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## WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA: Historical Evolution

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### ABSTRACT

“Yatra Naaryantu Poojanthe Tatra Ramanthe Devatha” means where the Woman is venerated there the Gods Rejoice. Women empowerment in India is dependent up to a great extent on numerous different variables that encompass geographical setting (urban/rural), social status (caste and class), educational status, and age factor. In India, for centuries, women have been pushed aside from the race of development in the name of customs, traditions and religion. As a result, they have been denied the opportunities for their social, economic and political development leading to a lower status in society. The independent India has seen tremendous functional changes in the status and position of women in Indian society. The Constitution of India has granted franchise to Indian women. Several committees have made recommendations regarding the employment of women. In the organised sector women were employed more in the public sector than in private sector. Majority of women are in the vast rural and urban unorganised sector. In Independent India women have important political and administrative positions. With political parties fielding 8-9% female candidates in the last decade of Lok Sabha elections, the houses could not have been more female. Their often-cited excuse is a lack of winnability of women, a complete fallacy in the face of counter-evidence.

**Key Words:** Women, Empowerment, Development, Status, India, Gender, Equality.

### INTRODUCTION:

As India progresses economically, there are calls for the country to pay more attention to social and human development, including women empowerment. Women empowerment is a critical aspect to achieving gender equality, where both men and women have equal power and opportunities for education, healthcare, economic participation and personal development.

The government has created the space for international agencies to work with state governments, local non-government organisations and private corporations on a plethora of projects to support women from different socio-economic backgrounds. Despite these efforts, India's ranking on global surveys of gender equality has not improved significantly over the years.

Women empowerment in India is dependent up to a great extent on numerous different variables that encompass geographical setting (urban/rural), social status (caste and class), educational status, and age factor. Actions on the women empowerment exist at the state, local (panchayat), and national levels. However, women encounter differentiation in most sectors like education, economic opportunities, health and medical assistance, and political participation, which demonstrates that there are substantial gaps between strategy advancements and real exercise at the community level.

“Yatra Naaryantu Poojanthe Tatra Ramanthe Devatha” says a famous Sanskrit verse. It means where the Woman is venerated there the Gods Rejoice. It also means where the woman is free, respected and given her due place there -in that land the people live in peace and happiness. The role of women in development is most intimately related to the goal of comprehensive socio-economic development, and is a strategic question for the development of all societies. Any development strategy, which neglects the need for enhancing the role of women, cannot lead to comprehensive socio-economic development. The point of priority should be to recognize the role of women as a dynamic factor and a valuable asset for the overall process of development it is neither a burden /cost nor a mere humanitarian concession to a disadvantaged group. The position of women and their role in this context are particularly important, not only because women contribute half of the human resources in developing countries, but also because they have to bear the brunt of the daily struggle for survival. Although women are not a homogeneous social group, and their position varies between and within countries there are some features which are common to all societies. Historically, their role in biological reproduction has generally restricted women’s participation in the mainstream of social, economic and political processes.

In this Article an attempt is made to present contemporary position of women in India. In order to have a better understanding of the present social structure and position of women therein, it is imperative to know the operation of various historical, political, cultural and economic factors moulding the society. Indian history, as much as history of other nations, indicates a dismal picture as also, conflicting situations in regard to the status of women. And such an historical perspective is all the more necessary in the case of a society with a continuous history of more than three thousand years. The present chapter has been divided into three very broad periods. They are

1. Ancient and Medieval India,
2. Colonial India, and
3. Independent India.

## 1. Ancient and Medieval India

The norms and values, class or caste base of Indian society provide a fundamental structural context for understanding women's status. Hence, a brief description of these norms and values are given before the description of the position of women in ancient and medieval India.

### Norms and Values

The Indian society like a number of classical societies was patriarchal. The patriarchal values regulating sexuality, reproduction and social production (meaning total conditions of production) prevailed and were expressed through specific cultural metaphors. Overt rules prohibiting women from specific activities and denying certain rights did exist. But more subtle expression of patriarchy was through symbolism giving messages of inferiority of women through legends highlighting the self-sacrificing, self-effecting pure image of women and through the ritual practices which day in and day out emphasized the dominant role of a woman as a faithful wife and devout mother<sup>4</sup>.

The basic rules for women's behaviour as expressed in the Laws of Manu insist that a woman must constantly worship her husband as a god, even though he is destitute of virtue or a womaniser. The women should be kept in dependency by her husband because by nature they are passionate and disloyal. The ideal women are those who do not strive to break these bonds of control. The salvation and happiness of women revolve around their virtue and chastity as daughters, wives and widows.

In India, for centuries, women have been pushed aside from the race of development in the name of customs, traditions and religion. As a result, they have been denied the opportunities for their social, economic and political development leading to a lower status in society. The social customs, religiously sanctioned rituals, the authoritarian structure of the family organisation, the accepted mode of socialization of young girls and the very rigidly defined roles and activities of women have contributed to the social degradation of women in the Indian society<sup>5</sup>.

