

# Status Of Women In India: Issues And Challenges

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*Abstract: Women have been challenged and marginalized from time to time. The status of women changes from Pre-historic times to post-modern one. Take for granted the women of ancient time who in patriarchal system enjoyed a position of respect and reverence, but with the passage of time her position underwent changes in all the walks of life. This paper explores the problems and concerns which the women underwent from time to time. Despite major changes that have occurred in the status of women from time to time, this paper will mainly deal with the problematic issues of the Indian women and the challenges set by the society to her from patriarchy to modernism. Taking all the constraints such as; Domesticity, Education, Economics, Gender bias, Politics and Poverty into consideration, this paper will explore the issues and challenges which women face from time to time in their livelihood.*

*Keywords: Challenges, Domesticity, Education, Economics, Gender, History, Politics and Poverty.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

India is a multidimensional civilization where no simplification could apply to the nation's various regional, religious, social and economic groups. Nonetheless definite broad situations in which Indian women live mark the way they participate in the economy. A common denominator in their lives is that they are generally confined to home, with restricted movement, and in seclusion. Other, unwritten, ranked practices place further restraints on women. Throughout history, women have generally been restricted to the role of a home-maker; that of a mother and wife. Despite main variations that have occurred in the status of women in some parts of the world in recent decades, norms that restrict women to the home are quiet influential in India, defining actions that are believed appropriate for women. They are, by and large, omitted from political life, which by its very nature takes place in an open forum. In spite of India's status for valuing women, including considering her as a Goddess, history tells us that women were also ill-treated. There was no equality between men and women. This is true of ancient, medieval and early modern times excluding some revolutionary activities such as that of Basaweshwara, the 12<sup>th</sup> century philosopher in Karnataka, who supported equality, casteless society, position for women, and improvement of the

downtrodden. Reform movements in the 19th and 20th centuries led by great social reformers offered s to women's legal status in India.

Independence of India heralded the introduction of laws relating to women. The Constitution provided equality to men and women and also gave special protection to women to realise their interests effectively. Special laws were enacted to prevent indecent representation of women in the media and sexual harassment in workplaces. The law also gives women equal rights in the matter of adoption, maternity benefits, equal pay, good working conditions etc. At the international level, the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) sought to guarantee better legal status to women. However, certain contentious issues like the Jammu and Kashmir Permanent Resident (Disqualification) Bill 2004 (which deprived a woman of the status of permanent residency of the State if she married an outsider) and the Supreme Court judgment in Christian Community Welfare Council of India (in an appeal over the Judgment of the High Court, Mumbai). The latter has permitted, under certain circumstances, the arrest of a woman even in the absence of lady police and at any time in the day or night. These instances have once again brought to the forefront the traditional male domination.

## II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Women held very important position in ancient Indian society. There are evidences to suggest that woman power destroyed kingdoms and mighty rulers. Veda Vyasa's Mahabharata tells the story of the fall of Kauravas because they humiliated Draupadi. Valmiki's Ramayana is also about the annihilation of Ravana when abducted and tried to marry Sita forcibly. The plethora of Goddesses in ancient period was created to instil respect for women. Women were allowed to have multiple husbands. They could leave their husbands. In the Vedic society women participated in religious ceremonies and tribal assemblies. There is no seclusion of women from domestic and social affairs but they were dependent on their male relatives throughout their lives. The system of *Sati* existed among the Aryans in the earlier period. The hymns of the Rig-Veda, the Adharva Veda show that it was still customary for the widow to lay symbolically by the side of her husband's corpse on the funeral, forced child marriages were unknown. Women could choose their husbands through a type of marriage called *Swayamvara*. As the time passed the position of women underwent changes in all spheres of life. In the Vedic period, women lost their political rights of attending assemblies. Child marriages also came into existence. According to the Aitareya Brahmana, a daughter has been described as a source of misery. Atharva Veda also deplors the birth of daughters. Yet, certain matrilineal elements are discernible in this period also. The importance assigned to the wives of the Raja in the Rajasuya Yaga has been regarded as an indication of matrilineal influence. The position of women gradually deteriorated as the Vedic ideals of unity and equality began to fade off through the passage of time. During the period of *Smritis*, women were bracketed with the Sudras and were denied the right to study the Vedas, to utter Vedic mantras and to perform Vedic rites. Marriage or domestic life became compulsory for women and unquestioning devotion to husband is their only duty. During the Mauryan period Brahmanical literature was particularly severe in the treatment of women and assigned them a very low status in the society. Buddhist texts on the other hand were much more considerate in treating them. Megasthenes testifies to the growing practice of polygamy; employment of women as palace guards, bodyguards to the kings, spies etc., permission of widow remarriage and divorce. Thus the position of women though inferior was not as bad as it came to be in the later ages.

