

The Status of Women and the Role of Society and Human Institutions

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Abstract: *The most enigmatic fact about our oriental culture is that the general conception regarding women is completely paradoxical on the one hand. She is hardly considered a human being. The status of women has been a topic of grave discussion, for many years in the past. It surrounds various burning issues of girl and women education, mental health, economic empowerment of females, and the role of women in family, community environment, politics and more. The status of women depicts the social, economic and mental condition in a nation. Women have been regarded as a symbol of spirituality in our scriptures. Yet, women were denied right and equality in ancient Indian civilisation. They have been treated badly and unequally to men. He maintains culture, customs and brings them out. She is the one who cares about her husband and his family. In other words she creates values, positive changes, and everything in society. In this paper I want to analyze the status of women in the light of social and human institutions.*

Keywords: environment, values, development, changes, policies.

Society is a dynamic reality. Change or transformation is inherent in the very nature of society. Various forms of changes occur in human society. The face of human society as we find it today is different from what it was five hundred years ago and that would undergo a tremendous change after another five hundred years; is a fact that would be disputed by none. When we speak of social changes we do not refer to the change of social structure but also to changes in social groups, social institutions, and social ideas and so on. This paper is dealt with the status of women in ancient India to present society. Whether it has downfallen or not is a matter to be examined? What could be the possible strategies for women welfare?

Every well –ordered society desires to have such an organisation of social life as would secure to every individual the place for which he is best fitted. This would enable society to bring out the best that is in the individual and to get from the individual his share of contribution to the general welfare of society. The ancient Hindu Epics and Shastras, through their conception of men and women relationship, have always insisted on maintaining such an organisation of social life.

Rig Veda and Raghuvamsa teach us the female child is called by the name duhitra, which English meaning is daughter and the term indicates the prominent duty of milking the cow. Weaving and needlework, household duties and watching the crops are her main duties. Education was regarded as quite important. While Brahmin girls were taught vedic wisdom, girls of Khsatriya community were taught the use of bow and arrow. The Barhut sculptures represents skilful horsewomen in the army. Patanjali mention the spearbearers (saktitis). Megasthenes speaks of Chandragupta's bodyguard of Amazonian women. Kautilya mentions women archers (striganaih dhanvibhib). In the houses as well as in the forest Universities of India, boys and girls were educated together. Atreyi studied under Valmiki along with Lava and Kusa, the sons of Rama. Fine arts like music, dancing and painting were especially encouraged in case of girls. Till recently, women proved themselves capable of performing efficiently which is generally

assigned to men. Yet till today the view persists that women are inferior to men in intellectual competence.

In the Epic period, women did not suffer from any special disabilities. They practised austerities and wore garments (valkala). Dhritavatra, Srutavati, Sulabha, remained unmarried and pursued the life of spirit.

Under the shadow of the great ideal of Indian Epics, the weaknesses of women were exaggerated as a warning of monks. To encourage renunciation, women were despised as the source of worldliness. But Varahamihara (6th century A. D.) urges that the pursuit of the ends of dharma or righteousness, and artha or wealth, depends on women and that they are essential for human progress. He complains against the other - worldly, who overlook the good qualities of woman and emphasise their weakness. The faults of women are the faults of men also. To speak the truth, they have more virtues than men can claim.

Left to themselves, without the guidance of any tradition, women are neither more nor less constant than men. Their sexual tendencies are not less variation than those of men. Woman is not an innocent deer, nor is man a devouring gigantic. In early times promiscuity was the fashion and it was not regarded as sinful. Women used to go about as they liked. Whenever, conditions permitted, they rejected the monogamous relationship. Monogamous marriage is not a natural condition, but a cultural state. The traces of promiscuity belong to the pre - vedic stage, as the institution of marriage is well established by the time of Rig Veda. Indian society and neighbours were covered by same ideals more or less.

Marriage becomes an obligation to women, possible as a reaction against Buddhism and Jainism. Dirghatamas ruled that women should not remain unmarried in future (Mahabharata I.114.36). Manu argued that women should have all the sacraments, but without the vedic formulas. The only vedic Sacrament for them is marriage. The smritis condemn prolonged celibacy and exalt the householder's status. A wifeless man is not eligible for sacrificial rites.

(Taittiriya Brahmana, II.2.2.6). It is in Manu and the Dharmasāstras that the doctrine of the perpetual dependence of women on men is enunciated. For them woman is a weak plant, to be cared for and nourished by man. The later commentators revel in increasing the restrictions on women. We however get exalted ideas of womanhood even in Manu, not to speak of poets like Kalidasa and Bhavabhūti. Though there are certain passages which declare that the woman has not equal rights with man for Vedic duties, the main view is that she is entitled to perform them, either as wife along with the husband or as maiden independently. When later her position deteriorated, the bhakti religion arose, satisfying all the religious needs of women.

From the 19th century onwards, the reviews of the status of women on national as well as state level have been started on a very slow rhythm but after independence, it catches fast speed. Sixty seven years have gone after independence; still it is found that women are the most neglected, under privileged and downtrodden section almost in all fields. The women societies in almost all countries are like a lamp that burns itself to light the whole world yet its own down part is ever sunk in darkness. The history of the world shows that women almost half of the total population got victim of deprivation in almost all fields just on their gender base.

