

POSITION OF WOMEN IN INDIA THROUGH THE AGES

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ABSTRACT

After attaining independence, the government of India planned to provide women equal status as men by means of developmental programmes. But, despite much effort Indian women are still treated and occupy a low status as compared to males. Changing status of women in modern India and is based purely on secondary data. The analysis shows that although women in modern India have made a considerable progress in every sphere of life, they still have to struggle against deep-rooted patriarchal mentality of society. The Indian constitution grants women equal rights as that of men but they were never been effective to bring a remarkable change in the status of modern women. Equal footing with men is still an illusion for females because male dominance still prevails in the society.

Keywords: Equal status to women, women exploitation, women in society, status of women

Introduction

A woman is the basic unit of society. She makes a family, family makes a home, home a society and ultimately society makes a country. A country cannot progress until and unless its women take initiatives for development works. Swami Vivekananda has also said, "it is impossible to think about the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved". The status of women in India has been subjected to great changes over the past years. The status of women in social, economic, political and general- in India today is much higher than in ancient and medieval periods. Though the status of women has been raised in the eyes of law, but they are still much far from equality with males. Theoretically the condition of modern women is high however practically it is low. Women are still exploited and humiliated in modern Indian society. Status of women in modern period changes radically and can be studied in two stages: They are,

- Status of women during British rule in India and
- Status of women in post independent India.

Status of Women during British Rule in India

After the fall of Mughal Empire, the British established their supremacy over the Indian people. During British rule, lots of changes were made in the economic and social structures of our society. Though the quality of life of women during this period remained more or less the same, some substantial progress was achieved in eliminating inequalities between men and women. Social evils such as child marriage, sati, purdah, devadasi system, prohibition of widow remarriage, etc. which were great hurdles in the path of women's progress, were either controlled by the efforts of reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Vidya Sagar or removed by suitable legislations. Many women reformers such as Pandita Ramabai also fought for the disabilities of women. Women like Bhikaji Cama, Annie Besant, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kripalani etc. played an important role in India's independence struggle. Sarojini Naidu, poet and freedom fighter, was the first Indian woman to become president of the Indian National Congress and the first woman to become the governor of a state in India.

Evil Customs of society which were imposed on women

Sati

Sati is described as a Hindu custom in India in which the widow was burnt to ashes on her dead husband's pyre. Basically, the custom of Sati was believed to be a voluntary Hindu act in which the woman voluntarily decides to end her life with her husband after his death. But there were many incidents in which the women were forced to commit Sati, sometimes even dragged against her wish to the lighted pyre.

Infanticide

Infanticide or (infanthomicide) is the intentional killing of infanticide or offspring. Infanticide was a widespread practice throughout human history that was mainly used to dispose of unwanted children its main purpose being the prevention of resources being spent on weak or disabled offspring. Unwanted infants were usually abandoned to die of exposure, but in some societies, they were deliberately killed.

Purdah

Purdah practice that was inaugurated by Muslims and later adopted by various Hindus, especially in India, and that involves the seclusion of women from public

observation by means of concealing clothing (including the veil) and by the use of high-walled enclosures, screens, and curtains within the home. The practice of purdah is said to have originated in the Persian culture and to have been acquired by the Muslims during the Arab conquest of what is now Iraq in the 7th century AD. Muslim domination of northern India in turn influenced the practice of Hinduism, and purdah became usual among the Hindu upper classes of northern India. Purdah system was also an obstacle in the empowerment of Indian women.

Child Marriage

Child marriage has been traditionally prevalent in India. Girls were usually married before they attained puberty and if by any chance parents failed to find a suitable match within the age limitation of 6 to 10 years, they suffered religious and social disgrace.

Widowhood

Condition of widows in India was very pitiable. They were not permitted to carry long hair or wear colored cloths and ornaments. They were considered very unfortunate persons of society. As an offshoot of child marriages, widowhood also became rampant. In 1921, the number of widows was 759 and their number increased to 1515, within the period of 10 years.

Dowry

Dowry crimes and sexual abuse were the commonest forms of violence against women in society. Most societies have been characterized by payment at the time of marriage. These payments typically go hand-in-hand with marriages arranged by the parents of the respective spouses.

Polygamy

Polygamy during the Joseph Smith research period became very common in all sections of society. Men could easily take a second wife even when the first wife was alive. In fact, men got the freedom to marry any number of times.

Devadasi

Devadasi originally described a Hindu religious practice in which girls were “married” and dedicated to a deity (Deva or Devi). In addition to taking care of the temple and performing rituals, they learned and practiced Bharatanatyam and other classical Indian arts. Society never considered the habit to be beneath the dignity. Women became mere things of luxury; it gave the birth of prostitution.

