

Status of Indian Women through Ages

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ABSTRACT

The status of women is the yardstick to assess the standard of culture of any age of any nation. Even though put inferior, women play a vital role in strengthening and shaping up the human civilisation.

Her status can be determined through various socio-economic and political laws and customs of society in the field of education, marriage, household-proprietary rights, religious freedom, widow remarriage, freedom to move about in society, arts, professional life, her contribution to society per se, associated social evils, etc.

The timeline to study the status of women can be divided into three periods. One, the Vedic Period where even though there existed two schools of thought regarding women's position, women, in general, enjoyed almost equal status along with men, be it in education, having a say in her marriage at the age of sixteen, dignified position in society post-marriage, widow remarriage and absence of polygamy. They had professional and economic freedom, a great religious and public life, and a taboo-free sexual life where the profession of prostitution was not considered shameful.

Everything else remaining unchanged, Post Vedic period confined women to four walls of the house and saw the introduction of the Devadasi system. Though in the later stage, Buddhism and Jainism tried and lifted her social status, they lowered her politico-economic status in society. The age of Dharmasastras and Manusmriti put a thrust on female chastity with ever-increasing male domination and thus subordinated her completely. Second, in the Medieval period, with the Arab, Turk, and Mughal invasions, women lost the rest of the available freedom and security. With all kinds of discrimination and violence in terms of preference for a male child, female infanticide, child marriages, the prohibition of widow-remarriages, purdah, seclusion, polygamy, rape, abduction, sati, and jauhar, a strong dislike towards girlchild developed.

In the last period, called the Modern period when British ruled India, the status of women was at its lowest scale. However, with the world over struggle in the 19th and 20th centuries regarding Women's Emancipation and with the effort of Indian educated reformists like Raja Ram Mohan Roy changed Sati, child marriage and widow remarriage. And finally, Gandhi's Indian National movement call paved the way for women's liberation.

Post-Independence in 1947, women's position was better to some extent. The formation of the Indian Constitution on 26th January 1950, which is the basic law of the land recognized sex-based equality as a fundamental right. Many provisions relating to women were made concerning her equality, security, and freedom. However, in the 21st century, we realise that freedom still eludes.

1. Introduction

Women play a vital role in strengthening and shaping up the human civilisation. According to Altekar, one of the best ways to understand the essence of a civilisation is to study the history and status of women and to understand its excellence and realise its limitations.

Women were initially placed in a state of absolute dependence on men which as per time passed was deliberately modified and later relaxed. The various socio-economic and political laws and customs of society pertaining to women in the field of education, marriage, household-proprietary rights, religious freedom, widow remarriage, freedom to move about in society, arts, professional life, her contribution to society per se, associated social evils, etc, enable us to determine the position of women of that particular period.

The principal concept acquired mostly from Brahmanical regulating manuscripts on women in early Indian society has confined her within the household. Women had a fixed set of norms and duties which had to adhere to in the capacities of a daughter, wife, and mother. This historical perspective allows

us to try and track women's descent from an ideal elevated position in Vedic times which reflected in their participatory scholarly and ritual status, to stages of the decline. In the patriarchal setup, women were regarded as mere associates hence they neither played an active role nor any exceptional role in the societal process. It is seen that they were alone the victims of the changes in society.

The historical perspective in which women's studies have to be conducted itself has its roots in patriarchy. This has resulted in a particular focus on women in terms of selected themes and analytical opinions which rationalised some of the bad modes of women's subordination in ancient texts, which were later opposed by the elite sections of society in the 19th and the 20th centuries.

However, these themes have led to creating a major gap in perception of the societal structure that had attempted to develop gender centric roles and positions in ancient India. Since early times, the societal structure has played a vital role in stimulating change in women's roles and positions.

In this context, this study has made an attempt to assess the history, position, and status of women throughout the ages,

i.e., ancient, medieval and modern of Indian civilization. The subject is very wide and comprehensive and we have to ascertain not only the general view formed about women in the different periods of our long vibrant history but also its effects on the various fields of women's activities during the different stages of her life.

