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The Changing Position of Women in Indian Society

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Abstract

The worth of a civilization can be judged by the place given to women in the society. One of several factors that justify the greatness of India's ancient culture is the honourable place granted to women. During the early Vedic period, women enjoyed a position of high status and equal rights with men in all aspects of life. The Muslim influence on India caused considerable deterioration in the position of women. They were deprived of their rights of equality with men. Raja Ram Mohan Roy started a movement against this inequality and subjugation. The contact of Indian culture with that of the British brought improvement and upliftment in the position of women. The third factor in the revival of women's position was the influence of Mahatma Gandhi who induced women to participate in the Freedom Movement. As a result of this retrieval of freedom, women in Indian have distinguished themselves as teachers, nurses, air-hostesses, booking clerks, receptionists, doctors and so on. They are also participating in politics and administration. But in spite of this amelioration in the status of women, the evils of illiteracy, dowry, ignorance, and economic slavery would have to be fully removed in order to give them their rightful place in Indian society. This paper analyzes the role, power and position of women in Indian society.

Key words: women, status, deterioration, upliftment

Introduction

The very word 'woman' is a symbol of eternal mystery and enchantment, as if it is not enough that she is flesh and blood, but that she must be something higher than what she is. And so she is never asked to take part in the incessant activity of this workaday world. Woman, it seems, was created to make the world more beautiful and man more ardent in his appreciation of beauty. Man is the maker of the world, and woman's duty is to make him a home. She has no place in the world of work outside her home. It is as if men were born to rule and the women to be ruled. And so our society remains absolutely in control of men. But in spite of all the obstacles, the grim struggle and dedication of those women who dared to question has made possible the emergence of the 'new woman'. So the development of woman as the human resources of the country has been recognized as a crucial factor in the national progress and development. And empowerment of women is empowerment of family or household and in turn development of a nation of a country.

Indian culture also attaches much importance to woman. India is symbolized as Mother India, keeping in view the exemplary qualities of women namely, patience, endurance, love, care, sympathy and generosity. Jawaharlal Nehru said, "to awaken the people it is the women who must be awakened". 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 ways 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. The Indian woman has passed through various phases of civilization, but she continues to be dominated and ill treated by the male sex. So, in order to understand the issues involved in women's development one needs to know the historical perspective of women's development.

Position of Women in the Ancient Period

In previous times, the position of women in India was inferior to men in the practical life. However, they are considered as the perfect home maker in the world. Indian women are completely devoted to their families. They are preached in the names of Goddess Saraswati, Goddess Durga, Parvati and Goddess Kali. According to the historians, the early Vedic period women had the same educational and social opportunities as men. They enjoyed a position of high status and respect. Ram Ahuja (1994) points out

that in Vedic period, Indian women had ample rights and were not treated as inferior or subordinate but equal to men. These references are available from the works of Grammarians such as Katyayana and Patanjali. According to ancient Hindu scriptures no religious rite can be performed with perfection by a man without the participation of his wife. Wife's participation is essential to any religious rite. Married men along with their wives are allowed to perform sacred rites on the occasion of various important festivals. Wives are thus befittingly called 'Ardhangani' (betterhalf). They are given not only important but equal position with men. Rig Vedic verses suggest that women get married at a mature age and were probably free to select their own husbands (R.C. Majumdar & A.D. Pusalker: 1951). This system was known as 'Swayamvar'. Scriptures such as the Rig Veda and Upanishads mentioned several women sages and seers, notably Gargi and Maitreyi. In fact, during this time, women had superior position than the males. But with the development of the idea of private property woman gradually lost her independent position. Her physical weakness and other disadvantages gave an excuse for the assignment of an inferior status to her. By 500 B.C again the status of women began to decline with the Smritis especially Manusmriti. The code of Manu summoned her position that she should be protected in all her stages of life from childhood to old age as she is never fit to be independent. It was Manu's Code which became a part and parcel of the Hindu Law. The Epics and Puranas also equated women with property; a few Puranas treated them no better than beasts. Thus, in Later Vedic Period, women were looked down upon as creatures worse than depraved men.

