



CONDITION OF WOMEN BEFORE 1947 IN INDIA

Dr. Atul Kumar Shukla

Asstt. Professor

Pt. J.L. Nehru P.G. College, Banda

In ancient India, though patriarchal system was highly prevalent women enjoyed a position of respect and reverence. Several inscriptions make references to the status of women in that they enjoyed the freedom to make liberal gifts to religious institutions like temples, dharma salas not merely for the welfare of heads of the families but for their parents as well.

Women held very important position in ancient Indian society. There are evidences to suggest that woman power destroyed kingdoms and mighty rulers. Elango Adigal's Sillapathigaram mentioned that Madurai, the capital of Pandyas was burnt, when Pandyan ruler Nedunchezhiyan killed a woman's husband by mistake.

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 is in still respect for women. Ardhanarshwar (God is half-man and half-woman) was highly worshipped¹.

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.

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.

Thus, it is quite reasonable to assure that the women of the royal and wealthy families were well educated. They received such instruction which included not only fine arts like music, dance and painting etc., but also literature, prosody, poetics, etc.²

POSITION OF WOMEN IN VEDIC PERIOD AND POST VEDIC PERIOD

Male and Female, the two basic components of our human society, depend upon each other and each one of them constitutes about half of the population. Over years sociologists and other scholars have tried to assess the problems faced by women and to study changes in their status around the globe in general and in Indian society in particular. We find that man and woman



have been established as the two wheels of a chariot.

The status represents the position of individual in the group. The word status denotes the position of an individual in a system with attendant rights and duties. It is the position which the individual occupies in the group by virtue of his or her sex, age, family, occupation, marriage and achievement.

The Rig-Vedic society was a free society. The Aryans evidently preferred male child to female child. However, females were as free as their male counterparts. Education was equally open for boys and girls. Girls studied the Veda and fine arts. Women never observed purda in the Vedic period. They enjoyed freedom in selecting their mates. But divorce was not permissible to them. In the family, they enjoyed complete freedom and were treated as Ardhanginis. **Prabhu** has remarked- ***"This shows that men and women were regarded as having equally important status in the social life of the early period"***.

Women had equal rights in social and religious fields but had limited rights in economic field.³

Status of Women in the Epics:

Epic age, in the history of female freedom, may be regarded as a golden age. Women had been accorded an honorable status in the society. Most of the female characters of Ramayana and Mahabharata were well educated. The Ramayana illustrates the Hindu ideal women of India. In Mahabharata we find instances where women gave counsel

and advice to men on social and religious issues.

Status of Women in the Smritis:

While speaking about woman and her relation to man, Manu says ***"Women must always be honoured and respected by the father, brother, husband and brother-in-law who desire their own welfare, and where women are honoured, there the very Gods are pleased, but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite even could yield rewards"***.

On the other hand we find a number of provisions in the Manu Smriti, which certainly go against her interests. Women are deprived of the Upanayana ceremony and thereby of education⁴.

Manu deprives women of her economic rights also. He says, "A wife, a son and a Slave, these three are declared to have no property, the wealth which they earn is for him to whom they belong". It appears that Manu had a very poor opinion about women. There are two schools of thought regarding the status of women in ancient India. One school has described women as the 'equals of men', while the other school holds that women were held not only in disrespect but even in positive hatred.

Status of Women in Buddhist Period:

Many evil social practices, like the practice of prepuberty marriages, denial of right of women to education and also to mate selection etc were imposed on women during the periods of Brahmans and Puranas. In the Buddhist period, the position of women improved to some extent. In the religious field, women came to



occupy a distinctly superior place. They had their own Sangha called Bhikshuni 'Sangha', which provided avenues of cultural activities and social services⁵.

Many historians claim that women enjoyed an equal status with men in ancient India. It is said that women were educated, had a say in family matters, took important decisions of life and were free to choose their own husbands. The ancient system of "Swayamvara" is mentioned in holy scripts and also in many epics. A woman in ancient India was respected and was given due importance in the society. Child marriage was unheard of and many women were also famous sages Gargi, Maitreyi, etc.

With time, women started to lose their importance and their status began to wane. The freedom given to women was curtailed slowly and she was not allowed to voice her opinions in political matters in a society. Polygamy began to increase and child marriage came into vogue. Daughters were considered to be a burden and they were reduced to doing the chores of household. Sati, an ancient practice in which a widow had to lie beside her husband's pyre, came into vogue. Women were tortured and humiliated and their position degraded⁶.

