

A Comparative Study of Critically Analyze the Status of Indian Women in Today's Society

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Abstract – The present study is related to status of women in Indian society from ancient days till today. It gives importance on the position of women in various fields like family life, social life and work situation. It highlights on female foeticide, low literacy level of women, women's low nutritional status, women's role in decision making, their position as per Indian tradition etc. This paper also gives emphasis on number of women in total workforce, torture of them by men in family life, social life and in other fields where they are participants. Lastly it concludes on importance of women and role of society for the emancipation of women from male dominated society and their oppression and suppression.

Indian society belongs to the man since time immemorial. The woman has been given a secondary and inferior position in her family and society. She has been facing injustice, suppression, oppression, subjugation and exploitation in a male-dominated Indian society. In spite of being educated, she has been looked down upon with contempt. She has been reduced to the status of a plaything and a machine, a lifeless object used to fulfill men's sexual desire. She has been treated as a commodity to be used, controlled and disposed of by the male members of society.

The place and status equal to man need to be given to her in various fields of life. She is stronger and bolder than man in many respects. The woman occupies an important position as a wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister, and most importantly, as a human being in all human relationships. However, man-woman relationship is marred by the evils such as male-ego, male-domination and gender-discrimination which seek to marginalize the role of a woman in Indian patriarchy.

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INTRODUCTION

The human society is everywhere composed of males and females and the society is stratified on the basis of sex. Women constitute half of the population and thus, a significant segment of every society. Hence, their status, role and position determine the progress and development of the society as well as identify the culture and values on which the society is based.

India has a long past civilization and in every stage of its history, women constitute half of its population, but their position in society is not the same in all the ages of history. Their position has been variously estimated and diametrically opposite views are expressed regarding their place in different stages of Indian civilisation.¹ Several factors including foreign invasions for centuries together, social movements, various geographic regions, different economic occupations, political stability and instability and religious affinity of the family to which women belong have greatly influenced her status in the family as well as in the community.

The woman, who is exploited and dehumanized by the institutionalized mechanism of prescriptive behaviour in the form of patriarchy, finds herself in an inevitable state of affairs. The process of dehumanization is accomplished by what the Latin American writer, Paulo Frier, calls "prescription" - a basic element of the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. "Every prescription", he writes "represents the imposition of one man's choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the man prescribed to into one that conforms to prescriber's consciousness. Thus, the behaviour of the oppressed is a prescribed behaviour following as it does the guidelines of the oppressor". Jessica Benjamin observes: "The anchoring of this structure so deep in the psyche is what gives domination its appearance of inevitability, makes it seem that a relationship in which both participants are subjects - both empowered and mutually respectful - is impossible". The psychologists and sociologists argue that there is a natural distinction between men and women. The basic difference lies in the fact that men are naturally polygamous, women are not. When a woman's desire for a loving mate, for