### Vedic Age

In the vedic age the women were highly esteemed and they enjoyed equal socio-cultural status. The early Rigveda's mentioned of women as equals who participated in all the household activities related both to social and economic spheres. No important function could be performed by man alone. Man was considered incomplete without the women in those days. The women had the rights to read and recite the vedas and other sacred as well as secular texts.

Several of them played very important roles in the formulation of social policies and code of conduct. Maitrayee, Gargi and Leelavati were not only highly learned women, they were equally well versed in higher mathematic astronomy and the humanities. Women were eulogized in the hymns. Feminine deities like Saraswati, Kali, Lakshmi, Durga are worshipped even today. Woman was regarded as the base of all power or 'shakti'. Many traditions and customs which persist even today bear evidence of such exalted status of women in the past.

In one of Manu's codes, it has been mentioned, "Be a girl or be a young woman or be advanced in years, nothing must be done even in her own dwelling place according to her pleasure. Again, Manu says, she should do nothing independently even in her own house. In childhood, she is subjected to her father, in youth to her husband and during her widowhood to her sons; she should never enjoy independence. Awesome practices of sati, female infanticide, child marriage, parda and suppression of widows got ultimately accepted as the cherished norms of the society. Thus, a woman become subordinate and subservient to man.

The heterodox religions like Jainism and Buddhism which sprang up challenging the Brahmanical (vedic orthodox) religion, too were based on the philosophy of avoidance of materialism. Women were regarded as a part of materialism, as both Gautam and Mahavir discarded their wives Yashodhara and Yashoda, respectively, and children in their so-called pursuit for Truth'. Moreover, nuns in both these religions were second to the male monks<sup>8</sup>. They walked behind the monks in processions and were not given any position of authority. Amongst the Jains, even today the nuns outnumber the monks but still women play a second fiddle to the monks. The nuns who are joining this religion do so not because of any religious conviction and faith but compulsion. As dowry is every high amongst Jains not many parents can marry of their daughters. Religion comes handy, by accepting them as nuns as it cannot provide a "dignified" life outside its confines.

Another liberal current to which to some extent widened the horizon for women was the Bhakti movement - the medieval saints movement. The saints emphasised salvation through devotion to a deity, wherein no intermediary such as a pandit or a purohit was required. The Bhaktas vehemently attacked ritualism and overlordship of the Brahmans, used the vernacular as a language of communication and opened the gates of religion for women. Not surprisingly it is the Bhakti movement which produced women saints like Meerabai and Lalla in the North, Andal and Akka as the Mahadevi in the South and Bahanabai in the West. movement did not basically challenge the unequal social structure and limited it only to individual salvation, it could not fundamentally affect gender subordination<sup>9</sup>.

## 2. Colonial India

In colonial India, imperial interests dictated economic policy and their impact in a gender - asymmetrical society descended with extra severity on women. After industrial revolution in England, the rulers turned India into a colony, which produced raw material for Britain. Industrial capitalism, transplanted on the Indian soil by the colonial rule, created major discontinuity for Indian economy. Women as major partners in the economic activities of the household lost out more than men as the occupations in which they were engaged declined drastically. Besides spinning and weaving women were involved in rice dehusking, selling milk and butter ghee, marketing of vegetables and fish, rearing of silk worms to weaving and spinning silk, etc. The advent of rice mills in the 20<sup>th</sup> century led to mass displacement of women. Every mill displaced 500 hand pounders, while a huller displaced 40 workers. By 1824

with Bengal importing British yarn, millions of people were out of jobs, half of them being women.

From 1885 to 1900 role of Indian women was confined to social reforms. "During this period Pandit Ramabai Rande, Maharani Tapasvani, Swarn Kumari Devi, Franchina Sorabji and lady Harnam Singh worked in the field of women education, important in the condition of Hindu women, prudah, Medical aid and infant care. Towards the close of the century many more ladies took up the cause of women's education in particular and also contributed to the literature of the land, like in Maharastra Miss BharSamaskar, Godavi bai and in Gujrat Miss Patrick Parsi lady who conducted the Stri Mitra Mandal, Mrs. Putli bai and in Bengal, Mrs R.N. Rai, Mrs Gindra Mohini, Mrs Pramila Nag and many others."<sup>10</sup>

The participation of Bengali women was started by meeting at Jemo Khand village to protest against British Government. They contributed their ornaments to the National fund. Miss Kumudini organized a group of women to help the revolutionary Leaders and to contribute revolutionary literature.

The Political scene of India after 1911 was Significant for reason more than one. Firstly, the cancellation of the partition of Bengal remarked the cause of agitation and removed mainly led by the Bengali extremists' women. Secondly the declaration of world war was first in 1914 was a sort of Promise to introduce democracy in all those countries that helped the aliens in the war. Unfortunately, during this period there was no active leader to lead the national movement.<sup>12</sup>

Annie Basent came to India in 1893 from 1903, She started her work of social reform continued up to 1913, She associated herself with Sanatan Dharma Sabha, Bomeros. During this period. She started her crusade against caste system, child marriage and unsociability. She established Hindu college at Banars. She Organized movements for the emancipation of women. Mrs. Basent observed that, "India is not ruled for the prospering of the people but rather for the profit of her conquerors and her sons are being treated as the conquered race".

