



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Role of Women in Making of Indian Nation

Dr. Anamika

M.A., Ph.D.

Department of Political Science
B.R.A.Bihar University, Muzaffarpur

Women in India have contributed significantly since the beginning of civilization. Their moral values and dedication towards humanity from ancient times till the present era can be seen in examples of Sita, Anusuya, Ahilya, Laxmibai, Mirabai, Razia Sultan, Sarojini Naidu, Indira Gandhi, Kalpana Chawla, Kiran Bedi, Medha Patkar, and others. In Indian culture women have been represented as and raised to the level of goddesses, but unfortunately the patriarchal family system and other socio-historical factors resulted in the subordination of women. The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. Though much progress has been made towards improving women's place in the society; 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 adorned high offices including that of the President, Prime Minister, speaker of the Lok Sabha and others.

Indian civilization has produced great women ranging from Brahmavadinis (lady Rishi) to stateswomen, from ideal wife to warrior queen. Hindu mythology witnesses that the status of Hindu woman during the Vedic period was honorable and respectable. The Rig Veda reveals a stage where women enjoyed equal status with men. "... a Rig Vedic hymn describes how a maiden could take a soma twig and offer herself as a sacrifice to Indra. Vedic sacrifices were performed jointly by husband and wife.¹" Patriarchy never denied women their rights and privileges. There are references, which indicate that, equal social and religious status was allowed to boys and girls in Vedic society. Girls had equal opportunity for advanced education. They also spent early years of their life in Brahmacharya ashram after observing Upanayana Sanskara for study of Vedas. They could quit before recommended period of Brahmacharya ashram as they were married at 16 or 17 years of age. They were then called Sadyovahas and if they continue her studies, they were called Brahmavadini.² The Rigveda shows abundant evidence pointing to the fact that women were fully the equals of men. Attainment of women in intellectual field is to be inferred from the fact that some of the hymns are attributed to female Rishis.

According to Ray Choudhri, the position of women was much better in this period than the subsequent times. The period witnessed many women scholars who were well versed in sacred texts. These women not only composed hymns but were also well-versed in sacred texts.³ They were on the same footing as men. They learnt the Vedas, were entitled to recite the Vedas and they were teachers as well as learners.⁴ According to A.S. Altekar "... education was regarded as very essential to secure a suitable

marriage."⁵ In Rig Vedic society". . . the practice of child marriage did not exist."⁶ So women got an opportunity to acquire education.

Marriage was an established institution in the Vedic age. It was regarded as a social and religious duty. The husband and wife stood on equal footing and prayed for longlasting love and friendship. The practice of Swayamvara or self-choice was prevalent at that time. Wishes and choices of girls in the settlement of their marriages are also a strong indication of their status in society. The bride had the right of selecting their own consort. Monogamy normally prevailed in the Vedic age which indicates high status of women in his period. In the family at least to a certain extent women enjoyed equal rights, as the Aryans believed that ". . . the wife and the husband being the equal halves of one substance were regarded equal in every respect and both took equal part in all duties, religious and social."⁷

In the Vedic era, there was no restriction on the mobility of women. They had sufficient freedom of going to attend fairs, festivals and assemblies. They were not confined to four walls of their family houses. There is no mention of purdah system. The fact that they commonly attend fairs and festivals is borne out by a number of verses in the Rigveda. The sister quitted for the elder sister and her place and having looked on her departeth. She decks her beauty, shining forth with sunbeams, like women trooping to the festive meeting.⁸ "Like women at a gathering fair, the streams of oil, look on with gentle smile and recline to Agni."⁹

But in the post-Vedic period, they started losing their status in society which she attained in the Vedic age. She lost her independence and became a subject of protection. Manu, the progenitor of Hindu race, stated that a woman should be kept day and night in subordination by males of the family- woman has to be protected by her father in childhood, by her husband in young age and by the sons in old age. She lost her identity after marriage.

Manu's codes are legal authority of the time with respect to Hindu family. He regards daughter as an object of highest tenderness. He did not treat women at par with men so far as rituals of Vedas are concerned. The woman was not eligible for study of Vedas, or for use of mantras in performing sacraments except marriage. Serving to husband is equivalent to living in the house of teacher, household duties amount to yagna for her. Women were pre-ordained for procreation and they had no other function. Manu was of the opinion that women do not need any education. Marriage of girls forms their initiation into study of Vedas. "The rules of marriage were rigidly enforced and marriage was primarily a social institution. The patriarchal system tended to keep the status of women at a low level, and the emergence of the joint family with special property rights for the male members reinforced male dominance."¹⁰

Women in pre-independence India:

