



Status of Women through Ages in India

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Abstract

The status of women is one of important aspects to study in every era. In Ancient Indian society status of women is some extent satisfactory. In recent years the role of women has undergone some drastic changes due to globalization and commercialism. This paper investigate whether the status of women in modern Indian society regarding Equality, Education, Health, Employment, Marriage and Family life, Race and Gender, Religion and Culture is maintained or deteriorated. It also explores that as the society is developed in 21st century the position and respect of women is deteriorated after so many constitutional provisions what are the factors behind it.

Keywords: Society, status, rights, participation, patriarchy, community.

Introduction

Any study of civilization is incomplete without study the status and position of women in it. Women constituted the keystone in the arch of Indian civilization. Indian civilization based on the spirit that women's cause is men; they rise or sink together, dwarfed or godlike, bond or free. One of the best way to understand the spirit of civilization and to appreciate its excellences and to realize its limitations is to study the history of the position and status of women in it. As far as education is concerned, the Ancient Indian Women enjoyed deny them the right to education.

Women enjoyed freedom and participation in public life show that the sense of justice and its play developed in a community. The laws of marriage and customs serve as guide to evaluate partner. His co-operation was must for the happiness and success of the family. The extent to which women were freedom to choose their partners in life. Her management of their household as also the recognition of their proprietary rights indicates man's capacity to control the natural love of self, pelf, power and possession, which is so deeply implanted in the heart of every human being. The position and status of women did not remain constant through the period of our study. Gods are pleased with where women are held at honour remained merely an ideal and in actual practice she was treated as Sudra. She was under the influence where she is given of her parents, as an adult, of her husband and as a widow of her sons. The freedom of women is also circumscribed. If she is girl and a young women or even by an aged one she cannot do anything independently even in her own house. There was gradual deterioration in her status and position. Ancient Indian society was found wanting in establishing the footing equality of man and woman. There was greater erosion in her status and position in medieval and modern period. Those countries which don't respect women

have never become great. The main reason why our race is so much degraded is that we have no respect for these living images of Shakti. If we do not raise the women who are living example of the Divine mother, don't think we have another way raise¹.

Objectives of the Study: i. To study the status of women from ancient Indian society to modern times. ii. To study status of women is maintained or not.

A debate is going on regarding the status of women in primitive communities. The ideas that the primitive people were barbaric have led some to conclude that women had been subordinate to men. In early uncivilized societies the communities had not yet emerged from barbarism and there hardly existed any checks on the tyranny of men over women. In primitive life the muscle was an indispensable element in success and the man was stronger in it than women. Physical power, bodily vigour and muscular strength thus naturally established man's permanent superiority over women. So the position women occupied in Hindu society at the dawn of civilization during Vedic age is much better than what we ordinarily expect it to have been.

During Vedic period the society had certainly left behind the state of food gathering and hunting. Women held a position of honour because of her participation was found to be necessary in the production process. During this, the husband and wife are called dampati. It is indicative of the society in which relations between the sexes were based on reciprocity and autonomy in their respective spheres of activity. They took equal part in the sacrificial rites, pressed the Soma, rinsed and mixed it with milk and offered adoration to gods. A woman frequently associated themselves with folk assembly and participated in its deliberations, but in modern time situation is

so deteriorate that on Panchayat level government gave thirty three percent reservations to women but after elected by public they do not utilize their power, their husband cherish their power and take the decisions, and participate in folk assembly. If we look in the period of the later samhitas, woman on satisfactory position. A woman was considered as an equal partner with man in the responsibilities and duties at home. She was initiated into Vedic studies after her upanayana (Initiation Ceremony). Sita was described as offering sandhya prayers, i.e. ritual prayers which were offered with mantras in the morning, noon and evening. She was not an obstacle in the path of religion and her presence and co-operation were absolutely necessary in religious rites and ceremonies. At the beginning of 500 B.C. upanayana came to be discouraged for girls and it was declared that marriage was the substitute disastrous consequences on the general status and dignity of women².

