

Contextualizing the Status of Women in India**Sanjay Prasad**

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Abstract

The status of women is one of the most important issues among the social scientists. The concept of status is a very wide term which includes all the aspects of human life like demographic, educational, occupational, familial, legal, social, political, moral, economic and psychological concerns of life. All these aspects of status are inter-related and inter-dependent. A woman like any other person occupies different positions at a point of time because of her multiple roles and enjoys or suffers to certain degrees due to attached advantages or disadvantages. In India, during the Vedic and the Upanishadic period, women enjoyed equal status with men. The Indian civilization produced great women ranging from Brahma-vadinas (Lady Rishis) to stateswomen, from ideal wife to warrior queen. During the post- Vedic period, they started losing their status in the society, which they attained in the Vedic age. They lost their independence and became a subject of protection. Manu, the progenitor of the Hindu race stated that a woman should be kept day and night in subordination by the males of the family. The woman had to be protected by her father in childhood, by her husband in young age and by the sons in old age. During the Medieval period, the socio-economic status of women further deteriorated. Social evils like Purdah system, child marriage, female infanticide and the custom of Sati became rampant. Lack of education, early marriage, absence of absolute property rights, non-existence of employment opportunities were the main causes of inequality of sex in the socio-economic field. With the advent of the British rule in India during the 2nd half of the 19th century, the newly educated section of the Indian society realized that the western society was dazzling with the idea of equality, whereas that of India was full of discrimination based on caste and gender. Thus, with the assistance of a handful of educated Indian elite, the British ruler took up the task of bringing out the more orthodox dimension of rigid Indian cultural life and henceforth the women's issue became important.

Keywords: Woman, Gender, Discrimination, Development, Status, Empowerment

Introduction

The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. With a decline in their status from the ancient to medieval periods to the promotion of equal rights in modern periods by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. In other words, the subject centering the status of women has become one of the most important issues among the social scientists. The concept of status is a very wide term which includes all the aspects of human life like demographic, educational, occupational, familial, legal, social, political, moral, economic and psychological concerns of life. All these aspects of status are inter-related and inter-dependent. A woman like any other person occupies different positions at a point of time because of her multiple roles and enjoys or suffers to certain degrees due to attached advantages or disadvantages.

Objective of the Study

In new social history, history of common people in India including the women has become an integral part of the human civilization. If the socio- economic and cultural aspects of the women-folk are taken into consideration from the "subaltern point of view", its diversity would be discernible before us to a great extent. Investigation regarding the life of the woman community will result in the enrichment of our understanding of Indian culture as a whole. Besides that, the paper aims to ascertain the necessity of women empowerment, to assess the awareness of women empowerment, to analyze the factors influencing the economic

empowerment of women, to study the schemes and policies launched by the governments for women empowerment, to identify the obstacles in the path of women empowerment, to identify the evidence on how women's empowerment affects important development outcomes such as health, education etc., to create awareness among women to be truly ambitious and to dream for their own betterment, to increase awareness among woman community for their development to use their talent optimally not only for themselves, but also for the society as a whole and many more.

Review of literature

In recent times, while there has been a massive deluge of research works and publications in different fields across disciplines, there also exists certain areas of study which have remained neglected or have attracted very little attention from scholars.

Jasodhara Bagchi (1995) has examined the role of the Indian woman in various relevant contexts in her edited book, *Indian women, Myth and Reality*.

Tanika Sarkar (2001) in her "Hindu wife, Hindu Nation: Community, religion and cultural nationalism" has analyzed the important Hindu notions and traditions of India that have shaped the dominant conceptions of womanhood, domesticity, mothering and of India as a Hindu nation. She has also discussed literary and social traditions; the elite voices and popular culture that helped create the lived reality of north India. The way of transformation of earlier Indian religious traditions, sacrifice, heroism and warfare by militant and fundamentalist forms of Hinduism has also found place in her book.