WOMEN IN GUPTA EMPIRE

In general, women of the Gupta Empire were viewed as inferior to the men. However, they were still respected and were viewed as equals to the female gods such as Saraswati.

The condition of women in the Gupta Empire period slowly

deteriorated. The women were given secondary position in the Gupta Empire society. It was expected from a woman to obey her father before she was married, then after marriage obey her husband and finally to obey her son. Thus, the life of a woman in Gupta period was confined within the restrictions imposed on her

STATUS OF WOMEN IN MEDIAVAL PERIOD

According to ancient Hindu texts and tradition, until about 500 B.C., women in India enjoyed considerable freedom. But during the next thousand years, women's position gradually deteriorated. Educational and religious parity was denied to them and widow remarriage was forbidden. In fact, the status of women started degenerating in the post-Vedic age because of the conception of purity and pollution and restrictions of inter-caste marriages. Child marriage had started in the Smriti age. During this period, a woman's husband was regarded as God. During the middle ages, the position of women in Hindu society further degenerated. A number of problems arose for Hindu women in the Mughal period⁷.

The 'Purdah' system was followed which resulted in seclusion of women. Education of women in whatever form came to be stopped. Child marriage was started. During this period the inhuman practice of 'Sati Pratha' was in vogue. Purdah Pratha, Sati Pratha, child marriage, girl killing, polygamy etc. were the main social evils of this period.

As a result of this freedom, they secured certain social freedom also. The saints encouraged women to



read religious books and to educate themselves. Although the Bhakti movement gave a new life to women, this movement did not bring any substantial change in economic status of women. Hence, women continued to hold low status in the society⁸.

CONDITION OF HINDU WOMEN

The Hindu women enjoyed respect in their family, participated in religious ceremonies, were educated and many of them acquired scholarly fame as well. Yet, in general, their status had deteriorated in the society and they suffered from many social evils. Normally, monogamy was prevalent in the society but, among the rich a man could keep many wives. The widows could not marry again. They either became sati at the pyre of their husbands or passed their lives as women-hermits. The Muslims were always prepared either to molest or to capture Hindu-women which resulted in child-marriages and Purdah system.

However, the lower castes remained free from many of these social evils. There was no purdah system in them and their women were free to divorce and remarry. Even widow-marriages were permitted among them⁹.

Devadasi system was another social evil which was prevalent among the Hindus. Beautiful unmarried girls were offered to images of God in temples where they passed their lives as maidservants of gods. There were certain other changes which the Hindus accepted because of their contact with the Muslims. The Hindus started to accept the converts back to the Hindu-fold. There were changes, in their

clothing's, food-habits, social habits and certain customs as well¹⁰.

CONDITION OF MUSLIM WOMEN

Muslim women also did not enjoy a respectable status in the society. Polygamy was widely prevalent among the Muslims. Every Muslim had a right to keep at least four wives or slaves. Purdha- system was strictly observed among Muslim-women. They were devoid of education because of this social-custom.

Thus, it can be concluded that the position of women in India was much inferior to men during the period of the Sultanate and they suffered from many social evils and other handicaps. Primarily, the women were regarded as articles of pleasure¹¹.

CONDITION OF WOMEN IN MODERN INDIA(AFTER 1947)

The Gandhian era and the decades after independence have witnessed tremendous changes in the status of women in Indian society. The constitution has laid down as a fundamental right the equality of sexes. But the change from a position of utter degradation and subjugation of women in the nineteenth century to a position of equality in the middle of the twentieth century is not a simple case of progress of women in modern era.

However, the absence of any economic compulsion was in fact one of the main reasons for the slow progress of women education till seventies. There has been a remarkable increase in the number of women getting out of the four walls of the household and becoming workers in both cities and villages, according to the 1991 census report. Job opportunities outside the family, economic hardship and social



situation have encouraged women to take up employment outside the family. The attitudes of women's relatives towards women's employment, women's own preference for employment are now quite different from earlier beliefs. People are now in favour of women employment¹².

In the political field, women now enjoy equal rights with men. The two important rights in the political field sanctioned to women by Indian Constitution are: female enfranchisement and eligibility for the legislature. Prior to independence, when the elections were held in 1946 for constitutional assembly, many prominent women of Indian like Sarojini Naidu, Hansa Meheta, Renuka Rai and others were elected. In the first general election held in 1952, several women contested for the Lok Sabha.

Rural women have remained backward due to tradition, illiteracy, ignorance, superstition, social evils and many other factors. Hence, emancipation of women in rural India is an essential prerequisite for social progress of the nation.

