

STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA: AFTER INDEPENDENCE

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INTRODUCTION

It is definitely after Independence that the Indian women gained considerable importance within their country in social and political spheres. At Independence the majority of women still remained ignorant but they did not allow the fire that burnt in their hearts to die. They took many progressive decisions such as organizing themselves to fight for a new set of goals. The goals were getting equality based on gender, job opportunities, reforming the existing laws which gave women only partial justice, and creating a society which did not oppress women intellectually, physically and emotionally. Even though the efforts made by women activists and concerned organization were slow in getting a real break-through, despite the conservative outlook of their counterparts, they succeeded in creating a focused consciousness among middle-class and upper middle-class women at large. Slowly it spread to the lower rungs of the existing political setup. From then they have been desperately trying to evolve a new self-concept or a new self-identity which is totally free from the traditionally imposed one. To assess the contemporary Indian women's position we have to analyse the women's movement after Independence up to the present. This will definitely include the different organizations and schools of thought which have evolved in India in the wake of Independence.

ISSUES RELATED TO WOMEN

Our Constitution gives equal rights to both men and women in every field. Today, women enjoy voting rights, right to inheritance and property. In fact, the Constitution lay down that the government should promote with special care

the interests of the weaker sections of the people. Several laws have been passed since independence to promote the interests of women. These laws relate to marriage, inheritance of property, divorce, dowry, etc. In 1976, the Equal Remuneration Act was passed to provide for equal remuneration to men and women for similar work. Recently, the government has started a scheme for the protection of girl child. The scheme is called 'Ladli', in which an amount is set aside at the time of the birth of a girl child which she gets when she completes eighteen years of age. This amount is then used for the education or the marriage of the child. Similarly, there is another scheme called 'Jaccha Baccha scheme'. Under this scheme, the state governments take care of the birth of the child and all expenditure related to medical assistance for the upbringing of the child. However, in spite of these provisions, we find a lot of discrimination against women.

1. Gender Discrimination Gender discrimination refers to the practice whereby one sex is given preferential treatment over the others. The practice of giving social importance to the biological differences between men and women is there everywhere. In some societies, these differences are very much pronounced while in others, they are given less importance. Even the Indian society is not an exception to this.

Different Faces of the Practice of "Gender Discrimination":

In comparison with some other social problems, "gender discrimination" does not "appear" to be a serious problem in India. It "appears" to be so because; it has not been

made a very big social issue so far. But in reality, it has weakened the strength of the female community of India. Though constitutionally men and women are equal, socially men are given priority and importance sometimes to the disadvantage of women. There are various areas wherein this discrimination is apparent.

- **Discrimination in Socialization:** In our socialization process female children are becoming victims of discrimination. In the Indian social context even today male children are preferred to female children. Hence, female children are subject to discriminatory treatment. Male preference and female negligence has almost become a working policy especially in the rural areas. Discrimination between male and female children is made in matters relating to food, dress, health, education, domestic work etc. The policy of male preference and female negligence has led to what is known as “female disadvantages”. In India, mothers show preferences for male children. Give them importance because – males are wanted during their old age to offer protection, males have greater scope than women and occupational avenues are also wider for males than for females. This male preference has led to the abuse of advanced technology. The sophisticated scanning and super monographic equipments are being misused to find out the sex of the child; that is to go for abortion if the child is found to be an unwanted female child.
- **Discrimination in the Distribution of Power and Work:** Most of the Indian families are patriarchal. Hence, the philosophy of equality of sex is not acceptable to them. Domestic works such as – cooking, looking after the children, washing clothes and vessels, keeping the house neat and clean, looking after the

domesticated animals, serving family members like a nurse on all days and especially when they fall sick, etc., are branded as “women’s work”. Very rarely men do these works. But when the question of exercising power comes, it is always the man who dominates. His decisions are final and his orders are ultimate. The female voice is always suppressed.