Geraldine Forbes (2004) in her "Women in Colonial India" has examined how the lives of Indian women started to change significantly in the 19th century, when the colonial government, critical of the treatment of both Hindu and Muslim women, found allies among Indian reformers. Keen to reform their own society, these men agreed that women should be educated and play some role in public life. By the end of the 19th century, Indian women were attending schools and colleges, becoming teachers and doctors, writing works of fiction and essays about their condition, joining organizations to promote social reform and participating in political meetings. They were referred to as 'new women', and like the next generation who joined the freedom movement, they entered public spaces reserved for men.

In her another book, "Women in Modern India", Geraldine Forbes (2008) has explained the reform movement established by men to educate women, and demonstrated how education changed women's lives enabling them to take part in public life. It also exhibits how through their own accounts of lives and activities, women documents the formation of their organization, their participation in the struggle for freedom, their role in colonial economy and development of the women's movement in India since 1947.

Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (2008) in their edited book, "Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader" have explained that social

reforms aimed at changing the social, political, or economic status of women in India were important both to the British colonial rule and to nascent nationalist movements. Debates over practices such as widow immolation, widow re-marriage and child marriage as well as those governing marriage and property within different religious communities continued to exert profound influence on Indian society and politics throughout the 20th century.

Thinking Gender, Doing Gender, the book edited by Uma Chakraborty (2016), aims to explain that gender was acknowledged as a useful and necessary category of analysis in different fields, such as culture, film, media and sexuality in 1980s.

In "Interrogating Motherhood (Theorizing Feminism)", Jasodhara Bagchi (2017) reveals that an understanding of motherhood is vitally important to understanding Indian society. The ideas and practice of motherhood changed once India became a part of a global capitalist system, from the colonial period to present day market driven globalization. It analyzes the complexities between motherhood and mothering (when the concepts are glorified but the women remain subordinate). It also describes the vulnerability of motherhood to the coercion of invasive technology and pressures of patriarchy, when a woman must not only be a mother but also the mother of a son.

Despite all these and other note-worthy works, some integrated works on the plight of women right from the beginning of ancient times to today's world is always imperative and welcome.

As far as the status of women in India is concerned, it can be analyzed by dividing it into three parts-

1. Status of women in Ancient India
2. Status of women in Medieval India
3. Status of women in Modern India

Status of Women in Ancient India

Scholars believe that in ancient India, women enjoyed equal status with men in all aspects of life¹. However, the role of women in Hinduism is disputed with positions ranging from a status equal to men to a restricted life². Hinduism is based on a number of texts, some of which date back to before 2000 B.C. They vary in authority, authenticity, content and theme. The most authoritative texts are the Vedas. The portrayal of women is dependent on the specific text and context. References are made to the ideal women in texts such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, while other texts such as Manu-Smriti advocates restricting women's rights³.

In ancient India, women occupied a very important position, in fact a superior position to men. It is a culture whose only words for strength and power are feminine – "Shakti" means "power" and "strength", male power comes from the feminine. Literary evidence suggests that king and towns were destroyed because a single woman was wronged by the state. For example, Valmiki's Mahabharata teaches that all the Kauravas were killed because they humiliated Draupadi in public.

In Vedic times, women and men were equal as far as education and religion was concerned. It is important to note that when God is worshipped as

"Divine Couple" by Hindus, the name of the feminine typically precedes that of masculine. For instance, we say that we are worshipping "Sita-Ram", "Radhe-Shyam", "Uma-Mahesh", or "Sri-Vishnu" and so on. The Rig-Veda places woman on a high pedestal of sublimity: where woman is worshipped, Gods preside there. Will Durant (1885-1981), American historian says: Women enjoyed far greater freedom in the Vedic period than in later India. She had more to say in the choice of her mate than the forms of marriage might suggest. She appeared freely at feasts and dances and joined with men in religious sacrifice. She could study and like Gargi, engage in philosophical disputation. If she was left a widow, there were no restrictions upon her marriage⁴.

