

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: A STUDY ON STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA

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Abstract

One way to judge the state of nation is to study the status of its women. In reality, the status of women represents the standard of culture of any age. The social status of the women of a country symbolizes the social spirit of the age. However to draw a conclusion about the position of women is a difficult and complicated problem. It is therefore, necessary to trace this position in the historical perspective. In the course of Indian history from prehistoric to modern times, there were distinct stages of the rise and fall in the status and role of women.

In ancient India, though patriarchal system was highly prevalent - all male domination -- 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, dharmasalas not merely for the welfare of heads of the families but for their parents as well. This paper includes historical background of women. Socio-Economic condition of women, and political participation of women in India etc.

Introduction

The difficulty lies in the fact, that the recorded evidence found in the same period and in the same province have expressed opposite view/s about the worth, nature and importance of women. While one school considers women as the best gift of God to men, the other school considers that the best way to reach God is to avoid women. Some people thought that woman brings prosperity when she is properly treated and respected and is called Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. Sage Agastya says "women combine the fickleness of the lightning the sharpness of a weapon and the swiftness of the eagle. Altekar says that to ascertain the position of women in Hindu society, one should study their position, under different circumstances, like normal i.e. in peace time and abnormal i.e. in war time. Because during wars, the attitude of the society towards women was very unsympathetic, particularly, if the women had the misfortune of falling into the hands of the enemies. They found it impossible to get re-admitted into their family and society.

India is a multifaceted society where no generalization could apply to the nation's various regional, religious, social and economic groups. Nevertheless certain broad circumstances in which Indian women live affect the way they participate in the economy. A common denominator in their lives is that they are generally confined to home, with restricted mobility, and in seclusion. Other, unwritten, hierarchical practices place further constraints on women. Throughout history, women have generally been restricted to the role of a homemaker; that of a mother and wife. Despite major changes 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 still powerful in India, defining activities that are deemed appropriate for women. They are, by and large, excluded from political life, which by its very nature takes place in a public forum.

Women in ancient India

Women held very important position in ancient Indian society. There are evidences to suggest that woman power destroyed kingdoms and mighty rulers. 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 life

Instances of Swayamvara ceremony can be found in epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharaya. This continued even in the later period in high caste families.

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

This brighter aspect of the high status of women in ancient India explains only one side. However, the other side of the picture of women was not so rosy. Several inscriptions and references in literature make it clear that polygamy, particularly among the kings, nobles, rich and high caste men were not uncommon

Status of women in Medieval

A brief account of the status enjoyed by women during early medieval period is quite necessary for our understanding of the position of women in Indian society. Women of high status such as queens, princesses, and wives of nobles, courtesans and dancers were educated in different fields including that of statecraft so that they would give right advice at the right time to their husbands. At the same time, queens warranted by the exigencies like the death of their husbands took the reins of administration into their hands.

Religious Freedom

The foregoing brief account bears testimony to the religious freedom enjoyed by the women of high rank and social status. These generous gifts to temples and Brahmans made the elite sections of the society happy and comfortable.

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. One of the inscriptions from Panagallu refers to one Shivarani, who is described as KaliyugaSaraswati. Another inscription of Panagallu refers to Mallmamba, mother of the Chief Bhima as Vagdevi. She has been praised by scholars as the goddess of learning.

Participation in Religious Rites and Rituals

We have quite a few references to the queens gifting Shivalingam for the PunyalokaPrapthi of their deceased husbands. The Bothpur inscription records that Kuppambika constructed a temple and consecrated a Shivalingam in the name of her deceased husband for his heavenly merit. It is believed that by installing Shivalingas in temples, the donors will obtain salvation from many religious activities such as performing worshipsyaga

Prostitutes

Apart from Bhogastrees who enjoyed the patronage of the higher strata of the society, there is another class of women known as prostitutes. They are by profession prostitutes. We do not have much information about them in the form of inscriptions but ancient and medieval literature tell us that they were condemned as totally of loose character, highly tricky and cruel enough to murder their paramours for the sake of money. They were often compared to leeches because of their nature of exacting money from anyone who approached them. Thus, they are portrayed as most unscrupulous, unfaithful and dangerous. Nannechoda in his Kumarasambhavam and PalakurikiSomanna in his Basavapuranalulu dealt with their greedy and tricky nature at length.