In 1914, she was elected a delegate for congress session where a resolution was passed for reciprocity between India and the colonies in the matter of emigration. The year 1915 was the starting point of Annie Basent's political activities. Ever since 1878, she was charging the British Empire for making the life of Indian's miserable. She had purchased the Madras standard Press in July 1914. She started a paper called New India. She wrote, "The fate of British Empire hangs on the fate of India and therefore, it is but wisdom and prudence to keep India contented by granting home rule to her. "India was a tremendous reservoir of man power, for greater than America and Home rule India was, "an asset to empire in the struggle against German militarism."

The greatest contribution of Mrs. Besant was the formation of home rule league in the congress session of 1915 in Bombay. Her purpose was to bring India and Great Britain close at each other She declared, "One thing that lives very near to our heart it's to draw Great Britain and India nearer to each other by making known in Great Britain something of India movements and of the men who will influence from her the destinies of the empire."



Home Department, Mr. Wadia, Mr. Aruale, Mrs. Besant were released on 17<sup>th</sup> September 1917. On coming out from the prison she formed United Front and toured Madras, Banaras, Allahabad and Bombay. The same year she becomes the president of the Indian National Congress.

In India also, Gandhi sought cooperation of women in his non-violent struggle for the freedom of the country. He called upon them to join the Indian National Congress and take part in the movement of Swaraj. He wrote in 1921 "I expect great things from the women. I expect them to do their full share in the struggle. Let government capture every one of our soldiers. I do not mind our work is as very easy that even our women can carry it without difficulty". Thus, at the call of Gandhi Women began to join the Indian National Congress and they contributed a great deal to the strength and popularity of the said organization. In 1921, at its 36<sup>th</sup> session of Indian National Congress held at Ahmadabad, member 131 ladies were active as volunteers, 14 women were member of the subject committees and 144 attended the session as delegates<sup>13</sup>.

Women did not enter in politics as silent spectator but as active participant in the drama of non-violent struggle for freedom. During the non-cooperation movement (1920-22), the women came out in large numbers from their purdah, took out and led processions and attended meeting. Not only this, but they bravely faced the police wielding lathis, bore any suffering and humiliation and welcomed even imprisonment.

Women also joined the no tax campaign started at Bardoli in 1928. The name of Miss Behn Patil, Smt. Bhakti Behn Desai, Mani Behn Patil and Mrs. Sharda Metha were associated with this movement. Miss Patil, the daughter of a respectable Bombay Parsi millionaire gave effective leadership to the women of Bardoli.

The women of Delhi achieved great success in getting many shop of liquor and foreign clothes closed. Satyavati made a great name by taking part in procession, picketing and distributed revolutionary literature. In course of her trail, she is said to have spoken "We have not abandoned our homes and children to redeem our motherland from foreign bondage and the threat of Qungenas nor of bullets and merciless beatings can deter us from the duty we owe to ourselves and coming generation in wining India's freedom". In Delhi Jail, Mr. and Mrs. J.M. Sen. Gupta had to go on hunger strike in sympathy with other prisoners whose food was uneatable.

During 1930s, ladies took out their own procession in Calcutta and also led them and addressed meetings. In Bengal, among the women revolutionary leaders the name of Sunita Choudhary, Shanti Ghose, Miss Beena Das Preeti Lel Waddeker, Smt. Leelalati Jathi, Kalpana Dutta and Miss Benna Lata Das Gupta are worth mentioning.

In the Indian National Congress, Women also had joined the rank of volunteers in Bombay. The Nari Satyagraha Sangh of Bengal, Stri Swaraj Sangh of Gujarat, Sevika Sangh of Allahabad and Swayam Sevika Sangh of Kerala also were important organizations to serve the country. Addressing a women volunteer training camp at Bombay in 1931, Jawahar Lal Nehru had emphatically said that man or women born in India should be soldier irrespective of sex or community.

The Congress Working Committee had met at Allahbad on 27 June 1930 and passed the following resolution. "The committee notes with grateful appreciation that women of India are continuing to take part in the national movement and bravely suffering to take part in the national movement and bravely suffering assaults, ill treatment and imprisonment." Kunwar Rani Ganvanti, Maharaj Singh, w/o the then home member of Uttar Pradesh Government was of opinion that if the women of India had not joined, Gandhi's political movement would not have been so successful. In fact, the credit of the success of the boycott movement went more to the women who decided not to wear or use soft foreign clothes and who also did not put any obstacle in the path of their man folk<sup>16</sup>.

The Government of India Act 1935 was passed by British Parliament, which gave a new constitution to India. Under this act provincial autonomy was introduced which provided an opportunity to Indian women to get elected to the State Legislatures and also to act as administrators. In the elections held in 1937, 8 women were elected from general constituencies and 42 from the reserved constituencies. Five were nominated to the upper house. When ministries were formed 6 women took office, one as minister and others as Dr. Speakers and Parliamentary Secretaries,"In the field of actual administration, Vijay Lakshami Pandit played a significant role. In 1929 when the Congress Party passed the resolution for complete Swaraj, Vijay Laxmi Pandir was a witness. She took active part in civil-Disobedience movement and was arrested on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1932 and was put behind the bars for one year. She got elected to the Allahabad municipal Board in 1935 and served as Vice-President of women's League for peace and Freedom. On 29<sup>th</sup> July 1937 she was minister for Local Self-Government in Uttar Pradesh. In 1939, Mrs. Vijay Laxmi Pandit reigned but she continued the political activities.