"We record our homage and deep admiration for the Womanhood of India who in the hour of peril for the motherland forsook the shelter of their homes and with unflinching courage and endurance stood shoulder to shoulder with their menfolk, in the frontline of India's national army to share with them the sacrifices and triumphs of the struggle".

From a Resolution passed on January 26, 1931¹³.

Role of Indian women:

The entire history of the freedom movement is replete with the saga of bravery, sacrifice and political sagacity of great men and women of the country. This struggle which gained momentum in the early 20th century, threw up stalwarts like Mahatma Gandhi, Lala Lajpat Rai, Motilal Nehru, Abul Kalam Azad, C. Rajagopalachari, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subash Chander Bose.

Rani Laxmibai

The first name that comes to mind is that of the famous Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi. Dressed in men's clothes, she led her soldiers to war against the British. Even her enemies admired her courage and daring. She fought valiantly and although beaten she refused to surrender and fell as a warrior should, fighting the enemy to the last. Her remarkable courage inspired many men and women in India to rise against the alien rule.

Begum Hazrat Mahal

Another woman whom we remember in this connection was Begum Hazrat Mahal, the Begaum of Oudh. She took active part in the defence of Lucknow against the British. Although, she was queen and used to a life of luxury, she appeared on the battle-field herself to encourage her troops.

Kasturba Gandhi

The life companion of the Father of the Nation contributed her mite to the freedom movement in a subtle manner. As the closest associate of Gandhiji during his epic struggle in South Africa and in India, she suffered in no small measure. One simply marvels



and wonders how this quiet self-effacing woman underwent countless trials as Gandhiji's wife, and how gallantly she agreed to the Mahatma's endless experiments and self-imposed life of poverty and suffering.

Swarup Rani and Kamala Nehru

The mother of Jawaharlal Nehru, Swarup Rani Nehru cheerfully gave her husband and children to the country's cause and herself, old and frail entered the fray at its thickest. She influenced her husband Jawaharlal and stood by him in his determination to plunge into the movement started by Mahatma Gandhi, to free the motherland from the clutches of the British rulers.

Sarojini Naidu:

Sarojini Naidu was one of the most enlightened women of modern India. She was one among the many men and women who dedicated their lives for the freedom struggle of the country under the guidance of Gandhiji. At a very young age she wrote many patriotic poems which inspired people in India to throw off the foreign yoke. She joined the Home Rule movement launched by Annie Besant.

Padmaja Naidu

Sarojini's daughter Miss Padmaja Naidu devoted herself to the cause of Nation like her mother. At the age of 21, she entered the National scene and became the joint founder of the Indian National Congress of Hyderabad. She spread the message of Khadi and inspired people to boycott foreign goods.

Vijay Laxmi Pandit

Sister of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru also played a great role in the

freedom movement. She was elected to Uttar Pradesh Assembly in 1936 and in 1946. She was the first woman in India to hold a ministerial rank. After Independence, she continued to serve the country. She was the first woman to become president of the United Nations General Assembly.

Sucheta Kripalani

The contribution of Sucheta Kripalani in the struggle for freedom is also worthy of note. She courted imprisonment for taking part in freedom struggle. She was elected as a member of Constituent Assembly in 1946. Sucheta Kripalani was in the words of Shrimati Indira Gandhi, a person of rare courage and character who brought credit to Indian womanhood.

Indira Gandhi

The most remarkable of women in modern India was Indira Gandhi who from her early years was active in the national liberation struggle. During the 1930 movement, she formed the 'Vanar Sena'. A children's brigade to help freedom fighters¹⁴.

FOREIGN WOMEN IN THE INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT OF INDIA

Besides the hundreds and thousands of Indian women who dedicated their lives for the cause of their motherland, there were a number of noble and courageous foreign women who saw in India - its religion, its philosophy and its culture, a hope for the redemption of the world. They thought that in India's spiritual death shall world find its grave.

First of all we will take up those who were influenced by the great men of India like Swami Vivekananda,



Aurobindo Ghosh, Mahatma Gandhi, and came to this country to serve it.

Sister Nivedita

Sister Nivedita was one among the host of foreign women who were attracted towards Swami Vivekananda and Hindu philosophy. She was impressed by the ideals of Womanhood in India. She once remarked that India was the land of great women. She, however, felt that Indian women needed, to cultivate among themselves a wider and broader concept of the nation, so that they could participate along with men in building a free and strong nation.