- **Women’s Health is ignored:** Women suffer from some distinctive health problems from which men are free. Women have to undergo the distinctive biological process of pregnancy, or child-bearing, delivering, nursing, feeding, child-caring or rearing etc. These are their maternal functions. But the insistence on the family planning has posed many health hazards. The use of contraceptives, Copper-T, sterilisation, abortion and hormonal drugs has an adverse effect on health. Those who make use of them suffer from problems such as bodily weakness, bloodlessness, high bleeding, fatness, problems in uterus, discomfort in breast, chronic back pain, etc. As Neera Desai and Vibhuti Patel have criticised, the advocates of family planning do not seem to bother much about these problems.
 - a. **Women neglecting their Own Health:** Studies have revealed that our women themselves are neglecting their own health. Normally Indian women consume less food [that is, on an average 100 calories a day] and spend more energy on work. Women toil for the good of the family and children even at the cost of neglecting their own health. Women very rarely complain about their ill-health because of their virtue of “self-denial”. The records in the health centres reveal that women are lagging behind men [that is, 1:3, meaning one woman

taking medical help for every 3 men] even in matters of availing of medical help.

- b. Women have their own reasons to neglect their health:

Not finding free time to go to health centres because of heavy work at home; nonavailability of proper medical facility to test the health or ill-health of the mother and the child especially in the primary health centres; inability to walk a long distance to reach a well-equipped health centre in the absence of proper transportation facility; non-availability of female doctors in the nearby health centres, etc., are some such excuses.

• **Decline in the Female Population:**

Normally, in the population of any country, male- female ratio remains more or less the same, that is, 50:50. In India as the census reports reveal female population has been steadily declining ever since 1901. It is for this reason Neera Desai and Vibhuti Patel raised the point whether the womenfolk in India represent a “declining sex”. According to 2001 Census, there is a deficit of 35 million women as compared to 3 million in 1901. For every 1000 men, we have only 933 women at present as against 972 women in 1901. The male preference has led to the abuse of technology. Thousands of “unwanted female” children are killed at the stage of foetus itself. It is said that in India, out of 12 million female children born every year, around 25% of them die before they attain the age of 15. Of the children who die every year, about 3 lakh 5 female children, that is, more than the number of male children, die for one or the other reason. Of the children which die every year in India, the 6th child dies due to gender discrimination.

• **Gender Discrimination in Occupations and Public Life:** Women workers are paid

less than the male workers for the same type of work. Much labour is extracted from women by giving them very minimum wages. In matters of giving treatment, promotion, increment, facilities, etc., discrimination is normally made. In public life also men are given priority. Excepting the glamorous film actresses and politicians, in all other fields, women are not given importance on par with men. Government officials also practise this discriminatory treatment in dealing with the people.

In India females are discriminated in various fields like health, education and jobs. The girls carry the liability of dowry on their head, and they have to leave their parents home after marriage. Besides, in order to safeguard their old age parents prefer to have male offspring. Many female babies are aborted, abandoned, deliberately neglected and underfed simply as they are girls. This is worst in the state of Rajasthan. But now there is a great change in this direction. In some states like Haryana where girl child ratio is very low, the government has taken out many schemes to promote education of girls. Reservation of jobs for women and even six months maternity leave is provided to them besides many others. The World Bank Document, “A New Agenda for Women’s Health and Nutrition” (Washington 1995) estimates that in developing countries, 450 million adult women have their development problems due to lack of protein input during their childhood. In many communities, women and girls get less food or poor-quality food compared to men and boys. When they are ill, they get less attention or receive some attention only when the disease becomes extremely serious. There is ample evidence at the global level of disparity in health status between men and women and their access to medical services.

In a majority of the countries, literacy rate for women is significantly lower than that for men. In 66 countries, the gap between the male and female literacy rates is estimated to be larger than 10 percentage points and in 40 countries; it is larger than 20 percentage points in the age group of 6-11, which corresponds to primary level education. According to 2011 census, there is a gap of 16.7 percent between the literacy rate of men and women i.e. men's literacy rate is 82.14 percent compared to women's literacy rate that stands at 65.46 percent. About 24.5 percent (85 million) of the girls in the world are estimated to be out of school compared to 16.4 percent (60 million) boys.