Position of Women in the Medieval Period

The position of women in India deteriorated during the medieval period with the entrance of the Muslims. According to Padmini Sengupta (1974), Muslim period was regarded as the black period in the history of women. Women were deprived of their rights of equality with men during this period. Several evil practices such as female infanticide, sati, and child marriage were practiced during this period. 'Purdah' was introduced to the society. Women were forced to practice 'Zenana'. We can notice uniqueness there in the life of women of this period. The Islamic invasion of Babur and the Mughal Emperors curtailed women's freedom and rights. Though movements such as Jainism and Buddhism allowed women to be admitted to the religious order, by and large, the women in India faced confinement and restrictions. Among the Rajputs of Rajasthan, the Jauhar was practised. In some parts of India, some of Devadasis were sexually exploited. Polygamy was also common during this period. A male Mohammedan was allowed to have four wives at any one point of time. He could divorce any one of them merely by pronouncing 'Talaq'....'Talaq'...three times.

In spite of these conditions, women often became prominent in the fields of politics, literature, education and religion. They were also rulers during this period. Some great women rulers were Razia Sultana became the only women-monarch to rule the throne of Delhi for fifteen years before she was defeated in a battle with Mughal emperor Akbar's general Asaf Khan in 1564. Jehangir's wife Nur Jehan effectively wielded imperial power, and was recognized as the real power behind the Mughal throne. She is still considered as the most effective rulers by the society. Chand Bibi defended Ahmednagar against the powerful Mughal forces of Akbar in the 1590s. The Mughal princesses Jahanara and Zebunnissa were wellknown poets, and also influenced the ruling powers. Shivaji's mother, Jijabai, was deputed as queen regent because of her ability as a warrior and an administrator. In South India, many women administered villages, towns, and divisions, and ushered in new social and religious institutions. The Bhakti movements tried to restore women's status and questioned certain forms of oppression. Mirabai, a female saintpoet, was one of the most important Bhakti movement figures. Other female saintpoets from this period included Akka Mahadevi, Rami Janabai and Lal Ded. Bhakti sects openly advocate social justice and equality between men and women. Immediately following the Bhakti movements, it was Guru Nanak, the first Guru of Sikhs, preached equality between men and women. He advocated that women be allowed to lead religious assemblies; to lead congregational hymn singing called Kirtan or Bhajan; to become members of religious management committees; to lead armies on the battlefield; to have equality in marriage, and to have equality in Amrit (Baptism). Other Sikh Gurus also preached for the inclusion and fought against the discrimination of women.

In spite of these powerful women, the condition of poor women remained the same. At this time girls were forced to get married at a very tender age. The society also practiced Sati which was originally a voluntary act of self-immolation by a widow on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. The southern India also practiced Devdasi tradition where girls were forced to get married to trees or deity. So, all these practices had brought down the status of women to a meaningless position. In other words, the position of women in medieval era was no better than of slave.

Position of Women during the British Period

For a long period English East India Company remained indifferent to female education. They did not recognize the promotion of any kind of favour to women. Gradually changes occurred in the economic and social structure of our society during the British rule and some progress was achieved in eliminating inequalities between men and women due to industrialization and spread of education through the Christian missionaries. The Christian missionaries even brought a revolution in the society by highlighting the social evils existing within the Hindu social institutions. Western education was responsible for the new patterns of thinking leading to rationalism and liberalism. Missionaries like Mr. Play and Ms Mary Ann Cooke deserves great mention in the cause of female education. There were many social reformers in India who worked for the uplift and betterment of women. During the British Rule, the social movements initiated by many social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda, Jyotiba Phule, Maharshi Karve, Swami Dayananda Saraswati played an important role for equal rights of women and as such these movements succeeded in arousing social consciousness for the liberation and equal status of women. The first social reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy advocated the abolition of Sati and the Act for the abolition of Sati was passed in 1892. The other social reformers also worked for the cause of women. After all they have made everything safe and secure for women. The Purdah system and early marriages were severely condemned by them. The earliest women's organization was women's Indian Association founded by Dr. Annie Besant in Madras in 1917. Furthermore the western system of education and policies generated a new platform for the flourishing of the Indian women. Nineteenth century Bengal especially Calcutta witnessed the rise of women education and the formation of social legislations in order to improve their conditions. Some important legislation, namely, Hindu widows' remarriage Act 1856, Child marriage restraint Act 1929, Hindu women's right to property Act 1937 were enacted for the upliftment of women from their miseries.

