



Status of Women in Indian Society

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ABSTRACT:- The present study is related to status of women in Indian society from ancient days till today. It gives importance on the position of women in various fields like family life, social life and work situation. It highlights on female foeticide, low literacy level of women, women's low nutritional status, women's role in decision making, their position as per Indian tradition etc. This paper also gives emphasis on number of women in total workforce, torture of them by men in family life, social life and in other fields where they are participants. Lastly it concludes on importance of women and role of society for the emancipation of women from male dominated society and their oppression and suppression.

Keywords:- Status, Women, Society

Men and women are two basic components of our human society. Women constitute 48.46% of the India's total population. Constitutional provisions give stress on the equality of men and women. Art-14 stresses on men and women to have equal rights and opportunities in political, economic and social spheres. Art – 15 also prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex etc. Art 51 {A (e)} stresses on the renunciation of the practices derogatory to the dignity of women. Constitution gives equal importance to women's position and accorded equality to them. It is seen that where all citizens irrespective of sex are equal, women are clearly less equal than men. There exists high gender inequality in our country.

Women's position in ancient India.

Towards the end of Vedic period (Post Vedic period) women were deprived of social and religious rights. There were not allowed to participate in social and religious functions. Gradually the position of women fell down to the extent that the birth of a girl was regarded as a curse in the family. During Buddhist period Lord Buddha regarded women a source of all evils. Therefore women were allowed low status compared to males. Macaulay's Minute 1835, was responsible to bring renaissance in Indian history by giving stress on English as medium of instruction but forgot the issue of women's education, which was responsible for upliftment of women. J.J. Rousseau, whom we call today the father of modern educational theory and practice, compared women with decoration pieces.

Women in Indian Tradition

The role and behaviour of women in the society is determined by our social structure, cultural norms, value system and social expectations etc. to a great extent. Norms and standards of our society do not change at the same pace as changes take place due to technological advancement, urbanization, cost and standard of living, growth in population, industrialization and globalization. Social and educational policies fail to cope with desired changes in various fields. Particularly, social status of women in India is a typical example of the gap between position and role accorded to them by Constitution and the restrictions imposed on them by social traditions. What is practicable and possible by women and useful for them, in fact, is not within their reach. They have to exist within the framework of social norms and standards, which in turn cause infinite harm.

In Hindu tradition, practices like giving away daughters in marriage and sending them to their in laws' house after marriage and importance attached to sons for maintaining continuity in the line have strengthened male dominated social structure. Women are debarred from joining religious ceremonies during the period of menstruation and child birth makes the women inferior in status than men.

In the views of Manu, “Woman is viewed solely as the mother and the wife and those roles are idealised. The ideal wife is faithful and service to husband and his family members without any complain is virtuous”.

A Hindu widow is cursed with misfortune and is neglected in many aspects. She is debarred from participating in any socio – religious functions like marriages, pujas, birthday celebration etc. which may bring misfortune to them as well as to others. The mere sight of widow is believed to be a barrier to success while attending any function or start of journey. But a widower is not subject to such restrictions.

Male like female never wear any distinctive marks to indicate that he is married. Male widow do not observe fasting for his wife and suffers no restrictions on remarriage. But married woman observe many vratas for the wellbeing of her husband and children and even her dresses change after marriage and more particularly after her husband dies.

In Islamic religion woman cannot be a priest nor can she lead the prayers. She has no place in the formal religious organisations and legal affairs of the community and cannot be a kazi .Women is also deprived of participating in community prayers.

In Buddhism also the male monk is given a higher status than the nun.

Women and social role / position.

Sense of femininity develops in the girl child before she is old enough to realize that there are two sexes. Although they possess all capabilities and potentialities but they are generally ignorant about that .Shyness, politeness, nobleness and modesty are approved qualities for girls. They are trained to speak with soft words and avoid harsh and hard language.

Girl child plays motherly roles in the family by shouldering responsibilities of household work such as looking after siblings, fetching water, collecting firewood, cleaning the house, cooking etc. The majority of children who have never attended school or who have dropped out at an early stage of education come from poor families or their parents are illiterate or semiliterate or do not in a position to visualize the importance of educating their daughters. Parents are not well enough to afford for education of their daughters. In rural areas, daughters of agricultural labourers, small farmers and artisans and in urban areas, daughters of slum dwellers working in low level occupations are most likely to be withdrawn from school early. (World Bank, 1991). Sometimes the economic condition of family pushes children to become child labour. Daughters in their childhood and adolescence are neglected and more labour is extracted from them parents because of net flow of wealth from daughters to their parents generally stops after marriage. Traditional sex role make going to school as secondary for girls (Mitra, 1978).

If we examine census report, though there has been rapid increase and improvement in female literacy rate, there exists wide gap in between male literacy and female literacy.

Male / Female Literacy in India from 1971 to 2011

Year	Percentage of Literacy in total	% of Literacy	Male	% of Female Literacy	M/F Literacy
1971	34.45	45.96		21.98	23.98
1981	43.57	56.37		29.75	26.62
1991	52.21	64.13		39.29	24.84
2001	63.38	70.85		54.16	21.69
2011	74.04	82.14		65.46	16.68

Educational Statistics, Ministry of HRD, Deptt. Of Edu.

According to census 2011, there exists 16.68% gender gap in literacy rate.

Despite increase in enrolment ratio, women remain unrepresented at all levels of education relative to men. Fewer females than males enter educational programmes be they formal, or non formal. Fewer females than males receive technical and vocational training and women account for a very small proportion of enrolment in Post Secondary Education. (Gail P. Kelly and Carolyn Elliott, 1982).

Homemaking is the sole vocation for women. In spite of development of human civilization new forms of vocations and professions have come up. But majority of women seem to contribute their time in unpaid activities like household and agricultural work like sowing, weeding, transplantaion, manuring, harvesting, winnowing, shelling and storing harvested crops and seeds along with activities within family such as cooking, cleaning utensils, washing clothes, taking care of children and aged persons etc.

Women and nutrition

Generally women suffer from malnutrition. (Waldron,1987) views that higher mortality rate in childhood may be either because of certain specific causes, which affect the fairer sex more or due to gender discrimination in nutrition and health care. Excess female mortality is a part of family building strategy, where girls are considered as burden and boys as resources. (Das Gupta, 1987)

Although practice of breast feeding is universal in India, some studies have pointed out gender differences in duration of breast feeding of children (World Bank, 1991). Sometimes female infants are breastfed less frequently and for shorter durations than male infants, their weaning all start earlier and they are given low quality food. Status of immunization is also far from satisfactory.

About 35% of adult women in the age group (15-49) suffer from chronic energy deficiency. About 55% of adult women suffer from iron deficiency and anaemia.

Female foeticide

In Indian social scenario a girl child is a burden on the family. We accept birth of male child gladly but we (some people) express unhappiness and anguish when listen the birth of girl child. In the marriage of girls parents are bound to give dowry which disturbs economic condition of family. So parents adopt different means to avoid the birth of girl child. Parents regard bringing up girl child is a wasteful expenditure and a financial burden in future. Most of the parents go for abortion when the foetus in prenatal period is detected as female foetus. If it takes birth somehow, then parents leave it in the hospital or in any place (unprotected) at the mercy of others. Even parents throw the girl child mercilessly.

It is also a matter of great concern that the sex ratio in the age group (0-6) years continues to widening since 1961 and stands at 914 to 1000 males in 2011. According to census 2011, there are 586.46 million females as compared to 623.72 million males giving a ratio of 940 females to 1000 males. For this reason there will be scarcity of women which will create problem of shortage of girls for marriage. Presently due to shortage of girls Madhya Pradesh is purchasing girls from Maharashtra for giving their sons in marriage.

Women and workforce

Due to either no earning or low earning activities of women their contributions to the society go unnoticed. The Five Year Strategic Plan of Ministry of Women and Child Development for 2011-16 notes that workforce participation rate of women in rural area is 31% where as it is 55% for men. In urban area this rate is 14% for women as compared to 54% for men. Women's share of organized sector and public sector is less than 20%. Their share in Central Government employment is less than 8%.

