

Women Status in India

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You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women

- Jawaharlal Nehru

Introduction

Education is the basis for growth and development of not just an individual but of the community and the country at large. The famous saying, "Educate a man and you educate an individual, educate a woman and you educate a family", applies very well in the Indian context more so in the context of women, a large section of whom have been denied education for a variety of reasons. It is true that the best way to judge a nation's progress is to find out the status of women there. There is strong correlation between status of women and cultural levels of society. Therefore, to know the status of women in society it becomes essential to study complexity of roles which women perform in society in the socio-economic, cultural, religious and political fields. It is also important to find such factors as how they face the problems and situation that are concerned with their roles from birth to death and how they adjust themselves to those role situations. The inferior status of women in societies also coincided with the denial of property rights and education, as well as denial of certain occupations to them. But globalization and industrialization has changed the picture of women. Education became a pre-requisite for playing many of the modern roles. In turn education also awakened women to a sense of their own self-importance and this encouraged them to assert many of the rights which were denied to them.

Women in Different Ages in India

The status of women has been low and subordinate in major part of the human history. From the ancient times to modern period, the female component of humanity has been deprived of the basis of human right of dignity and freedom. Women's participation in education is low may not leads their low participation in economic activities, more discussing point is that their contribution is much lower in Indian economy. The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia, 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 in India including that of the president, prime minister, speaker of the lok sabha and leader of the opposition. As of 2011, the president of India, the speaker of the lok sabha and the leader of the opposition in lok sabha (lower house of the parliament) were all women. The roots of the Indian women's movement go back to the 19th century when male social reformers who took up issues concerning women and started women's organizations. Women started forming their own organization from the end of the 19th century first at the local and then at the national level. In the years before independence, the two main issues they took up were political rights and reform of personal laws. Women's participation in the freedom struggle broadened the base of the women's movement.

Women in Ancient India

Traditionally, India had seen a woman as a member of the family or a group and not as an individual with an identity or right of her own. The principle of equality of women and men has been basic to traditional Indian thinking and the Hindu religious philosophy. Historically Indian women were equal to men.

Another evidence of equality of women at par with men in gender relations was that a woman enjoyed freedom of movement and had the same rights and access to reading Vedas, getting education and having a say in the choice of her marriage partner. Thus, during the Vedic periods women actively played in the intellectual and social life of the country.

According to studies, women enjoyed equal status and rights during the early Vedic period. However, later (approximately 500 B.C) the status of women began to decline.

Women in Medieval India

With the coming of Muslim rule, medieval India witnessed enhanced dependency of women on men. The Islamic custom of Purdah (veiling of women) forced the public world to be separated from the private world, with women confined to the latter. Following its subjugation by the Muslims, and fearing adverse outcomes for its women, a large part of the Hindu India accepted the practice of veiling. Through this privatization, Indian women were forced to trade their mobility for safety. The challenge of Islamic aggression also made Hindu India defensive and introverted causing a desperate return to orthodox Hindu beliefs and practices and further constraining the status of Indian women. Thus, during the medieval period, Indian women lost their earlier status and were at the lowest ebb.

However, women like Razia Begum rose to become a ruler, Chand Bibi, Tara Bai and Ahaliya Bai Holker, left their great imprints for their ruling capabilities. With the advent of Islam, once again, women like Jahan Ara, Begum Mumtaz and Noor Jahan enjoyed respectable positions in the country. These remarkable ladies though strict Muslims, publicly administered justice with their faces covered by veils or burkas.

Women in British India

British occupation of India began in 1772, and the British crown assumed charge of administering the colony from the British East India Company in 1858. Although, the common women faced male domination and atrocities during the medieval and English period but at the higher level a women could become a ruler or regent of her children at the death of her ruler husband, she had the right to get training in war tactics. This is evident from the fact that Maharani Laxmi Bai, participated in the 'First War of Independence' in 1857. Reformist organizations such as Brahma Samaj founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1828, the Arya Samaj set up by Dayanand Saraswati in 1875, and Ramakrishna Mission created by Vivekananda in 1897 and individual male reformers like Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Keshab Chandra Sen, Maharishi Kare, Mahadev Ranade and Gopal Krishna Gokhale led the fight against women's oppression by condemning such practices as polygamy, early marriage, enforced widowhood and by advocating female literacy. The Britishers along with Indian reformers raised their voice to eliminate brutal practices against woman, which had placed them at the marginalized position in the society such as: female infanticide, child marriage, enforced widowhood and sati. Thus, in order to raise the status of Indian women, the British rule led to number of socio religious reforms in the country.