The changing status of Indian women

Within the four principal castes, there are thousands of sub-castes, also called jatis, endogamous groups that are further divided along occupational, sectarian, regional and linguistic lines. Collectively all of these are sometimes referred to as 'caste Hindus', or those falling within the caste system. The SCs are described as varna are "outside the system"- so inferior to other castes that they are deemed polluting and therefore

“untouchable”. Even as outcasts, they themselves are divided into further sub-castes. Although “untouchability” was abolished under Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, the practice continues to determine the socio-economic and religious standing of those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Whereas the first four varnas are free to choose and change their occupation, Dalits have generally been confined to the occupational structures into which they are born. The Constitution has merely prescribed, but has not given a description of the ground reality.

Status of Indian Women and the role of Legislation

Position of women in society is the index to the standard of social organisation. In ancient India woman enjoyed equal status with man in all fields of life, she received the same education like man, many Hindu religious books like Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata have mentioned the names of several women who were great scholars, poets and philosophers of the time. Wife was regarded as ‘Ardhangini’ which means she is half of her husband. An unmarried man was considered to be incomplete man. All religious ceremonies were performed by the husband along with the wife.

But in the medieval period, the status of women went down considerably. She was considered to be inferior to man. Decline in the status of women in Indian society begins with the Muslim rule in India: customs of pardha, sati, child marriage, restrictions on widow marriage and prevalence of joint family system have been the factors responsible for the injustice meted out to women.

Several factors like women’s education, reform movements, women’s participation in politics and many social legislations are responsible for the changes in the day-to-day life of women in today’s India, some of the important statutory legislations to improve the positioning of women are:

- The Hindu Widow Re-marriage Act of 1856
- The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929
- The Hindu Women Right to Property Act of 1937
- The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955
- The Hindu Succession Act of 1956

- The Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act of 1956-57, and
- The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961.

Modern Period

In the modern period, the status of Indian women can be divided into two distinct periods, the British rule, i.e., Pre-Independent India and the Post-Independent India. The British Rule in the 18th century brought in some degree of political orderliness, but the social structure, customs and practices remained unchanged. It was mainly during the 19th century that the reform movement undertaken by enlightened thinkers and leaders of Indian society like Raja Rammohan Roy who understood the importance of women's participation that the status of Indian women started changing for the better. Though initially all the leaders were men, women gradually came into the scene and played their role not only in changing history but also the society as a whole, through their efforts in

different areas of work such as education, politics and freedom movement

Socio-Economic and Political status of Women

Though the early and medieval society was a male dominated one, women enjoyed a position of respect and reverence. Many contemporary inscriptions make it particularly clear that they enjoyed the freedom to make liberal gifts to religious institutions. Women of higher status were given good education though to a limited extent. Nevertheless, she was very well acquainted with moral and material affairs. She was also able to win the heart of her husband by her absolute devotion, command respect from children and from other members of the family. Through her selfless service, she was regarded as the most important person in the family. Because of these laudable qualities woman was considered to be the very goddess of prosperity (Lakshmi) of the house.¹⁰

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Participation in political decision-making is another indication that determines the status of women. Equal representation in parliamentary institutions is a pre-condition for this. Though Indian women got right to vote on par with men, contesting elections and getting elected to Parliament and Legislatures is an exceptional opportunity to women. Till today, women's representation in Parliament did not exceed 8.8 per cent. Moreover, the Bill related to 33 per cent reservation to women in Parliament is subjected to discussion for the past one decade. This shows the gender discriminatory nature of politics in India. However, in Andhra Pradesh, because

of 33 per cent seats reserved in local self-government bodies; the participation of women at this level naturally shows a rise especially since 1990s. But, it is a well-known fact that this phenomenon is determined, dictated and directed by mainstream politics of men. From decision to

contest elections to taking political decisions and exercising power after occupying public position stage and at all levels, men control women.

Conclusion

In India, there is diversity of culture, tradition, and norms, castes religion that influence situating gender in the society. A common denominator in their lives is that they are generally confined to home, with restricted mobility, and in seclusion. Other, unwritten, hierarchical practices place further constraints on women. India as we know is a country of different races; therefore, we find several languages, different customs and traditions in this country. All these facts constitute one side of picture; the other side is more significant because of the existence of different religions. In order to identify, the exact nature of status of women in India we need to understand woman's place in Socio-Religious context.

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