In most Indian families, a girl child is least welcome although in India women were respected from the early ages. Even though there are growing instances of girls excelling in education, tradition, custom, and social practices place greater value on sons than on daughters, who are often viewed as an economic burden. This attitude of the society also stands in the way of the girl child being able to achieve her full potential. A recent report on the girl child makes the following observations: "Girls are the world's most squandered gift. They are precious human beings with enormous potential, but across the world, they are generally the last to have their basic needs met and first to have their basic rights denied." The need of girls for food, clothing, shelter, healthcare, education, nurture, and time to play often goes unmet. Their rights to safety, freedom from harassment and exploitation, as also their rights to grow, develop and blossom, are denied. Prejudice against the girl child becomes clearer and sharper from the data in sex ratio in the age group 0-6 years. In the Census, 2011 this ratio has been recorded as 914, down from 927 in the Census, 2001. The child sex ratio has steadily declined from 976 in 1961 to 914 in 2011.

2. **Dowry System** The practice of dowry is one of the worst social practices that have affected our culture. In independent India, one of the landmark legislations is the passing of the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961 by the Government of India. Despite the fact that the practice of both giving as well as accepting dowry is banned by law and such acts are punishable offences, the system is so thoroughly imbedded in our culture that it continues unabated. Whether it is rural or urban India, the blatant violation of this law is rampant. Not only dowry deaths, even most of the acts of domestic violence against women including psychological as well as physical torture are related to matters of dowry. Some of the very basic human rights of women are violated almost every day. Sometimes it is heartening to see some girls stand firm to assert their rights against dowry. But there is an urgent need to strengthen such hands by taking some concrete as well as comprehensive social, economic, political and administrative measures in order to free Indian society of this disease.

3. **Problems and Issues of Women Education in India** The problem of women's education in India is one which attracts our attention immediately. In our country, due to conservative traditionalism, women's status has, through ages, been considered to be lower than that of men. During the later part of the Vedic period the Aryans had sealed the fate of women culturally and socially by denying them the right to study Vedas and thus half of the population was deprived of one of the most fundamental human rights. They were regarded as the bond slave to men for their economic dependence on them. Even today, in spite of the recognition of women's status equal to that of men, the majority of them suffer in primitive ignorance as ever

before. Illiteracy and ignorance is prevalent more in women folk than in men-folk and this evil is rampant especially in rural areas and backward communities.

The importance of women in matters of building the character of the citizens, economic reconstruction of the country and social reforms is being realized. Under the fast changing conditions in the country in the recent times increased attention is being paid to their education. Though different Commissions and Committees appointed at times, suggested for the solution of the problems of women's education and for its expansion, even then there are certain problems still persist in that field.

The main problems facing their education are:

- i. Development of immorality;
- ii. Suitable Curriculum for the education of girls;
- iii. Lack of social consciousness among women;
- iv. Scarcity of lady teachers;
- v. Lack of proper physical facilities; 8
- vi. Unwillingness of lady teachers to serve in rural areas;
- vii. Financial difficulties;
- viii. Problem of transport;
- ix. Problem of wastage and stagnation;
- x. Problem of co-education;
- xi. Lack of enthusiasm and interest of the officials in charge of education

The education of girls and women is an integral part of national development. Steps that are being taken to improve and expand their education will not recede to the background due to lack of finance. It must be remembered that there is still a big gap to be filled between the education of the boys and girls, further; mother is the pivot of family life in India. Our way of life depends on her. It is essential; therefore, that at least the programmes for girls and women that have already been included in the current pan are not disturbed. The lack of

coordination that existed between the home, the school and the life outside had to be remedied; and a close integration must be secured between the process of education and the social and economic life of the country. Everyone should be trained to make an adequate living and to fill effectively her appropriate place in life.

