

Socio-Cultural status of Women in India: A Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Gender as a socio-cultural construct of assignment of role, responsibility, value, attitudes and status to two different sex. Women as a socio-culturally devalued gender in Indian society and the facets of valuation or devaluation has a historical perspective. In this paper attempt is made the status of women in different times and initiatives taken by society to ameliorate the condition. But in spite of several constitutional measures or different plane or policies taken by government, till date their social status has not changed. So along with Government different Non Governmental organisations should come forward for their empowerment.

1. Introduction

According to World Health Organisation Gender is a socio-culturally constructed regarding the behaviour, action and role a particular sex would perform. As a result the attitude, value and belief in connection to the role and status of a particular sex are formed. Some time the socio-cultural scenario show the pictures where women got the prominent role and sometimes negligible and curtailed the freedom in society. The progress or development of any society has direct positive relation with the status of women in that society. In the history of Indian civilisation, women dominated the social scene for a long period and were the virtual head of the families while men were busy with their nomadic life and hunting pursuits. As per the traditional bio-social theory regarding the work and responsibility division between male and female, the female are entrusted with the work of care taker, family manger, give birth to child and male are produce and controller of economic affairs. As a result the social respect and values are differenced and favours the male. Women are perceived as devalued social group in India. This devaluation has its own religious driven socio-cultural explanations and inherited patriarchal family system. In Rig Vedic era, women were admitted to full religious rights and were also having complete educational opportunities for the development of their personality (Tripathy, Prabha Chandra, 2000). They had a say in family matters, took vital decisions of life and were free to choose their own life mates. The ancient system of "Swayamvara" which is mentioned in holy scripts and in many epics is a testimony to this. Child marriage as a socio-cultural menace in the present time was not found during Vedic period. A woman in ancient India was dignified and was given due importance in the society. In short, they not only enjoy the equal status with the men of the then period but also had more prestigious position at times than the men had.

Nevertheless, in the later Vedic period, women started to lose their importance as well as the position and their status began to wane. Though several women enjoyed educational rights and acquired fame for learning, yet the social status in general was not the same as that of the Rig Vedic period. Society slowly curtailed down the freedom of the women and not allowed them to voice their opinions in family matters as well as political, social and economic matters of the society.

Polygamy began to increase and child marriage came into vogue (Mahajan, V.D., 2018). In the Aitareya Brahmana, daughter has been described as a source of misery for parents, also in the Atharva Veda its is seen deplorable condition of women, for example the widow has to lay symbolically by the side of her husband's corpse in the funeral pyre in later stage this became the *Satidaha* custom in society. During the period of Smritis, it is found a similar status of women with the sudras and they were not given the right to study the Vedas, to utter Vedic mantras and to perform Vedic rites like their male counterparts. The primary and compulsory duty of a woman is to marry and immerse in domestic life and they were restricted to lead their live in the four walls of husband's home have to work like machine.

Gautama Buddha (563---483BC) was the first religious teacher who never shared the Brahmin's view regarding women. According to him, daughters were quite as good as sons were. During this period women get the opportunity to lead a liberal and independent life and they can decide their own path of leading life. Their marriage was no longer a compulsion. The Buddha had given opportunity for women participation in the religious activities like male in the society. Like the male nuns Goutam Buddha provides opprinited for women to admit the sangha, matha or vihars as *Bhikkhuni*, although there were separate *Bhikkhuni Sangha* for them which show the example about equality between male and female. Many eminent nuns shone brilliantly in the study and practice of the religion. The Psalms of the Sisters (Therigatha) containing 77 verses by individual nuns is one of the prides of Buddhist literature (Dhammananda, 2003; Hallisey, Charles, 2015).

In sixth century BC, Jainism also came into existence. Lord Mahavira HAD ALSO AN SPIRIT OF CONSIDERATION OF EQUALITY BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE. In reality because of the gender-stereotyping that has taken place for thousands of years in a patriarchal society and the inherent biological differences between male and female, the roles prescribed for men and women are different especially in a social and cultural setup. Nevertheless, the roles played by both of them are equally important for the concerns of wellbeing of their children and family. From the evidence found in the oldest Jain texts, it

appears that among the Svetambara Jains, women were allowed to lead monastic life. However, according to Digambaras women cannot achieve liberation without first being reborn as a man. This is because women cannot live a truly austere life (they have to possess clothes since it is impractical for them to live naked). For Digambaras woman's very femaleness creates spiritual inequality (Collins, Nancy Quinn, 2018).

However, the admission of women into the Order under Buddhism as well as Jainism was a step too advanced for the period and was fleeting. Essentially, the people were unable to adapt themselves to the improved conditions and tended to regress back to the society that they were used to. Antagonistic propaganda by the Brahmins, who found their caste system destabilized and privileges giving way, was also a factor that caused the decline of the Orders.

