

Status of Women in India: In British Period

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The one and the best way to study and judge the nation is to judge the status of its women. Because the status of woman is not merely a figure to any one. It represents the culture of any age. To reach at any conclusion about the status of woman it is very much necessary to trace the position of woman in the historical perspective. There were distinct ages in the history which represents different status of woman. According to A.S. Altekar,

“The difficulty lies in the fact that the recorded evidence found in the same period in the same province have expressed opposite views about the worth, nature and importance of woman. While one school considers woman as the best gift of God to men, the other school considers that the best way to reach God is to avoid woman.”

(The position of women in Hindu civilization, Pg. 319)

According to Sage Agastya,

“Woman 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 woman 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 attitudes 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.”

(A.S. Altekar, “The Position of women in Hindu civilisation”, Pg 319)

For the purpose of depicting a brief history of the changing position and role of women in India, six broad categories are considered.

- (a) 2500 B.C. to 1500 B.C. – Vedic Period
- (b) 1500 B.C. to 500 B.C. – Post Vedic Period
- (c) 500 B.C. to 500 A.D. – Samriti Period
- (d) 500 A.D. to 1800 A.D. – Muslim Period
- (e) 1880 A.D. to 1947 A.D. – British period
- (f) 1947 A.D. onward – Contemporary Period

Indian history is full of contradictory and conflicting views on the status of woman. To understand, the status of women it is very much essential that it should be judged with in the socio cultural condition of that very much respective society. In this paper my main focus will to depict the status of woman in British period. In the latter half of the 18th century when the British came to India, the position and status of woman was very miserable. It was the worst period in the history of the country because of child marriage and Sati system. A.L. De'souza says,

“Women were denied equal rights in marital, familial, social, educational, economic and political fields. They were assigned a subordinate status. They had scant personal identity and few rights.”

According to Cousin,

“The condition of woman was at its lowest point of literacy of individuality, of hearth, of social status, of freedom of movement, or initiative of economic status of power.”

(Margret E. Cousin, “Indian Womanhood Today”, Pg. 13)

The British were the first rulers who unified the country as a whole and were liberal in this thinking. They believed that rational thinking had to be the basis for all customs and institutions and all customs and institutions not so based on reason had to be done away with. Therefore, during British period society (Indian society) faced remarkable modifications and changes. British government gave the all possible opportunities to them who wanted to see a change in the society. The position of girls, women was improved in British period. They introduced female education the main obstacle was child marriage tradition. So first of all British government passed the child-marriage restrict act in 1929. The act not merely prohibited the solemnization of child-marriages but also raised the minimum age for marriage of girls to 14 and of boys 18 years. This act is also known as Sarda Act.

The familial social status of woman i.e. of wife also improved in British period. It was due to the rise in female education and rise in the age of marriage. The Hindu Woman's Right of Separate Residence and Maintenance Act of 1946, enabled Hindu wives to claim maintenance even without having judicial separation under certain circumstances. Woman acquired a new social status because of social legislation called the Civil Indian Marriage Act 1872.

The Cruel Act of 'Sati' which was on its peak throughout the 17th, 18th centuries attracted the attention of a good number of enlightened Indians and the British under the leadership of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Lord William Bentinck. In spite of strong opposition, a historical resolution of great importance was passed in December 14, 1829 by which Sati was made a crime. However the widow was ill treated by her in laws and kinsmen as the virtual destroyer of her husband. The tragedy became all the more poignant if the widow happened to be more poignant if the widow happened to be the child. So for this British government passed the Hindu Widows Remarriage Act, 1856. This Act was enacted to remove all the legal barriers to remarriage of Hindu widows. Later British government realized that arranging remarriage of Hindu windows is not such an easy task. Because the widows had to suffer because they had no property of her own. So to improve the economic condition of the woman British government came with the "Hindu Women's Right to Property Act 1937." By this Act Hindu Woman (widow) got if the right to claim partition and the right of enjoyment of that property during her life time. She was freed from depending on others. On the other side Mrs. Annie Besant in 1917 tried to promote women's education through the Indian Association. In 1920 the federation of university of women was established and in 1925 National Council of Women started. AryaSamaj, GopalKrishanGokhale, Swami Vivekanand, Pandita Ramabai, Keshab Chandra Sen were to other who gave their valuable contribution to British government for up liftment of the status of woman.

The familial, social and economic position of woman (Hindu Woman) was greatly improved in British period. Although a small number of women took privileges from this but their initiation was indeed significant. During India's Struggle for Independence, thousands of women tookpart. So certainly the position of Hindu woman improved in British period.

K. Gill truly observed about the achievements with regard to the status of women during British period that:

"If a person who died a hundred years ago comes to life today, the first and the most important change which would strike him is the revolution in the position of women."

(K. Gill, "Hindu Women's Right to Property in India, Pg. 38)