## III. GENDER ISSUES IN INDIA

As soon as a child is born families and society begin the process of gendering. The birth of a son is celebrated, the birth of a daughter is filled with pain; sons are showered with love, respect, better food and proper health care. Boys are encouraged to be tough and outgoing; and girls to be homebound and shy. Women from infant stage to their old age women get an unfair deal in the matter of health. Their health concerns receive a low priority resulting in women bearing pain and discomfort in silence for long periods of time without seeking relief. The sex ratio in India speaks volumes about the

neglect. It is not just the poor who for want of resources and with the inherent preference for a boy are guilty of bias. Even in well-to-do families parents tend to spend more on the health-care of boys than on girls. Reports show that India's maternal mortality ratio (MMR) is highest in South Asia. An estimated 1, 36,000 women die in India every year due to pregnancy related setbacks. However the measures taken by the government have not proved effective despite the fact that high fatalities occur among women every year due to poor reproductive health practices. One of the reasons why women succumb to reproduction related complications is the absence of timely transportation to the nearest hospital. India still ranks first among the 12 countries that account for 2/3 of under-five and maternal deaths in the world. One of the major problems is the shortage of trained healthcare personnel.

## IV. GENDER BIAS IN IDENTITY FORMATION

The Indian society's sole societal structure is a tyrant of women in almost every circle of life due to its rejection of equal prominence to them. The patriarchal system of the society forces women to be confined to the four walls of their homes largely engaged in the household chores. There are various social hassles which still pose a hindrance to the identity of women. Although the Panchayati-Raj system is an important tool for transforming women into equal partners in the process of development, the elected women still face a lot of resistance from the males. Women are not allowed to participate in decision making process and more than eighty per cent of the elected women admit that decisions are made by the male members, who ignore suggestions from the women members. Although there are some cases of women coming forward to make their presence felt as potential workers in Panchayati-raj system, women have to go long way in achieving a dignified and acceptable identity for themselves.

## V. ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL FACTORS

As a result of the cultural and economic factors, women face discrimination right from the childhood. It is held that both in childhood and adulthood males are fed first and better. According to one estimate, even as adults women consume approximately 1000 calories less per day than men. The sex ratio in India stood at 933 females per 1000 males at the 2001 census and out of the total population, 120 million women lived in abject poverty. Lack of healthcare facilities and poverty has been resulting in India accounting for 27% of all maternal deaths worldwide. Death of young girls in India exceeds that of young boys by over 300,000 each year and every 6th infant death is especially due to gender discrimination.

## VI. POVERTY AND HUNGER

Poverty affects the woman most in as much as the female members in the family are denied education, healthcare,

nutritious food, and good sanitation because of poverty. Poverty directly affects the future of women. Girl children are discriminated in the matter of feeding compared to boys. Studies have shown that girls in rural areas take a mean of 1355K.Cals/day in the 13-15 years age group and 1291 K.Cals/day in the 16-18 years age group, which is much below the recommended levels. The disproportionate impact of poverty on girls is not an accident but the result of systematic discrimination. Hungry people live in a social environment of traditional prejudices, unjust law, corruption, broken promises, and failed economic policies, leading to the severe subjugation of women, marginalization and disempowerment. It is a tragic irony that while the society holds women responsible for all the key actions required to end hunger: family nutrition, health, education, food production and increasing family income on the one hand, through laws, customs and traditions women are systematically denied the resources, information and freedom of action they need to carry out their responsibilities, on the other. The bottom line is that hungry people, particularly women, are systematically denied the opportunity to end their own hunger. Only people-centric development coupled with powerful strategies for social transformation can succeed in eradicating poverty.

#### VII. EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS

It remains true that Indian women still constitute a large body of under - privileged citizens. Women of course do not form a homogenous group in class or caste terms. Nevertheless, they face distinctive problems that call for special attention. The Backward Classes Commission set up by the Government of India in 1953 classified women of India as a backward group requiring special attention. The educational, economic, political and social backwardness of women makes them the largest group hindering the process of social change. It is inevitable that when this 'backward' group has the major responsibility of bringing up future generations the advancement of society cannot be rapid or take any significant form of development. The differences between the positions of men and women in the society will not lessen; leave alone disappear, as long as there are differences between the education levels of men and women. Inadequate education or no education is the most important factor contributing to the backwardness of our masses, especially women. The low literacy among women brings down the national literacy. This gap which exists between the literacy rates of the two sexes also exists between the enrolment of girls and boys at all levels of education. Right from the primary school to the university, we find that the number of girl students is considerably lower than boys. According to Article 45 of the Constitution, universal compulsory and free education until the age of 14 was to be achieved by the year 1960. Looking at the present condition of primary education in villages, it is doubtful whether we can achieve 100% enrolment of girls. It is unfortunately true of our society that children are sent to school not according to their intelligence or aptitude but according to their sex. The reasons for not sending girls to school are both economic and social.