Position of Women during the Freedom Struggle

During the Freedom Struggle it was recognized that economic development must include women. Mahatma Gandhi encouraged women to actively participate in the freedom struggle. Gandhi's contribution to the cause of women upliftment was very significant. Gandhian politics allowed greater potential for women to their subjectivity and for empowerment. He also viewed that women education was a powerful media. Some famous women freedom fighters, such as, Bhikaji Cama, Dr. Annie Besant, Pritilata Waddadar, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kriplani and Kasturba Gandhi played an important role in India's independence struggle. Other notable names include Muthulakshmi Reddy and Durgabai Deshmukh. The Rani of Jhansi Regiment of Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army consisted entirely of women, including Captain Lakshmi Sahgal. Sarojini Naidu, a 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. So, they all pleaded for the rise of the end.

Position of Women in the Modern Period

The modern period can be referred to the period after independence of our country. During post-independence era, the founding fathers of India while making the constitution of India provided for all its citizens including women, equality before law and equal protection of laws (Art-14), prohibition of any discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste and sex etc. (Art-15), and equality of opportunity in matters of public employment (Art-16). The Constitution provides for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief for women and also has further empowered the State to make special provisions for women and children.

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. In 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 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. The Department of Women and Child Development in the Ministry of Human Resources Development has prepared a 'National Policy for the Empowerment of Women' in the year 2001.

As a result of the newly gained freedom, now, Indian woman have distinguished themselves in various spheres of life as politicians, orators, lawyers, doctors, administrators, diplomats, etc. They are enjoying 'ladies first' facility in different fields. There is hardly any sphere of life in which Indian women have not taken part and shown their worth.

It is a fact that women are intelligent, hard-working and efficient in work. They put heart and soul together in whatever they undertake. As typists, clerks, receptionists and air-hostesses, they are now competing successfully with men. There are many women working in the Central Secretariat. They are striving very hard to reach highest efficiency and perfection in the administrative work. Their integrity of character is probably better than men. Generally it was found that women are less susceptible to corruption in form of bribery and favouritism.

Another job in which Indian women are doing well is that of teachers. In country like India, where millions are groping in the darkness of illiteracy and ignorance, efficient teaching to the children is most urgently needed. By virtue of their love and affection for the children, the women have proved themselves as the best teachers in the primary and kindergarten schools. They can better understand the psychology of a child than the male teachers. Small children in the kindergarten schools get motherly affection from the lady teachers. It is probably significant that the Montessori system of education is being conducted mostly by the women in this country.

Women have been serving India admirably as doctors and nurses. Lady Doctors have been found to perform efficient surgery by virtue of their soft and accurate fingers. They have monopolised as nurses in the hospitals and nursing homes. Very few men have been able to compete with them in this sphere because the women have natural tendency to serve and clean. It is thus the natural tendency found in women which motivated Florence Nightingale to make nursing popular among the women of the upper classes in England and in Europe. She showed the way to women kind how nobly they can serve humanity in the hours of sufferings and agonies.

Women's contributions in politics and social services have also been quite significant. Women exercise their right to vote, contest for Parliament and Assembly, seek appointment in public office and compete in other spheres of life with men. We cannot fail to mention the name of Indira Gandhi who shone so brilliantly and radiantly in the firmament of India's politics. In the field of social service Indian women have also done some excellent jobs. They have not only served the cause of the suffering humanity but have also brought highest laurels for the country. The name of Mother Teresa should be mentioned. She brought the Nobel Prize for India by her selfless services to the poor, destitute and suffering people of our country in particular and the needy and handicapped people of the world in general. The Government is alarmed at the rapid growth of population in the rural areas in particular. Women volunteers can more easily take up the task of canvassing the advantages of family planning among the rural womenfolk. In urban areas, they can efficiently take up the task of visiting and teaching the orphans and the helpless widows in the orphanages and the widow welfare centres. They can train them in sewing, knitting, embroidery and nursing in which women by nature excel. They can also train them in the art of music and dancing.

But all this should not lead us to wrap up that the women should look down upon domestic life. The main sphere of action for them who have not taken up jobs outside should be essentially a happy home which is their real kingdom and where their sweet manners and mature advices as wife, mother, sister and daughter make tremendous effects on the male members of the family. The progress of a nation depends upon the care and skill with which mothers rear up their children. The first and foremost duty of Indian women should, therefore, be to bring forth noble generations of patriots, warriors, scholars and statesmen. Since child's education starts even in the womb and the impressions are formed in the mind of a child while in mother's arms, women have to play a role of vital importance. They have to feel and realise at every step of their life that they are builders of the fate of our nation since children grow mainly in mother's arms. They should also discourage their husbands and sons from indulging in bribery and other corrupt practices. This they can do only when they learn the art of simple living by discarding their natural desires for ornaments and a living of pomp and show.

