interview schedule.
- Different journals, books, magazines and audio - visual documents are consulted on the concern issue.

Ethical Issues:

In modern times the ethical issues concerning abortion is being increasingly debated. The abortion debate asks whether it can be morally right to terminate

a pregnancy before normal childbirth. Some people think that in some circumstances, abortion is morally acceptable. Abortion is an issue on which rigid rules do not work.

1. Can a foetus be considered a potential human being?

Special characteristics like thinking, intelligence, self consciousness, understanding. that makes human being different from all other animals. Human beings have the capacity to think, judge, imagine, plan and so on.

According to John T. Noonan Jr., we have a human genetic code that is, 23 pair of chromosomes. He also says that conception is the point at which the non-human becomes the human. Since a human foetus contains the genetic code of human parents, Noonan argues that the foetus is a human being from the time of conception. (Satyanarayana, 2010)

2. Is abortion morally wrong?

Abortion is considered legal in two situations :

- (i) When the pregnancy is ectopic.
- (ii) When a woman is detected with uterus cancer after conceiving.

Ectopic pregnancy is a condition in which the fertilised egg implants out-side the uterus.

3. What is moral community? Does the foetus belong to the moral community?

Moral community is a group of individuals living together, sharing their common interests, desires, aspirations, goals, happiness and sorrows.

We know that foetuses have life, however they do not have the maturity to experience feelings, emotions and their brain is not developed enough to carry out the complex process of thinking.

4. Is abortion a form of gender discrimination?

The discrimination means making unjust distinction on the ground of caste, colour, creed, race and sex.

Gender discrimination is a major cause of abortion. In Indian society, a girl child is discriminated against a boy. According to the society a girl child is looked upon as a burden for the family and is considered someone else's belonging and investing money on them is considered useless.

5. Should foetus have the right to life?

The zygote receives 23 pair of chromosomes from its parents and anything with the human genetics code is considered as a human being, so foetus should be considered as a human being.

Every human being has the right to life given by the constitution of India. So, foetus should also have the right to life. It should not be taken for granted.

6. What reasons can justify abortions?

The life and health of the mother has always been given priority over the life of a foetus. Reasons that justify abortion are either ectopic pregnancy or pregnancy carried out with a cancer where there is no possibility to save the foetus life.

Moreover, it should be justified in some other cases like, a rape victim trying to terminate a pregnancy or, when there is a case of someone belonging to an economically weaker section of the society, already burdened by the responsibility of looking after a large family. It should be considered as a genuine reason from a social-economic perspective and they should justify abortion.

7. Should the autonomy of women considered be respected?

Autonomy means freedom and freedom is an important postulate of morality. In order to give moral judgement upon human action freedom or autonomy of a person is important. In case of an induced abortion, the question arises, should the autonomy of women considered be respected? So if the pregnant woman is not willing to go for abortion but the pressure of family and husband make her do so. It should be considered morally wrong in every case. Mother should be given the full autonomy to decide the issue/cases of abortion. However, we find that sometimes woman herself is not able to take the decision.

8. Can abortion be equated with infanticide?

It is important to understand the difference between an embryo and a baby.

According to some liberals, it is permissible to kill the embryo / foetus but some others argue that life of a foetus is as important as that of a baby. The foetus has the same claim of life as a person.

"A week old baby is not a rational and self-conscious being, and there are many non-human animals whose rationality, self consciousness, awareness, fetuses are neither rational nor self-aware

similarly newborns lack the essential characteristics of a person. Therefore, killing a foetus is never equivalent to killing a grown-up person. The life of a new born baby is of less value to it than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee is to be non-human animal" (Peter, 1993).

Religious Views on Abortion

Many religious traditions have taken a stance on abortion, and these stances span a broad spectrum as highlighted below:

The Hindu View on Abortion

Almost all ancient Hindu scriptures and lawgivers considered abortion as a sin. The Atharva Veda condemns abortion as a sin because 'Prajapati, the creator and 'fountain head of pregnancy', is moving within the womb of a woman.' This is to say that abortion is against the principle of creation, or procreation.

The doctrine of reincarnation, sees life as a repeating cycle of birth, death and rebirth, is basic to Hindu thinking. The doctrine of reincarnation makes a strong case against abortion: If a foetus is aborted, the soul within it suffers a major karmic setback. It is deprived of the opportunities its potential human existence would have given it to earn good karma, and is returned immediately to the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Thus abortion hinders a soul's spiritual progress.

Hindu view of abortion has never been static and religious beliefs of a bygone age have been compromised in the event of compelling and changing needs of man and the society.

The Muslim View on Abortion

Muslims regard abortion as wrong and 'haram' (forbidden), but many accept that it may be permitted in certain cases.

All schools of Muslim law accept that abortion is permitted if continuing the pregnancy would put the mother's life in real danger. This is the only reason accepted for abortion after 120 days of the pregnancy.

The Islamic view is based on the very high priority the faith gives to the sanctity of life. The Qur'an states:

"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

Most Muslim scholars would say that a foetus in the womb is recognised and protected by Islam as a human life. Muslim views on abortion are shaped by the Hadith (action of Muhammad Prophet) as well as by the

opinions of legal and religious scholars and commentators. In Islam, the foetus is believed to become a living soul after four months of gestation, and abortion after that point is generally viewed as impermissible.

