

Position of Women Down the Ages in India

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The status of women in India has been progressing subject to the changes in the legislature over the past few years. From ancient time to present the promotion of equality for women by many reformers has been eventful in India and is also believed that women enjoyed equal status with men in all walks of life. From the words of Patanjali and Katyana is believed that women were educated in the early Vedic period. Rig Veda elucidate that women got married at matured age and were free to choose their husbands. Scriptures of Rig Veda and Upanishad mention the existence of women sages and seers in those periods. It is also known from the great Tamil Literature Silapathikham that Kannaki had instigated the king Pandian for justice. It is believed that women enjoyed equal status and rights even during the early Vedic period. Throughout the Vedic period women were given a status equal to men to participate in sacrificial rites, to undergo the investiture ceremony and to be man's equal in upholding 'dharma'. Vedic era has witnessed equal rights for women in the field of education, religion, politics, property and inheritance. However, later on approximately during 500 B. C, the status of women began to decline. Around sixth century, the practices of child marriages is believed to have started in India.

The position of women in the society gradually weakened during the medieval period. It was considered the worst period in the history. During this period society had become patriarchal and men women difference was evident. Man-Woman role was decided on the basis of sex. Women were consigned inside the four walls of home. Later on Sati, child marriage and on widow remarriages became part of social life in India. In some part of India, the Devadasi or the temple women were sexually exploited. Polygamy was widely practised especially among Hindu Kashatriya rules. Queen Durgavati ruled for fifteen years before she lost her life in a battle with Mughal emperor Akbar's general Asaf Khan in 1564. Chand Bibi defended Ahmednagar against the mighty Mughal forces of Akbar. Jahangir's wife Nure Jahan effectively wielded the imperial power and was recognized as the real force behind the Mughal throne. Shivaji's mother, Jijabai was deputed queen regent, because of her ability as a warrior and administrator. In south India, many women administered villages, divisions, towns and heralded social and religious institutions. The Bhakti cult tried to restore women and questioned some of the forms of oppression. Mirabai, a female saint poet was one of the most important personalities in Bhakti movement. Some other female saints include Akkama Devi, Rani Janabai, and Lal Dev Bhakti sects within Hinduism such as the Mahanubhab, Varkari and many other were principle movements within the Hindu fold to openly advocate social justice and equality between men and women. JahanAra Bagum and Princess Zebunnisa were well known poetesses and they also influenced the ruling administration. Gurus of Sikhs also

preached the messages of equality between men and women by advocating assemblies.

During the modern period a number of social reformers felt the need to emancipate women and tried to establish a justified place for them in the family and society. The thinkers and social reformers realized that unless the condition of 50% of Indian population is improved Indian society cannot improve. In this era, the demographic factors, industrialization, organization and advancement of knowledge have brought about radical changes in the basic institution like family and are also affecting the economic security and social status of women. In the beginning the Britishers adopted passive 'non-interference' policy towards personal status of Women. However, the impact of Western civilization through British rule gave an impetus to claim equal status and rights by the Indian women.

Sincere efforts were made by eminent scholars, judges and social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Ray, Dwarkanatha Tagore, Kesava Chandra Sen, Eshwara Chandra Vidyasagar, etc, to improve the status of Indian women. As a result of the efforts of the social reformers and public up surge some reformative laws like Hindu Widows remarriage Act 1856, the Abolition of sati Act, [1929] The Widow Remarriage [1858], Female infanticide Act, [1870], The civil Marriage Act [1873], the Married Women property Act [1874] The age consent Act [1881] the child Marriage Act [1992] were passed by the British Govt. the family and social status of Women also improved during the British period because of female education and raise in the age of Marriage. In 1946, the Hindu Women's Right of separate Residence and maintenance Act 1946 was passed. To improve the pathetic status of Widow, the Hindu Women Right of property Act was passed in the year 1937. Entrance of Dr. Anne Besant in the Indian political scene in the year 1914, marked the dawn for Women's resurgence. Gandhi ji call for Women's participation in the freedom struggle brought out the Indian Women from the seclusion in their houses. Many Women leaders emerged during the freedom struggle Sarojini Naidu, Durgabai Desh Mukh, Aruna Asaf Ali etc. are some of the prominent personalities to mention. The Government of India Act 1935 provided franchise and civil service under the crown for the women.

After Independence in 1947, Government of India went for socio, economic transformation of the country and the framers of the constitution realized the unequal status of women and assured that women should get equal rights. The fundamental rights enshrined in Article 14, 15 and 16 guarantees the principle of equality before law, equality of sexes and equal opportunities in all walks of life. Effective steps were taken to improve the status and position of Women by envisaging equality before law and equal protection of laws in the constitution of India. There were

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nearly 13 Women members in the constituent Assembly which framed the constitution of India. The constitution of India has brought the Indian Women in to a new era clothed with all rights which men do. Special protection (Annexure 1.1) is also given to Women under fundamental Rights Directive principles of state policy also enumerate certain directives towards emancipation of Women. The government also enunciated numerous measures over the years for improving the status of women through its various commissions committee, namely the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956, and Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956, were passed only for the benefit of women and to raise the status of women. The Dowry prohibition Act, 1961, Maternity Benefit Act in 1961, the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, the Medical Termination of pregnancy Act, 1971, the Prevention of Immoral Traffic Act, 1986, the Indecent Representation of Women [prohibition] Act, 1986, the Commission of Sati [prevention] Act, 1987, the insertion of sections 376 A to D and section 498A in the Indian penal code are some of the Legislative measures to ensure dignity and social status of Hindu women.