One of its outstanding leaders was a woman - the Rani of Jhansi – who became a legendary figure in the history of Indian nationalism. The Revolt of 1857, with the spread of English education, intelligentsia imbued with a nationalist sentiment and liberal ideas emerged in the Indian society. The Indian National Congress, the first all India political organization of the Indian people was founded in 1885 by liberal Indian intellectuals in co-operation with non official British liberals like Hume and others. During the post war period, the congress increased its agitation for national and democratic demands. Regarding women's rights, at its Calcutta session in 1917, it expressed the opinion that the same tests be applied to women as to men in regard to the franchise and the eligibility to all elective bodies concerned with local government and education.

Status of Women in Present India: A Reality Check

The reality of women's lives remains invisible to men and women alike and this invisibility persists at all levels beginning with the family to the nation. Although geographically men and women share the same space, they live in different worlds. The mere fact that "Women hold up half the sky"- does not appear to give them a position of dignity and equality. True, that over the year's women has made great strides in many areas with notable progress in reducing some gender gaps. Yet, 'the afflicted world in which we live is characterised by deeply unequal sharing of the burden of adversities between women and men'. Sprawling inequalities persist in their access to education, health care, physical and financial resources and opportunities in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres.

Educational Status of Women in India

In order to work towards development that benefits women too, the need to focus on women came to be recognized in the matter of policies and various development programmes. This perspective moved away from the earlier 'welfare' approach wherein women were relegated to being mere recipients of various beneficiary projects, often under the assumption that some benefits would trickle down to them (Rustogi 2004; Feldman 1998; Mazumder et al., 2001). The history of female education in India is not much old. The recognition of female education as a social issue is quiet recent in India. In fact, at the beginning of the 20th century, the female literacy rate was below 1% in every province of British India. Against this background the recent picture of female education is far more satisfactory.

According to a study, *Women in India- How free? How equal?* by Sen, Kumar, as close to 245 million Indian women lack the basic capability to read and write whereas Adult literacy rates for ages 15 and above for the year 2000 were 46.4% (female) and 69% for male.

According to Census 2011, the female literacy rate was 65.5% against the male literacy rate of 82.1%. Although there has been a considerable improvement in literacy rate of female but still it is much lower compared to male. Male-female gap is predominant and nearly 20% gap is remaining between male-female literacy rates. The problem of literacy is acute in rural India where nearly 43% female are illiterate.

Women Health in India

Health is generally regarded as a vital component of growth and development of a nation. However, in India the field of health and health care in general and women health in particular is the most neglected aspects of development. Women are viewed mainly as the means of production often at the cost of own personal, individual identity (Rustogi 2004). Even today the issue of family welfare and reproductive health is much more important to policy makers than the issue of providing basic level of nutrition, better health, better control over women's body etc. In this context to assess the women health in the country the following indicators are chosen.

- i) IMR for females
- ii) Anaemia among women
- iii) Maternal Mortality Ratio

Infant Mortality Rate for females

IMR for females refers to the number of female death in the first year of life per 1000 live birth. It reflects the probability of female child dying before attaining age 1 year due to poor health of either the child or mother. The data for IMR overall witnessed a remarkable decline over the

years from 67.8 in 2001 to 50 in 2009 in India. The same trend has been observed for the IMR for females – it decreased from 68.9 in 2001 to 52 in 2009 for overall India according to the data of India Human Development Report 2011. It is worth mentioning that discrimination in access to healthcare services to females and the lower status ascribed to females in our society is at the base of excess female mortality in the inference stage (Basu, 1989).

Maternal Mortality Rate:

Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) is calculated as the number of maternal death per 1, 00,000 live birth. This information collected on account of death of women due to pregnancy, child birth or within 42 days of child birth. A steady decline in MMR has been observed in India from 301 during 2001-03 to 212 during the period 2007-09. There are various reasons explained for high MMR in the country. These are early marriage of girls without any mental and physical preparation a girl has to take the responsibility of bearing and rearing of a child), low immunity level, lack of balanced food intake, proper nutrition and health care for women and institutional bottleneck at delivery time particularly in the rural areas. According to Krishnaji and James (2002), the high rates of maternal mortality are not due to reproduction but are a result of poor health condition that are the outcome of gender discrimination melted out over the years from childhood.