The participation of women in productive activity such as agriculture, manufacture of cloth, bows, arrows and other war materials was at the root of freedom and better status of women in the Vedic age. Their position began to deteriorate when the cheap or forced labour of the enslaved population or of the Sudras became available to the society. The lowering of the marriageable age of women from 16 or 17 to 18 or 19 and practice of Sati were obviously the consequences of the deterioration in their status. The deterioration in the status and position of women began from 300 B.C. onwards. They come to be considered as fickle-minded, who could be easily, won over by one who is handsome and can sing and dance well. In the *Anusasana Parva* of the Mahabharata we are told that Yudhishthira prayed to Bhishma to enlighten him regarding the nature of women. He prefaced his prayer with the statement. It is said that women is the root of all evils and she is narrow minded. Bhishma agreed and lures. She is not endowed with strength of will enough to resist temptation. She is always stands in need of protection by men. Elsewhere in the Mahabharata we find Bhishma extolling them. Women should always be adored and treated with love. For where women are treated with honour, the very gods are said to be propitiated. Where women are not adored, all acts became fruitless. If the women of a family, on account of the treatment they receive, indulge in grief and tears, that family soon becomes extinct. Those homes which are cursed by women meet with destruction such homes lose their splendor, their growth and prosperity would cease. This contradiction in Mahabharata shows society's lack of confidence in the nature of women. Though it was forthright in ideal sing women hood and recognizing women as symbol of purity, righteousness and spirituality. Tara, Sita, Draupadi, Ahalya and Mandodari are the five ideal and revered women. The attitude of Buddha, a born democrat, was in no way different though he granted to women the rights to the monastic life and found an order of Nuns. A moral feminine in equality is pointed out in the Jalaka stories. According to the Jatakas "of all the snares of the senses which ignorance sets before the unwary, the most

insidious, the most dangerous, and the most attractive is women." The want of sympathy by Buddhism towards women was based on the belief that a woman is nearer to the world than man. Even by founding the order of Nuns, the Buddha does not indicate that he was broad-minded enough to establish the equality of sexes.

Education: In the Rig Vedic Period women took part in the intellectual life of the society. After Upanayana ceremony, this took place as regularly, as that of boys. They devoted their time, till their marriage, to specialize in Vedic theology and philosophy. After marriage both husband and wife took equal part in the sacrificial rites. The authorship of some Vedic hymns is ascribed to women and in fact there are twenty such Women authors. These celebrities attained great eminence as philosophers. In the Upanishadic period there are references to women of high intellectual attainments. Gargi Vacaknavi is one of the example. Maitrey, the wife of Yajnavalkya is represented as holding with her husband philosophical discussion on the relationship of the universal soul (Paramatma) to the individual soul. These examples demonstrate the height of intellectual and spiritual attainments to which as women could rise. Some ladies took teaching carrier and they were known as Upadhyayas. The new term had to be coined to denote lady teacher's shows that Women teachers were numerous. The Puranas also speak of lady teachers and Bhagavata refers to two daughters of Dakshayana as experts in theology and philosophy. This high note about the education of women was not to continue for long. After 300 B.C. the situation changed and the right to study came to be denied for women. It is possible that girls in the well to do families were not denied of educational opportunities. Since higher education was not permissible for girls, they were given training in fine arts like music, dancing and painting from early times. In fact they were recognized as feminine accomplishments³.

The ganikas or the courtesans and nautch girls had a recognized place in the social life in South India. They were proficient in fine arts like music and dance. They were even honoured by village assemblies for their public benefaction. In course of time they looked down upon when the dancing girls attached to the temples (devadasis) fell into immorality and these fine arts came to be regarded as fit only to such girls. Some women went in for military and administrative training. Kautilya speaks of a female body guard and directs that the king on getting up from bed shall be received by troops of women armed with bows. Around the beginning of the christen era the doors of Vedic knowledge was closed to women.

Marriage: Hindu writers attach great importance to the marriage of a woman. Woman is the very source of purusharthas, not only Dharma, Artha and Kama, but even Moksha. It was a social and religious duty and necessity. It was obligatory for girls as there will be more pit falls in the path of

an unmarried woman. Thinking is same in modern period. Although the society is change, ways of working and living is changed.