In Mauryan period (fourth century BC), Brahmanical literature was mostly brutal in the treatment of women and assigned them a very low status in the society. Owing to the suppressed condition of women in the society of his time, it is possible that Emperor Ashoka (304–232 BC), a great devotee of the Buddha, felt the need to appoint a special group of *mahamattas* who would be concerned mainly with the welfare of women. During his time, women took part in religious preaching. Sanghamitra, who was the daughter of King Ashoka, along with her brother Mahendra went to Sri Lanka to preach Buddhism. In the smirti and Purans women are equated as a property which could be given away or taken as a loan. This socio-cultural attitude of equating women as property has a relation with typical patriarchal social system. Because of this, the socio-religious customary law during post vedic or Brahman period did not allow any proprietary rights to women. The women had her rights only jewels, ornaments or any gifts given to her which is known as *stridhana*, apart from these neither she had rights on her fathers property or in-laws property. This type of societal attitude was more prominent during Gupta (fourth century AD) and Post Gupta periods. Though according to Hiuen Tsang, the famous Chinese pilgrim (early seventh century AD), Rajyashri (the sister of King Harshavardhana) was a distinguished scholar of her time yet the broad scenario was nothing like that. The practice of using veils by women particularly in high caste families was in vogue. Actually, the earlier invaders, who came to India, looted, plundered and destroyed temples and marauding soldiers abducted young girls and women.

As life, property and the chastity of women were at immediate danger, each community strongly impose some socio-cultural norms to protect women. It can be assumed that child marriage was practised to keep the girl chaste before marriage or protect them from abduction before grown attractiveness. The widows from the upper caste had to shave their hair (mundan), so that they look less attractive to keep them safe from the lust of foreign soldiers, the wide spread practice of forceful Sati amongst martial race became the norms during this unsettled period of Indian history. Hindu women lost all their liberties and became objects requiring male protection. As a result, daughters were considered as

burden and they were reduced to doing the chores of household.

However, these evils present in medieval age were mainly confined to Hindu and Muslim society. As compared to them, other societies such as Buddhist, Jain and Christians were a bit lenient and were more liberal in their approach with respect to religious direction for women. Women in these religious driven societies enjoyed far more freedom and had easy access to education. According to these religions male and female both have same and equal opportunities for religion and salvation.

2. Women during the pre independence period

Due to the lack of self-confidence and economic backwardness of the women, male chauvinism has been completely established in the orthodox Hindu society. Most of the families as well as the society considered the female folk as material object. They did not get any regard and freedom in daily life. The spread of western education and philosophy in nineteenth century made the men concerned about the status of the other half of the society. The reformation movement was at first concentrated to abolish the sinister customs from the society. The next most necessary step was to spread female education. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the torchbearer of social reforms for the women, was strictly against this societal evils practice prevalent in his time. He is the man who has given credit for abolishing this Satidaha lawfully. It was due to his efforts and endeavour that Lord William Bentinck banned the custom of Sati in 1829. The abolition of this customary practice and enactment of law against this had not only a significant effect on life of women but also it changed mind-set of people to some extent. He wished to stop child marriage from society and start of widow remarriage system. Along with Dwarka Nath Tagore, he founded "Brahmo Samaj" for the reformation of Hindu society and emancipation of women. In this context, we must remember that the Christian missionaries established first female schools in India. Obviously, they had their own interest and the upper caste Hindu families did not show any positive attitude towards the endeavour of the missionaries. Mahatma Jyotirao Govindrao Phule was given credit for opening first girl school in India. He, after educating his wife, opened a school for girls belonging to the lower castes in 1848. This was the second girl's school in India established by the Indians. Peary Charan Sarkar who was a former student of Hindu College situated at Calcutta and a member of "Young Bengal" set up the first free school for girls in 1847 in Barasat, a suburban city of Calcutta (the school was later named as Kalikrishna Girls' High School). Mahatma Phule is one who had opened first home for widows from the higher caste and a home for newborn girl children to save them from female infanticide. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was another pillar of social reformation movement in 19th century. He widely read ancient Hindu religious texts and found that the gender discrepancy or lower status of women which was prevailing in society is not rooted in true sense in spiritual scriptures rather it was the output of nasty politics done at that time to keep women as subordinate to men. He had done a lot for widow remarriage. Due to his incessant effort, widow remarriage was legitimated in 1856. His role for spread of women education was praiseworthy. First female school in which the respected Hindu

families started to send their daughters was the 'Calcutta Female School', established by J.E.D. Bethune in 1849 (later the school was named Bethune School). His attempt was strongly supported by Madan Mohan Tarkalankar, Vidyasagar, Dakshinakaran Mukhopadhyay and others. Madan Mohan Tarkalankar sent his own daughters in that school. Vidyasagar, who was the honorary secretary of that school, established 50 female schools in Bengal in 1857 onwards. He got great support from the then Lieutenant Governor of Bengal F.J.Halliday. However, in the initial stage there was no financial backing from the Government. The venture was solely dependent on the personal funding (*Narishiksha bhandar*) of Vidyasagar and his supporters. It should be remembered that in the rural area there were no scope of girls' formal and non-formal education due to the lack of girls' school and educated parents and liberal persons in the family. Not only that, wherever there were girls' school the male teachers were not accepted by the orthodox Hindus. Another major hindrance was child marriage. At that phase, the role of Brahma Samaj was remarkable. Keshab Chandra Sen, one of the renowned leader of Brahma Samaj, wanted to train female teachers with the help of Miss Merry Carpenter (who came to India with the mission of spreading female education). He established 'Female Normal School' (1871) for women teachers' training, 'Metropolitan Female school' (1879) etc. Though several girls' schools were started at that period, yet the mind-set of the Hindu society was not favourable to enlighten the female folk. In the late nineteenth century only the women of the Brahma, Christian and educated Hindu families got the opportunities of formal or non-formal education. However, the large section of the female was in the dark. Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of Araya Samaj had translated Veda from Sanskrit to Hindi, so that common man including women can understand the vedic religious scripture and apprehend that the ancient scripture gives utmost importance on women. He emphasized for the equal rights of women and men in every facets of life. He tried to change the mind-set of people with his Vedic teachings.

Situation gradually changed in the first half of the twentieth century. The social reformers of nineteenth century although had laid down the stage for the emancipation of women from socio-cultural evil practices but it became more vibrant and spread to the mass by the initiative of Mohan Das Karam Chand Gandhi. He was the one who liberated Indian women largely from the clutches of *Purdah* and other social evils. In Gandhi's mission of free India women have participated in the struggle for independence. According to him, women should be released from the slavery of kitchen and only then, their true potential could be realised. According to him although women have a vital responsibility in household affairs but it should not be the only one duty and responsibility for them. In fact, women should come forward to share the responsibilities of nation building. It was due to his efforts female participation in the struggle for independence became visible. They came out of their homes to organise meetings and processions, to spread the message of *Swadeshi*, to sell *khadi*, to give away their jewellery and ornaments, to picket near the shops of foreign cloth. He spread the message of equality of gender to the masses and criticised the desire of Indian people to have male child instead of a female (Patel, Sujata, 1988). Gandhiji

was strictly against the child marriage and favoured widow remarriage. He said that the girls are also capable of everything that boys can do. It was mainly due to his efforts 'right to vote' came naturally to Indian women after independence whereas in other developed nations like England and America women got this right after lot of protest.

3. Women during the post independence period

After independence the government of India has tried to enact laws, rules, positive discriminatory policies and measures for safeguard of women's interest and for their upliftment due to its very spit of democracy, sovereignty and socialistic nature of governance. In the constitutional framework the divisive social forces are tried to be reduced and attempt has been made for equality in respect of caste, gender and religion etc. Also sufficient legislative measures are enacted and developmental policies are initiated to increase women participation in economic affairs by coming out of the traditional and rigid socio-cultural constraints and customs and attitudes; initiatives have been take for increasing awareness of sex equality, but the index of success of mission seems to have found among elite circles. The occupational, property and other legislations have clearly upgraded the quality of many individual women's lives. However, these changes are not indicative of any significant improvement in the status of women as a whole, especially amongst the low caste, illiterate and poor female population who are in a majority. It means Gender as a socio-cultural constructed phenomenon when inter mix with other social challenges like Caste (Scheduled caste), religion (Minority), locality (rural), it further aggravates the status.

Census 2011 shows our national sex ratio as 943:1,000 (943 females for every 1,000 males). The Declining trend in sex ratio, from 972 in the year 1901 to 933 in 2001 and 943 in the year 2011, indicates the actual deteriorating condition of women in the society. Biological evidence proves that resistant to diseases power women is more than men. Life expectancy is a proof of that. In our country, life expectancy of women is 65.27 years whereas for men it is only 62.36 years. Though women have a higher death rate until the age of 34, the probabilities of survival after this age are higher. Therefore, the ratio of female above 60 years is greater than male. However the child sex ratio (in the age group of zero to six) in India has dropped to 914 females against 1,000 males -- the lowest since Independence, in the provisional 2011 Census report released by the Government of India. Despite of laws to prevent abortion of female foeticide and schemes to encourage families to have girl child, the ratio has declined from 927 female children against 1,000 male children in 2001 to 914, which was perceived as a "matter of grave concern" by Census Commissioner of India C. Chandramauli. It portrays social discrimination shown towards women even at the stage of birth. Main reasons of this high gap in the ratio are sex wise abortions and female infanticide. Although Abortion is legal in our country but sex based abortion is a crime here (Regulation & Prevention of Misuse Act 1994, which prohibits any prenatal diagnostic techniques and sex selective abortions). However, gender wise abortions are on the rise in India. Although abortion of female foetus in society has a high relation with poverty due to son preference attitude for economic return