The imprisonment of Miss Jinha inspired and encouraged many Muslim Women to join Politics. On the congress side Mani Behn Patil, Sushila Nair, Leelavati Munshi, Basanti Devi, Sucheta Kriplani, Begum Hasarat Mohini, Rajwanshi Devi, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sarojani Naidu, Vijaya Lakshami Pandit Participated in the national struggle for freedom with militant enthusiasm.

### **3. WOMEN STATUS IN INDEPENDENT INDIA**

The independent India has seen tremendous functional changes in the status and position of women in Indian society. The Constitution of India has granted franchise to Indian women. This has brought women on an equal footing with men. The adult franchise has done much to remove sex discrimination. The Constitution has laid down as a fundamental right the equality of the sexes. But the record of decades after independence shows that we have progressively but unmistakably regressed from the position that we had attained<sup>17</sup>.

In general, education, employment, and political participation have been looked upon as enhancing women's status. This expectation is in keeping with the claims of the nineteenth century social reformers when they made appeals for educating women. Education was not merely expected to liberate a woman from some traditional values and customs but was also presumed to make her A a willing partner in initiating and supporting social change. A somewhat similar pay-off has also been expected from voting rights, leading to access to deliberative processes in the political sphere. Thus, at different periods, of time, education, franchise

and employment are looked upon not merely, as significant in themselves but also steps towards achieving higher status for women. In the following pages, the present status of women in India in terms of sex-ratio, education, health, employment and political representation has been examined<sup>18</sup>.

## SEX RATIO

Sex composition of the human population is one of the basic demographic characteristics, which is extremely vital for any meaningful demographic analysis. Indian census has the tradition of bringing out disaggregated information by sex on various aspects of population. The first and foremost is the simple count of males and females. Changes in sex composition largely reflects the underlying socio-economic and cultural patterns of a society in different ways. Sex ratio, defined here as the number of females per 1000 males in the population, is an important social indicator to measure the extent of prevailing equity between males and females in a society at a given point of time.

### SEX RATIO (1901-2011)

Year	Sex Ratio (Female per 1000 Males)
1901	972
1911	964
1921	955
1931	950
1941	945
1951	946
1961	941
1971	930
1981	933
1991	927
2001	933
2011	943

Source: Census of India, 2011.

In 1951, there was a marginal increase of one point, but thereafter it again dropped for two consecutive decades to reach 930 in 1971. In fact, between 1961-71, the country saw the sharpest decline of 11 points in the sex ratio. Thereafter, it has fluctuated marginally around 930 in successive census.

The Sex Ratio 2011 shows an upward trend from the census 2001 data. Census 2001 revealed that there were 933 females to that of 1000 males. Since decades India has seen a decrease in the sex ratio 2011, but since the last two of the decades there has been in slight increase in the sex ratio. Since the last five decades the sex ratio has been moving around 930 of females to that of 1000 of males.



Several reasons are adduced to explain the consistently low levels of sex ratio and their further decline in the country. Some of the important reasons commonly put forward are listed below:

1. Neglect of the girl child resulting in their higher mortality at younger ages.
2. High maternal mortality
3. Sex selective female abortions
4. Female infanticide
5. Change in sex ratio at birth

The imbalance in the number of males and females begins at the beginning. It is now a well-established law of nature that the males exceed females at the time of birth. It is believed that generally, 943-952 female births take place for every 1000 male births, which in effect would mean that there is a deficiency of about 50 females per 1000 males in every birth cohort. Many demographers believe that left on its own, this is an unalterable constant. The possibility of female foeticide or the existence of infanticide in some rare cases is also contributing to adverse female sex ratio.

The infant mortality rate is another factor that decides sex ratio. Though there is significant drop in infant mortality rates (IMR), largely due to the grand success of the Expanded Programme of Immunization started in 1978 and the universal immunization launched in 1985, which has succeeded in getting more than 85 per cent children immunized, the figures of girl child mortality are higher than boys. This factor contributes to the low sex ratio of women. This phenomenon can be attributed to the lower health care status of girl children, where delay often takes place in taking the girl child to the hospital, as also her lower nutrition status leading to poor health. A review of the status of the girl child indicates that it is the people's perception, in general, that the birth of a girl child is less desirable than that of a baby boy. It is ingrained in the Indian psyche, cutting across religious, caste and regional barriers, that the birth of a girl child evokes less happiness than that of a boy. If the first child born to the parents is a girl, she is less welcome than her subsequent sisters. The phenomenon of aborting female fetuses is occasionally resorted to in cities as well as in rural areas, if girl children are already present in a family. The passing of the Prevention and Regulation of Amniocentesis Act, 1993, has not been a great hindrance as doctors still use the procedure of ultrasonography to predict the sex of a foetus.