The facilities for education should be adjusted as accurately as possible to the actual needs and opportunities which arise. Any wastage of training should not be tolerated in a country so poor as India. The methods of education had to be so designed that the inherent appeal and the value of education would win for it the loyalty of the pupils and support of the parents. The awakening among Indian women has been really considerable during recent years. Despite all obstacles and many difficulties women education is advancing steadily. They are making their influence felt in international affairs. Inside the country there is a demand for equal rights. Indeed, it is quite obvious that women's education must catch up with men's education as rapidly as possible and that great gap between the two must be bridged.

Apart from being a wife and mother, women must play a positive role in the country's planning and progress and she must develop her own talent. She then to achieve her two rolls of wife and mother, and a worker to her country, and she can only do this with the mutual cooperation of educational set up of her country and herself Our girls have all the potential qualities, mental, physical, but these will have to be nourished and cherished until they grow into the full and glorious womanhood. Our late Prime Minister Pandit Nehru said, "the most reliable indicator of a country's character is the status and social position of women more than nothing else. He said, "I am quite convinced that in India today progress can be measured by the progress of women's of India". Dr. Radha Krishanan quoting Manu believed "Where

women are honoured there the Gods are pleased, where they are not honoured all work becomes fruitless". Women as human beings have as much right as men have and the honour they expect in society depends on the degree of their education.

Before drawing conclusion it may be mentioned that the task of the school authorities in India is to prepare the girls for the triple role she will have to play in adult life. First, as the founder and fashioner of a happy home, secondly to be able to earn her livelihood independently an honourably if circumstances demand her to do so and thirdly to discharge her duties as a responsible and enlightened citizen. The Indian Education Commission 1964-66, rightly emphasized, "For full development of our human resources, the improvement of homes and for moulding the character of children during the most impressionable years of their infancy, the education of girls is of greater importance than that of boys". However, the change in the attitude of the public towards women's education would go a long way in improving the situation.

Social reformers and social thinkers believe that in a nation like India giving education to women in as large a number as possible can prove to be a panacea for many of the problems of women. Accordingly, much attention is paid to the education of women after independence. The female literacy level is also increasing steadily. It has increased from 18.7% in 1971 to 39.42% in 1991 and to 64% in 2001. In spite of this change in the trend towards literacy, some problem has cropped up. We find glaring differences between the level of education of men and women. For example,

- i. It is found that girls are being discouraged to go for higher education and also for professional and technical education.
- ii. There are regional imbalances also. In states like Kerala, Karnataka and Maharashtra, female education is

encouraged and given almost equal importance. Whereas in states like Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh etc. education of girls is neglected even today.

- iii. Increasing drop-out of female children from schools is another problem. Though female children are getting admitted to primary, middle and high schools in a substantial number, many of them drop out of the school in the middle without completing the course.
- iv. Admission to School: Even in the matter of admitting children to school at elementary level, female children are discriminated against male children. Awareness is not there among people regarding female education.

CONCLUSION

Women in independent India are comparatively in a more respectable position. Some of the problems which had been haunting the community of women for centuries are not found now. Problems such as child marriage, practice of 'sati', prohibition on widow remarriage, exploitation of widows, devadasi system, purdah system, etc. have almost disappeared. Development in the field of science and technology, universalization of education, socio-political movements, modernization and similar developments have changed the approach of people towards women to a certain extent. These developments boosted the morale and self-confidence of women. As a result, Indian women now feel that they too have their own individuality, personality, self-respect, talent, capacity and efficiency.

Many of those women who could grab the opportunities extended to them have proved that they are capable of discharging the responsibilities assigned to them on par with men. The nation which neglected almost 50% of its population for several centuries has now understood the necessity of giving equal rights

and opportunities to its womenfolk. The Constitution of India provides equal rights and opportunities to women. It does not make any discrimination on the grounds of sex. Indian women are also responding positively to this changed socio-political situation. This does not mean that our women are completely free from

problems. On the contrary, the changing situation is causing them new problems. They are now beset with new stresses and strains. Some of the major problems haunting the modern women was analysed here.