home and for motherhood is satisfied, she doesn't need anything more in her life. Men, on the other hand, do not share these feelings and continue to seek variety in conquest. The woman is totally controlled and dominated by the males. She is expected to submit herself obediently and passively to the authority of a man. Simone de Beauvoir writes: "History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers; since the earlier days of the patriarchy they have thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence".. She has been reduced to the status of a plaything and a machine, a lifeless object used only to fulfill a man's sexual desire. Man always wants her to be the object, to be the means of enjoyment. According to Jessica Benjamin, the male-ego and dominance is the key note in the analysis of man-woman relationship where the male attributes are associated with the mental thought and positive activity while the woman is regarded as a passive creature that is forced to respect the male sexual drive for the subsequent reproduction of the human species.. She opines that she has been assigned the task of the reproduction of the human species only. She has been looked down upon as a child-bearing machine. She has been facing humiliation, injustice, suppression, oppression, subjugation and exploitation in the world of males. She has always been a mute and silent sufferer totally dependent on her male counterpart. An inevitable and unavoidable tragedy of the woman is that she is born and destined to passively, obediently and silently submit to the dreams, desires and aspirations of her male-counterpart. Her dreams, desires, aspirations, opinions, self and identity are suppressed in patriarchal set-up. She is identified and recognized in terms of her relationship with others. She is known as someone's daughter, someone's wife, someone's mother, someone's sister and someone's someone. In this connection, Indira Kulkshreshtha opines: "Generally, a woman's identity is defined in terms of her relationship with man as a daughter, a wife and a mother; it means virtually a woman doesn't have an identity of her own". (Kulkshreshtha 1987). She is not allowed to enjoy the status and dignity of being an individual who is equal to a man. She sees herself in her husband's shadow, lives as her husband wants her to leave, and behaves as her husband wants her to behave. She sheds her „I“ into her husband's. She gives up her name, self, virginity, almost everything in marriage. She becomes his *ardhangini*. She follows her husband willingly and ungrudgingly. She accepts her husband as a sheltering tree. She feels proud in doing these things. Though, she suffers a lot on account of the male-ego and male-domination, she considers herself incomplete, almost nothing without her husband. We should salute her silence, endurance, tolerance and sacrifice. The Hindu moral code, known as „The Laws of Manu“, denies the woman a separate and independent existence apart from that of her male-counterpart. These laws define and decide the place, position and status of the woman in her family and society. The age-old respect for these laws dictates her destiny. She cannot enjoy the taste of freedom and independence. She is made to submit herself to the authority of a man:

father, husband, brother or son. She is made to believe that she derives her status and dignity from her husband, and power from her son. Both her success and failure are measured in terms of her husband's success and failure. Her father is the first guardian-cum master of the woman. In the absence of her father, his role is performed by his son or his male relatives; and when she is married; her father's role and function naturally is transferred to her husband. In marriage, she is separated from the roots the family in which she was born, brought up and nurtured, and is automatically connected to her husband's family with its values and norms, customs and conventions. She becomes a connecting link between two families, her ancestral family and marital family.

Though we speak of the feminine world and the masculine world, we know that the woman has never constituted a closed and independent world of her own. She derives pleasure in rotating around the world of males. She becomes an integral part of the universe which is controlled and governed by males. She herself accepts that the world, on the whole, is masculine. Man always takes delight in keeping the woman in a state of dependence. He tries to have a complete hold and control upon her; he strives to shape and mould her to his desires and dreams. She too submits passively to his wills and desires. She sees herself and makes her choices and decisions not in accordance with her nature and temperament, but in accordance with that of her male-counterpart. In Indian society, over the years, the woman has been ruled over by men in one way or the other by using the laws of his world against her. She continues to face injustice, humiliation, torture, harassment, suppression, oppression, subjugation and exploitation in the name of gender-distinction and patriarchy.

The place of women in our society is a burning issue merely discussed by Indians. No special efforts have really been made to improve their status and dignity. Women have rarely been given liberty and the position equal to men in our society. Naturally, they have a strong desire to be free and liberal. They do not like to live within the four walls of the house. Therefore, they have started educating themselves; they have started competing with men by exhibiting their talent and potentiality in different fields of life including games, sports, media, education, literature, medicine, engineering, science and politics; they have started taking up jobs and earning. Their earnings are used to meet the family expenses and to raise the quality of life. They are working with men at different work places with equal competence. Owing to their sincerity, their performance at work places is better than that of their male-counterparts. However, a question remains: how many of them have the right to spend the money they earn the way they like? I think, very few. These working women are not relieved of the drudgery of their household activities. There have been two different attitudes towards women: one that women are weak, meek, submissive, silent, passive,

need to be protected, kept at home as a daughter, a wife or a mother; and the other that women are goddesses like *Lakshmi*, *Durga* and *Saraswati*, who must be worshipped. However, Indian women are neither of these two. They are caught in a kind of dilemma in Indian patriarchal set-up. It is true that women are better than and superior to men in many respects. They are more tolerant, more enduring, more compromising, more sincere, and emotionally stronger than their male-counterparts. Silence, endurance, tolerance and sacrifice are her divine virtues which make her bear her tragic lot. They adjust themselves with changing circumstances with ease and speed. Though delicate and soft as a lily, they have a heart, far stronger and bolder than that of a man. They are the supreme inspiration for man's onward march towards progress, an embodiment of love, pity and compassion. We should respect her virtues. We should try to improve their status. We should change the way we look at the females who form half of the population of our country. Only government-made laws cannot save them from their problems. The root cause of her tragedy is our patriarchal attitude to women, male-ego and male-domination. Women empowerment is impossible unless and until we change our attitude to women. Women, too, should change their attitude to themselves. The gender-oriented attitude is the only obstacle in the way of their development and empowerment.