In the Vedic age girls were normally married after puberty. The Mahabharata favours the marriage of well-developed and grown-up girls. Draupadi, Kunti, Sita, Uttara, as also Devayani were fully grown-up at the time of their marriage though in the early times it was usual for girls to be fully adult before the marriage. There is tendency in the sutra texts to lower the age of marriage for girls. Around 200 A.D. the child marriage was gradually coming into vogue. Marriage usually took place among the couple of the same class and caste but sagotra, sapravara and sapinda marriage were prohibited, as the demands arise in this modern time, the Khap-Panchayata demands the changes in Hindu marriage act 1957 which allows same gotra, and marriage in same village. The sutras permit anuloma (male of higher caste marrying a lower class female) and Smritis regards such marriages a legal. The progeny of anuloma unions inherited the caste of the father. Marriages were generally arranged by the parents of the couple though there are references to love marriages. Perfect harmony and happiness was expected in conjugal life.

Right to Property: The study of the evolution of the proprietary rights of women is both important and instructive. It is important because the evolution unfolds before us the economic independence and prosperity that women enjoyed in the society. It is instructive because with the gradual decline in her status in the society. The couples were the joint owners of the household as well as the property. At the time of marriage the husband declare that he would not violate the rights and interest of his partner in the economic matters. The joint possession secured her numerous rights and privileges. It gives her an absolute right of maintenance against the husband. By and large the Hindu jurists never made a sincere effort to secure women an absolute equality with their husbands in the ownership of the property of the family. Free India has however corrected this grave injustice to Women. The law-givers have recognized the claims of wife to Sridhana (Women's Special Property) which consisted of the bride-price, gifts given by the husband even subsequent to the marriages. Later landed property came to be included in the Sridhana. The law relating to the inheritance of Sridhana varied from region to region. If a women died childless and if her marriage was not according to approved forms, the Sridhana devolved on her parents or brother; otherwise it was inherited by her children. In Eastern India brother less daughters were entitled to patrimony. The situation changed after 300 B.C. sisters having brothers denied a share in the patrimony. In free India according to Hindu Succession Act. daughter have equal share in the property inherited from their forefathers. But due to some social pressure and people make the mind set of girls is like that they did not take her own share from the property. This is situation in Middle class of Indian girls in 21st century.

Divorce: The sacred law states that the marriage union was indissoluble once the seven steps had been taken together. There was no place for divorce. An errant wife was denied of most of her rights; still the husband had to maintain her, if demanded. However, she could not remarry. Careful examination of the dharma sutra literature suggests that abandoning of wife/husband was permitted well before the beginning of the Christian era under certain well defined circumstances. Manu does not blame a wife if she left her a husband who is impotent, insane or suffering from an incurable or contagious disease. Manu permits remarriage of such wife. Kautilya is more liberal to women in matters of marriage, contract and divorce. A woman can remarry when her husband was abroad for long time, if he suffered from incurable disease or was sterile, if he had become an out caste, if he was bad in character or was guilty of high treason or was dangerous to her infertility or if she failed to give birth to sons. Divorce on the ground of ill feeling was also possible by mutual consent but not of the will of one party alone. Manu permits the wife to contract a second husband under the defined circumstances, appears to be unsympathetic to the cause of the wife. The above all rules completely forgotten by Gupta time when divorce becomes almost impossible for the people of higher classes. In Modern time divorce is easily possible. Indian Panel Code gave such rights to women but Indian Middle class society consider the divorce women inferior in categories and faults lies on her head.

Prostitution: Ancient India contained one class of women who mixed freely with men. They were free from restrains which matrons had to observe. They are called as ganikas (Courtesans) and Vesyas (prostitutes). In the literature the prostitute is depicted as a beautiful, accomplished and wealthy. Women enjoying a position of fame and honour. She was to be thoroughly trained in sixty four Kalas (arts). These included music, dancing, singing and acting etc. the ganikas or the courtesans enjoyed a great social standing and they had nothing in common with such women in modern industrial cities. They were particularly proficient in fine arts like music and dancing. They were honoured by the people for their expertise in those arts as also for their public benefactions. Typically of such respected and honoured courtesans was Ambrapali, the noted courtesan of Vaishali: She was immensely wealthy, highly intelligent and famous throughout the civilized portions of India. She was one of the most treasured possessions of her city, and mixed on equal terms with princes. She was a Sri-ratna (jewel of a woman).