The 126th hymn of the first book of the Rig Veda was revealed by a Hindu woman, whose name was Romasha. The 179th hymn of the same book was revealed by Lopamudra, another inspired Hindu woman. There are a dozen names of woman revealers of the Vedic wisdom, such as Viswara, Gargi, Apala, Ghosha. Every one of them lived ideal life of spirituality, being untouched by the things of the world. They are called, in Sanskrit, Brahmadinis, the speakers and revealers of Brahman. The Rig Veda reveals a stage where women enjoyed equal status with men. "...a Rig Vedic hymn describes how a maiden could take a soma twig and offer herself as a sacrifice to Indra. Vedic sacrifices were performed jointly by husband and wife. Patriarchy never denied women their rights and privileges. From 4th century B.C to 3rd century B.C, girls were given education. But this was particularly confined to the well-to-do-families. There existed the initiation ceremony or Upanayan, for both girls and boys. Education was regarded as very essential to secure a suitable marriage⁵.

The idea of equality was most forcibly expressed in the Rig Veda (Book 5, Hymn 61, and Verse, 8). The commentator explains this passage in these words: "The wife and husband, being the equal halves of one substance, are equal in every respect; therefore both should join and take equal parts in all work, religious and secular". No other scripture of the world has ever given to the women such equality with the men as the Vedas of the Hindus.

The noted historian, Romesh C. Dutta writes, 'women were held in higher respect in India than in other ancient countries, and the epics and old literature of India assign a higher position to them than the epics and literature of ancient Greece. Hindu women enjoyed some rights of property from the Vedic age, took a share in social and religious rites, and were sometimes distinguished by their learning. The absolute seclusion of women in India was unknown in ancient time'.

However, with the passage of time, position of women went down. Women, who once enjoyed an honoured position and are found in the Upanishads conversing freely with men upon the highest philosophical topics, had become virtual slaves in the joint family. With the expansion of the Vedic religion in the northern India and possibly also under the impact

of threats from the outside, a new definition of the place of woman in the Aryan society emerged, which amounted to increasing restrictions of their independence and a clear preponderance of patriarchal rule. Several Dharmashastras mention the restricted role of women, such as the Manu Smriti : Her father guards her in her childhood ; her husband guards her in her youth, and her sons guard her in her old age. A woman is not fit to act on her own. To Manu, all women are prone to Vyabhichara, which is inherent in their nature. She should not be independent at any stage of life. Manu also recommended early marriage for women. The bride should be eight, while the groom should be twenty four. However, the literature of Kalidasa displays contrary examples. Neither Sakuntala nor Malabika were eight years old. On the other hand, Manusmriti along with the Arthashastra are the sources concerning women's right to property (Stridhan-wife's property).

Status of women in Medieval India

Medieval India was considered the 'Dark Age' for the Indian women. Medieval India saw many foreign conquests which resulted in the decline in women's status. The real history of India in the Medieval Period is a struggle for political power and economic supremacy between two systems which were totally different in their outlook. The incursion of Muslims in India began with the Arab invasion of Sind in the beginning of the 8th century A.D. The large majority of Muslims who came to India were Turks, Afghans and Persians. "And thus for the first time in recorded history, Indian religion and social systems were faced with a system which was equally formulated and definite"⁶.

When foreign conquerors like the Turks, Afghans and Persians invaded India, they brought with them their own culture, which in some cases adversely affected the condition of women and in some cases emancipated them. Over the ages in India, women have been treated as the sole property of her father, brother or husband and they have not been given any choice or freedom of her own. One more reason for the decline in the status of women and their freedom was that original Indians wanted to shield their woman-folk from the barbarous Muslim invaders. As polygamy was a norm for these invaders, they picked up any woman they wanted and kept them in their harems. In order to protect them, Indian women started using Purdah i.e. a veil, which covers the body. Due to this reason, their freedom also became affected. They were not allowed to move freely and this led to the further deterioration of their status. These problems related with women resulted in changed mind set of people and they began to consider a girl as a misery and burden. All these circumstances gave rise to some new social evils such as child marriage, Sati, Jauhar and restriction on girl education. As far as Polygamy was concerned, it was practiced among Hindu Kshatriya rulers for some political reasons⁷.