Indian women, today, have been striving to capture their place, status, dignity and individuality. Independent India has seen a woman as the prime-minister in the form of Late Smt. Indira Gandhi. It has also seen a woman as the president in the form of Mrs. Pratibha Patil. It has seen many women as ambassadors, speakers, ministers, chief-ministers, legislators, governors, scientists, engineers, doctors, magistrates and what not. Education, a source of personality development, has helped and encouraged them to cast-off their age-old inferiority complex and contribute to their nation-building. They have started stepping out of Indian patriarchy; they have started questioning and opposing the orthodox conventions and traditional practices which are in favour of men. They have started revolting against male-domination and gender-discrimination. They are marching forward with grace and dignity side by side with men in every walk of life. They are contributing significantly towards the building of modern India. They have realized their value and importance as a social being. They know that they are the nucleus of their family and society.

INDIAN WOMEN IN PRE AND POST INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

Pre Independence Period-

The reformist wind blew in the direction of emancipation of women for the first time in India during the 19th century. The great thinkers in this direction were Raja

Rammohun Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekanand and Mahatma Gandhi. The ideas of the social reformers became manifested to some extent by the laws enacted by the British Government in India. In 1829, the first social law was enacted by Lord William Bentinck to abolish Sati and to declare it a crime. Simultaneously, the Brahmo Samaj established by Raja Rammohun Roy stood for the principle of freedom of women and equality of sexes. He vehemently opposed Sati and campaigned for widow marriage. All these ideologies were reflected through the publications particularly, in *Sambad Kaumudi* published by him. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar took leading part in promulgating the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 to make the widow marriage legal as well as to provide a status to Hindu widow in society. In order to prevent child widowhood, another great landmark of the 19th century was the Civil Marriage Act of 1872, which raised the age for marriage of the girls to fourteen and enforced monogamy.

During the national movement for independence, Gandhiji gave a clarion call for emancipation of women from household drudgery and to join the movement. He was very well aware of the fact that if fifty per cent of the population being women would not join the movement and remain alienated from it, the non-violent struggle based upon people's participation would not be successful.

Post Independence Period-

The first task in post-independent India was to provide a Constitution to the people of India and the spirit behind the Constitution was to bridge every gap between the citizens of India, so far as right, equality and development were concerned. Hence, the Constitution does not make any distinction on the basis of sex and provides rights, freedom, and privileges equally to both men and women.

Among the Personal Laws made to raise the status of women is the Uniform Civil Code which was enacted by Parliament in 1955-56. It is the first step in evolving a uniform Civil Code for the entire Indian people and in removing disabilities of law. It reformed the Hindu Law relating to (i) marriage and divorce, (ii) succession, and (iii) adoption, and (iv) minority and guardianship. The Anti-dowry Act of 1961 prohibits dowry system and thereby makes the woman equal partner with man so far as property is concerned. The daughter, the widow and the mother now inherit property along with the son, several laws against dowry, rape and immoral traffic have been enacted.

Though the Constitution of India is working since more than forty-five years and social laws are enacted, the raising of the status of women to one of equality, freedom and dignity is still a question mark.

The very fact that the numerical strength of women is declining during these years raises doubt relating to the improved status of women.

WOMEN IN INDIAN TRADITION

The role and behaviour of women in the society is determined by our social structure, cultural norms, value system and social expectations etc. to a great extent. Norms and standards of our society do not change at the same pace as changes take place due to technological advancement, urbanization, cost and standard of living, growth in population, industrialization and globalization. Social and educational policies fail to cope with desired changes in various fields. Particularly, social status of women in India is a typical example of the gap between position and role accorded to them by Constitution and the restrictions imposed on them by social traditions. What is practicable and possible by women and useful for them, in fact, is not within their reach. They have to exist within the framework of social norms and standards, which in turn cause infinite harm.