point of view but in some societies opposite pictures are visualised. In economically developed states such as Haryana and Punjab, the tendency is found to be more. Though there is an increasing trend in 2011 census still Punjab and Haryana remained at the bottom of the list of sex ratio. Haryana has 830 female children and Punjab 846 against per 1,000 male children. The accepted reason for practice of female infanticide in India is the existence of dowry system, where parents of girls have to pay a great deal of money to the parents of groom during marriage. By avoiding a girl, a family can avoid paying a large dowry on the marriage of their daughter.

In India dowry remains as the major point of discrimination and injustice shown to women. It has always been an important part of Hindu marriages. Not only among Hindus, are its evil tentacles now spreading to other religions also. Although dowry was legally prohibited in 1961 (Dowry Prohibition Act), it continues to be highly institutionalised. As per the prohibition of dowry Act, the precipitant and provider of dowry will be sentenced to imprisonment for 5 years and a fine of Rs 15,000 or the value of dowry if that is more. Still the practice of dowry abuse is rising in India. It is ridiculous to see that even among highly educated sections the practice of dowry is seen which is perceived as a symbol of status from both end. The statistics are more in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh but miserably, the largest IT sector of the country, Bangalore has also recorded an alarming rise (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2015).

It is found from the survey data that half of the world's malnourished children live in India primarily due to the non-availability of nutritious food to their mother during pregnancy period. In all the stages of human development i.e. prenatal, postnatal, infancy, childhood, adolescence the girls or women suffer from malnutrition purely due to the discriminatory and the narrow social attitude mentalities. This type of discriminatory attitude is more prominent among lower middle class or below the poverty line families. In the poor families where the income is not sufficient to fulfil the basic needs of life, the male members get the priority in case of food and nutrition without any consideration to the health of the females.

Poverty is a major cause of poor health and various social issues in India so also the issue of illiteracy and lack of education to girls is closely related to poverty. As per census data, 2011, literacy rate in India is 74.04%. where the male literacy rate is 82.14% and that for females is 65.46%. As per the literacy rate it shows a significant decrease of the gap in comparison to the year 2001. In the year the literacy gap was 21.59 percentage in 2001 which is reduced to 16.68 percentage points in 2011. Also trend of literacy growth is

higher among female (11.8%) where as it is (6.9%) among male in the 2001--2011 decadal period that indicates narrowing of the literacy gender gap. Nevertheless, there is huge discrepancy in between male literacy and female literacy. More boys are enrolled in primary schools than girls are. In addition, more girls drop out of school before any kind of graduation or certificate than boys do. Of course, the reason for this result of studies is the perception of the society about the role of women in the family, especially in poor areas, that women do not need education, as they have no financial responsibilities to maintain families. It is true that the people living a life below the poverty line do not have enough funds to educate all their children. Hence, they prefer giving education to boys and keep girls away from schools and colleges. Even if girls get a basic education, they are often called back to stay at home when they start their teenage in order to help their mother in chores of household. Another problem is a lack of job offers to educated women in rural areas. Usually parents consider it very unproductive to get the girl children higher educated as it end up working on a field and traditional engagement in domestic works like cooking, watering crop or taking care of cattle etc. Primarily in rural and economically back ward areas, parents hardly found any scope of engagement for their daughters. People have no better outlook on the future if they go to school. Consequently, the gender disparity in literacy rate is higher in rural areas.

Despite several Acts and schemes undertaken by the Government, women are immobilized and are mistreated inside and outside the home. Intense study reveals that the level of awareness of Government schemes is very low. Therefore, more effective publicity as well as system for monitoring women welfare and empowering programmes has to be developed. Along with the Government lots of non-governmental organisations are also involved in the process of capacity building of the underprivileged women to improve their situations economically, educationally, socially and physically.

4. Conclusion

The status of women in Indian society is basically guided or shaped by socio-cultural beliefs, attitude and practice. Vedic period was the golden time where the conservative gender differentia attitude or practices were hardly found. But gradually due to various religious and other social problems like, poverty, caste system the situation become worse. Although constitutional frame work have been enacted, developmental policies have been under taken but those cannot be fruitful to achieve the mission of equality without the change of social attitude and this direction education is suggested as best mechanism

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