Created by the so-called law-givers and upholders of religion in the medieval age, it literally induced physical as well as intellectual damage on

women. It took away her morale which was as expectedly delicate. Above all, it resulted in the emotional break-downs and traumas of a serious kind. Thus, her self-concept received another lethal lash at the hands of the dark forces that ruled the roost. The condition of the Hindu widows became more miserable during the medieval period. Rigidity of the caste system denied them the right to freedom and social mobility. Inhuman treatment was offered to the widow. She was forced to lead a life away from worldly pleasures. A widow was also secluded from society as well as family. Another pre-requisite for a widow was shaving the head. She was thus humiliated mercilessly by contemporary society. The condition of the Muslim widow was slightly better owing to the fact that she could marry after a certain lapse of time following her husband's death. The feudal society of the time encouraged "Sati", which meant self-immolation of the widow. By burning herself on the pyre of her husband, she used to prove her loyalty. Even the child widows were not spared from this gruesome ritual. "Because of the continuous wars, there were chances of too many widows, young and old, and a big question was how to accommodate them without bringing stigma to the family or creating problems for society"⁸. There was another horrible practice of "Jauhar", by which, the Rajput women used to immolate them collectively with a view to protect their chastity, whenever it was very much endangered. Prostitution became a recognized institution. The Devadasi system, which was prevalent among the Hindus and the courtesans, who adorned the court of Muslim rulers, degraded the status of women in society. Under the Devadasi system, women were the brides of gods. But they were supposed to entertain kings, priests and even members of the upper classes. The fact that they were exploited by the existing male-dominated society is clearly revealed in the testimony of Al-Beruni: "the kings make them an attraction for their cities, a bait of pleasure for their subjects, for no other but financial reasons".

In spite of these restrictions, some women in Medieval India excelled in the field of politics, literature, education and religion. Razia Sultan became the only woman monarch to have ever ruled Delhi. The Gond queen, Durgavati ruled for fifteen years before she lost her life in a battle with Mughal emperor, Akbar's general, Asaf Khan in 1564. Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri states, it is a maxim of the Hindus that no good deed can be performed by men in the social state without the partnership or presence of the wife, whom they have styled the half of the man. Chand Bibi defended Ahmednagar against the mighty Mughal forces of Akbar in the 1590s. Jahangir's wife, Nurjahan effectively wielded imperial power and was recognized as the real force behind the Mughal throne. The Mughal princesses, Jahanara and Zebunnissa were well known poetesses and also influenced the administration. Noted historian, P.N. Chopra writes, 'whatever might have been the position of a woman as a girl, bride and widow in the Mughal period, she (mother) certainly occupied a

most respectable position in society as a mother"⁹. The Bhakti movement tried to restore woman's status and questioned some of the forms of oppression. Mirabai, a female saint poet, was one of the most important Bhakti movement figures. In South India, many women administered villages, towns and divisions, and ushered in new social and religious institutions.

Status of women in Modern India

The status of women in Modern India is a sort of paradox. If on one hand, she is at the back of ladder of success, on the other hand, she is mutely suffering the violence afflicted on her by her own family members and others. There were many women reformers in India, who worked for the uplift and betterment of their female counterparts in the colonial period. The Begum of Awadh discarded the 'Pardah' and fought in the Revolt of 1857¹⁰. In the same Revolt of 1857, when the Indian soldiers protested to follow the orders of the British officials, queen of Jhansi, Laxmibai fought bravely against the British soldiers and laid her life for the cause of the nation. Jotiba Phule with his wife, Savitribai Phule endeavored for the uplift of women in Maharashtra. Many reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar undertook various measures to eradicate social stigmas associated with woman community from the society¹¹. Among many, the Widow Remarriage Act was introduced in 1856. The education system was also elevated. English was introduced in this period and some female English writers like Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Das made their presence felt in this period. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan established the Aligarh Muslim University for the spread of education among the Muslims.