## **EDUCATION**

Education is the heart of the development process. It is also an important instrument for attaining economic power and independence, for it opens up formal education attainment. Education is an important input in the overall development of individuals enabling them to comprehend their social, political and cultural environment better and respond to it appropriately. Higher levels of education and literacy lead to a greater awareness and also contribute to the improvement of economic conditions. Improved levels of literacy are also one of the prerequisites for acquiring various skills.

While education is essential for both boys and girls, the benefits of educating girls tend to be greater. Educated women pass on their knowledge to their peers and family members, particularly their daughters, thereby multiplying the effects of their education manifold. Moreover, realising the importance of education, they also tend to assert that their daughters be educated also. There is a close and complex relationship among education, marriage age, fertility, mortality, mobility and activity. Women play a key role in the tasks of child-bearing and child rearing and are the chief agents of socialization, particularly in the early formative years of a child, which contribute significantly to the healthy foundation of an efficient society. Education enhances a women's sense of her own health needs and perspectives and her power to make any health and family planning decisions. Education helps reduce child and maternal mortality and morbidity rates<sup>20</sup>.

There is a clear link between higher literacy rates and lower infant mortality rates. This fall in infant mortality rates is more in higher female literacy states than in lower female literacy states. Studies by Dreze and Sen and Deolalikar show a clear correlation between women's educational status and infant and child mortality. Broader access to education is also a factor in internal migration and the composition of working population. In other words, the educational level of women is particularly important because educational attainment can affect age at marriage, reproductive behaviour, the use of contraceptives, the health and nutritional levels of the family, proper hygienic practices, migration trends and above all, their own status. After independence, the Government of India appointed various commissions and committees to promote the cause of women's education. National Committee on Women Education regarded women's education as a major and a special issue. It recommended that every state should be required to prepare comprehensive development plans for the education of girls and women in its area. According to the National Policy on Education, education should be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. The National Perspective Plan for Women's Education formulated some important objectives for women's education so that women may also participate in the area of social, cultural, economic, political and educational fields.

As a result, there is a phenomenal expansion of the formal educational system since independence. There has been noticeable progress in literacy rate of the general population. Literacy rate has increased from 18.33 per cent in 1951 to 64.63 per cent in 2011. Male literacy rate has increased from 27.16 per cent in 1951 to 80.83 per cent in 2011, whereas female literacy rate has increased from 8.86 per cent in 1951 to 54.16 per cent in 2011. There has been a continuous progress in total male and female literacy rates in the previous decades. However, nearly 50 per cent of the female population is still steeped in ignorance and illiteracy. Women have been benefited much less from educational opportunities. The female literacy rate is low when compared to the literacy rate of males<sup>21</sup>.

## HEALTH STATUS

Health is the basic factor that affects the physical and mental efficiency of human beings and acts as a reinforcing force for life. In the 30th World Health Assembly in 1977, it was decided that the main social goal of the governments and of the World Health Organisation should be the attainment by all the people of the world by the year 2000, of a level of health that will permit them to work productively and to participate actively in the social life of their community.

Across much of Africa, Asia and Latin America, drastic population growth and poverty have contributed to extremely severe health problems that stand as an enormous obstacle to sustained development and social progress. Apart from the health problems in general, the gender biases in health are even more glaring. Gender focussed understanding of health problems becomes all the more important because women face specific health problems and their health concerns are often neglected, especially in developing countries like India, where health consciousness is very low among women. It is vital for a women's health and life that she has access to medical and health care needs for preventive, as well as curative health, so as to be able to play her full part in the development of this country. An important indicator of women's health is her life expectancy at birth. The available data, which traces life expectancy for men and women, indicate that women had lesser life expectancy than men up to 1971-81. It is only now that women have a slight edge over men. There is an increase in the life expectancy of women from 31.7 years in 1941-51 to 69.66 years in 2011-2021. This has been due to the multifaceted health initiatives taken by health agencies. It is a very significant achievement. The steeply declining death rates have contributed towards increasing life expectancy. However, India still has a long way to go to achieve the standards of the developed world and even to some important developing countries.

In India nearly 1,00,000 women die every year due to abortion and childbirth, a figure 100 times higher than in developed countries. Two-thirds of pregnant women in India are anaemic complications of pregnancy due to high fertility led to many complications of pregnancy resulting in a high percentage of deaths. Pregnant women lose immunity to malaria and are most susceptible to viral infections. It also participates the development of overt leprosy and diabetes and childbirth triggers episodes of major psychiatric pathology. Besides maternal mortality deaths, a tremendous wastage of female reproductive energy occurs due to high rates of illegal abortions, neonatal, postnatal and prenatal mortality rates<sup>23</sup>.

Women have also special occupational health hazards. Every woman is a working woman in India, whether she works at home or outside. The mental and physical health hazards are innumerable and varied. Most of them are concentrated in the informal sector where the nature of occupation exposes them to severe back pain as in rice planting, weaving, coir, jute, carpet making, construction industry and cooking of food which is almost entirely the women's preserve. Respiratory diseases occur because of consumption of kitchen smoke while cooking, or due to the burning firewood, and during spinning and carpet making. Women are

also exposed more to rheumatism through exposure to water and parasitic infections like malaria and insect bites through agricultural labour.