All these show that women in India enjoy today more liberty and equality than before. They have acquired more liberty to participate in the affairs of the country. They have been given equality with men in shaping their future and sharing responsibilities for themselves, their family and their country.

Problems of Women in Modern India

Though women in India have made a considerable progress in the last fifty years but yet they have to struggle against many handicaps and social evils in the male dominated society. They are still suffering from untold miseries. Some main problems confronted by the modern women are the following:

Dual role:

The present day women are educated and outstanding. She is both the bread winner and the home maker. She is expected to perform these roles without making any compromise at any place. As she has to compete with her counterparts in his workplace, she is striving hard to prove herself. At home she has to do all the household chores and child rearing works as her husband is untrained or unwilling to take part in her burden. She is the guide, friend, philosopher, and advocate to the whole family members.

Dowry Harassment:

Even now there are dowry deaths and dowry harassment despite legislation on dowry prohibition exists. The dowry system is still practiced in our society and women are subjected to untold miseries because of dowry demand. Women, who brought in less 'Sridhans' or dowry, are harassed by in-laws and husbands. Many homicides also take place because of dowry demands. Dowry problem lead to late marriages and some women have to remain single if they cannot afford dowry.

Educational Disparities:

The literacy rates of men in the country are substantially higher than those of the females. Still today, a man's education is given preference to woman's education. The boys in the family are encouraged for higher education, whereas girls are discouraged to higher education in rural areas and even in urban areas. But the state of Kerala has higher literacy rate and educational level to the women folk as compared with those in the state like Rajasthan and Bihar. Thus women education is viewed as unproductive compared to male education as he would earn and support the parents in later life.

Sexual Exploitation:

At home, work place, everywhere women are subjected to sexual exploitation. Sexual abuses are growing in number especially girls children are sexually abused in their family by the members themselves. Even now a woman cannot go out in the night. Advances are made by men in the work place and in public places. Women are seen as sex objects. Media influences this idea. In media women are portrayed as only a thing of beauty. Sexual violence against women including rape is another major area which badly disturbs the health of women both physical as well as psychological.

Domestic Violence:

Violence not only damages the physical but also leaves a deep psychological damage in the shape of constant fear, anxiety, depression, insomnia etc. Basically incidents of violence against women are not reported because of several reasons. They are raped, sexually abused, beaten, tortured and killed. More over domestic violence's are the violation of Human Rights. To build up awareness of human rights of women are the prime solutions against different kind of violence against them.

Divorce:

In the recent times so many divorces are taking place. A divorced woman is always looked down upon. Her character is marked. She always carries a stigma. Even the remarriage do not bring any relief for her. Even after remarriage she is harassed and punished. This idea of divorce and remarriage is still not accepted in rural areas. Women have to put up with the ill treatments met doubt by her husband and his family members.

Economic Problems & Unequal Income:

Though woman claims to be educated and employed, but very rarely they enjoy economic freedom. Still women are considered to be secondary citizens who have to remain in the shadow of a man. They are not allowed to take any decision involving money. Even the

right to property or claiming of property from marital home is for the husband and his family sake. In India, most of the women in the lower economic strata are engaged in various types of economic activities but do not get equal treatments.

So, we have to fully remove the evils of illiteracy, dowry, ignorance, and economic slavery in order to give women their rightful place in Indian society. Preventive measures need to be taken to empower the status and position of women in India.

Conclusion

We have seen that women empowerment through different periods is a process of social transformation where women gain control over vital issues, resources and benefits. Through empowerment she becomes an important source of energy in the functioning of the society. Women today are the point of immense debate and discussion initiated, nurtured and maintained by men. Recently things have changed for women to ventilate and mould their ideas and thus build their own images. Women today are not the silent half of the civilization. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, providing education to a male is giving it only to a single person, while to provide education to women means providing knowledge to a whole family and from family to community and likewise. Thus she is the educator of the whole family. Through her devoted and sincere services a woman teaches its members. She inculcates good values namely respect towards others, self control and co-operation among the members of her family. She should guide the family which is the pivot of the society. Indian women have done and are still doing extraordinary things. History, literature, religion and politics give examples of women who have inspired others. In all scenarios of life, women are the elixir of life.

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