Anaemia among women:

Gender discrimination results in very high incidence of anaemia among women and adolescent girls in India (IHDR 2011). In India, anaemia is rampant among women in the reproductive age group, children and low socio-economic strata of the population. Anaemia remains a major indirect cause of maternal mortality in India (planning Commission 2008). The 11th five year plan targeted reducing anaemia among women and girls by 50% by 2012. According to IHDR 2011 data percentage of women suffered from anaemia increased to 55.3% of women aged 15-49 years. Moreover, more prevalence of anaemia is observed in rural areas than urban area. In fact, it is noticeable that unlike other indicators which experienced an improvement over the years anaemia among women significantly increased for nearly last 10 years.

Social Status of Women

There are many studies showing that after many efforts taken to spread education and awareness for women empowerment, still there has been a lacuna in improving social status of women in India. The declining sex ratio, early marriage of women, different types of crimes against women and spousal violence are the glaring example of the lower status ascribed to women. The equal rights of women to live life with dignity are often being ignored in Indian society.

Although efforts have been taken to improve the status of women, the constitutional dream of gender equality is miles away from becoming a reality. Even today, 'the mainstream remains

very much a male oriented and with gender bias'. The dominant tendency has always been to confine women and women's issues in the private domain. The traditional systems of control with its notion of 'what is right and proper for women' still reigns supreme and reinforces the use of violence as a means to punish its defiant female 'offenders' and their supporters. Hence it is of no surprise when the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) predicted that the growth rate of crimes against women would be higher than the population growth rate by 2010. The social status of women has been analysed looking at the indicators like sex ratio, crimes against women in which spousal violence takes a major part.

Crimes against Women:

Crimes against women are a day to day phenomenon in recent days. Women are often viewed as the property of the men in their lives, whose responsibility is to protect them; conflict between men and women over any issue provokes violence against women (Centre for women development studies 2002). The fear of violence against women often put a hindrance over women's educational mobility, employment, skill enhancement or income earning capacity and political participation. This, in turn affects women's capacity building and exploration of their potential.

In India, crimes against women have been rising at a steep rate. A total of 2, 28,650 incidents of crime against women (both under IPC and SLL) were reported in the country during the year 2011 as compared to 2, 13,585 incidences in the year 2010 recording an increase of 7.1% during the year 2011.

Majority of the violence that a woman faces comes from her home. Among crimes against women cruelty by her husband and his relatives (as defined by the section 498A of the Indian Penal Code) constitutes 43% of the total crimes against women and consistently tops the list.

Molestation of women comes at second. Moreover, it has been stated by many that the crimes against women is much high than that are recorded in the data. Reportage of crime has been low because of the social taboos associated with them.

Sex Ratio:

The sex ratio is indicative of the composition of population. It is defined as the number of females per thousand males. One of the glaring examples of gender inequality is declining sex ratio and declining sex ratio at birth. Given a preference for boys over girls that exists in many male dominated society, gender inequality can manifest itself in the form of the parents' wanting the new born to be a boy rather than a girl (Sen and Drez 2005).³In India the use of sex determination technique for foetuses has been banned for several years, but enforcement of this law is comprehensively neglected due to reluctance of mothers to give evidence of the use of such techniques. There are so many factors responsible for this adverse sex ratio in India and outside India. The existence of patriarchal social structure, patrilinear property transfer, religious

and ritualistic practice, lower status ascribed to women, prejudice against girl children as they have to be married, girls are financial liability and vulnerable to sexual assault and kidnapping are the factors behind strong son preference and discrimination against girl children. Along with the above reasons the emergence of advanced technologies of determining sex and elimination of female foetus are also held responsible for declining sex ratio in India.

Conclusion

After Independence, the Constitution of India gave equal civil liberties to men and women in all subject of life. But still these days one cannot say that all women in India have the benefit of equal rights with men in all concern in their life.

This paper tries to explain the development of women movement in India and the status of women during the Vedic period to present day India. It also tries to explain the position of women on the basis of socioeconomic– political empowerment. In view of this a historical study of women becomes important in order to generate knowledge about women. These may be useful in refining the development strategies followed in the past.

This paper also tries to evaluate the status of women and its position in the light of several important gender related development indicators. The indicator covers a wide spectrum of the area of women's education, health and its social status in India since ancient to the recent period. Analysis of each indicator separately has helped to identify the progress and backwardness in respect of each particular indicator.

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