Recent trends in public and policy awareness about women's health needs and concerns, and actual access by women to the means and services to address those concerns show complex and contradictory tendencies. Although women became central targets of the family planning programme from the late 1960s, it is well known that their reproductive health needs were neither acknowledged as a policy concern nor set within an overall integrated approach to their health. The field of women's health in India was full of resounding policy and research silences, misdirected and partial approaches, and insufficient attention to critical issues.

Problems of irregular bleeding and amenorrhoea were left unaddressed despite growing evidence of the prevalence of under and mal-nutrition and iron deficiency anaemia among girls and women. The cross linkages between anaemia and vulnerability to malaria continued to be ignored by policy and programme. In a country, where abortion had been legal since the early 1970s, it continued to be unsafe for an overwhelming majority of those who needed the service.

Women have been the major targets of family planning programmes. The family planning programmes are population control oriented and do not place any emphasis on women's health and emotional and psychological welfare. They do not raise the status of women by reducing unwanted pregnancy but make them victims of experimentation and state policy. In sum, there is a deterioration in health condition of women and this is precisely what a declining sex-ratio indicates. The health services for women shall be improved so that there is a substantial change in their social status. Basic services such as routine ante-natal care (ANC), postnatal care (PNC) infant care, immunisation and treatment of ailments should be delivered to all women.

## **WOMEN EMPLOYMENT**

The vital role of women in the Indian labour force and their contributions to the national economy have been established beyond doubt. Several committees have made recommendations regarding the employment of women. The Committee on the Status of Women had made far-reaching recommendations. It had suggested the development of training and employment programmes. Action plans were proposed to take care of promotion of self-employment for women as well as greater opportunities in other areas. Special training programmes were also considered. Action plans, developmental efforts and welfare services had led to the expansion of employment opportunities for women.

### **The Organised Sector**

In the organised sector women were employed more in the public sector than in private sector. Women are employed in community, personal and social services in the public sector while they have the highest percentage of employment in the manufacturing sector in the private sector followed closely by

community, personal, social services and agriculture. Employment in organized sector has done much to draw women out of the family and household which had hitherto made up their world. The wages earned through industrial employment have given them a measure of independence, besides contributing handsomely to household earning. However, their prospects in the organized sector have come under a cloud even before the full impact of such employment has become manifest. Rapid changes in technology, automation and the curtailment of employment have drastically reduced their opportunities for work in the organised sector. In traditional industries such as jute, mining and cotton textiles, which were the major employers of women's labour, they have suffered a sharp setback. There has been a marked reduction in their employment in mining, the loss being most pronounced in coal. Women who constituted about a quarter of the work force in coal mines around independence now make up one-fourth of their original strength. The situation is not very different in jute and textiles, which apart from closing their doors to women, have themselves become declining industries.

Although the organised sector has offered employment opportunities to women, industries do labour under severely restrictive notions as to what is properly women's work. The labour market in this sector is sharply segmented, with lower-end jobs being regarded as the proper domain for women. The division of labour in all kinds of industries - including the most modern is circumscribed by custom and tradition. The report of the National Committee on the Status of Women in India shows that out of 200 operations in the textile industry, women are employed in only four or five operations. The fact that modern technology has brought many arduous manual jobs well within women's reach is not reflected in the actual division of labour in the industry. Even now, occupations are categorized as men's or women's on the basis of conventional norms rather than any assessment of changes made possible by new technology. The low premium on women's skill continues to colour the character of women's employment. Women are normally found in unskilled, semi-skilled or low-grade office jobs, or in assembly and tail-end tasks associated with packing, filling and checking.

### **Unorganised Sector**

Majority of women are in the vast rural and urban unorganised sector. According to an estimate by National Commission on Self-Employed Women, 94 per cent of the female work force operates within this highly exploited sector. In the rural unorganized sector, women have a noticeable presence in several segments. They participate extensively in agriculture, animal husbandry, dairying, social and agro-forestry, fisheries, handicrafts, khadi and village industries, handloom weaving and sericulture. In agriculture, where their participation is substantial, their activities range from sowing to weeding, transplantation and harvesting. In agro-forestry, they are engaged in the collection of minor forest produce and medicinal herbs, as well as in afforestation programmes. Besides land-based occupations, women contribute in no small measure to village industries. The majority of working women are in self-embroider making garments, rolling bidis and incense sticks and in a variety of other activities<sup>27</sup>.



The women workers in unorganized sector experience acute subjugation and vulnerability. Certain features typify women's work. Custom and tradition prescribe the jobs in which women would be employed. Division of labour is gender-specific. Whether in agriculture, construction, weaving or village industries, women carry out jobs which are tedious, arduous and low-skilled, while men corner the more skilled and less onerous tasks. Handloom weaving is an excellent example of such a hierarchical, gender-controlled division of labour. Women carry out the entire range of tasks involved in preparing the yarn for the loom, while men are in charge of the actual weaving. This situation is more or less replicated in all village industries, where women perform tedious, unskilled work while men take on the skilled jobs. In addition to this, women also put in much longer hours of work. This is primarily because of the nature of their labour. They work with the lowest forms of technology and carry out the least skilled jobs. They also have to combine gainful labour with childbearing, child-rearing and the performance of domestic chores. Quite a lot of their time is taken by domestic work involving the collection of food, fuel, water and fodder. Putting together these basic necessities is back-breaking labour for a great many women.