During the uprising of 1857, women of the ruling class came together along with the men to fulfill their ambition for an independent India. Women were actively involved in nationalist politics from the middle of the 19th century. For example, women formed organizations for social reform in which issues related to women were addressed and women voiced their opinions and participated in the first struggle against British rule, the 1857 revolt. Right from ancient times, the women of India have never hesitated to stand shoulder to shoulder with the men folk whenever the country faced a crisis. History is replete with instances of women coming forward to offer their strength and their intelligence for causes they deemed relevant for the progress and sovereignty of the nation. In the freedom struggle of the country, they have contributed significantly. The initiative, bravery, guts and hardship that the women have showed in the freedom movements for the country's independence from colonial rule have given them widespread significance in the Indian society. Women were 'accepted as political comrades and given equal opportunities for participation in the freedom struggle.'¹¹

Maharani Ahalya Bai Holkar, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Rani of Ramgarh and the famous Laxmi Bai of Jhansi had become iconic figures in the Indian political arena. They were at a supreme status in the society. Some of them led troops to the battlefield and fought valiantly, while others suffered imprisonment, exile and eventual death. Hazrat Mahal, wife of Nawab Wazid Ali Shah, the deposed ruler of Avadh rose in revolt against the British rule and became one of the principal leaders of the great revolt of 1857. With the active help of the revolutionary forces, she captured Lucknow after defeating the British troops and set up her son Birjis Qadar as the king of Avadh. She assumed real power as the regent of the infant prince and personally participated in the defense of Lucknow against the invading British forces under Sir Colin Campbell. Under adverse circumstances, the Begum had to escape to Nepal and refused to surrender to the British authorities even when a pension and an "honorable position" were offered to her.

Women in post-independence India

The active participation of women in the freedom struggle simultaneously developed among them an increasing sense of awareness to organize and lead the cause of their liberation from oppression and subordination. After independence, a large number of legal and socio-economic measures have been taken to elevate the status of women. Independence of India opened the doors for the women of the country to find their due place in society and partake in the political, social and administrative life of the country.¹¹

A major achievement on the part of women after independence is the granting of franchise or voting rights to women. Hindu laws of marriage and divorce, adoption, and inheritance have also witnessed a major alteration, which again proves the noteworthy place of women in independent India. Women in the modern era stand as the insignia of India's development and equality. Be it in career development or in the seamless majestic development of women empowerment, women in modern India has explicated as separate individuals whilst playing a crucial role in the modern society. The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity (Article 16), and equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)). In addition, it allows special provisions to be made by the State in favor of women and children (Article 15(3)), renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51(A) (e)), and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief. (Article 42)³⁰. Below mentioned Articles in the constitution of India focus on women and their constitutional rights.

Fundamental Rights:

Article 15(1) of the Constitution protects the rights of citizens, as it prohibits the state from discriminating against any citizen on grounds of gender amongst other grounds like race, religion, etc. Article 15(2) prohibits any citizen from being subjected to any sort of disability, liability, restriction or conditions on grounds of gender. This is with regards to accessing the public places like restaurants, shops, etc. It is also effective while utilizing facilities of public utilities like wells, roads and such other places which are wholly or partly maintained by or out of State funds or dedicated for public usage. Article 15(3) empowers the State to make special provisions in favor of women and children. (For example, reservation of seats for women in public bodies, free primary education for children, etc.)

Article 16 of the Constitution, states that there shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment in any office under the State. Also, no citizen shall be held ineligible or discriminated against on grounds of gender.

Fundamental Duties:

Article 51A (e) imposes on every citizen by way of fundamental duty the responsibility to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. Today, where politics is being viewed upon as a career, by means of Article 243D and Article 243T, the State makes provisions for reservation of seats for women from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in Panchayat and Municipalities respectively.

Directive Principles of State Policy:

The Directive Principles of State Policy are guidelines to the central and state government of India, to be considered while framing laws and policies. These are not enforceable by any court, but are considered fundamental in the governance of the country. The Directive Principles of the State Policy makes provisions with regards to: Article 39 enjoins the State to direct its policies towards securing all citizens without discriminating between men and women.

Thus, the position of women after independence supported the fact that the Indian constitutional law etc. endorsed the qualities like equality and righteousness. Indian women have played an important role from the very beginning of Independence in different walks of life. They have taken bold steps in all nation building activities, which started with education and have now blossomed into women's involvement in every activity of India. Despite hurdles like male chauvinism and indifference towards them, women have proved their worth as teachers, administrators, officers, entrepreneurs, doctors, engineers, nurses, and computer scientists and almost in all the spheres of activity contributing to social transformation and nation building. There is no arena, which remained unconquered by Indian women.

