



STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA: ANCIENT TO MODERN

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ABSTRACT

The status of women in India is a sort of paradox. If one hand she is at the peak ladder of success on the other hand she is mutely suffering the violence afflicted on her by her own family members and other too. Their path is full of roadblocks. The women have left the secured domain of their home and now in the battlefield of life fully armored with their talent. They had proven themselves. But in India they are yet to get their dues. The sex ratio of India shows that Indian Society is still prejudiced against female (940/1000). There are many problems which women in India have to go through daily. The present paper intends to highlight the status of women in India from ancient era to modern era. This paper is based on review of literature and secondary data (Library research). The whole paper is divided into three sections. First section deals with the status of women historical perspective, second section describes the constitutional and legal provision for the upliftment of status of women in India and third section presents the contemporary position of women in India.

KEYWORDS-Discrimination, empowerment, equality, participation, status, violence.

INTRODUCTION

“Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development, and building good governance. There is no tool for development more effective than empowerment of women.”

- Kofi Annan (Former Secretary UNO)

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its preamble, fundamental rights, fundamental duties, and directive principles. The constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the state to adopt measures to make positive discrimination in favour of women, but a global survey (2013) known as the ‘third billion index shows in its scorecard a depleted position of Indian Women and recommends for a concerted effort towards women empowerment. According to this survey India gets



placed at a dismal 115 out of 128 countries surveyed. On the other hand, Human Development report 2015 puts India at 130th position out of 188 countries. In its GDI that measures the inequality between males and females in terms of three key indicators i.e., labour market, reproductive health, and empowerment. While in the W.E. Forum's Global Gender Gap Index (2015). India has been ranked at 108th place among 145 countries; the index assesses the gap between men and women on the basis of economic participation and opportunities, educational accomplishment, health and survival and political empowerment.

STATUS OF WOMEN

'Status of Women' refers to the position of women in society in relation to men. Although, geographically men and women share the same space, yet they are not treated equally in the world. In reality, there exists inequality in women's access to education, health care, physical and financial resources, and opportunities in the political, economic, social, and cultural field. Everywhere in the world women have been accorded a lower status than men.

The study of the progress and development of society from early primitive stages of hunting and food gathering societies to industrial, post-industrial modern society reveals the fact that revolutionary changes have taken place in every aspect of human society, but the women are still in a more discriminated and marginalized position. This discrimination and marginalization of women exists all around the world. Women, around the world irrespective of the state of economic development of the country, have little say in the domestic matters or household decision making. They spend endless hours in domestic work that hardly finds any recognition and are generally subservient to men.

The concept of relationship of domination and subordination is based on sex and inherent politics based on male centric power structural relationships where males controlled females in society. Economic dependency of women on men places them outside the class system. Lack of knowledge and education restricts the power of women. Economic inequalities are reinforced by lack of education. Religion also legitimizes masculine dominance. In such a society even, women tend to develop a passive temperament and a sense of inferiority and accept men's dominance. Women are not biologically weak, but



physical and emotional training make them unable to resist the force used against them by their men folk.

WOMEN IN INDIA – HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Womanhood has been revered in the ancient Indian culture as a manifestation of divine qualities. The ancient saints in India believed that the seeds of divinity grow and blossom in a truly cultured society where women are given due respect and equal opportunities to rise and have dignity.

The status of women in India has been subjected to many momentous changes over the past few millennia from enjoying equal status with men in ancient time to degraded low position in medieval period and the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India is eventful.

The historical background of Indian society reveals that in very early stages, women were regarded like mother goddess (Shakti, a symbol of life with immense capacity of tolerance and sacrifice and they had a respectful place in society). During Vedic times women enjoyed equal status with men in all spheres of life. They got educated like men and were allowed to take decision about their life and were free from social constraints. During that period, husband and wife were called 'Dampati' (partners). It was indicative of the society in which relations between the sexes were based on reciprocity and autonomy in their respective spheres of activity. The participation of women in productive activities was the source of freedom and better status of women in vedic age. They were also familiar with social and political life and allowed to play a significant role in all matters. Girls were free to choose their own husbands and were normally married after puberty.