A further discriminating feature is differential wages. Is now a common place that women get paid much less than men, often for performing similar work? Their earnings are low because wages are discriminatory and work is seasonal. They are the lowest segment of the workforce and are afforded hardly any statutory protection either with regard to wages or hours of work and are the first to be dislodged when work is scarce.<sup>29</sup> Definitely much of the work that woman perform as part of family labour or as self-employed and home-based producers is either not recognized as work or is dubbed a subsistence and therefore, a subsidiary activity<sup>28</sup>.

Middle class women, who are urban, educated and upper caste, took up work outside the home in significant numbers. The acceleration of work participation of middle-class women began in the 1970s for various reasons, such as the growing economic crisis, the widening public sector, and the emerging concert of the use of higher education through work participation.<sup>32</sup> Available studies refer to middle class women working largely in white collar jobs as clerks, secretaries, telephone operators and so on, and in the professions like school and college teaching, medicine and research. They are found mostly in lower or middle level jobs, and with fixed hours of work. Generally, the educated working woman is married, has two or three children, and stays in a nuclear household<sup>29</sup>.

Recent emphasis on vocational training and job-oriented courses in higher education for girls have an underlying assumption that girls will be working for money, perhaps they may not do so immediately after marriage, but the possibility of their entry at a later stage cannot be ruled out. Mathews noted that, in the fishing industry, young unmarried girls from poor families who had dropped out from school had to fill in the gap between school and marriage<sup>30</sup>.

## POLITICAL STATUS

Dr. Ambedkar argues that for any popular democracy, there are two pre-requisites, first, the 'representation of opinion' and second, 'representation of persons. According to him, Government is one of the important fields for the exercise of individual capacities, therefore, it is in the interest of the people that no person as such should be denied the opportunity of actively participating in the process of Government. Since independence women across social groups, religious communities and Adivasi identity have been denied the opportunity to represent themselves in the Lok Sabha

The Indian Constitution made a deliberate radical departure from the age-old poor social status of women by granting them equal, social and political status. Constitutional equal status means that every adult female, whatever be her social position or accomplishments, has now the opportunity to function as a citizen and individual partner in the task of nation building. In view of the constitutional obligations, during the post independent era, women have been recognized as a separate target group and the government have directed its efforts towards mainstreaming of women into the national developmental process. This period has witnessed far reaching changes in almost all spheres - political, economic and social. In terms of constitutional, legal and administrative measures, many commendable initiatives have been taken. Prominent among them are the constitutional provisions for gender equality and justice, enactment of new laws and amendment of existing laws to protect and promote the interests of women, setting up of women-specific administrative and economic structures, such as Women and Child Development Department at the Union and State Government levels, National Commission for Women, Women Development Corporations, orienting plan strategy to include women specific and women related programmes and launching of special schemes like Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Mahila Samridhi Yojana, Indira Mahila Yojana, etc.

In Independent India women have important political and administrative positions. For instance, Indira Gandhi guided the destiny of the country as Prime Minister for more than 15 years. Women have also served as Governors, Chief Ministers, ministers in central and state governments, presiding officers of legislative bodies, judges of high courts and secretaries to the government. Though the constitutional equality is granted to women and women have held important positions, in practice, women are not treated well in all fields including politics.

It was believed that though very few women were actually joining politics, given time the overall change in terms of education and employment opportunities would necessarily percolate into the political sphere too and their representation would increase. However, the position of Indian women in the Parliament has always remained at a very low level never going beyond 10 per cent at any point of time.<sup>41</sup> An Inter-Parliamentary Union report in February, 1997 revealed that women hold 7.2 per cent seats in the Lok Sabha, 7.8 per cent in the Rajya Sabha. The track record of women candidates in the last Seventeen Lok Sabha elections speaks for itself<sup>32</sup>.

Women Members of Lok Sabha and their  
Percentage

S.No.	Year	Number	Percentage
1.	1952	22	4.41
2.	1957	27	5.40
3.	1962	34	6.76
4.	1967	31	5.93
5.	1971	22	4.22
6.	1977	19	3.49
7.	1980	28	5.15
8.	1984	44	8.09
9.	1989	27	5.22
10.	1991	39	7.04
11.	1996	39	7.18
12.	1998	43	7.92
13.	1999	49	9.02
14.	2004	44	8.16
15.	2009	59	10.87
16.	2014	65	11.20
17.	2019	79	14.49

*Sources: Election Commission of India, New Delhi from 1952 to 2019 General Elections.*