The most enigmatic fact about our oriental culture is that the general conception regarding women is completely paradoxical on the one end. She is hardly considered a human being, violence against her being a commence torture and on the other hand, she is worshipped as 'Devi' the goddess of strength is Durga, Kali, the goddess of wealth is Laxmi, the goddess of learning is Saraswati, the most pious river of the Hindu's is Ganga and numerous other examples are there about women God.

May be the fact is that these women Gods are made of clays and are worshipping for one, two or three days. But women of flesh and blood at homes, communities and societies are alive with all desires and requirements equally necessary and it is a fact that this equality on all levels from birth to death to a women's life is sometimes denied partially, sometimes completely. This gender inequality almost all societies of all classes even don't allow the girl child to be born that leads a continuous fall in the numbers of women at par with men whereas, biologically female infants are sturdier than male offspring. It is only because gender inequality works as a network of beliefs, personality traits, attitude feelings, values, behaviours and activities that differentiate men from women in society. It has a historical dimension and takes place within different micro and macro spheres such as the state, labour market, schools, media, law and above all the family. All social relations are 'gendered' that are perpetuated across generations.

As a proverb goes "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness", the notion of gender inequality is that darkness, and to get rid of this darkness, the light of a candle is needed that can lit up thousands of other candles and thousands to lakhs and to crores and so on. It is like giving voice to voiceless which means equal opportunity, freedom and status for women as they are the most oppressed for centuries.

The empowered women should be able to participate in the process of decision making, to share the control over resources like money and access to money and to gain power against social injustice and inequality. When the interests and voices of half of humanity are not reflected in decision making processes, the very legitimacy of the institutions, legislative and executive becomes questionable. Women's qualitative as well as quantitative participation at all levels of governance structure starting from her home to outside world is absolutely essential for their so called desired empowerment.

This empowering attempt for women gets its germinating form in India actually by the call of M. K. Gandhi for emancipation of India from the clutches of the British. It is something like to kill two birds with one stone as it also brings women on street from the restricted four walls to demand the country's freedom breaking the shackle of their own feet. Of course, the work of the Missionaries and some Englishmen like Lord Dalhousie, then the Governor General of India is mention worthy in this regard. Bethune school for girls and later on Bethune school for women by the missionary during the period of 1800 - 1854 AD are remarkable step as a foundation. Besides, several great Indians like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar played a very important role in supporting the opening of girl's schools and breaking down the popular resistance against women education.

The post independence period had witnessed tremendous improvement in providing facilities for education of women as education is the most powerful instrument of changing women's position in the society. A number of voluntary organisations made considerable efforts for empowerment of women. The late 20th century witnessed the social, political, economic improvement, gender of justice, gender equality, women's rights, human rights, voluntary action, social legalisation, custodian justice which are very important issues regarding empowering women. The economic field also gives huge changes in women's world which are most evident in the modern and organised sectors where women occupying prominent positions in every field from aviation to medicine, to information technology to arm combat. In many fields which were earlier male preserves such as medicine, women outnumber men and in universities and top educational levels, both in numbers and performances of women students outshine that of men. So the last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century have given a big boost to the empowerment of women. A joint committee of the parliament on the empowerment of women has already been constituted to keep women's issues under constant review and monitoring and to watch progress in pursuance of plans of action evolved at international and national levels.

Now, the recently published sex ratio chart in the statistical year book, 2013, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, New Delhi will show that women have come up very slowly increasing their ratio in birth, education, working status and so on. In all India level, for the last three decades will show that women's birth rate in 1991 was 927 against 100 male, in 2001, it comes up

933 and in 2011, it is 940. That means last twenty years the recovery has been made a little bit, firstly 927 to 933 and then 933 to 940 per thousand men girl child are allowed to come to the world. In Tripura the picture is little better - 94 girls per 1000 boys and 948 in 2001 and 961 per 1000 boys in 2011. We can conclude that the trend is encouraging, which indicates that the awareness among people is rising. A comparative study of the literacy rate will reveal the same picture for the last two or three decades.

In 2001 the all India picture of literacy rate shows 54*16% women against 75*83% male literacy. In Tripura, the literacy rate in 2001 was 65*41% of women against 81*47% male. The recent survey in 2011 shows that all India level, the ratio for both men and women have increased. The women literacy rate is 65*46% against 82*14% male in 2011. It means in all India level the trend of literacy rate is rising up gradually. Almost 11% has been increased on women literacy rate comparing 7% in the case of men. In Tripura, this picture is much more sparkling. The literacy rate for women in 2011 is 83*15% against 92*18% male literacy rate and a comparable study between 2001 to 2011 proves that almost 18% has been increased in women literacy rate against 11% hike for male literacy rate which is not only huge but extremely encouraging steps for everyone because survival of girls will ultimately guide to the path of empowerment of women.