In the later vedic period the status of women began to decline. We find evidences in 'Manusmriti' and other religious texts which curtailed women's freedom and rights. Manusmriti prescribed duties and obligations of a woman. For Manu, woman was a perpetual minor and had to lead whole of her life under the guardianship of either the father, the husband, or the son. Women were considered to be impure and thus could not attend spiritual functions i.e., their religious rights and privileges were curtailed. There was gradual decline in female literacy. The involvement of women in political activities declined and their representation in the Sabha too became negligible. She was viewed solely as



mother and wife and never as a woman or a person. Practices like giving away of daughters in marriage and the importance attached to sons strengthened the patriarchal social structure. A woman in this period was treated as property and an object of enjoyment. Remarriage was not allowed for high caste widows. But the men were not subjected to such restrictions.

Although protest movements within the Hindu fold, like Buddhism, Jainism, Vaishnavism and Sikhism contributed to some improvement in the status of women, particularly in regard to religious activities, yet, they continued to regard women primarily as mothers and wives, and inferior to men in society.

During the medieval period after invasion of Mughals. The position of women further deteriorated. Society encouraged child marriages and banned widows' remarriage. Education was denied to majority of women. They were excluded from public gathering or any intellectual deliberation. *Sati pratha*, polygamy and *Parda*(veil) became part and parcel of social life in India. Restrictions on rights and privileges of women were imposed.

In the eighteenth century, the position of women became miserable. They were considered inferior to men and were to be ill-treated. The women, both Hindus and Muslims were confined to their homes. Their duties, rights, and obligations all were interpreted in terms of devoted wife and a sacrificing mother.

In spite of miserable condition some women became prominent in the field of politics, literature, education, administration and religion. Some famous personalities of this period were Rani Durgawati, Rani Karunawati, Kurma Devi, Rani Laxmi Bai, Jijabai, Razia Sultana, Nur Jahan, Jahanara and Zebunnisa.

These women could learn and attain dominance by strength of their personality. Thus, it can be said that during Mughal period the women from Royal families enjoyed much respect and freedom but the women of lower and middle strata of society were largely ignorant and illiterate.

On the advent of the British Empire the status of the Indian women was very miserable. Customs like polygamy, the *parda* system, the denial of property rights to property child marriage, *sati pratha* and denial of remarriage to widows –resulted in the subjugated personality of women. She was not only considered inferior to man but also



became rooted to the idea that she was weak, helpless, subordinate, and inferior, a non-entity, a slave.

The socio religious reform movements of the 19th century highlighted the necessity of reforming Indian Society and stressed the need of improving the status of women. All the major reformers of that time attacked the malpractices like *satipratha*, child marriage, denial of widow remarriage and advocated for emancipation of women.

Mahatma Gandhi considered that if a husband is a God, the wife is a goddess. Wife is not a slave but a friend & companion with equal rights. Gandhiji's efforts led to the elevation of women's status and involved them in their struggle for social progress and political independence. Consequently women were able to develop their latent powers.

Many great women like Sarojini Naidu, Dr. Annie Besant, Vijaylaxmi Pandit, Rajkumari, Amrit Kaur, Kamla Nehru, Sucheta Kriplani, Kasturba Gandhi, Aruna Asaf Ali, etc. participated in Indian Freedom Movement with all their might and potentials. Sarojini Naidu a poet and a freedom fighter was the first Indian woman to become the president of Indian National Congress and also the first woman Governor of India. 20th century brought great changes in the lives of women all over the world.

CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL PROVISIONS FOR THE UPLIFTMENT OF WOMEN IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

After independence, the real change came when the constitution of India gave equal rights to women and laid down that they cannot be deprived merely on the ground of sex.

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS

The introduction of our Constitution in 1950 granted equal social and political rights to women. These certain provisions are: -

- i. Article 14 Guarantees that the state shall not deny equality before the law and equal protections of the laws,
- ii. Article 15 prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the ground of sex: And Article 15 (3) empowers the state to make positive discrimination in favour of opportunity in matter of public employment.