Women Members of Rajya Sabha and their  
Percentage

S.No.	Year	Women Represents	Percentage
1.	1952	15	06.9
2.	1954	17	07.8
3.	1956	20	08.6
4.	1958	22	09.5
5.	1960	24	10.2
6.	1962	18	07.2
7.	1964	21	08.9
8.	1966	23	09.8
9.	1968	22	09.6
10.	1970	14	05.8
11.	1972	18	07.4
12.	1974	18	07.5
13.	1976	24	10.2
14.	1978	25	10.2
15.	1980	29	12.0
16.	1982	24	10.1
17.	1984	24	10.3
18.	1986	28	11.5
19.	1988	25	10.6
20.	1990	24	10.3
21.	1992	17	07.2
22.	1994	20	08.3
23.	1996	19	07.8
24.	1998	19	07.7
25.	2000	22	09.0

26.	2002	25	10.2
27.	2004	28	11.4
28.	2006	25	10.2
29.	2008	24	09.8
30.	2010	27	10.6
31.	2012	26	10.6
32.	2014	31	12.7
33.	2016	27	11.0
34.	2018	28	11.4
35.	2020	25	10.2

*Sources: Election Commission of India, New Delhi from 1952 to 2020 Rajya Sabha Elections.*

When India became a sovereign republic, the first Lok Sabha had only 22 women though there was no dearth of suitable candidates at that time. The second Lok Sabha had 27 women (5.4 per cent). In the third Lok Sabha this was improved marginally to 34 (6.7 per cent), whereas the fourth one saw a slump with only 31 women (5.9 per cent). There was a sharp decline when Indira Gandhi was at the peak of her career and only 22 (4.29 per cent) women were elected to the fifth Lok Sabha. There was a further decline in the sixth Lok Sabha (with 3.4 per cent). There was a small increase in 1980 in the seventh Lok Sabha with their figures going up to 28 (5.1 per cent). This situation improved somewhat and the figure went up to 44 (8.11 per cent) in the eighth Lok Sabha, the highest so far. This declined in the ninth Lok Sabha to 28 (5.29 per cent). It went up a little in the tenth, eleventh, twelfth and Lok Sabha. The number of women in the fourteenth Lok Sabha has, however, declined to 45 (8.25 per cent). The political parties remain reluctant to field female candidates for election unless they are judged potential winners. In the case of Rajya Sabha also the percentage of women members has never crossed 12 per cent. Thus, the participation of women has dwindled in the country's political life. At 79 elected women MPs, the 17th Lok Sabha will have the highest number of women representatives ever. They have account for 14.49% of the entire strength of the Lower House, which was at 11.9% with a total 65 women MPs in the previous Lok Sabha. The Rajya Sabha brought the number of women MPs to 25 of 245, just over 10% of the house. This brings the tally of women in parliament to 104 (there are 79 women in the 17th Lok Sabha), which is a new record.

Electoral outcomes cannot exceed inputs, be they direct elections to the lower house or indirect elections to the upper house. With political parties fielding 8-9% female candidates in the last decade of Lok Sabha elections, the houses could not have been more female. Their often-cited excuse is a lack of winnability of women, a complete fallacy in the face of counter-evidence. In every single Lok Sabha election since 1952, women have won at a greater rate than men, as per Election Commission statistics. The graph of the data from 1957-2019 clearly illustrates that.

Parties are particularly skilled at electoral math, especially the winning ones, making their data-devoid arguments on winnability implausible. Even so, Rajya Sabha victories are foretold, given the parties' strengths in state legislatures are known quantities. That implies that the gender of candidates for Rajya Sabha seats is irrelevant to the election and the gender proportion of Rajya Sabha is entirely predicated on the parties' willingness to field women. In other democracies like South Africa, Australia, Sweden, Germany

and the UK, political parties have acknowledged this skew and course-corrected to enable a democracy that hears diverse voices on legislation and policy. Parties self-enforce with voluntary quotas or minimum limits of 33% or 50% women in their candidate lists and party leadership roles. Most of our neighbours, from Pakistan and Afghanistan to Nepal and Bangladesh, have reserved parliamentary seats for women. Both these tactics have boosted the number of women in world parliaments.

The 73th constitutional amendment has been hailed as a watershed achievement in empowerment of women, as over one million rural women have joined village panchayat posts as Sarpanch or adhyaksha or members of community administration. According to Majumdar, a feminist author, this legislation brought about the 'political dynamism' of female voters. She concludes, "It is time for India to try out some new experiments in achieving real democracy..." The kind of political empowerment is unprecedented even from the Western standard. For the first time in the history of this country, low caste people are substantially represented in statutory panchayats. Although most women are illiterate and poor and belong to the category of other backward classes, and yet, many of them have proved their mettle and won acclaims as able administrators.

There is strong apprehension about the necessity of reservation for women in the highest legislative body at this juncture. Many people, even those who are strong votary of gender equality, feel that it would be premature to initiate affirmative action for women through passing the women's reservation bill. The level of literacy for women is quite low and the country is way behind in matters of development compared to most developing countries, leaving the developed world aside. Indian democracy has not really come to the stage for such an action. There is no need to caricature or emulate blindly what is seen in some developed countries. India should wait and watch for some more time and assess the effectiveness or success of reservation for women at the local level government<sup>35</sup>.

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