In Hindu tradition, practices like giving away daughters in marriage and sending them to their in-laws' house after marriage and importance attached to sons for maintaining continuity in the line have strengthened male dominated social structure. Women are debarred from joining religious ceremonies during the period of menstruation and child birth makes the women inferior in status than men.

In the views of Manu, "Woman is viewed solely as the mother and the wife and those roles are idealised. The ideal wife is faithful and service to husband and his family members without any complaint is virtuous".

A Hindu widow is cursed with misfortune and is neglected in many aspects. She is debarred from participating in any socio - religious functions like marriages, pujas. Birthday celebration etc. which may bring misfortune to them as well as to others. The mere sight of widow is believed to be a barrier to success while attending any function or start of journey. But a widower is not subject to such restrictions.

Male like female never wear any distinctive marks to indicate that he is married. Male widow do not observe fasting for his wife and suffers no restrictions on remarriage. But married woman observe many vrats for the wellbeing of her husband and children and even her dresses change after marriage and more particularly after her husband dies.

In Islamic religion woman cannot be a priest nor can she lead the prayers. She has no place in the formal religious organisations and legal affairs of the community and cannot be a kazi. Women are also deprived of participating in community prayers.

WOMEN AND SOCIAL ROLE / POSITION

Sense of femininity develops in the girl child before she is old enough to realize that there are two sexes. Although they possess all capabilities and potentialities but they are generally ignorant about that. Shyness, politeness, nobleness and modesty are approved qualities for girls. They are trained to speak with soft words and avoid harsh and hard language.

Girl child plays motherly roles in the family by shouldering responsibilities of household work such as looking after siblings, fetching water, collecting firewood, cleaning the house, cooking etc. The majority of children who have never attended school or who have dropped out at an early stage of education come from poor families or their parents are illiterate or semiliterate or do not in a position to visualize the importance of educating their daughters. Parents are not well enough to afford for education of their daughters. In rural areas, daughters of agricultural laborers, small farmers and artisans and in urban areas, daughters of shanty dwellers working in low level occupations are most likely to be withdrawn from school early. Sometimes the economic condition of family pushes children to become child labour. Daughters in their childhood and adolescence are neglected and more labour is extracted from them by parents because of net flow of wealth from daughters to their parents generally stops after marriage. Traditional sex role makes going to school as secondary for girls.

If we examine census report, though there has been rapid increase and improvement in female literacy rate, there exists wide gap in between male literacy and female literacy.

Year	Percentage of Literacy in total	% of Male Literacy	% of Female Literacy	M/F Literacy
1971	34.45	45.96	21.98	23.98
1981	43.57	56.37	29.75	26.62
1991	52.21	64.13	39.29	24.84
2001	63.38	70.85	54.16	21.69
2011	74.04	82.14	65.46	16.68

Table 1 : Male / Female Literacy in India from 1971 to 2011

Homemaking is the sole vocation for women. In spite of development of human civilization new forms of vocations and professions have come up. But majority of women seem to contribute their time in unpaid activities like household and agricultural work like sowing, weeding, transplantation, manuring, harvesting, winnowing, shelling and storing harvested crops and seeds along with activities within family such as cooking, cleaning utensils, washing clothes, taking care of children and aged persons etc.

WOMEN AND WORKFORCE

Due to either no earning or low earning activities of women their contributions to the society go unnoticed.

The Five Year Strategic Plan of Ministry of Women and Child Development for 2011-16 notes that workforce participation rate of women in rural area is 31% where as it is 53% for men. In urban area this rate is 14% for women as compared to 54% for men. Women's share of organized sector and public sector is less than 20%. Their share in Central Government employment is less than 8%.

Many women are working in domestic sector in India. About 10% of the female population over the age of 12 are employed in domestic service. It is second largest employment of women after agricultural labour. The women working as fulltime servants are harassed physically, psychologically and sometimes, sexually. Some women also serve as part time servants. After sexual harassment they are killed by supari killers. In some cases they are underpaid.