Politics:

Women of India are highly active today in this area. Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Sucheta Kriplani were the torchbearer for the women of India. Mrs. Vijay Lkshami Pandit was the first Indian woman to hold a post in the cabinet. Thus, paving the way for other women. The most important name in the category of women politicians of recent times is Mrs. Indira Gandhi. She was the one who made world stop and notice the talent and potential of Indian women. She was the first women Prime Minister of independent India. Today her daughter-in law Mrs. Sonia Gandhi is following her footsteps and leading the Indian National Congress. Other women who have made their name in politics of India are Shiela Dixit, Uma Bharti, Jayalalitha, Vasundhara Raje, Mayavati and Mamata Banerjee.

Sports:

Indian women have achieved great laurels for the nation in every sport. Whether it is cricket or hockey India have national women team for every game. Indian women cricket team has won Asia Cup of 2004 and 2005 and made country proud. Some women sports icons of India are: P.T. Usha (Athletics), Kunjarani Devi, (Weightlifting), Diana Edulji (Cricket), Sania Mirza (Tennis), Karnam Malleshwari (Weight lifting)

Art and Entertainment :

This arena is full of Indian women. We have many names to boast of like M.S. Subbulakshmi, Indian Nightingale Lata Mangeshkar, Asha Bhosle as famous singers. Madhu Bala, Rekha, Aishwarya Rai as Bollywood queens. Today Indian woman is a painter, an actor, a singer, and a beauty queen.

Literature:

In past women of India used to write, but their work did not get the recognition. Today they are getting their dues. Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Shobhaa De, Jhumpa Lahiri are famous names in Indian literature. Not just in India now these women are recognized all over the world. Arundhati Roy has been awarded with the Booker Prize of 1997 for her work *"God of Small Things"*. Kiran Desai has been given Booker Prize of 2006 and Jhumpa Lahiri got recognition in the form of Pulitzer Prize.

Corporate Sector:

Kiran Majumdar Shaw is the undisputed corporate queen of India. She is the richest Indian woman. She is the MD of Biocon India. She is the wealthiest entrepreneur of India. Kiran wanted to become a doctor but could not get admission in medical colleges but even then she did not lose courage and went on to become India's first woman 'Brew Master' and subsequently corporate queen. Other names in this list include Vidya Mohan Chhabaria, Chairperson of Jumbo Group, Naina Lal Kidwai, Vice Chairperson and Managing Director of HSBC Securities and Capital Market, Sullaija Firodia Motwani and Mallika Srinivasan.

Social Activists:

The Indian saint of today's times Mother Teresa is the name which every Indian whether rich or poor is familiar with. She was the person who used to consider the smile of her countrymen as her wealth. She worked for those whom even their own families have deserted. She did not care whether she is in the company of a person suffering from communicable disease or whether it is day or night. Whenever or wherever one needed her she was present. She opened various homes for these people most famous of which is 'Nirmal Hriday'. It is open to everyone irrespective of caste, creed or religion. Another important name working for the cause of people includes Aruna Roy who worked for the same RTI Campaign and Medha Patkar who is associated with Narmada Bachao Andolan.

Universal Queens:

Indian women have not just made their mark on earth but they have engraved their name in the whole universe by flying to space. Kalpana Chawla, who was the member of Columbia Space Shuttle, which exploded on its way back, was the first Indian woman astronaut who visited space station. And now following on her footsteps other women of Indian origin Sunita Williams has become the second one to be the member of International Space Station crew. Indian women have mastered anything and everything which a woman can dream of. Thus, it can be said that free India has carried forward the process to a point where legally at least men and women are equal but some of the basic cultural orientations towards men and women in contemporary Indian society have been shaped by the authority of classical texts, teachings of religion, factors of historical development and the persistence of regional and local traditions.

The contradictory attitudes expressed about women in classical texts persist in contemporary society. On the one hand, they are regarded as the highest embodiment of purity and power - a symbol of religiousness and spirituality, on the other; they are viewed essentially as weak and dependent creatures requiring constant guidance and protection. While girls are also considered necessary, the birth of a boy has been considered more desirable. Ritual considerations materially add to the desirability of the male. In the traditional scheme of Hindu life, the attainment of salvation occupies the place of highest importance. For this it is necessary to complete all the rites and ceremonies of the life cycle prescribed by dharma. In the patrilineal Hindu society, only a male can offer water to the spirits of the deceased ancestors; a son alone can perform the essential rites ensuring passage to heaven or attainment of salvation. This makes a male offspring very desirable.