The status of Indian women, in particular, cannot be studied in isolation but has to be seen in the terms of social, economic and political development of the nation. Therefore, it can be said that the level of development or under development of a country can be seen in the status given to women in a particular society.

The period is divided into 3 different stages.

1. The Ancient Period
2. Medieval Period
3. Modern Period

Lets us briefly study the 3 phases..

2. Ancient Period

From 'pre-historic' to 'modern times' one can find a great variation in the condition and position of women. Their status varied from total slavery to freedom and sometimes a status inferior/equal/superior to men. It is observed that from pre-historic to Indus valley civilization of Harappa and Mohen-jodaro, women enjoyed an equal status with men. During the Indus-valley civilization i.e. 25th century B.C, the first known civilization of India, women enjoyed a very honourable position in the society.

The Indus valley civilization like ancient Greece shows evidences of the cult of worshipping earth or goddess. The deities of pre-vedic people of Indus valley were predominantly 'feminine', Mother Goddess' whose numerous figurines were revealed through excavation was their first worshipped deity. The presence of 'Terra cotta' and the figurines of 'mother Goddess' in private houses also favour for a prevailing matrilineal system in the society, as 'Irfan Habib' defines matrilineal system in his book 'The Indus Civilization' that, "Where inheritance and family identity pass through the mother".

As per the evidences there are many reasons to believe that the Pre-historic society was a matriarchal one, where women were worshipped. There is complete absence of any kind of crime and violence particularly domestic violence against women.

Women in Vedic Period:

In the ancient period, the birth of a girl in all patriarchal societies was generally an unwelcome event. Almost everywhere the son was valued more than the daughter as he was a permanent economic asset of the family. He lived with his parents all his life and did not leave like the daughter to another family after the marriage. He continued the name of his father's family. As he grew into teens and youth, he could offer valuable co-operation to his family in case of defending or attacking an enemy. On the other hand, the daughter was not given the preference of offering suggestions or fighting the enemy. Whereas undoubtedly women do have a potential military value which is evident by the act of giving birth (to sons) where they contribute indirectly to the fighting strength and efficiency of their community. Therefore, they hardly

welcomed the birth of a daughter. The daughter was sometimes abandoned and killed. (ref: Westermarck's History of Human Marriage).

Even though birth of a daughter was an unwelcome event, the family took the same interest in the daughter as it did in the son. They regarded girl as a good omen as Goddess of Fortune resided in the unmarried daughter.

Like her male counterpart, she was imparted Vedic education with the initiation ceremony called, 'Upanayana', post which she was married at the age of 15 or 16. The Atharvaveda observes that a girl can succeed in her marriage only if she has been properly trained during the period of the studentship (brahmacharya).

She had a say in her marriage. Widowhood was not popular as levirate and re-marriages were allowed and were very common. Despite girl being unwelcome, we do not find instances of female infanticide in Vedic, epic or classical literature.

There were two schools regarding the status of women in ancient period. One of the schools has described women as 'the equals of Men', while the other school holds that women were held not only in disrespect but were even shown hatred. Both Schools refer to several passages from available literature to prove their point. The Apastamba Dharmasutra has prescribed- "All must make way for a woman when she is treading a path."

Manu said, "where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes, but where there are not unhappy, the family will prosper." Manu also goes on to say.. "Where women are honoured, the Gods are pleased but where they are not honoured no sacred rite yields any reward." on, etc.

At the same time, it is said in Mahabharata that, "There is nothing that is more sinful than woman. Woman is the root of all the evils. There is no creator more sinful than woman. Woman is a burning fire." Identification of Woman with Shudra- "Early law books assessed a woman's were held as equivalent to that of a Shudra, whatever her class."- Basham

If God is male, then the male is God."- Mary Daly (cited in Mcphee 1979: 130)

Women were considered as the embodiment of all divine virtues on Earth. Women are not only held as centers of domestic life but also as pivots of entire social organization.

