

# Abortion: An Alternative to Family Planning

Amar Jesani

Article published in the daily '*Metropolis*' January 28, 1995

# ABORTION: AN ALTERNATIVE TO FAMILY PLANNING?

Dr. Amar Jesani

Contrary to popular belief and the government's claim that *induced abortion* is not to be used as an alternative to contraception and family planning, the demographic concern was one of the two chief considerations for liberalisation of induced abortion by the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act in 1971. The second consideration was medical or mortality and morbidity associated with the unhygienic abortions.

The belief that under the MTP Act women can avail of service for induced abortion simply *on demand* is equally misplaced. A reason for having induced abortion must be given and recorded by the doctor. It is altogether different matter that due to great support among doctors to the population control, even if the woman has no reason to offer, the failure of contraceptive is mechanically recorded by the doctor as the reason. However, in future if the government's demographic priority changes either due to perceived less pressure of population or a revivalist and communal party coming to power (*Manusmriti* does not approve induced abortion), the practice could be turn other way round without changing a word in the present MTP Act.

Simply put, the MTP Act is not Women's Right to Abortion Act. The issue is not whether induced abortion should be used as a backup service to the failure of contraceptive, but right to abortion upto 22 weeks of pregnancy should be available to every woman irrespective of whether she used contraceptive or wishes to plan her family. Woman's desire and demand to undergo induced abortion is nothing but her refusal to carrying on with an *unwanted pregnancy* to full term. It is in essence her desire to have a control over her body. For every woman the decision to abort a child of her own, however unwanted, is a painful decision. Undergoing of the medical procedure for it is even a more painful process. This does not mean there are no exceptions. But whenever a deep probe is made, even most of those women who did not show problem at the time of undergoing abortion, have shown great unease at the decision taken. In spite of that when she decides, it only shows the amount of hardship a woman has to undergo in the existing patriarchal social system in order to have a basic dignity of having control over her own body.

Therefore, linking induced abortion to population control and family planning is fraught with serious dangers. Firstly, the state's role should be limited to providing the *safest* (not like injectables and implants) and *free* contraceptives. This is usually a need of most women (the stumbling block is usually man who dominates the family) as it provides a means for self-control over the body. The planning of family belongs to the *personal* sphere which should not be interfered with by the state. Secondly, once the induced abortion is linked to population control, a programme for which the state as well as most of the elites have shown tendency to blame people and use unethical means, nobody would bother even if the legal abortions are done in unhygienic way. That is why the state's regulatory authorities have bothered little about the conveyor belt type abortion centre who have shown gross indifference to psychosocial aspects of conducting induced abortion. Lastly, after decriminalising and liberalising induced abortion by enacting MTP Act in 1971, the state has done very little to make accessible the hygienic and humane induced abortion services to women. In 1989 the country had one properly registered MTP centre (public and private together) for an average one and a quarter lakh population and only one out of eight abortion was legal! The state's indifference to this is simply because it is happy that over five million births are averted by induced abortion or that many women used it as a backup services. Blinded by Malthusian ideology it doesn't care that of them only half a million were legal and that the unhygienic abortions are still creating havoc with women's health.

Isn't it now time that state stop playing with women's health in the name of population control? Women have very few means to exercise control over their bodies. By linking abortions to family planning and population control, the state is only trying to control women's bodies. Instead, for a change, the state should make hygienic and safe abortion services freely accessible to women as a fundamental right of theirs.

---