Indian women's entry into politics started like their male counterparts with India's independence movement. However, the Indian women's entry into political arena was more a matter of design and accident than a matter of plan and premeditation¹². At the initiative of Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant, Indian women got encouraged to participate in the various stages of the freedom struggle right from the Swadeshi movement in 1905¹³. By the second decade of the 20th century, Indian women organized themselves and formed powerful women's organizations and demanded political rights from the British government¹⁴. It was only with the advent of Gandhi that we see a major rupture in the story of women's involvement in the nationalist movement. Gandhi, in conceptualizing the ideal Indian womanhood, shifted the focus from motherhood to sisterhood, by negating women's sexuality. It was in South Africa that he had realized the power of selfless sacrifice that women could offer and decided to harness it in the service of the nation¹⁵. The Women's India Association (1917) was the first women's organization of this kind that demanded voting rights for Indian women. Women's participation in the freedom struggle was note-worthy also. Kasturba Gandhi, Madam Bhikaji Kama, Sarla Devi, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kripalani, Priti Lata Waddedar etc. are only a few to have out of many. There are several

instances like this. But for fulfilling their dreams of political equality and justice, to some extent, they had to wait up to the independence. However, the story of women's role in the nationalist struggle is not simply one of marionettes who were told when to march and where to picket. First, the numbers of women who played some role in this movement, however small, far exceeded expectations. The nature of their work influenced how women saw themselves and how others saw their political contribution to national development. At the same time, their involvement helped to shape women's view of themselves and of their mission¹⁶.

In the post-independent India, we have series of laws such as The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act of 1956, The Hindu Succession Act of 1956, The Hindu Women Right to Property Act of 1973, The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, The Equal Remuneration Act of 1976 etc. passed for the upliftment of women. These legislations have been brought in order to give equal rights and privileges with men, to eliminate discriminations against women, remove inequality between sexes, and remove external barriers coming in the way of their self-realization and development. But, only making laws and enforcing them is not enough, there is a need of social awakening and change in the mindset of masses, so that there should be no discrimination on the basis of gender¹⁷. In last few years, the most positive development, in this regard, has been the growing involvement of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions¹⁸, which has proved a mile-stone in the empowerment of women in India.

Findings/ Result

The Indian constitution asserts that women are legal citizens of the country and have equal rights with men. But due to lack of acceptance from the male dominated society, they suffer immensely. Women are held responsible for bearing children only, but they, themselves, are malnourished. Women are over-worked inside as well as outside the home. The poor state of the women is not just restricted to the rural areas but extends to the so-called urban civilized world. Even the so called educated and highly paid white collar job holders behave with gruesome savagery and unbelievable ruthlessness when it comes to the matters related to women in their families

Suggestions

The bottom-line to the empowerment of women in India is their economic independence. The whole thing could be resolved if people understood the concept of freedom properly. Freedom means each person in every role respects other's liberty and dignity. This respect should be accorded both at work and home. Unfortunately, conception of freedom and dignity are not known to us properly. The idea that women should choose their life, career, future etc. is anathema to many Indians. Besides, active education must come into play in the empowerment of women. Though laws for equal opportunity exist in India, its real enforcement is bleak. Again, the law and order machinery is so flawed that it can't possibly provide

the desired level of security to the women. And finally, women must join the politics actively to lead their community from the front.

Conclusion

There is no denying the fact that women in India have made considerable progress in the last fifty years. Yet, they have to struggle against many handicaps and social evils in the male dominated society. Social problems like honour killing, dowry, infanticide, sex selective abortion, domestic violence etc. are still prevalent in the society. Several acts have been passed to demolish all these problems but concrete results are yet awaited. Besides that, a large majority of women in the villages or women of low caste still suffers from injustice and inequalities. If we notice at them properly, we will find that no social change of much importance has been brought among them. Most of the women in the villages are still illiterate and superstitious and rarely participate in the political, social and economic activities of the nation. Rural women have remained backward due to tradition, ignorance, superstition, social evils and many other factors. Hence, emancipation of women in rural India is an essential prerequisite for social progress of the nation.

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