

## Status of Women In Post Independence Era

Pooja

*Assistant professor, Department of History, M.P. college For women (India)*

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### ABSTRACT

*There have been innumerable debates about gender in India over the years. Much of it includes women's positing in society, their education, health, economic position, gender equality etc. What one can conclude from such discussions is that women have always held a certain paradoxical position in our developing country.*

*While on one hand, India has seen an increased percentage of literacy among women, and women are now entering professional fields, the practices of female infanticide, poor health conditions and lack of education still persisting still continue. Even the patriarchal ideology of the home being a woman's 'real domain' and marriage being her ultimate destiny hasn't changed much. The matrimonial advertisements, demanding girls of the same caste, with fair skin and slim figure, or the much criticised fair and lovely ads, are indicators of the slow changing social mores. If one looks at the status of women then and now, one has to look at two sides of the coin; one side which is promising, and one side which is bleak.*

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### INTRODUCTION

When our country got its independence, the participation of women nationalists was widely acknowledged. When the Indian Constitution was formulated, it granted equal rights to women, considering them legal citizens of the country and as an equal to men in terms of freedom and opportunity. The sex ratio of women at this time was slightly better than what it is today, standing at 945 females per 1000 males. Yet the condition of women screamed a different reality.

They were relegated to the household, and made to submit to the male-dominated patriarchal society, as has always been prevalent in our country. Indian women, who fought as equals with men in the nationalist struggle, were not given that free public space anymore. They became homemakers, and were mainly meant to build a strong home to support their men who were to build the newly independent country. Women were reduced to being second class citizens. The national female literacy rate was an alarmingly low 8.6%. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for girls was 24.8% at primary level and 4.6% at the upper primary level (in the 11-14 years age group). There existed insoluble social and cultural barriers to education of women and access to organised schooling.

A very few were allowed into the public space, which she was expected to manage on her own, while maintaining her domestic role as a homemaker. In spite of the Sharda Act which was passed in the 1950s to raise the marital age limit for girls, child marriage particularly in North India was quite prevalent though the average age at marriage for females was increased to 18. Sprawling inequalities persisted in their access to education, health care, physical and financial resources and opportunities in political, social and cultural spheres. It was almost unthinkable for women to have a choice or a say in matters of marriage, career or life. Rather she had no voice at all. The practice of dowry was as common as ever.

And since men were better educated than girls, the demands were even more. The Dowry Prohibition Act was finally passed in 1961, to protect women and promising severe

punishment, but the conviction rate of crime against women was, and still is very low in India. Because of such inhuman practices which were normalised by our society, the birth of the girl child was considered inauspicious. In villages as well as cities, the girl child was killed either before birth or after it. Even till date, the practice continues. The United Nations Children's Fund, estimated that up to 50 million girls and women are 'missing' from India's population because of termination of the female foetus or high mortality of the girl child due to lack of proper care.

Though a number of constitutional amendments were made for women's social, economic and political benefits, yet they were never effective to bring a radical change in the situation. Women had only the role of a 'good wife' to play, and if a woman ventured out to work, she was seen as a bad woman, going against societal norms. Women were expected to cook food and eat only after the men, with whatever meager amount of food is left. This led to rampant malnutrition among women, and an extremely poor health status. Around 500 women were reported to die every day due to pregnancy related problems due to malnutrition, and getting married before 18. It was only by the 1960s, that a few educated women began to see themselves increasingly change from a mere guardian of home to a legitimate participant in the discourse of life. The country saw the first undercurrent of female discontent with the system.

With time, a lot has changed since those dark ages of the 1950s for the women.

Though at some levels like dowry, crimes like rape, sexual harassment at office or public places, and molestation, eve-teasing, even after over sixty years of independence women are still exploited, which is the shameful side of our country. Yet one can't deny that the situation has improved since the earlier times. Women, who now represent 48.2% of the population, are getting access to education, and then employment. From 5.4 million girls enrolled at the primary level in 1950-51 to 61.1 million girls in 2004-05. At the upper

primary level, the enrolment increased from 0.5 million girls to 22.7 million girls.

Dropout rates for girls have fallen by 16.5% between the year 2000 and 2005. Programs like 'Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan' and 'Saakshar Bharat Mission for Female Literacy' has helped increase the literacy rates from less than 10 percent to more than 50% today. The result of this is that India has world's largest number of professionally qualified women. In fact India has the largest population of working women in the world, and has more number of doctors, surgeons, scientists, professors than the United States.

### WOMEN IN MODERN HISTORY

Women in India slowly started recognising her true potential. She has started questioning the rules laid down for her by the society. As a result, she has started breaking barriers and earned a respectable position in the world. Today Indian women have excelled in each and every field from social work to visiting space station. There is no arena, which remains unconquered by Indian women. Whether it is politics, sports, entertainment, literature, technology everywhere, its women power all along.

Today names like Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Shobhaa De, Jhumpa Lahiri can put any other writer to shame. In the field of cinema, women like Rekha, Smita Patil, Shabana Aazmi and Vidya Balan and Konkona Sen are such names who don't play feminised roles, but have asserted themselves over this male-dominated realm. In the field of Politics, from Indira Gandhi to Shiela Dixit, Uma Bharti, Jayalalithaa, Vasundhara Raje and Mamata Banerjee today, women are making their presence felt.