The Rig Veda refers to spinsters as "Amajuh, one who grows old in (one's parents') house". That means she was not subjected to child marriage. After puberty and the completion of their education, girls could take up marriage. Marriage was never forcibly imposed on her. She could select her life partner through swayamvara (choosing a husband). According to Rig Veda, polygamy and polyandry existed during the early Vedic period. Post marriage, women enjoyed autonomy over their marital role. As wives, they were considered as ardhagini (better half) and sahadharmini (equal partner). Widow remarriage was also socially acceptable. However, divorce was not allowed. Women were honoured as the "very source of Puruṣārthas, including Dhárma, Artha and Káma, and she was even entitled to Mokṣa (salvation).

Women of the early Vedic period enjoyed absolute economic freedom. They were into the teaching profession as acharyas, spinning, and weaving of clothes was done at home, and they also helped their husbands in agricultural activities. Coming to proprietary rights, Vedas had limited her right to

inheritance of property. A married daughter had no right on fathers' property. While spinsters were entitled to patrimony in the form of one-fourth of the share allocated to their brothers.

Women had the privilege and all the rights to participate in religious ceremonies and rituals. They participated in sacrificial rituals jointly with their husband.

Women talking about sex was not a taboo in Vedic society as observed in Vātsyāyana's Kāmasūtra, a book which highlights the sexual eroticism of that period. The system of prostitution was never considered shameful. Infact prostitutes were portrayed as classy women. Kautilya in his Arthaśāstra, talks about the legal status of prostitutes and refers to several classes of prostitutes namely, : Ganikā, Rūpājīva, Vésya, Pratiganikā, Dāsi, Devadāsi, and Rūpadāsi. They were beautiful, talented, and prosperous.

Thus, women in Vedic society had held a comfortable position in Vedic society.

Women in Post Vedic Society:

Later Vedic period also known as the Epic period was the time when a woman was idealised. The two famous epics of India namely, the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata portrayed women as the root of dharma, pleasure, and prosperity. Sītā, Draupadi, Kaikeyi, Rukmani, Savitri, and Satyabhama symbolized the value, great willpower, and the courageous role and position of women in Epic society.

Sita was considered as ideal womanhood and was seen as glorifying the value of pativratya (devotion to one's husband) which later got imbibed in the Indian value system. Polygamy was legal in this period however polyandry was not.

While women had economic freedom in Vedic period, the later Vedic period confined them to four walls of the house as she was to look after the betterment of the family. The Devadasi system emerged in this period where girls were dedicated to the gods and were bound to spend the rest of their lives serving the priests and the likes. Women had sexual liberty. They also held higher roles and positions in the war.

Women in Jainism and Buddhism (600 BC–200 BC)

The rise of Buddhism brought in a positive change in the status of Indian women. As a religion it gave women, equality, ample freedom in terms of education, to travel places as missionaries or to remain unmarried. Buddhism opened the doors of religion to all human beings without any distinction. Any woman could enter it, even the prostitutes were also admitted who was always seen in a bad light in society. Like men, women were also entitled to achieve Nirvana- salvation.

Jainism of 3rd Century B.C also preached equality between both the sexes. Mahavira emphasized the liberation of both men and women. According to him, 'Atma' has no division of male and female and one could achieve liberation only by living within a monastery or nunnery. Jain religion gave the women membership for the nunnery. Women's status was high and interesting roles in Jainism. Status of widow was also much better in Jainism than in Hinduism. History is full of names of Jain women who did a lot for society and their religion. They also excelled in the political field and they proved themselves as remarkable warriors

According to the Jain tradition, Jayanti, a daughter of king Sahasrānīka of Kauśāmbi, remained unmarried and received ordination at the hand of Mahavira after he convinced her in the

philosophical discussion. A Jātaka refers to the story of a Jain father having four clever daughters who toured in the country and challenged everyone to hold a debate with his daughters in philosophical matters.