However, while these constitutional and legislative measures were adopted to guarantee the legal equality to women, in practice the full impact of these progressive laws is yet to be perceived. Only few Indian women derived benefit from the new reformative and protective laws. Despite of constitutional guarantees of equality of sexes, equality of opportunity, the women continued to be victim of exploitation and discrimination. Even after six decades of independence the birth of a female child is regarded a curse and financial liability by some families. The practice of female infanticide is prevalent in many parts of the country. Currently also in extreme cases, 'Amniocentesis' test as a scientific technique is misused to deduct sex of foetus and subsequently getting rid of it, if found female foeticide. Even today she is not sent to school. School enrolment ratio for women is only 46 per cent Child marriage is still widely practised in rural areas. The old custom of purchasing of groom continues to plague the lives of young brides. There has been a constant rise in dowry deaths and bride burning in the country. In recent years not a day passes without a news paper carrying reports of bride burning or suicide committed by women for lack of sufficient dowry as is evident from media, articles and statements. It is a daily affair that in domestic sphere, innocent wife is beaten and humiliated but in society she is advised by her well wishers to keep her misery under wraps. The helpless victims of domestic crimes are crippled under the social pressure but the helpless investing authorities and judiciary just watch it like a silent spectator because they get no complaints, to ignite the jurisdiction of investigation. The Hindu succession Act, 1956 provides equal share to daughter in parental property by and large still goes to son.

Women suffering indignities in different forms, from comments of roadside Romeo to eve-teasing, molestation and even rape. There are several incidents of kidnapping or abduction of young women who are forced in to prostitution by flesh traders. Equal wages are often denied to women. In the 21st century, in the society the earning of women are appreciated and encouraged but on the other hand family

and society have not changed their attitude and outlook towards working women. She is ill treated. The working class women in offices and in factories are also victims of insult, comments, misbehavior and other offices of co-worker and their authority in place of working and outside the office she is mishandled by anti social and bad elements. Women while proceeding to the place of work or during their return journey to home are sexually tortured, it includes touching the body, eve teasing etc.

According to the Indian committee on the status of Women (1974)

- 1) Equality of women is necessary, not merely on the grounds of social justice, but as a basic condition of social, economic and political development of the nation.
- 2) In order to release women from their dependent and unequal status, improvement of their employment opportunities and earning power has to be given the highest priority. Society owes special responsibilities to women because of their child bearing function. Safe bearing and rearing of children is an obligation that has to be shared by the mother, the father and society.
- 3) The contribution made by an active house wife to the running and management of the family should be admitted as economically and socially productive contribution to the national savings and development. Therefore, it is important that society, including women themselves, must accept their responsibilities in this field.
- 4) Our society is to move in the direction of the goals.... the special temporary measures will be necessary to transform defuse into de facto equality.
- 5) The extent of quality of women with men varies in different societies ranging from near equal to utter subjugation. Different explanations have been given by scholars for the differentially low status of women.

The national plan of action for women (NPA) adopted in 1976 becomes a guiding document for the development of women. In this series other programs also started for the empowerment of women effects since then have been directed towards main streaming women into the national development process by raising their overalls status social, economic, legal and political at the par with men.

The position of women and their status in any society is an index of its civilization. Women are to be considered as equal partners in the process of development but, because of centuries of exploitation and subjugation, Indian women have remained at the receiving end. They have not been actively involved in the mainstream of development even though they represent equal proportions of the population and labour force. Primarily women are the means of survival for their families, but are generally unrecognized and undervalued being placed at the bottom of the pile. Though there have been cases of women predominance in different societies, it has been evidenced that no society in the world ever provided or provides women equal status with men. Men and women have been performing different roles, but aspects such as cultural expression, work and mobility, education, health, family size, political expression and social awareness etc. have changed the role of women considerably

over years. Even in the traditional society women participation in various fields has been necessitated a changing image of women. The role and status of women change according to different environment, depending upon the culture factors, structural variables, economic and social development process and influence the science, technology and modernization.

The Government of India has adopted the National policy for the empowerment of Women on (20th March 2001.) The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its preamble. Fundamental rights, fundamental duties, and directive principles. The constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women, with in the frame work of democratic polity, our laws, development policies, plans and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. From the fifth five year plans (1974-1978) onwards there has been a marked shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development. In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognized as central issues in determining the status of women. The National Commission for women was set up by an act of parliament in 1991 to safeguard the right and legal entitlements of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendment (1993) of the constitution provides women for 1/3 of representation in local bodies, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels.