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Status of Women in India: A Historical Perspective

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The social status of women in any society depends upon the particular role assigned to them by the society and the social attitudes of that society are evolved towards that role. However, in the course of history the role- ideal, expected or equal is not static in any society. It changes from time to time depending upon the economic conditions, economic structure and the ideology. The committee on the status of women in India observes, “Patterns of women’s activity are greatly affected by social attitudes and institutions, which stem from social ideology” concerning basic components of status in any given period. These may differ according to the stage of economic development. For example, at certain stage of development, capacity for work may provide the highest claim to status. At other stages, when society becomes inegalitarian, leisure may substitute work as a basic indicator of status. If we talk in Indian context, women enjoyed a noble status in ancient times. But it was the position in the distant past, with the passage of time the Indian society became patriarchal and was enslaved by the foreign rulers. Mainly there were two religions in India viz. Hinduism and Islam. In India law and religion are mixed with each other mainly in these two religions in which patriarchy started to be prevailed with the passage of time.

There have been infinite variations in the status of women diverging according to cultural milieu, family structure, class, caste, property rights and morals. Moreover, the status of women in India may vary according to the different kinds of regions like in rural areas women are treated differently as compared to urban areas; also for example, the position of women is different in northern India than the southern parts of the country. The most appropriate example of this is Kerala where women are more empowered as compare to UP and Bihar. In spite of all these differences India has a distinct culture and identity of its own.

There have been different perceptions among scholars about the status of women in India. They have been given highest position in our history and philosophical thinking. The harmony of

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Purusha (male) and Prakriti (female) have been prevailed in Indian culture. In our religious scriptures, the concept of ‘Aradhnarishwara’ is the symbol of god which is denoted as the combination of both male and female. The ‘Shakti’ cult is the symbol of female superiority and destructive strength. “Rivers and streams, dawn and twilight, flowers and seasons, knowledge and music are conceived as feminine.” While tracing the history of women throughout ages, we conclude that the position of power, status and disabilities of women went on changing with the passage of time. The status of women in the sphere of family, religion and public life was high during the Rigvedic period, but as centuries rolled on, the situation changed adversely. They began to be considered as inferior creatures, unequal, slaves and had no inheritance rights and were not given the chance of equal education and personality development. “The degree of freedom given to move about in society and to take part in the public life gives a good idea of the nature of its administration and to enables us to know how far it has realized the difficult truth that women too have a contribution of their own to make in its development and progress.

However, without studying the position of women from historical perspective, proper estimate about the status of Indian women cannot be made. History reveals many important factors about the reality. So, it is important to review the history to women to have an accurate idea about the real position of Indian women. The Civilization of our country is one of the greatest and oldest civilizations the world. Our country is considered as the mother of many religions. The religions of our country like Hinduism, Jainism, Budhhism and Sikhism have originated in India. In every part time in history, there is a wave of one or more religions in India. So, to study the status of women from historical perspective, we will study this from point of view of different religions which have grown in India from time to time.

Status of Women in Vedic Period

The Rig-Veda, the most authoritative text of Hindus, shows many evidences that women enjoyed equal status with that of men and had great privileges and rights. In Snatan Dharma, God was considered both in form of male and female. The concept of ‘Prakriti Para Prakriti’ shows that the supreme feminine is thought to be endorsed and adorable. There have been a lot of citations

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of feminine supremacy. “Here the relative status of man and women can at best be characterized as ‘Separate but equal’.” We find many examples in Vedas which indicate that women were given equal status with men regarding access to education also. We find the names of more than forty female rishis called ‘rishikas’. For example Suryadevi is known for composing marriage songs. Even today marriage ceremonies have been performed with the help of these marriage songs. In Mandlas, forty eight mantras have been composed by Suryadevi. Although ritualism in our country have been male dominated, but the essence of these rituals ‘mantras’ have been revealed by females. Gender biases have nowhere mentioned in the Vedic literature.

In the Vedic age, women were given equal rights to join Gurukul and attain the true knowledge. “She could fight wars, join in festivals, take part in philosophical discussions, like Gargi and Maitreyi or even remain unmarried if she so desires.” It was the duty of the father to get her married to a suitable boy. In case the father was unable to get a suitable groom for her, she could choose herself through ‘Swayamber’ or she could become spinster or brahmcharini. “it is therefore no wonder that a wife enjoyed with her husband full religious rights and regularly participates in religious ceremonies with him.” In fact the performance of religious ceremonies was not considered complete without the male member of the family joined with his wife as his full partner. Thus the qualified women of those days were enjoying the highest social status in Rig-Vedic period.

It is observed that in the Vedic period, the women in India enjoyed a considerable position. If the position of women is compared with her western counterpart, it is noticed that no western woman could compose poems, invent something and move over the world. Many great women are found in the Vedic period before centuries in the great and unique culture of India. Women in those days were provided opportunities deliberately because of adverse circumstances of those days. Adverse conditions means in those days, mobility was very difficult and the body of women could not bear such things. For example there was no print material available for study because the mediums of communication were not available like today. The contact between people and study groups were difficult to establish. Except some difficulties of this kind, everything else was good. Apart from all these, women were provided equal opportunities for everything. All our

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religious values are in favour of women. It can be said that the position of women in Vedic period was much better.

Women in Upanishdas

Upanishdas are sacred scriptures of Hinduism. These Upanishdas are mainly created by men, learnt by men; even the names of gods referred in Upanishdas are also of men. There existed some women learning and discussing Upanishdas like Gargi, Maitreyi, and Uma etc. the noted philosopher of Vedas Yajavalkya was even out questioned by Gargi. Maitreyi was a preacher of the true knowledge and she was called Brahmavadini. However it has to be noticed that although women were not considered much important in Upanishdas, they were also not humiliated. We cannot assume that they did not enjoy any respectful position at all. For example, in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, there is a long list containing a list of an ancestry of nearly 50 teachers. A special thing about the list is that all the names in the list contain the names of their mothers as their last names which prove that they gave all the credit of their greatness to their mothers.

Status of Women in Laws of Manu

Manu is considered the first law giver in Hinduism and his ideas are depicted in 'Manusamriti'. In Indian tradition he is considered as the first man and the first king. The philosophy of Manu has left adverse affects on the status of women for the coming generations. The Hindu orthodoxy in the minds of the people is the result of Manu's laws. He was first to bow the seeds of male dominated society in India. But some kind of contradiction is found in his views about women; spiritual being on one hand and a unit in the society on the other hand. "He averred that a mother is more to be revered than thousand fathers, yet his laws place women socially on a level with the lowest in all groups in Aryan society, the Shudra"

Although Manu believed in Hindu traditional values and was orthodox to some extent, but he was not anti-women. It was he who said "If the lady of the house is happy, the whole household will be happy, but if she is not happy, nothing else would give delight." Although bigamy and polygamy were prevailed at that time, but Manu was in favour of Monogamy. He allowed

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women to marry again after some time if her husband deserted her. Thus Manu was the principle law maker of that time. “His prime objective was to safeguard the interest of the family and society at the expense of individual liberty.”

Status of Women in Mahabhart

Mahabhart, the great epic is the mirror of social life in ancient India. It is considered as the heroic age in which poets have described Indian women full of energy, will power and activeness. It is observed in this document that women were the important part of life

whether it was house or battlefield. Although at many places in earlier Hindu literature, women were depicted as helpless creatures, but in Mahabhart we find many examples of real empowerment of women. They were enjoying a respectful position in the society. “.....the sweet speached wives are their husband’s friends on the occasion of joy, they are as fathers on occasions of religious acts, they as mothers in the hours of illness and woe.”

In Adi Parva, we notice that queen Gandhari, who participated in in the administrative worksalongwith her husband, bandaged eyes, pledging that she would not enjoy worldly pursuits which her husband could not enjoy. This is the example of deep sympathy, love and sacrifice for her husband. This is also an instance of participation of women in politics and administration.

In the period of Mahabhart, the birth of a girl-child was considered a welcome news. They also had a right to choose their life partners through ‘Swayamber’. In the epic, in spite of the evidences of high status of women, contradictory views have also been noticed about the real position of women. “Milk is possible in cows, devotion is possible in Brahmanas and unsteadiness is possible in women”¹ thus we can conclude that women hacc been highly praisedas well as denounced in Mahabhart. In spite of some restrictions which the Brahmanas tried to impose on women, they enjoyed a highlu respectful position. The picture of women portrayed in Mahabhart, is the symbol of hope and faith for the Indian women.

Status of women in the Ramayana

The Ramayana is the important branch of Hindu liertature which is written by great saint Valmiki. It is one of the great epics of Hindus. In the patriarchal society of Ramayana, women

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fought for their own identity. In Valmiki's Ramayana Sita is depicted as an ideal wife who is loyal to her husband throughout her life. She rejects the luxurious life and prefers to go with her husband who was exiled for fourteen years. Even when she was abducted by Ravana, she retains her chastity. After that she had to face next 'Agnipariksha' to prove her chastity and she passed it successfully. Even then Lord Rama refused to take her to his kingdom when he observed that the people of Ayodhya had bad opinion about her character. Finally, she desires to take shelter in the arms of 'Dhartimata' or 'the mother earth'. The present condition of subordination of women to men in the patriarchal society has its roots in the traditional culture of Hindu society. The religious scriptures of Hindus are enough to perpetuate the exploitation of Hindu women. Sita is an ideal lady of all Hindu women. She is the symbol of self sacrifice and purity. All Indian ladies are expected to become like her. No doubt it is good to be 'Pativarata' but not at the cost of exploitation and oppression.