Sanghamitra, the daughter of Ashoka, took up preaching Buddhism. Buddhist nuns composed hymns, wrote Sanskrit plays and verses and also excelled in painting, music, and other fine arts.

During the period of Jainism and Buddhism, women occupied esteemed positions in religion and were permitted to become Sannyasins'. Women also participated in socio-cultural activities and had a considerable good public life.

However, women's economic status deteriorated in this period. They were prohibited from political participation. When compared to monks, nuns had low politico-economic status in the society. And this indicates the decline of women's status during the Buddhism and Jainism period.

The Age of Dharmaśāstras, Mānasmṛiti (200 BC–600 AD)

Since the days of Manu, Hindu law has assigned women a dependent but not a dishonourable position in society. Manu's code says: "By a girl, by a young woman or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent. She must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband, or sons; by leaving them she would make both (her own and her husband's) families contemptible".

Manusmṛiti imposed several restrictions on women's right to education. Pre-puberty marriage/Child marriages were the order of the day. As per the Dharmasastras, husbands were given the status of a god. Polygamy existed in this period. The Kautilya's Arthaśāstra, while explaining the duty of marriage, the proprietary rights of a woman and remarriage, states that "having given his wives the proportionate compensation and an adequate subsistence (vritti), he may marry any number of women; for women are created for the sake of sons.

As motherhood was glorified, women's role was reduced to the observation of social rituals for the welfare of the male members of their family. The custom of avagunthana, also named purdah, began approximately in this phase which was also practiced by married women while going about in public places. Widow remarriage was illegitimate. And the practice of Sati increased considerably in the society.

According to Manu's codified laws, women were impure and were second class citizens. Hence women were strictly prohibited from offering prayers, sacrifices, undertaking pilgrimages, and from practicing penance. Women were completely denied by inheriting any share of their husband's property. To make things worse, the laws declared that women should not possess any property via inheritance. And this ripped her off from economic independence.

Monogamy was popular in this phase with more thrust on female chastity which favoured male domination. Hence we can say that, the age of Dharmaśāstras and Mānasmṛiti, completely subordinated women.

3. Medieval Period

Women played a crucial role in medieval society. They formed an important economic entity for their family in

particular and society in general. She actively shared the major responsibilities of the house and her profession. However, despite being a major productive resource, women became the worst victim of all kinds of violence, atrocities, and discriminations in this period.

The long period of freedom and security which women enjoyed ever since ancient times almost came to an end with the foreign invasions. The continual battle between Arabs, Turks, and Mughals and the indigenous Hindu rulers played a major role in an increase in all kinds of discrimination and violence against women. The discrimination took the form of preference for a male child, female infanticide, child marriages, the prohibition of widow-remarriages, purdah, seclusion, polygamy, rape, abduction, sati, and Jauhar. The constant wars in this period gradually increased the importance and need of the male child and eventually, a strong dislike towards a girl child developed.

Hence in such an environment, it is no surprise that daughters were not favoured. Among the Rajputs, the birth of a daughter was considered a curse. If a woman gave birth to two daughters in succession she could even be divorced.

Eventually, brutal crimes like 'female infanticide' became the norm of the day in all over medieval Indian society especially in the areas which due to their geographical location, (like Gujarat and Rajasthan), were in constant conflict with outsiders and hence, lost a large number of their male population to wars. The scarcity in the male population gave rise to the problem of suitable marriage alliances for girls.

Child marriage also was very common, particularly amongst Hindus. Since girls were considered a burden, parents were anxious to pass on the burden early through marrying her off.

