

Status of Women in India: Improved or Deteriorated?

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Abstract: The status of women in India is in such a condition that needs a serious check on the growing imbalance in the society. This paper analyses the status of women in ancient, medieval and modern India and examines whether it is improved or deteriorated from the beginning.

Keywords: Constitutional safeguards, Sexual harassment, Status of women, Women degradation.

INTRODUCTION

According to Jawaharlal Nehru, "You can tell the condition of the nation by looking at the status of women." A phrase of Manusmriti, "Na Stree Swathantryam Arhati" (woman is undeserving for independence), reflects our whole attitude towards women in our country. Woman suffers discrimination and injustice in all stages of her life (Malhotra, 2009).

Though India is developing economically and technologically by leaps and bounds, the status of women is in a pathetic condition that needs a serious check on the growing imbalance in the society. The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. From ancient times through the medieval period, to the promotion of women rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful (Prema, 2012).

This paper addresses the status of women in India, improvement or deterioration that has occurred over the ancient period to the current times.

WOMEN IN VEDIC PERIOD

Literary and historical researchers have established beyond that the Women enjoyed a respectable position in the early Vedic society. They had freedom to choose husbands. The wife was the mistress of the house. They participated in public meetings. They held a position of equality with man during the Vedic period. Both the girls and boys were imparted Vedic studies. The importance of woman education is described in the Atharva Veda. It states, "The success of woman in her married life depends upon her proper training during the BrahmaCharya". There were women scholars like Lopamudra, Visvavara, Ghosha, Sikata, Nivavari and Apala. They were treated equally. Re- marriage of widow was permitted. The brother of the deceased husband could marry the widow with the permission of the elders. Some scholars are of the opinion that the widow could marry any person, not necessarily the brother of the deceased husband. According to Shakuntla Rao, the Rig-Veda does not mention anywhere the practice

of the burning or burial of widows with their dead husbands (Bader, 2001).

But their position changed in the Later Vedic period. There was a decline in the status and dignity of women during the Later Vedic period. Women were subordinated. Submissiveness was considered as an ideal virtue of a wife. Women were not allowed to participate in public affairs. They could not own property. Child marriage was not prevented. Widow remarriage was not allowed. Though monogamy was the rule, polygamy was practised. Women degradation started from the later Vedic period (Rajagopalan, 2008).

Though the degradation started in later vedic period, there were also great woman scholars during Buddhist period. Sanghamitra, the sister of the great emperor Ashoka, went to Ceylon to spread Buddhism. Ten married and 32 unmarried women were among the authors of Theragatha. Even in the Jainism period, the woman had an access to the education. Yayant, princes, remained unmarried and received ordination from Mahavira himself. One can say the women before 300 B.C. enjoyed a high status and dignity.

The political condition appears to have had their impact on the status of women. There were invasions during the period 300 B.C. to A.D.300 by the Greeks, the Scythians, the Parthian and the Kushans. The political reverses, the atrocities due to war and the decline of prosperity, produced a detrimental effect on the society. The status of widow was badly affected. Remarriage of widows was stopped and they were asked to devote themselves to an ascetic life at home. Some scholars are of the opinion that Upanishadic, Buddhistic and Jaina influence of asceticism is responsible for neglecting the daughters. many young women renounced their homes and joined the Buddhistic and the Jaina monasteries. one of the reasons of early marriage of girls was perhaps to prevent them from entering the monasteries as nuns.

WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

The status of Indian woman in the society further deteriorated during the medieval period.

The tonsure (shaving of head) of the widow was enforced by about the eighth century A.D. The Muslim conquest in the Indian subcontinent brought the purdah practice and was widely used in the middle class families. Among the Rajputs of Rajasthan, the Jauhar was practised. In some parts of India, the Devadasis or the temple women were sexually exploited. Polygamy was widely practised esp. among Hindu Kshatriya rulers. In many Muslim families, women were restricted to Zenana areas.

Even with their status deteriorated, some women excelled in the fields of politics, literature, education and religion. There were women like Razia Sultana, Nurjahan, Chand Bibi wielded imperial power. Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi, Rami Janabai were some of the saint-poets (Adhav, 2012).

- Sati - Sati is an old, largely defunct custom, in which the widow was immolated alive on her husband's funeral pyre. Although the act was supposed to be a voluntary on the widow's part, it is believed to have been sometimes forced on the widow.
- Jauhar - Jauhar refers to the practice of the voluntary immolation of all the wives and daughters of defeated warriors, in order to avoid capture and consequent molestation by the enemy. The practice was followed by the wives of defeated Rajput rulers, who are known to place a high premium on honour.
- Purdah is the practice of requiring women to cover their bodies so as to cover their skin and conceal their form. It imposes restrictions on the mobility of women, it curtails their right to interact freely and it is a symbol of the subordination of women. It does not reflect the religious teachings of either Hinduism or Islam, contrary to common belief, although misconception has occurred due to the ignorance and prejudices of religious leaders of both faiths.
- Devadasis - Devadasi is a religious practice in some parts of southern India, in which women are "married" to a deity or temple. The ritual was well established by the 10th century A.D. In the later period, the illegitimate sexual exploitation of the devadasi's became a norm in some parts of India.

Altekar summarises the pathetic condition of women as, "Thus for nearly 2000 years from 200 B.C. to A.D. 1800, the position of woman steadily deteriorated though she was fondled by the parents, loved by the husband, remarriage, the spread of purdah and the greater prevalence of polygamy

made her position very bad." There was a marked deterioration in the status of woman in the medieval period.