Status of Women in Buddhism

At the time when Buddhism was at rise, Indian women were chained in the rigid norms of Brahmanism. In the post Vedic period, society was dominated by the ritual of Brahmanical religion. Buddhism was first religion after Vedas which gave equal rights to both the genders in the field of religious development. According to Buddhism, Nirvana is the path of self-culture and self-restraint. The person who has these two qualities can follow the path of 'Dharma' irrespective of one's gender. Thus, first time after Vedic period women got their right to salvation. In order of nuns, known as Bhikshuni Sangha was open to women of all Vernas equally and it was a good platform for social service, spiritual learning and provided enough opportunities for public life. The offers of financial support and hospitality by individual women of deep religious devotion were highly praised by Lord Buddha.

Status of Women in Jainism

India is a religious country. It has been crowned with the credit of being the mother of many religions. Jainism is one of them, the main focus of which is Ahimsa or Non-Violence. Also the aim of Jainism is the end of the cycle of rebirth through self control and purification of the soul.

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The soul has no division of male and female. Jainism provides equal rights to all male and female; therefore women also played an important role in attaining true knowledge and salvation. Mainly there are four types of people living in the society nuns, monks, laymen and laywomen. There are names of many distinguished women who played an important role for the sake of religion. Sixteen virtuous women or 'Sola Sati' were the women who had exemplary religious virtues and they were considered as the role model for the Jain women, the mothers of the Thirthankars were given a special respect and their motherly characteristics were revered. There are names of female deities like Padmavati, Chakreshvari and Ambika are worshipped by all.

Status of Women in Sikhism

The advent of Sikh religion brought a revolutionary change in society for the upliftment weaker sections especially women. The condition of women at the time rise of Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji was very pitiable because of the rigid rules in the society. The main reason for this condition was the Muslim rule at that time. The evils of Purdah and Sati were prevailed, the country was enslaved by foreigners, the life was insecure and so the ladies were kept inside the four walls of the house for the safety purpose. But Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji started 'Sangat and Pangat' and spread the message of equality and brotherhood for all. The evil practices like Sati and Purdah were denied by Sikh Gurus. The practice of female infanticide was also condemned. Sri Guru Amardas Ji started the practice of Manjis. He appointed 87 person to many this institution; out of these, 52 were women. Thus women left much relieved and gained higher position in the society. It is one of the first religions who talked about the emancipation of women and granted equal status to them.

Status of Women in Muslim Period

The condition of women in 11th century was further degraded and they became insecure with the invasion of foreigners on the rights of women and they had to face more problems than earlier times. The Muslim invaders forced the Hindu women to become slaves and marry with them. As a result of this insecurity prevailed everywhere, the position of women was further deteriorated. On one hand, the foreign Muslim rulers tried to impose their coercive norms on the Hindus; on

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the other hand, the Hindus became more rigid and curtailed the rights and freedom of women. Because of these two reasons, medieval period is considered as darkest period for women in the Indian history till nineteenth century; the degradation in the status of women was continued.

Status of Women in British Period

The condition of Indian women improved a lot during the British rule as compared to earlier times. Although the women who were advantaged from these privileges were few in number, the steps taken by Britishers for the welfare of women were significant. During the Indian Independence struggle, many women participated and fought bravely, under the Charismatic leaders like Rani Laxmibai, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Annie Besant etc. “We are aware of the necessity of finding and being judged by our own standards as free human beings, voluntarily accepted; we are determined to face the facts of life, to fight the battle of our sex and take the risk.”

Certainly, the status of women in the ancient times was respectful to freedom and equality. During this period, they took part in every sphere of life. In spite of the respectful position of women in all our religions, some evil practices still prevail in our society for which Manu was responsible to some extent. He granted women a subordinate position to men. Later on in the medieval period, she became the victim of the foreigners. She was surrounded by the evil practices of Sati, Purdah and many more. After that many social reforms and religions of Bhakti movements advocated equal rights of women. At the time of advent of Britishers, the condition of women was bad. After that, with the efforts of great social reformers of India, in the British period, their position improved slightly. Many enactments were made for the welfare of women in that period. In the post-Independence era, there are a number of laws made for the emancipation of women. The laws have been made for bringing gender equality, abolish all kinds of discriminations and remove the obstacles coming out in the way of empowerment of women. But the reality is that in spite of various kinds of legislations, Indian women still live under the condition of subordination in the male dominant society that is manifested in the form of various kinds of daily news of cruelties against women.

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