One of the reasons to it was the fear of Islamic influence and accordingly to save the indigenous culture and also the so-called perception of saving daughters and the honour of family from falling in the hands of Muslim invaders, people encouraged the practice of child marriages. The collective impact of child-marriage, purdah, and seclusion resulted in the isolation of women and a decline in their status. The phase started denying women their traditionally available academic and physical autonomy. Girl education, which was of however of short duration in earlier Vedic and Post Vedic age (of 12 years), was now limited to reading and writing knowledge of religious scriptures which was deemed adequate for them. As a result, the vast majority of female population remained ignorant. The custom of dowry also started taking roots and was now changing its nature from a tradition to a compulsion to that of a crime and the victims of which were many lower and middle-class families of medieval India. Polygamy, yet another social evil made women the worst victim of domestic violence in medieval Indian society. Prohibition of widow-remarriages that began around 1000 A.D. further worsened the situation of women. Even child widows were restricted from re-marriage in the Hindu society from about 1100 A.D.

The condition of the Hindu widows became more miserable during the medieval period. The rigidity of the caste system denied them the right to freedom and social mobility. A widow was secluded from society and was devoid of any worldly pleasure. 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. Sati was

widely practiced. Burning the widows to death was not the only way to perform Sati, but burying the widows alive was yet another barbarous act that was practiced against the women of medieval India.

Just like Sati, 'Jauhar' was also the most heinous crime against the women of medieval India. There was a steep rise in the practicing Jauhar in Rajasthan during the 14th-15th century. When Rajput kings sensed defeat from their enemy, they used to kill their women, lock them inside an underground enclosure and set fire to the building.

The Purdah custom was beginning to get a strong foothold in a few royal families towards the end of the medieval period. However, it also met a staunch opposition in the 12th century. Initially, Purdah entered the families of feudatories and nobles, and gradually the custom spread among higher classes in northern India. As Muslim influence was weak in south India Purdah got no acceptance with exceptions being a handful of ruling families.

Medieval Indian history is predominantly the history of Muslim rulers. Prominent women who occupied a place in history were.. Razia Sultana- she was the only woman who had ever occupied the throne of Delhi. Gulbadan Begum was a woman of exceptional poetic talent who wrote Humayun-namah.

Nur Jahan and Jahan Ara took an active part in state affairs. Nur Jahan was the greatest Muslim queen of India. She was the very embodiment of beauty and military valour. Mumtaz Mahal a princess of a rare beauty combined with superb intellectual talents and aesthetic tastes. Jehanara, the follower of Dara Shikoh, Roshanara, the partisan of Aurangzeb, Zebunnissa, the daughter of Aurangzeb, whose poems were written under the pen name of Makhfi, were also a commendable poetess. There were heroic Indian women too who contributed to history like, Chandbibi, of Ahmednagar who was dressed in male attire, Tara Bai- the Maratha princess who stood against Aurangzeb, Ahalya Bai Holka an administrative genius.

The medieval period saw the flourishing of Bhakti movements which sort of erased the gender bias existing in the society. This widened the status of women to some extent. Female poet-saints played an important role in the Bhakti movement. The prominent women in Bhakti movement were

Akkamahadevi, from Karnataka who was a devotee of Shiva in the 12th century CE. Mirabai, or Mira born to a Rajput family, was an ardent devotee of Lord Krishna and wrote many poems.

4. Modern Period

Modern India refers to the period from 1700 A.D to 1947AD and was also considered the worst period for Indian women which was full of crime and violence. In 1817 James Mill, an official of the English company in London (the father of John Stuart Mill) wrote that 'one could judge the level of a civilization by the status of its women and concluded that, India was at the bottom of the scale because of the low position of its women. His statement reflected women's position under the rule of colonial masters during the period of 1750-1945.

A.L. De 'Souza' also highlights the real picture of women's position under the British period and remarks.. "Women were denied equal rights in marital, familial, social, educational, economic and political fields. They were assigned a

subordinate status. The marriage ideals, power, and authority exercised by the joint family and caste system, combined with illiteracy, age-old traditions seclusion within the four walls of the house-made it difficult for them to seek fuller personality development. They had a scant personal identity and few rights."