- iii. The state to direct its policy towards securing for men and women equally the right to an adequate means of livelihood (Article 39a); and equal pay for equal work for both men and women (Article 39(d))
- iv. The state to make provision for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief (Article 42)
- v. To promote harmony and spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India and to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51(A)(e)).
- vi. Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the SC's and ST's) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat to be reserved for women and such seats to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a panchayat (Article 243 (3)).
- vii. Not less than one-third of the total number of offices of chairpersons in the panchayats at each level be reserved for women (Article 243 D(41)).
- viii. Not less than one third (including the numbers of seats reserved for women belonging to the SCs and STs) of the total numbers of seats to be filled by direct election in every municipality to be reserved for women and such seats to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Municipality (Article 243 T. 41)).
- ix. Reservations of offices of chairpersons in municipalities for the SCs and STs and women in such a manner as the legislature of a state may by law provide (Article 243 T (4)).

LEGAL PROVISIONS

In Independent India various legislative measures intended to ensure equal rights, to counter social discrimination and various forms of violence and atrocities and to provide support services specially to working women have been enacted by the Govt. of India to uphold the constitutional mandate.

The Hindu succession Act 1956 sought to shift major inheritance system from the position of gross gender inequality to quite substantial equality. Besides the formal structure of equality a series of progressive legislations like, the special marriage act 1954, The Hindu marriage Act, 1955, The maternity benefit Act 1961, Dowry Prohibition Act 1961,



Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act 1971, the equal Remuneration Act 1979, Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act 1986, Prohibition of Domestic Violence Act 2005 and the compulsory Registration of marriage Act, 2006 etc. gave some relief to women whatever their caste, creed or religion.

CONTEMPORARY POSITION OF WOMEN IN INDIA

Women today occupy high ranking posts like IAS, IPS also in our defence services. The modern Indian women participate in various sports and games like football, hockey, cricket, table tennis, lawn tennis and also in athletics namely Saniya Mirza, Saina Nehwal etc. The contemporary women in India serve as MLAs, MPs, Governors and Ministers. Many women in recent times (Pratibha Patel, Lata Mangeshkar, M.S. Subhalaxmi, Sushma Swaraj, Indira Noor, Chanda Kucher etc.) have achieved International fame. Moreover, women are joining the field of Science and Technology also.

The constitution guarantees equal status to women and a series of progressive legislations no doubt empowered Indian women yet equality as an idea needs to be embodied not just in laws, but also in the institutions and practices of everyday life. In India, a gap remains between de jure and de facto rights. This is reflected in various indicators of status of women.

Sex Ratio – The sex ratio, which represents survival scene of women has been exceptionally unfavourable to women, besides being on a declining trend right from the beginning of the century except for a marginal rise in 1951 to 1981 registered a very marginal improvement from 933 in 2001 to 940 in 2011. In some states it is much lower as 877. These are the states where female foeticide is maximum. The 2011 census found a worrying trend in child sex ratio (0-6) age group from 945 in 1991 to 914 in 2011.

Literacy Rate – Another example of discrimination against women in India is the literacy rate. The Literacy rate in India as per 2011 census is 74.04 percent, with male literacy rate at 82.14 percent and female literacy rate at 65.46 percent. Although female literacy has shown an increase from 15.34 percent in 1961 to 65.46 percent in 2011. There still exists a wide



gap of 16.48 percent between male and female literacy rate in 2011. Regional variations in female male literacy level are also wide.

Work Participation – Women’s work still continues to be the most invisible in National Accounts, despite their high levels of contribution to national economy. In low-income countries like India more than 75 percent of women’s work is in unpaid activities because much of the non-market work performed remains statistically invisible. As a result, women who perform unpaid tasks are neither economically rewarded, nor socially valued or recognized as productive members of the society. As per 2011 census female work participation rate is 25.6 while that of males is 51.7 percent. There is seen an increase from 14.22 percent in 1971 to 25.6 percent in 2011. There exists a gap of 11.38 percent in 2011. There are wide regional variations amongst the major states, ranging from as high as 47.5 percent in Mizoram to as low as 15.4 in Kerala as per 2011 census. It was only 7.3 percent in Lakshadweep and 9.4 percent in Delhi.

Political Participation– The World Bank defines participation as a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them. It is believed that equitable participation of women in politics and governance is essential to build and sustain democracy. Comprising over 50% of the world’s population, women continue to be under-represented as political leaders and elected officials. Democracy cannot truly deliver for all its citizens if half of the population remains unrepresented in the political arena. Women’s participation in mainstream political activities has important implications for the broader arena of governance in any country.