South Indian inscriptions record the role that the ganikas played in contemporary society. They suggested how by their charms and wiles the ganikas enslaved and disturbed the courts and cities. The records of the chalukyas, cholas and other dynasties show the been interest the ganikas showed in charities. By the time of the Mauryas the institution of prostitution had come to stay.

We learn from the Arthashastra of Kautilya a prostitute noted for her beauty, youth and accomplishments was appointed superintendent on a salary 1000 pangs per annum. She not only looked after the welfare of the prostitute but arranged for their education in the relevant arts. Prostitutes were employed by the state as spies. They had to carry a license from the state to carry on their profession by paying two days earning a license fee to the government. They attended the court regularly and also worked in the royal household on a fat salary. As in Indonesia prostitution is legally permitted in modern time. Secular view was favorable to prostitution. The religious view regarded it as an evil and disapproved it.

Widows: A cultured society regarded widows as almost non-entities, humiliated them, and considered their very look an inauspicious. Sati system is disgraceful for living. It is true that they were permitted to hold property in their own right, but this did not improve their position.

The evidence in the Rig Veda regarding the widow is too meager to form any idea of her position. If the position enjoyed by women in general is any guide, then it can be said that the position of widow was much better. The discussion on the question of widow remarriage and upholding the right of widows in her husband's property is further proof to the non-prevalence of sati in the Vedic period.

The custom of sati was not vogue in India down to 400 B.C. There is no reference to the custom in the Buddhist literature and the Arthashastra of Kautilya. Stray references to sati occur in the Mahabharata. Four wives of Vasudeva and five wives of Krishna committed sati, but Satyabhama, another wife of Krishna retired to the forest. Similarly, Madri, the second wife of Pandu, committed sati, but not Kunti.

The custom of sati began to gain popularity among the ruling classes from around 400 A.D. and some smritikas make mention of it, though they do not hold it as an ideal for the widow. Even then, it was not that widespread. Queen Prabhavati Gupta of the Vakataka dynasty did not commit sati, while Yasomati, mother of Harsha did. During the first half of the seventh century A.D. contemporary social thinkers and writers abhorred the custom become evident from the following statement: "To die after one's beloved is most fruitless. It is a custom followed by the foolish. It is a mistake committed under infatuation. It is a reckless course followed only on account of haste. It is a mistake of stupendous magnitude. Some thinkers like Angirasa, Harita extolled the custom of sati and it began to gain popularity in north India. All along the practice was confined to the ruling classes; a few of the brahmana families began to follow it around 1000 A.D. A reference has been made to the practice of Niyoga in the Vedic period. The Vedic literature and the dharma sutras allow remarriage of widow generally those who opposed this were not against the remarriage of child widows. According to Smritis, a woman can remarry with the recitation of the sacred.

Women have contributed to the progress of humanity in every age. They are the agents of change. They have contributed significantly towards nation making. The status of women is a significant reflection of the social justice in the society. In modern Indian society, there are many constitutional guarantees and legislative measures to protect them; but the literacy rate of women is not so high and work participation for women is also low.

The constitution of India has incorporated some special provision for increasing the status of women in India. From 1950 with the introduction of the democratic constitution, it has granted equal social and political rights to women. There are certain constitutional provisions⁴: i. Article 14 guarantees that the State shall not deny equality before the law and equal protection 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 women and child, iii. Article 16 provides for equality of opportunity in matter of public employment. iv. The State to direct its policy towards securing for men and women equally the right to an adequate means of livelihood (Article 39(a)); and equal pay for equal work for both men and women (Article 39(d)), v. The State to make provision for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief (Article 42), vi. To promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India and to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51(A) (e)), vii. Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) 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 D(3)). viii. Not less than one-third of the total number of offices of Chairpersons in the Panchayats at each level to be reserved for women (Article 243 D (4)). ix. Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the total number 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 (3)). x. Reservation of offices of Chairpersons in Municipalities for the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and women in such manner as the legislature of a State may by law provide (Article 243 T (4))

Legislative Provisions

Various legislative measures intended to ensure equal rights, counter social discrimination and various forms of violence and atrocities and to provide support services especially to working women have been enacted by the Govt. to uphold constitutional mandate. Women may be the victims of crimes such as 'Murder', 'Robbery, cheating etc, the crimes which are directed specifically against women, are characterized as