This trend is witnessed in two or three particular states of India like West Bengal, Manipur, Kerala, whereas the opposite picture of decline in girl's birth rate and literacy rate is seen. In Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Chandigarh and Delhi (the capital of India) the decline is drastic. In Punjab it is 793 (2001) and now 875 (2011), in Haryana 879 to 820, in Himachal Pradesh it is 951 to 897, in Gujarat it is 928 to 878, in Chandigarh it is 845 to 899 and in our national capital Delhi it is 915 to 865 - an unmistakable decline in the sex ratio in the last 2001. Yet one thing is clear everywhere the gap is fading in a snarl's pace.

It is very difficult to understand why in this country so much difference is made between men and women, whereas the Vedanta declares that one and the same conscious Self is present in all beings. The Upanishads also teaches the same. We always criticize the women, but say what have we done for their uplift? Is there any sex distinction in Atman or self? The answer is no, because all is Atman or Self.

Thus whatever the theory acts and shows, the practice sadly speaks the other story. The female infanticide was banned in 1870 through Registration of all Births and Deaths Act. The worrying fact is that it came back in 1980 and some states where it is shamelessly declared openly in some private nursing home on its hoarding "spend 30, 000/- to save 5, 00000/- of future" to encourage infanticide. If the girl child is unwanted in an era of advancement of science and technology despite laws to protect her and the Government's will to ensure her survival what is one to do! More than the empowerment of women, we have now to take up the survival of the girl child it is not only the responsibilities of the Government, it is the responsibilities of each and every informed citizen of our country to start a mass campaign to save the girl child - she must be allowed

to be born, survive, to be protected, given care, to be allowed to enjoy every opportunity to become a responsible human being.

The realities of the women's condition till to this new century thus are far from equality, equity, and justice. Politics proved to be a very inhospitable terrain for women and continues to be the male bastion into which the entry of women is severely restricted. The issue of violence against women is far reaching in its impact. The forms of violence against women are changing these days. The attacks are more brutal, cruel and direct. The sexual torture against women is not only physical killing but it murders the soul of society and morality.

The rate of reported crimes against women is increasing in such a way that proves girls and women belong to every class of society become victims by various adverse socio - psycho - emotional, familial and societal circumstance.

Thus if we make an analysis of theory and practice, two fold picture will emerge. The laws, funds, articles for women development and empowerment are there in papers of Government, non - government, private sector, NGO's in theoretical forms but practically women and girl children seem to be at the bottom of the list when it comes to health facilities as well as the distribution of wealth. In terms of leadership and decision making position within policy making arenas, a very few women in position of influence with regard to the direction of the future.

The possible Strategies for Women and Child Welfare

In order to strengthen the role of women in the society, only social welfare measures and humanitarian and demographic policies are insufficient. They must be accompanied with creation of helpful conditions at workplace, family and society as a whole under which women can function efficiently and contribute more to the development of the society. To achieve an atmosphere in which women can acquire equal status, it is necessary to evolve a strategy to create awareness in the society regarding women's role, responsibilities and rights. With this view in mind, the Government of India established the Department of Women and Child Development in 1985 as a part of the Ministry of HRD., which is a nodal agency responsible for co - ordinating the activities of women and child development carried out primarily by the private, NGOs and government departments. This department has four autonomous organizations:

- a) National Commission of Women.
- b) National Institute of Public Co - operation and Child Development.
- c) Rastriya Mahila Kosh.
- d) Central Social Welfare Board.

The department works for the betterment for women and children. It formulates plans, policies and programmes; enacts and amends legislations; and guides and coordinates the efforts of both governmental and non - governmental organization working in the field of women and child development. It is also organize innovative programmes for women and child; the programmes for children emphasize on nutrition, pre - school education and aspects of health,

while those for women relate to welfare and support services, training for employment and income generation, awareness generation and gender sensitization.

Following is the list of important laws and rules in India to safeguard the interests of women -

- a) The protection of Women against Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act, 2007.
- b) Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005.
- c) Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 and Rules.
- d) Indecent Representation of Women.
- e) The commission of Sati Prevention Act and Rules.
- f) National Commission for Women Act.

For example, Susila Devi already one daughter, so when she gave birth to a second girl, she had no option but to get rid of her. For the four days of the child's short life, she refused to nurse her and finally, in order to silence the child's cries, she mixed the milky sap from a poisonous plant with some salt and fed it to her. The child bled from the nose and died soon after. Susila's neighbours helped her to bury the dead child in a small hole near her hut. Although they sympathized with Susila, the fact remains that they would probably have done the same in similar circumstances. It is considered safer to run the risk of punishment and sentence by law than try to raise a girl child.

A society can be reformed only by changing men's heart and minds. Though we may desire to make all things new, we cannot get away our roots that have been subsisting in the old. We have to make equidistance from the past and trace the ideas which rule the present. The supreme task of our generation is to give a soul to the growing world - consciousness, to develop ideas and institutions necessary for the creative expression of the world soul, to transmit these loyalties and impulses to future generations and train them into world citizens. To this great work of creating a new pattern of living, some of the fundamental insights of ancient epics, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, seem to be particularly relevant.

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