Today, the modern woman is so deft and self-sufficient that she can be easily called a superwoman, juggling many fronts single-handedly. Women are now fiercely ambitious and are proving their metal not only on the home front, but also in their respective professions. Women in Indian are coming up in all spheres of life. They are joining the universities and colleges in large numbers. They are entering into all kinds of professions like engineering, medicine, politics, teaching, etc. A nation's progress and prosperity can be judged by the way it treats its women folk. There is a slow and steady awareness regarding giving the women their dues, and not mistreating them, seeing them as objects of possession. Despite progress, the very fact that women, along with being achievers, also are expected to fulfil their roles as wives or mothers, prioritising home against anything else.

This point of view hasn't changed much. There is still a large section of women who are uneducated, and married off before the age of 18. Families are required to supply a chaste daughter to the family of her future husband. Also very few women are actually employed in good-paying jobs, and hence parents don't see the point of spending money on girls' education. Statistics say that close to 245 million Indian women lack the basic capability to read and write, which is a large number. Only 13.9% women are employed in the urban sector, and 29% in the domestic and agriculture sector, where too a majority of women are exploited by the men. The sex ratio of India shows that the Indian society is still prejudiced against female, and a lot is yet to be achieved in this context.

The path towards total gender empowerment is full of potholes. Over the years, women have made great strides in many areas with notable progress in reducing some gender gaps. Yet realities such as 11,332 women and girls getting trafficked every year, and increased practice of dowry, rape

and sexual harassment hit hard against all the development that has taken place. Thus, if on one hand women are climbing the ladder of success, on the other hand she is mutely suffering the violence afflicted on her by her own family members. As compared to the past, women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality they have to still travel a long way. Women may have left the secured domains of their home, but a harsh, cruel, exploitative world awaits them, where women have to prove their talent against the world who see women as merely vassals of producing children. The Indian woman has to make her way through all the socialised prejudices against her, and the men yet have to allow and accept the women to be equal participants in the country's way forward.

The status of Indian women has radically changed since independence. Both the structural and cultural changes provided equality of opportunities to women in education, employment and political participation. With the help of these changes, exploitation of women, to a great extent was reduced. More freedom and better orientation were provided to the women's organisation to pursue their interest.

The centuries of slavery were over. Today women want equality, education and recognition. The advancement of women is the most significant fact of modern India. Gandhiji once said "woman is the noblest of God's creation, supreme in her own sphere of activity." These words are blossoming now.

In the National movement, hundreds and thousands of women shed their veils and left their sheltered homes to work side by side with the man. In free India, the status of women has under gone profound changes. Remarkable progress has been achieved in the field of administration, science and technology, sports, education, literature, music, painting and other fine arts.

### DISCUSSION

It is highly significant that women in independent India have achieved great progress in all walks of life. We can confidently assert that India is the only nation among the developing countries of the modern world where so many women occupy high administrative positions quite successfully. The improvement in the status of Indian women especially after independence can be analysed in the light of the major changes that have taken place in areas such as legislation, education and employment, political participation and awareness of their rights on the part of women.

After Independence, women of India took to education in a relatively large number. For example in 1901, the literary level of the females in India was just 0.6%, it increased to 39.42% in 1991 and to 64.1 in 2001. Various benefits such as free-ship, scholarship, loan facility, hostel facility etc are being given to women who go for higher education in many towns and cities, educational institutions meant only for female children have been established.

The educational performance of girl students particularly at high school and college level is proving to be better than that of boys especially after 1980. We have today some universities exclusively meant for women. Example- SNDT university for women (poona) (ii) Padmavathi University for women (Terupati), Mother Teresa University for women (Kodai Kanal, Tamilnadu) Sri Avinashi lingam Homes Science college for Women (Deemed University, Coimbatore.) Girls' students are getting admitted on merit basis to the prestigious engineering and medical colleges in a relatively bigger number during the recent years.

The contribution of women for developing various languages cannot be ignored. Mahadvi Verma and Subhadra Kumari Chauhan are well known for Hindi writings, Amreta Pritam has enriched Punjabi language with her works. Kuntala Kumari Sabat has enriched Oriya literature, many women writers have been awarded prizes by the Sahitya Academy and other organisations. There are hundreds of women editors, journalists and columnists in the land who are performing meritorious services.

In both villages and cities there has been a remarkable increase in the number of women going out of the four walls of the household and becoming workers. In the "employment market" they are successfully competing with the men folk. In every field, the number of women employees is steadily increasing since 1991, though in a smaller number, women are

getting recruited into the Army force, Air force and Naval force also.

## CONCLUSION

Employment has given women economic independence and the feeling of importance. They now feel that they can stand on their own and look after the entire family by themselves. This has boosted their self-pride and self-confidence. Employment provision has made them to feel that they need not live as parasites on their men folk. In order to give protection to the economic interests and rights of the women folk the government has undertaken various socio-economic legislations, which cover areas such as rights to property or inheritance, equal wages, working conditions, maternity benefit and job security.

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