'Crime against Women' which are classified under two categories viz,' The crimes identified under the Indian Penal Code like Rape, Kidnapping or abduction for different purposes, Nomicide for dowry, Dowry deaths, or their attempts, Mental and physical torture, Molestation, Sexual Harassment and Importation of girls etc and (ii) The crimes identified under the special law like: - Employees State Insurance Act, 1948, The plantation labour Act.1951, Family Courts Act, 1954, The special Marriage Act, 1954, The Hindu marriage Act, 1955, The Hindu succession Act, 1956, The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, Medical Termination of pregnancy Act, 1971, The Contract Labour Act, 1976, The equal Remuneration Act, 1976, The child Marriage Restraint Act, 1979, Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 1983, The Factories (Amendment) Act, 1986, Indecent Representation of women (Prohibition) Act, 1986 and Commission of Sati(Prevention) Act,1987. Protection of women under domestic violence Act, 2005³.

Special Initiatives for Women

Some special initiations have been taken in recent years in this regards viz: i. National Commission for Women In January 1992, this statutory body with a specific mandate to study and monitor all matters relating to the constitutional and legal safeguards provided for women, review the existing legislation to suggest amendments wherever necessary was set up. ii. Reservation of women in Local Self Govt. The 72nd and 73rd constitutional Amendment Acts passed in 1992 by Parliament ensure one-third of the total seats for women in all elected offices in all Rural and Urban Local Bodies. iii. The National Plan of Action for the Girl Child (1991-2000 AD) The Action Plan is to ensure survival, protection and development of Girl Child with the ultimate objection of building up a better future for the girl child. iv. National Policy for Empowerment of women, 2001 The Department of Women and Child Development in the Ministry of Human Resources Development has prepared a 'National policy for Empowerment of Women in the year 2001. The goal of this policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women.

At present a number of women's organizations have created a sense of consciousness for gender equality but rape, dowry deaths, humiliations, Honour Killing domestic violence and other atrocities against women have become common in our society today. Women constitute half of the population and their contribution to the country's economy is tremendous. But their number in the parliament is just around 8 percent which is highly minimal. Now the government of India has been implementing various schemes and programmes for the welfare and empowerment of women in the area of Poverty, Alleviation, skill up gradation, development and sustainable income generation, education. Health services, awareness generation, legal literacy and support services. Development and empowerment of women has been a thrust area in five

year plan. But even after so many implementation and provisions position of women is not satisfactory. Recently the Gang Rape in Delhi, after it gang rape in Mumbai, we heard in news every day at least one news of gang rape, no preventative measure is present in the society.

Aarushee Murder Case, Naina Sahni Murder Case, Honour Killing in Rohtak is the taint on humanity. If we consider legal provisions are sufficient to control the crimes against women and it provides safety, security and status to the women then we say modern society is retrogressive on the pole of women status not progressive. Out of universe of 137 countries, India's gender related development ranks 103rd. Life expectancy at birth is 60.7 as compared to 60.7 of males. As for gender empowerment, India ranks 93rd out of a universe of 174 countries. It had 8.01 % women in the last parliament and the proportion of administrators and managers is only 2.3% while the professional and technical workers are 20.5%.

In Indian society, there is very little value for the fact that in the totality of things, men and women have different qualities, they are complementary to each other and their relationship should not be one of superior and subordinate. As compared to man's greater muscle power, women have greater capacity to care and nurture. Women live longer and can withstand more stress; they have more patience, perseverance and tenacity. They have fewer egos, and more capacity to give service, and these are attributes which form the essence of being.

Conclusion

Through this study we come on conclusion that as the women have equal participation in human development. She is half of the human race. But she lack in society. Women is not treated with respect as in the ancient Indian society. Lot of crime against women is seen in modern society. Constitutional provisions are not sufficient to get the respectable position in society. Some certain changes inside mind-set of women as well as man is required. Everybody tries to understand that there is division of labour in society some essential role is played by every pole in society so why we consider women is secondary to men. In Modern times technology developed, globalization and commercialism come in to existence but the status and position of women is rather deteriorated.

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