When the part time domestic woman worker comes to her own house after a day's work, her dirty home with hazardous environment waits her which damage her own children's life who do not attend school. (Mallick. Amiupriya. 2013).

FACTORS LED TO THE ENHANCEMENT OF STATUS OF WOMEN IN MODERN SOCIETY

The improvement in the status of women in the society can be analyzed in the light of the major changes that have taken place in areas such as legislations, education, economic and employment sector, political participation and awareness of their rights on the part of women, etc. Following are some changes:

Women in the field of education - The effects of women's education on development constitute a significant area of research within international development. An increase in the amount of women's education in regions tends to correlate with high levels of development. Some of the effects are related to economic development. Women's education increases the income of women and leads to growth in GDP. Other effects are related to social development. Educating girls leads to a number of social benefits, including many related to women's empowerment. Recent research in human development has established a strong link between women's education and international development. In particular; researchers seek to determine what factors explain differences in rates of development. Women's education is one of the major explanatory variables behind the rates of social and economic development. According to notable economist Lawrence Summers "investment in the education of girls may well be the highest-return investment available in the developing world."

Women in economic and employment fields - 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 giving tough competition to menfolk. In some fields the number of women employs is steadily increasing. For example, women working as teachers, doctors, nurses, advocates, bank employees, clerks, typists, telephone operators, receptionist, personal assistants and so on. Since 1991, though in a smaller number, women are getting recruited into armed force, air force and naval force also. In order to give protection to the economic interests and rights of the womenfolk the government has undertaken various socio-economic legislations, which cover areas such as right to property or inheritance, equal wages, working conditions, maternity benefits and job security.

Women in political field - Every country deserves to have the best possible leader and that means that women have to be given a chance to compete. If they're never allowed to compete in the electoral process then the countries are really robbing themselves of a great deal of talent" says Madeleine K. Albright, Chairman of NDI. It is believed that equitable participation of women in politics and government is essential to build and sustain democracy. Comprising over 50 percent of the world's population, women continue to be under-represented as voters, political leaders and elected officials. Democracy cannot truly deliver for all of its citizens if half of the population remains underrepresented in the political arena. Women's participation in mainstream political activity has important implications for the broader arena of governance in any country. Governance relates to a set of rules, institutions, and values that are involved in the management of state and society. Governance institutions and processes include political parties, parliaments, government and their interactions with society. Although governance is a generic term which could mean good government or management, the governance values, types of government, the nature of political processes, the political parties and organizations, which/whose interests are represented and protected, and the extent of power that the masses have to challenge the state or in suggesting alternatives in methods of governance etc.

Women given equal rights - The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, enshrines "the equal rights of men and women", and addressed both the equality and equity issues. In 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) for legal implementation of the Declaration of elimination of discrimination against sex. Described as an international bill of rights for women, it came into force on 3 September 1981. The Convention defines discrimination against women in the following terms, "Any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of

impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.” It also establishes an agenda of action for putting an end to sex-based discrimination for which states ratifying the Convention are required to enshrine gender equality into their domestic legislation, repeal all discriminatory provisions in their laws, and enact new provisions to guard against discrimination against women. They must also establish tribunals and public institutions to guarantee women effective protection against discrimination, and take steps to eliminate all forms of discrimination practiced against women by individuals, organizations, and enterprises.

CONCLUSION

It is largely held that women all over the world have been made to suffer discrimination and deprivation of various kinds since the beginning of time that they have all along been denied even such basic rights as access to literacy and property. This global concern has steadily grown through the past few decades and has resulted in efforts to bring women into the mainstream of life, mainly through socio-economic activities aimed at empowering them and thus restoring equality between the sexes. Real empowerment of women, however, lies in helping them unfold the spiritual aspect of their personality, build up their character and manifest their purity and motherhood.

All women are parts of the same infinite divine Power, and hence divine. Fully realizing the importance and urgency of the uplift of women, if we are to save our cultural traditions and spiritual values and counter the negative trends that are now affecting our body politic. SHGs too organize cultural and value-orientation programs and other meetings on their own for their all-round development.

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