Domestic Violence

An unnoticed form of violence, which takes place in the four walls of our domestic spheres called domestic violence. Silence of the four walls writes many stories sprinkled with blood. Domestic violence was very common in British period. Where a man beaten a woman, they continued to live together in the system of domestic violence. History of the society speaks about the unspeakable cruelties' women were subjected to in the protected walls of domestic sphere.

Women during British period

Illiteracy

Low literacy level of Indian women has been one of the major impediments in the way of women's empowerment. Illiteracy and semi-illiteracy keep women in the state of asset lessness. According to the official educational Report of 1838 there existed then in Bengal and Bihar as many as 100,000 schools, that is about one school for every 400 children. But in 1912 G.K. Gokhale stated that there was at this time only one school for every six villages in India.

Poor Health Rate

Under the British rule, medical facilities were very few. There were no satisfactory medical facilities. The longevity of life was low. Millions of men and women did not see even their 34th birthday. There were born dead and infants, who did not live more than one year, numbered in lakhs. Millions of them were disabled. In 1947, the estimated figure of deaths during childbirth was about 2,00,000 every year.

Approaches for Women Empowerment

In the 18th century, when the Britishers were ruling India, a degree of political orderliness was brought in India and some modifications took place in the social structure through legislative measures for better condition of women.

Women Empowerment through Education

In the early years of the British rule women's education remained slow. Their achievements were very little till the end of the 19th century. Margaret E. Cousins stated that only one out of all hundreds of India's girls get primary education, only one out of every thousand girls get secondary education. Brahma Samaj a modern reform movement gave it a great impetus. Members of the Brahma Samaj wrote journals for the promotion of women's education. Many Muslim reformers were also come forward to rescue the state of affairs prevailing in the country. Number of Muslims decided to educate Muslim women, so that

they could understand the irrights and duties which provided them Islam.

Empowerment of Women through Social Upliftment

During the British period many reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotirao Phule, Keshav Chandra Sen etc. fought for the empowerment of women. Many women reformers such as Pandita Ramabai also helped the cause of women upliftment. Many foreign missionaries started taking interest to improve the social condition of India. Brahma Samaj was against the social customs which had rooted in Indian religion included childmarriage, polygamy, limited rights to inherit property and seclusion of women. Raja Ram MohanRoy's efforts led to the abolition of the Sati practice in 1829. Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar raised his voice in favour of the marriage of widows.

Women Empowerment through Political Achievements

During 1900 AD, the condition of Indian women may be said to have been its lowest ebb. Then by the time of 1940s, the tide of social, educational and political honor for women had risen very high then India has (80) women members in the Legislatures of its combined provinces and states, and at that time India got third rank amongst the nations of the world as regards the political status and partition secured by its women. At 1914, the entry of Annie Besant into the Indian politics increased national consciousness in women. Indian women joined Home Rule League with great enthusiasm. At the Calcutta Congress three women occupied the place of power and honor.

Women Organization

Women organizations like All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) emerged. Women of the organization were grappling with the issues relating to the scope of women's participation in political spheres, women's franchise, communal awards and leadership roles in political parties. These organizations developed their critical consciousness about their role and rights in their homes, society and nation. This resulted in the introduction of the franchise and civic rights of women in the Indian Constitution. In 1941 over 80 women members have been elected legislators. It forms a new chapter in history of Indian women. It was the time when they foot their steps in new phase of time.

Empowerment of Women through Economic development

Indian women also availed of the opportunity to be recruited. Medicine and education were the two main fields where women gained entry as early as late eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. It was proposed that trained female nurses should

be introduced in the hospitals. And as an effect of this proposal, the trained nurses were being appointed in the hospitals of towns of Madras and the first time a female native doctor was appointed in the Bareilly Lunatic Asylum in 1869. European and Anglo-Indian women had already been working as nurses, midwives and doctors. A resolution regarding women in practical midwifery was also passed in 1869. Again, stress was laid on the training of female native teachers in Bombay Presidency. Almost Indian women employed in all the departments at the clerical and higher administrative posts. The maximum number of Indian women working in the post and telegraph department, held a variety of postings like as 68 in the clerical grades while 17 worked as telephone operator while one was on the post of an inferior staff, whereas not even a single European female was employed. In the Education, Health and Lands Department seven women were working on important posts. After Independence first competitive examination for the two All-India Services (IAS & IPS) was held in 1948. But women's entry was restricted only to the IAS, as they considered unsuitable for the IPS. It was the year of 1951 when the first lady stepped in the arena of IAS, where before then existed the monopoly of the male sex.