The Christian View on Abortion

Christianity and abortion has a long and complex history. There is variety of positions taken by contemporary Christian denominations on the topic.

There is no explicit prohibition of abortion neither in the Old Testament or New Testament books of the Christian Bible. While some writers say that early Christians held different beliefs at different time about abortion, others say that, inspite of the silence of the New Testament on this issue, they consider abortion at any point as a grave sin.

The Buddhist View on Abortion

There is no single Buddhist view concerning abortion. Some traditional sources, including some Buddhist monastic codes, hold that life begins at conception and that abortion, which would then involve the deliberate destruction of life, should be rejected.

The Dalai Lama has said that abortion is “negative”, but there are exceptions. He said, “I think abortion should be approved and disapproved according to each circumstance.”

The Buddhist view of abortion does not include a concept of rights, either a “right to life” or a “right to one’s own body.” In part, this is because Buddhism is a very old religion, and the concept of human rights is relatively recent. However, approaching abortion as merely a “rights” issue doesn’t seem to be getting us anywhere.

Views of the Doctors

It was also found that the ethical code of conduct is not being followed by the doctors. According to them, there are several causes of the problem of abortion in which the lack of proper health and sex education is the main cause. There should be implementation of proper health and sex education from the primary stage of study.

According to most of the doctors, abortion is not morally wrong in all cases. There are many complications in pregnancy in which abortion becomes compulsory like Ectopic pregnancy. Ectopic is a condition of pregnancy in which zygote is not able to move through the fallopian tube and fails to enter the uterus and start developing there itself. Similarly, in case of cancerous uterus, abortion is a must. In such cases if

abortion is not carried out it becomes dangerous for the mother.

On the other hand, some doctors believe that every human being has a right to life and foetus is also like a human being. Thus, abortion is a violation a foetus also has the right to life on the basis that it is a potential human being.

Most of the doctors went with the option ‘NO’ when the question of ‘Right to Abortion’ aroused. According to them, people will start misusing this right for their selfish motives. Majority of them advocated for stricter laws for preventing abortion.

Views of the Common People

On the basis of interface discussion with the common people with the help of an interview schedule, their views regarding abortion was elicited.

It is common knowledge that abortion is carried out everyday in hospitals and no one objects or thinks it is to be immoral.

People in general, do not support abortion especially, the youths. They are against it. They see a foetus as a human being and hence like a human it also has the right to life. So, abortion is morally wrong.

With regard to the question whether it is right that people go for abortion when they come to know that the pregnant woman has a girl child in her womb, the opinion is that when there is already a girl child in the family there is no use of having another one. So, they abort that foetus. Although a majority of people feel that abortion is illegal, killing foetus is wrong, aborting a foetus after determining the sex of it, is wrong, but they do so because of the economic condition of the family and some other factors.

Conclusion:

The study throws light on **the Ethical Issues Related to the Problem of Abortion**. Abortion has been practised almost in all societies for varieties of reasons. Various causes of abortion were found like unwanted pregnancy, financial crunch, lack of proper health and sex education, and so on. It is believed that 6 to 8 million induced abortions take place every year in India which is alarming and need to be checked. According to doctors, abortion is morally justified when there is a health risk or when pregnancy is the result of rape and similar other reasons. But common people think that abortion is morally wrong and this practice should be stopped.

Coming to the views of various religions regarding abortion, it is found that in every religion abortion is acceptable only in critical cases. Almost all major religions of the world prohibited abortion as it is against the commandments of God and also against the principles of procreation.

There are many ethical issues that had been raised regarding the problem of abortion. A solution to the issue of abortion may not be obtained from the answers to the questions- whether or not the foetus is a living being or whether or not the foetus has a right to life. The incidence of abortion can be minimised if people understand the difference between unwanted and wanted pregnancy. In the wanted pregnancy, the foetus in the womb gives satisfaction and pleasure to the mother and makes her happy. But, unwanted pregnancy brings displeasure and discomfort to the family and the mother leading to abortion. Hence, in order to check the practice of abortion the pregnancy should be a wanted pregnancy for which the male and the female both should be responsible.

Lastly, it can be concluded by saying that abortion is ethically justified only in some cases but as a rule it is not morally justified because the foetus is a potential human being and its right to life should be respected.

Suggestions:

There are challenges in front of us but also there are solutions to every problem. Every issue has a resolution, the end should be to find it and practise it. Here are a few suggestions based on this study.

1. Introduction of ethics as a compulsory subject from the very primary stage of education:

Ethics is the study of values, moral system, understanding the language of right and wrong. This subject should be designed properly and offered to every student from primary stage of education. This subject can help understand and distinguish between good and bad.

2. Proper health and sex education: Sex education is important for teenagers to live a healthy life. It protects them from unwanted pregnancies leading to abortions.

3. Strict implementation of laws: There should be strict implementation of laws against this practice. Though there are strict laws against abortion in India but, still it is practised illegally. It's the duty of the doctors and the common people as well to follow these laws for the betterment of our society.

4. Application of ethical principles to professionalism and practice management: Few things can be put into practice by the doctors and other health care providers:

- Act appropriately when aware of unethical conduct by a colleague.
- Monitoring of one's own professional behaviour.
- Evaluate an employment contract for features that may be ethically compromising.

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