Female education was not encouraged as it was not part of British policy to rule India. However, even if there existed schools for girls, it had a very clear mission to train a woman to become a perfect 'housewife', which further deteriorated the status of Indian women. The women's position in the household was in a dismal state. Social evils like, child marriage, widowhood, sati, devadasi system, purdah, dowry, female infanticide and the practice of polygamy made the situations worse.

Even though the Britishers considered Indians inhuman and barbaric towards their women however to protect the capitalist/feudal and patriarchal interest they did not interfere in the socio-religious practices. Eventually, violence and crimes against women which acquired a situation of norm during the medieval period turned more intense and widespread in British rule. Women became the victim of various kinds of violence and atrocities. Child-marriage became very common even among respectable Hindu families as well as among Muslims. This practice was regarded as a religious and social obligation and as a means of 'economic power' for daughters/girls of higher Hindu caste. Similarly, the lower caste regarded child-marriage as a means of 'economic protection' for girls.'

One of the major consequences of child-marriages was widowhood. The second consequence being the early death of women during childbirth due to premature pregnancies. Likewise, the system of purdah resulted in seclusion and child marriage and led to a total denial of female education during British rule. The literacy rate of women reached a new low. The conservative society of that period regarded female education as a source of moral danger, unnecessary, dangerous and unworthy. Polygamy was rampantly practiced by both Muslims and Hindus under British rule. Men could easily take a second wife even while the first wife was alive. Kulin Brahmins were allowed, unlimited wives.

Widow-remarriage was strictly prohibited during the British period. The Hindu widow had to face the pathetic condition and a life full of misery. A widow was also denied any right on the property of her deceased husband. She could only exercise the right to maintenance which made widows to fully depend on the mercy of their husband's relatives. High caste widows were ill-treated and prevented from remarriage and they slowly turned to prostitution.

Indian men with modern education like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshav Chandra Sen, M.G. Ranade, Maharshi Karve, Jyotiba Phule, and Swami Dayanand Saraswati started to fight for the cause of women in the matters of dreaded social evils like 'Sati', child-marriages, widow-remarriages, and female education.

The movement led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy against 'Sati' was strongly supported by Lord Bentinck the governor-general of India. Finally, much to the respite of Indian women, on 4th December 1829, Sati the inhuman, barbaric act of widow burning was abolished and hence was termed illegal. Likewise, various other laws of women's protection from

domestic violence were also enacted by the British government.

The Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed in 1929. This Act penalized the marriage of girls below fourteen and boys below eighteen years of age. Hindu Widow Remarriage Act was passed in 1856. The Hindu Woman's Right to Property Act was passed in the year 1937. It intended to improve the position of widows in respect of the property. This Act made the provision that after the death of the husband, his widow would succeed to his property along with his son. The enactment of this Act improved the legal position of the widow and she became self-sufficient in terms of food and shelter.

Indian National Movement & Gandhi:

The early twentieth century witnessed the rise of the National Movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi who was against all the social evils relating to women. Gandhiji gave a call to women to come out in large numbers in support of the cause of India's freedom. Although women's role in the freedom struggle started before 1919, it can be said that it was only in the Gandhian phase of Freedom Struggle that women clearly held a pivotal role in nationalist politics. Indian National Congress, welcomed women's membership ever since its inception. Women responded to the call and their mass participation under Gandhiji's leadership gave them a sense of equality with men. Some Muslim women shed their purdah and joined the struggle. A few Parsi women also joined the struggle under the leadership of Gandhi. It is estimated that more women participated in the salt-satyagraha and the civil disobedience movement than in the non-cooperation movement.

Women's Emancipation Movement in India:

When it comes to Women's Emancipation movement in India, we can divide the stages into three. The first stage began in the 19th Century where Raja Rammohan Roy and his efforts changed certain evil social practices like Sati, widow remarriage, and child marriage. The second stage started in the mid 19th century where women's education was greatly emphasized. And the entry of women into the political arena marked the third phase.