#### VIII. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

In India, violence within the home is universal across culture, religion, class and ethnicity. The abuse is generally condoned by social custom and considered a part and parcel of marital life. Statistics reveal a grim picture of domestic violence in India. The National Crimes Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India reports a shocking 71.5% increase in instances of torture and dowry deaths during the period from 1991 to 1995. In 1995, torture of women constituted 29.25% of all reported crimes against women. The question arises as to why women put up with abuse in the home? The answer lies in their unequal status in the society. They are often caught in a vicious circle of economic dependence, fear for their children's lives as well as their own, ignorance of their legal rights, lack of confidence in themselves and social pressures. These factors effectively force women to a life of recurrent mistreatment from which they often do not have the means to escape. The sanctity of privacy within the family also makes authorities reluctant to intervene, often leading women to deny that they are being abused. This is equally common in the higher as well as in the lower segments of the society. A woman who lodges a complaint of abuse is often forced to withdraw the complaint or drop the charges not only by her family and society but also by the authorities. Social prejudices reinforce domestic violence against women. They are treated as their spouses' property; husbands assume that this subordinate role gives them right to abuse their wives in order to keep them in their place.

#### IX. PROBLEMS OF WORKING WOMEN

Working women i.e., those who are in paid employment, face problems at the workplace just by virtue of their being women. Social attitude to the role of women lags much behind the law. The attitude which considers women fit for certain jobs and not others, causes prejudice in those who recruit employees. Thus women find employment easily as nurses, doctors, teachers, secretaries or on the assembly line. Even when well qualified women are available, preference is given to a male candidate of equal qualifications. A gender bias creates an obstacle at the recruitment stage itself. When it comes to remuneration, though the law proclaims equality, it is not always practiced. The inbuilt conviction that women are incapable of handling arduous jobs and are less efficient than men influences the payment of unequal salaries and wages for the same job. A woman could still bear with these problems if she has control over the money she earns. But in most families her salary is handed over to the father, husband or in-laws.

#### X. WOMEN AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Gandhi stressed on the need for active participation of masses during the freedom movement, including women. He encouraged total participation of women resulting in the emergence of a large number of women freedom fighters. The *Swadeshi* movement, the non-Cooperation (1920-22)

movement, the Civil Disobedience movement (1930-34) and the Quit India (1942) movement drew large number of women. Such participation helped women to voice the need for women's participation in the legislation process. Annie Besant, Madame Cama and Sarojini Naidu formed the Women's Indian Association. But, women still constitute a mere 10% of the legislators in the Parliament and State Assemblies. Success at the Panchayat level based on reservations for women convinced women's organizations that it is the correct time to extend these reservations to the higher levels. It is a different matter that even at the Panchayat level women members face lot of opposition in as much as the male members of the Panchayat do not consider them as equals. Women face opposition from the family members, often resulting in their resigning their membership. Karnataka and West Bengal are good examples where women have exceeded the reserved 33% with 42% and 39% respectively. These examples show that given a chance women can excel in any field. Women just need the necessary support and encouragement.

## XI. CHALLENGES FACED BY MUSLIM WOMEN

### PERSONAL LAW

Personal Law (i.e. laws governing family relations, marriage, divorce, inheritance custody rights etc.) is a contested arena in the case of Muslim women, who are largely subjected to the Sharia Act 1937 and the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act 1939. The Special Marriage Act 1952 which allowed Indians to marry without renouncing their religion provoked strong opposition from Hindus and Muslims.

### EDUCATIONAL LEVELS

Muslim women in both rural and urban India lag behind their counterparts in school enrolment from the very beginning. Muslim women in urban India are much worse off than their rural counterparts. This educational disadvantage of women in Muslim communities calls for attention. Even the Aligarh Muslim University and Jamia Millia Islamia – minority institutions with the specific aim of furthering education among Muslims in India, are unable to have a majority of Muslim students in their professional schools. Even after six decades of independence, Muslim women face considerable challenges as citizens in India's and as members of India's largest minority. According to government reports Muslim women are among the poorest, educationally disenfranchised, economically vulnerable and politically marginalized group in the country. In 1983 the Gopal Singh committee instituted by the government declared Muslims as a backward community in India. A central feature of this 'backwardness' is their exceedingly poor socio-economic status, particularly that of the Muslim women. The Muslim share in public employment is less than 3%. The lack of social opportunities for Muslim women is a crucial issue needing urgent action.

## XII. CONCLUSION

A woman is the essential part of the man, as she has descended from the left rib of the man so is her importance in the day today world. Women form the basis of family as well as of the nation. She is considered as the core of success of the man as well as of the nation. In the history of human development, woman has been as important as man. In fact, the status, employment and work performed by women in society are the indicator of a nation's overall progress. Without the participation of women in national activities, the social, economical or political progress of a country will be stagnated. Though women have been deprived from the equal status to man from time to time till she doesn't distressed her conscience. The status of women will be empowered by providing them equal opportunities in each and every walk of life and then and only then the happy nation could be prospected.

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