WOMEN IN MODERN INDIA

The important reason of the change in the social status of women in the nineteenth century is the acceptance of the tenets of liberal philosophy from the Western civilization. It emphasized the principle of contract not the status, a rational outlook of life and its problems, freedom of speech, criticism of authority, authenticity of dogmas and insistence on the rights of man as opposed to his duties.

During the British rule, many reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Dayanand Saraswati, Keshab Chandra Sen etc. fought for the upliftment of women. Raja Rammohan Roy's efforts led to the abolition of the Sati practice under Governor-General William Bentinck in 1829. Ram Mohan Rai established Bramasamaj and advocated the principle of freedom of women and equality of sexes. The untiring effort of Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar promulgated the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 and thus widow remarriage became legal (Pruthi et. al., 2001).

During the period from about 300 B.C., there was practically no education for women. Few women of the upper castes and upper classes had some education at their homes. The Dharm Sastra writers made women along with shudras ineligible for Vedic studies. The social reformers of nineteenth century also attempted to educate Indian girls. By the end of the nineteenth century the women not only became teachers in girls schools, they also entered the profession of nurses and doctors. The entry of women in professions indicated the marked change in the outlook of men and women in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Considering the progress made by the girls; education, it is beyond any doubt that the credit goes to Rammohan Rai who advocated for the women education in the beginning of the century.

In the last decade of the 19th century, Swami Vivekananda also gave a great impetus for the liberation of women from seclusion and bondage. He said, "That country and that nation which did not respect women have never become great nor will ever be in the future." He advocated the liberation of women and equality on the basis of the vedantic ideals that state. "One and the same self is present in all beings." According to him, the helplessness and dependence of women on man are due to the training given to her by men. In case she is not governed tyrannically her hidden power will make her a lioness. He emphasized that proper education will enable her to solve her problems and having independent thinking.

Women played an important part in India's independence struggle. Some of the famous freedom fighters Annie Besant, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Aruna Asaf Ali, Durgabai Deshmukh, etc. The great campaigner and leader of social and political movements, Gandhi could see and realize the importance of the participation of the women who constitute 50% of the Indian population. He declared that no nation can prosper without participation of the women and men together. It is important to include Sarojini Naidu was the first woman to become the governor of a state.

WOMEN IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity (Article 16), equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)). In addition, it allows special provisions to be made by the State in favour of women and children (Article 15(3)), renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51(A) (e)), and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief. (Article 42).

Women in India now participate in all activities such as education, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology, etc. 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 women's rights in India. Many women have emerged as leaders of local movements. The Government of India declared 2001 as the Year of Women's Empowerment (Swashakti). The National Policy For The Empowerment Of Women came was passed in 2001 (Menon-Sen and Kumar, 2001).

CONCLUSION

Though the status of women in India appears improved from earlier ages, women here still continue to be discriminated. Declining sex ratio portrays our discrimination shown towards her even at the stage of birth. Census 2011 shows our national sex ratio as 940:1000 (940 females for 1000 males), and this will lead to detrimental social problems if not corrected. The main reason for this is female infanticide. Strict measures should be taken for the implementation of Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation & Prevention of Misuse) Act 1994, which prohibits any prenatal diagnostic techniques and sex selective abortions.

According to Mahatma Gandhi, "If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate an entire family." Our predominant patriarchal system doesn't provide enough chances for women to have higher education even if they wish. Girls should be motivated to take up higher education. Universal

education for all below 14 years should be strictly implemented. There is an urgent necessity of framing gender sensitive curricula at all stages of primary education to address sex-stereotyping menace.

Dowry still remains the major reason for all the discrimination and injustice shown to women. Dowry has always been an important part of Hindu marriages. Not only among Hindus, its evil tentacles are now spreading to other religions also. Although dowry was legally prohibited in 1961(Dowry Prohibition Act), it continues to be highly institutionalized. Women should be more economically empowered and should be educated properly regarding the various legal provisions such as Section 498ACrPC, protection from domestic violence etc. Only then this evil menace could possibly be eradicated from Indian social system.

Women should be allowed to work and should be provided enough safety and support to work. Legislatures such as Equal Remuneration Act, Factories Act: Constitutional safeguards such as maternity relief, and other provisions should be strictly followed. Half of the total number of crimes against women reported is related to molestation and harassment at the workplace. Eve teasing is a euphemism used for sexual harassment or molestation of women by men. Many activists blame the rising incidents of sexual harassment against women on the influence of "Western culture". Detailed guidelines for prevention of such grievances laid down by the Supreme Court should be followed to set women free of sexual harassment.

The incidents of domestic violence are higher among the lower Socio-Economic Classes (SECs). The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 should be followed strictly in such instances. In many families, especially rural ones, the girls and women face nutritional discrimination within the family, and are anaemic and malnourished. The maternal mortality in India is the second highest in the world. Most women deliver with help from women in the family who often lack the skills and resources to save the mother's life if it is in danger. This can be avoided if Government health services reach all people even in remote places.

True empowerment will only be reached when women take part actively in the decision making process of our country. The recently passed Women Reservation Bill that entitles to provide 50 per cent reservation of seats for women in the local bodies is an encouragement towards achieving women empowerment. But despite all these measures, there should be a strong determination among every man that every woman in this country should be honoured. Only then empowerment in its true meaning will be realized.

Swami Vivekananda had said “That country and that nation which doesn’t respect women will never become great now and nor will

ever in future” and in pursuit of making India a great nation, let us work towards giving women their much deserved status.

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