The Mother

Mira Alphonse, the Mother, was born in Paris in 1878. She had shown depth of vision and fragrance of expression even in her early childhood. She came to India in 1914 and met Shri Aurobindo.

Mira Behn

Mira Behn, or Mira as she was most often called was the western world's acknowledgement of guilt and the will to atone for it. This was not at all in her won consciousness, but in that which put her forth.

Dr. Annie Besant

Dr. Annie Besant, along with Charles Braudlaugh, it is said, did more than anyone had done in a hundred years to break down the barriers of bigotry and prejudice, who won the greatest victories of their times for the freedom of speech and liberty of the press which Britain enjoys today¹⁵.

CONDITION OF WOMEN AFTER ARRIVAL OF BRITISHERS

During the British rule, a number of changes were made in the economic and social structures of Indian

society, and some substantial progress was achieved in elimination of inequalities between men and women, in education, employment, social rights etc. Prior to this period, the status of women was in an unpromising state.

The idea of imparting education to women emerged in the British period. After the Bhakti Movement, the Christian Missionaries took interest in the education of the girls. The Hunter Commission too emphasized on the need for female education in 1882. The Calcutta, Bombay and Madras institutions did not permit the admission of girls till 1875. It was only after 1882 that girls were allowed to go for higher education. Since then, there has been a continuous progress in the extent of education among females. Though the number of girls studying at various levels was low, yet there has been a marked increase in the number of female students at every level from 1941 onwards.

Raja Ram Mohun Roy, who played an important role in getting the Sati system abolished raised voices against the child-marriage and fought for the right of inheritance for women. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar launched a movement for the right of widows to re-marry and also pleaded for educating women. Maharaja S. Rao, ruler of Baroda State worked for prevention of child-marriages, Polygamy and getting the rights of education to women, and the right of re-marriage to widows. Swami Vivekananda, Annie Besant, and Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Dayanand Saraswati also took interest in the social and political rights of women. Gandhiji was of the opinion that, women should labour under no legal disability. He was



in favour of treating daughters and sons on an equal footing.

Therefore, immediately after birth, the female infants were being killed either by feeding them with opium or by strangulating or by purposely neglecting them. Some laws were enacted against this practice in 1795, 1802 and 1804 and then in 1870. However, the practice could not be completely eradicated only through legal measures. Gradually, this evil practice came to be done away through education and public opinion¹⁶.

The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. From equal status with men in ancient times through the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of [equal rights](#) by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. In modern India, women have held high offices in India including that of the [President](#), [Prime Minister](#), [Speaker of the Lok Sabha](#) and [Leader of the Opposition](#).

According to scholars, women in ancient India enjoyed [equal status](#) with men in all aspects of life. Works by ancient Indian grammarians such as Patanjali and Katyayana suggest that women were educated in the early Vedic period. Rigvedic verses suggest that women married at a mature age and were probably free to select their own husband. Scriptures such as the [Rig Veda](#) and [Upanishads](#) mention several women sages and seers, notably [Gargi](#) and Maitreyi.

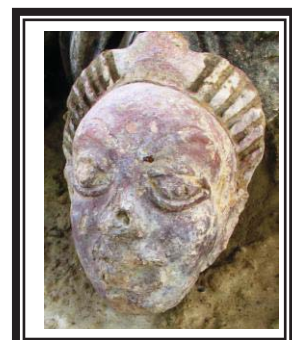
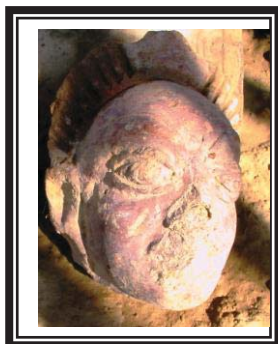
Industrialisation has not only affected the joint family system, but also the relationship between the husband

and the wife. The position of a woman as consultant is found in most families where she shares the responsibility of making the major family decisions with her husband or father. Now authority vests not only on eldest male but also on females. The status of women and their social relationship as necessitated by the new social, political and economic organisation in society has come out through the routine factors of social change.

Undoubtedly in the period before 1947 there was a considerable change in thinking, outlook and value of Indian women. Subsequently Indian women have gradually moved towards self-reliance and independence. The status of Indian women through the ages has been changing and the status, which was lost during the middle ages and earlier parts of 19th century, has been regained somewhat. It appears that the status of women has gone high in India. However the real position is that a large majority of women in the villages or women of low caste still suffers from injustice and inequalities.

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These Terracotta faces lying under a tree outside Shiv Temple, Karchhalipur A.S.I. Protected Monument