73rd and 74th amendment of the constitution provided 33 percent reservation to women in local elected bodies. Since the onset of PRI, the percent of women in various levels of political activities have risen from 4.5 percent to 25.40 percent. However, the number of women in the highest elected bodies of legislative that actually give them decision making power has never been more than 10 percent. In 2009 Lok Sabha election, the two major national parties BJP and Congress had fielded 44 and 43 women candidates as against 397 and 389 male candidates, respectively. As of December 2009, women held 58 of 543 seats in the Lok Sabha (lower house) of parliament and 23 of 243 seats in Rajya Sabha (upper



chamber). According to W.E.F. (2012). There are 10.82 percent women in parliament in India. Whereas the percentage of men is 89.18. 61 women secured seats in 2014 Lok Sabha Elections, which is only 11.23% of the total 543 seats.

Violence Against Women – The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women defines violence against women as any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm of suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. Violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of the objectives of equality, development, and peace. It violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedom by women. In all societies, to a greater or lesser degree, women and girls are subjected to physical, sexual, and psychological abuse that cuts across lines of income, class, and culture.

Despite the increasing work participation rate, Indian women are still under the clutches of violence. VAW in India is an issue rooted in societal norms and economic dependence. Discriminatory practices are underlined by laws favouring men. Inadequate policing and judicial practices deny female victims proper protection and justice. Although female participation in public life is increasing and laws have been amended, India still has a long way to go to make Indian women safe equal citizens in their own country. Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act was passed in 2005. Even then the distribution pattern of crimes against women has not changed much in the last few years, but between 2001 and 2011 the overall numbers of incidences of crime against women increased steadily and was 59 percent higher than in 2001. According to national Commission for Women, the number of complaints received by the commission in relation to crimes against women from 2008 to 2014 are as follows- 13868 (2008), 16277 (2009), 17837 (2010), 18090 (2011), 19579 (2012), 21242 (2013), 33906 (2014). This clearly shows an increasing trend in crime and violence against women in the recent years.

In reality, the status of women in contemporary India is a sort of paradox- the paradox of an egalitarian constitution with a non-egalitarian society. There is a gap between theoretical equality and practical equality. Patriarchal values and old normative structure still persist, though in a different manner. Legal protection of women's rights has little effect



in face of prevailing patriarchal tradition. Women are still victims of exploitative system operating against them. Thus, it is necessary to empower to attain gender equality in the society.

Summing up

Women have occupied a significant, albeit paradoxical place in Indian Society through ages. This is evident in historical accounts and ancient stories. Throughout, women have been viewed as the pivot around whom the family revolves.

In the vedic age, women enjoyed a privileged status, in no way less than men. After the vedic age, the position of women in society deteriorated. Further, during Muslim period the customs and traditions which advocated subordination of women exacerbated prevalent Hindu thinking of the time. Seclusion of women, for reasons of security and respectability, female infanticide and other such practices became commonplace at the time of Muslim rule and persisted thereafter. At the later period in History, during the early British regime, the situation was no better.

In independent India, the introduction of our constitution granted equal social and political rights to women. Various legislative measures intended to ensure equal rights to counter social discrimination and various forms of violence and atrocities and to provide support services specially to working women, have been taken by the government of India to uphold the constitutional mandate.

India has seen an increased percentage of literacy among women and women are now entering in professional fields. The percentage of female infanticides, poor health conditions, lack of education and violence against women still persist. Even the patriarchal ideology of the home being a woman's 'real domain', and marriage being her ultimate destiny has not changed much. The matrimonial advertisements, demanding girls of the same caste with fair skin and slim figure or the much criticised 'Fair and Lovely' advertisements are indicators of slow changing social mores. If we look at the status of women during ancient era and in modern era, one side is promising and the other is quite bleak.

The constitutional guarantee of equal status for women and a series of progressive legislations, no doubt, empowered Indian women yet equality as an idea needs to be



embodied not just in laws but also in the practices in everyday life. In India, a gap remains between de jure and de facto rights.

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