Status of women in Post Independent India

A revolutionary change has taken place in the status of Indian women after independence. Cultural and Structural changes reduce exploitation of women to a great extent and provide equality of opportunities to women in various fields. The women have left the secured domain of their home and are now in the battle field of life, fully armored with their talent. Now, there is no arena which remained unconquered by Indian women. Female activists also united over issues as female infanticide, gender bias, women's health, women's safety and women's literacy. Some notable positive changes which took place during this period are;

- In 1966, Indira Gandhi became the first- women Prime Minister of India and served on that post, for an aggregate period of fifteen years and becomes the world's longest serving women Prime Minister.
- In the field of politics, women like Indira Gandhi, Jayalalitha, Mayawati, Vasundhara Raje, Usha Bharti, Shriya Dixit, Mamta Banerjee, etc. proved themselves and make Indian women feel proud. From a time when there were no women writers in India, today names like Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri etc. can put any other writer to Shame.

- Kiran Bedi, Mother Teresa, Bachendri Pal, Kiran Majumdar, Kalpana Chawla, Meira Kumar, Pratibha Patil etc. are those names from different fields which set examples for others.
- Along with being achievers, women of modern India are fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers.
- Women are now regularly performing duties that are traditionally assigned to males. The income of one man is no longer enough in the modern expensive culture, so fluctuations in the economy have made it necessary for a woman to obtain a career, in order to provide the essential funds to support and maintain the family.
- In the 1990s, grants from foreign donor agencies enabled the formation of new women oriented NGOS. Self-help groups and NGOS such as self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) have played a major role in the advancement of women's status in India.
- Many Women have emerged as leaders of local movements, for example, Medha Patkar of the Narmada Bachan Andolan.
- The Government of India declared 2001 as the year of women's Empowerment. The National Policy for the Empowerment of women was also passed in 2001.
- Women are actively participating in the democratic process and elections which is quite impressive in enhancing their Status.
- Today modern women in India are entering in to all kind of professions like engineering, medicine, politics, teaching etc. They are joining the universities and colleges in large numbers. Infact, India has the largest population of working women in the world, and has more numbers of doctors, Surgeons, Professors than the United States.

Some notable negative changes which took place during this period are

- According to UNICEF's 'State of the World Children-2009' report, 47% of Indian's women aged 20-24 were married before the legal age of 18, rising to 56% in rural areas. The report also showed that 40% of the world's child marriages occur in India. The birth of the girl child was considered inauspicious. In villages as well as in cities, the girl child was killed before or after birth.
- In 2011, Government stated India was missing three million girls and there are now 48 less girls per 1000 boys. The gap between the two genders is a direct response to the

gender bias within India. Men and Women in India have unequal health and education rights. Male education and health are a more priority. Women's death rates are increasing.

- A 1997 report claimed that each year at least 5,000 women in India die due to dowry. In 2011, the National Crime Records Bureau reported 8,618 dowry deaths.
- According to Renuka Chowdhary, former Union Minister of women and Child Development, around 70% of women in India are victims of domestic violence.
- 11,332 women and girls are getting trafficked every year.
- Rape in India has been described by Radha Kumar as one of India's most common crimes against women.
- In India, acid attacks on women who dared to refuse a man's proposal of marriage or asked for a divorce are forms of revenge. The numbers of acid attacks have been increasing.

Thus, on one hand women are climbing the ladder of success, on the other hand, they are also suffering from atrocities of male dominated Indian Society.

Government initiatives for Women

Numerous legislative measures have been enacted by the Government to uplift the status of women in India. They are;

- (i) The Employees State Insurance Act, 1948
- (ii) The Plantation Labour Act, 1951
- (iii) The Family Courts Act, 1954
- (iv) The Special Marriage Act, 1954
- (v) The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955
- (vi) The Hindu Succession Act, 1956 with an amendment in 2005
- (vii) Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956
- (viii) The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 (Amended in 1995)
- (ix) Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961
- (x) The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971
- (xi) The Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1972
- (xii) The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976
- (xiii) The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006
- (xiv) The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 1983
- (xv) The Factories (Amendment) Act, 1986

- (xvi) IndecentRepresentationofWomen(Prohibition),Act1986
- (xvii) CommissionofSati(Prevention)Act,1987
- (xviii) TheprotectionofWomenfromDomesticViolenceAct,2005.

Besides legislative provisions, a number of welfare schemes and programmes, both at central and state level have been operated by different department and ministries. There are;

1. Mahila Samridhi Yojana (MSY), 1993
2. Indira Mahila Yojana, 1993
3. Swadhar, 1995
4. Support to Training and Employment programme for Women (STEP), 2003
5. Ujjawala, 2007
6. Dhanalakshmi, 2008
7. Sabla scheme, 2010
8. National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW), 2010
9. Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP)
10. Women Development Corporation Schemes (WDCS)
11. Indira Priyadarshini Yojana
12. SBI Sree Shakti schemes.

Thus, a number of efforts have been made for women's social, economic and political benefits, yet they were never been effective, to bring a remarkable change in the situation.

Yet one can't deny that the situation has improved since the earlier times. As compared with past, women in modern times have become powerful in various fields and have achieved a lot but, in reality they have to still travel along way.

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