Post third stage, women's emancipation movement was not only the dream of a few intellectual social reformers, but it became part of a political movement. As women participated in political activity, many of the taboos and prohibitions imposed on them, were either lifted or ignored. Political changes bring about social change and the status of Indian women was largely uplifted in these two decades of the political struggle of India- which was not possible at all in the bygone periods.

By participating in the political movement, Indian women paved the way for their own movement for liberation. In India, feminism and nationalism were closely associated. As the national movement momentum picked up, the dream of independence became the only concern for people of India, irrespective of gender, as no cause was bigger than India. Unlike the movements in the West movements, the Indian freedom movement did not have any man-woman opposition. Women in India were accepted as political associates and were provided equal opportunities for participation in the freedom struggle and must say that women have set a very proud record.

Some of the Important women in Freedom Struggle were, Basanti Devi and Urmila Devi, wife and sister, of Deshbandhu Das, Parvati Devi,, Bai Amman, Sarojini Naidu, Usha Mehta, Sucheta Kriplani, Aruna Asaf Ali.

Thus, the struggle of the 19th and 20th Centuries world reformists, and Indian reformists, brought a positive change in favour of Indian women. By the time Britishers left India in 1947, women's position was better to some extent. Fortunately, the modern Indian reformist seriously considered the basic vulnerability of Indian women for ages. The formation of the Indian constitution on 26 January 1950 is the total reflection of their views. The constitution-makers also considered women's equal claim, for the enjoyment of rights and privileges as guaranteed to men. Special efforts were also made by them to protect and safeguard them from violence and atrocities.

The Indian Constitution which is the basic law of the land recognized sex-based equality as a fundamental right. The preamble promises to secure to all its citizen's justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity. The constitution consists of several provisions under the fundamental rights. Chapter III ensured equal status to men and women- which guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of laws irrespective of race, religion, caste, sex, etc.

Article 14 of the Constitution guarantees 'Right to Equality'. It says.., "The state shall not deny to any person equality before the law and equal protection of the law within the territory of India".

Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, religion, caste, sex, and place of birth. According to clause (1) of Article 15..."The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them".

It also enables the state to adopt measures of affirmative discrimination in favour of women. Article 15(3) of the Constitution has its great importance as it states, "Nothing in this article shall prevent the state from making any special provisions for women."

Article 16 of the Constitution provides equality of opportunity in the matter of public employment. Clause (1) says... "There shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in

matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state".

Furthermore, Article 21 the most important right of the Indian Constitution guaranteed the protection of life and personal liberty to an individual. According to it.. "No person shall be deprived of his life and personal liberty except according to the procedure established by law".

"No person shall be deprived of his life and personal liberty except according to the procedure established by law".

Apart from Fundamental rights, a host of specific provisions to secure the rights of women have also been incorporated in 'Directive Principles of State Policy'. According to Article 37 of Indian Constitution, "The provisions contained in this part shall not be enforceable by any court, but the principles therein laid down are nevertheless fundamental in the governance of the country and it shall be the duty of the State to apply these principles in making laws." Through this, the constitution has also empowered the state to enact special provisions for the progress of women. Therefore, not only the fundamental rights of the Constitution but also the Directive Principles of State Policy safeguard the rights of Indian women.

Chapter IV of the Constitution guarantees justice (socio-economic) and dignity to women. Article 38(1) guarantees for the promotion of welfare and to provide a social order in which justice (social, economic and political) shall inform all the institutions of national life. It consists of Clause (2) which is directed towards the State to minimize the inequalities of income and to eliminate inequalities in status, facilities, and opportunities.

Article 39(a) of the Directive Principle aims for securing all citizens men and women equally, the right to means of livelihood. Clause (d) of the Article ensures 'equal pay for equal work'.

Article 42 of the Directive Principles directs the state to make provisions for ensuring 'just and humane condition of work and maternity relief'.

Above all, Article 51A(e) considers a fundamental duty on every citizen 'to renounce the practices derogatory to the dignity of women'.

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