It is believed; parents can depend on sons for support in old age and are looked upon as potential builders of family prestige and prosperity. On the contrary, daughters are considered to be destined for

others, their upbringing is all worry and work for the parents. The difficulties and expenses involved in her upbringing and marriage further detract from her desirability. Even today in a large number of Hindu households, the birth of a son is an occasion for rejoicing; the birth of a daughter is a cause for anxiety. The assumption of superiority of males has built up the ideas of male dominance and female dependence. Most of the major decisions - making roles are thus the domain of man in most cases. These cultural attributes have left a deep mark on women's development in India; of-course it varies according to specific variables operating in Indian society such as caste, class, rural, urban, education, region and other socioeconomic parameters.

In India, outside the educated elite and often even within it, girls are considered an economic liability because of the tradition that requires a girl's parents to provide her with a dowry at the time of her marriage. Indian society has had a culture of Kanyadan and Vara-dakshina where the parents offer their daughter to the bridegroom and give affectionate gifts in kind or cash with the intention of setting up the household of the new couple at the start of their life together. Also there has been the notion of streedhan, which relates to the ornaments given to the bride by her father or brother, the intention, again being to help the daughter to tide over difficulties, if ever the situation so warranted. Over a period of time these cultural attributes became a compulsion and the whole process has been commercialized. For many families, the dowry represents an enormous financial burden. The dowry system is directly linked to many harmful practices against women and girls in India, including burning of brides over dowry disputes.

Women play a key role in both land use and management. They supply inputs from the forests as fertilizer to the soil as well as fodder for the cattle, which produce fertilizer for the soil. In India, there are women-headed movements for forest protection such as Chipko. The first Chipko action took place in 1973 and over the next five years spread to many districts of the Himalaya in Uttar Pradesh. Its leaders and activities are primarily village women, acting to save their means of subsistence and their communities.

Even though globalization is broadening the workforce for women, it can have a negative impact by exploiting women in dangerous jobs, in which they are overworked. In the neo liberal work practices, contract work, unsocial hours of work, cooperative practices, and payment by result make it very difficult for women to cope with their multiple responsibilities. Privatization of education and training will increase the cost of getting educated. When family budgets are readjusted, the female children will be the main casualty because most of the resources will be spent to educate the male children.

Migration of women especially for economic reasons often gives rise to exploitation and trafficking in women at the local, regional and global levels. According to estimates from World Development Indicators, "Women work two-thirds of the world's working hours, produce half of the world's food, but earn only ten percent of the world's income, and own less than one percent of the world's property". According to Vandana Shiva, an Indian ecofeminist and scholar, globalization along with the support of organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, have created slave wages. These wages are not necessarily the result of "unjust" societies, but of the fact that global trade devalues the worth of people's lives and work. While globalization has brought jobs to rural, developing areas such as India where there was previously no employment, these jobs seem to be wolves in sheep's clothing. The work available to women is almost always poorly paid, mentally and physically unhealthy, demeaning, or insecure.

In conclusion, it can be said that Indian women have played a dynamic role in all spheres of life in post-independence India. Over the years, they have made their entry into civil services and other professions in large numbers and are showing their talents, and contributing to nation-building activities. The legislative, reformative, educational, health and employment strategies have given them a significant boost in their struggle for equal rights in the society, a lot is yet to be done in terms of giving them enough confidence to carry this struggle further. What is required is a thorough filtering of cultural norms and biases, tackling

poverty, improving literacy, enhancing awareness for role of science & technology education for girls, increasing awareness for the importance of girl child to be same as that of a male, provision of adequate family welfare services for upliftment of women.

References :

- [1] Altekhar, A. S., Position of Women in Hindu Civilization (1938; New Delhi: Motilal Banarasadass, 1959), p. 10.
- [2] Ibid. pp. 11
- [3] Ray Choudhuri, Social Cultural and Economic History of Ancient India (New Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 1978), p. 37.
- [4] ibid. pg. 10
- [5] ibid. pg. 10
- [6] Joshi, P.S. Cultural History of Ancient India (New Delhi: S. Chand; 1978), p. 7.
- [7] Indra, Women in Ancient India, Cited in Indian Women: From Tradition to Modernity; Sharma, Usha; (vol.I), Vista International Publishing House, Delhi, 2007, p. 2.
- [8] Indra, 'The Extent of freedom allowed to women'; op. cit. pp. 59
- [9] Ibid. p. 69.
- [10] Thapar, Romila, 'Ancient Indian Social History', New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1966, p. 32.
- [11] Panikkar, K.M.; 'The Middle Period', cited in 'Indian women: From Tradition to Modernity', op. cit., pp. 263.
- [12] Kaur, M. 'Role of Women in the Freedom Movement, 1857-1947'; Sterling Pub., New Delhi, 1968, pp. 45
- [13] Mishra, Anil Dutta, Gender Perspective: Participation, Empowerment & Development, 1999, Radha Pub, New Delhi, p. 54
- [14] Forbes, Geraldine, Women in Modern India, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998