Many women are working in domestic sector in India. About 10% of the female population over the age of 12 are employed in domestic service. It is second largest employment of women after agricultural labour. The women working as fulltime servants are harassed physically, psychologically and sometimes, sexually. Some women also serve as part time servants. After sexual harassment they are killed by supari killers. In some cases they are underpaid.

When the part time domestic woman worker comes to her own house after a day's work, her dirty home with hazardous environment waits her which damage her own children's life who do not attend school. (Mallick. Annu priya, 2013).

In some corporate sectors women are given less amount of wages than men labourers.

In the field of politics their number is very low. Less than 11% seats of Parliament are held by women.

There have been 5 women judges, of Supreme Court since Independence.

Women and their position in the family

Children cannot inherit their caste or surname of their mother. In spite of education of women, they occupy an inferior position in family. Important decisions like pregnancy, size of family, purchase and ownership of property, vehicles and cell phone etc .are mostly taken by male members. Economically independent women are also helpless. They begin their day at the crack of dawn. They take care of entire family, send children to school, pack their husbands' lunch and go to the vehicle stand to catch overcrowded vehicle for reaching at work places. They have to perform their duties equivalent to their male counterparts. On returning home they have to complete all their household works and have to manage the same routine of the next day. The works they do at home are uncountable. Their works are not considered as productive work by family. The household work and childcare are not considered "work". This invisibilisation of women's labour fails to get them their due weight age in the family.

Wife is the possession of husband. He has full right of her. According to Manu. "In childhood a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband and when her lord is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent".

In most of the times women are the convenient and easy prey of men because of their economic and social dependence. It is not only case of illiterate and economically dependent women but also the case of educated / uneducated employed women. Severe incidents of wife – beating cases are seen in our society which is mostly in connection with dowry. It is a medium to extract money or property from the relatives of married women even in excess of what was already negotiated. This sometimes leads to death of victimized women.

Here the oppression of girl child does not end. When the girl child goes to school she faces the problem of sexual harassment. Even the child of 3 years is sexually tortured. Presently news papers bring out news concerning sexual assaults given by teachers, tuition masters, distant relatives, passerby bus conductors, auto drivers etc. Sometimes girls commit suicide after being raped or getting sexual offence. In some cases girls and even married women are raped and put to death mercilessly and thrown into the river or roadside bare bodied. Our civilized society hind itself and go away without giving any help to those dying and dead follows.

Women in the name of religious and socio-cultural practices have been denied opportunities of growth. To think equality of sexes is an illusion.

Women historically have never been given the required importance in India be it in the field of agriculture, production, construction, politics and education, History is full of stories of exploitation, humiliation and suppression.

Indian woman has a multifaceted personality. She is the centre around which the whole world revolves. She is hard working and works with dedication. She shares most of the duties and responsibilities of her family .She strongly influence the moral, social and creative development of her children .She is dutiful and housekeeping, childrearing, assisting in agriculture and in industry. But we are treating them as second class citizens. Oppression, rape, humiliation, disrespect are rewards for women. We are torturing women from cradle to grave. To quote Dillip kaur, Tiwana, 2012 in this context, “when she takes birth, you become gloomy, when sits back home, you call her crazy, when she marries you, you burn her; but can you live without her? Your daughter, your mother? Your sister? Your wife?”

Gender inequality is a far reaching social impairment. (Amartiya Sen).Law is becoming lawless where women versus men are involved. (Justice Krishna Iyer).

Time has ripen to analyse the causes of gender disparity, which give a low status to women .Efforts should be taken for empowering women which may help them to move out form a weak position and to exercise their power like men. They should be given free and compulsory education so that they can claim their rights. They should be educated enough to exercise their opinion in taking decision in the matters of marriage, family size, household developmental activities, work situations and even community activities, national and international debates and discussions.

Autonomy and power to maintain strong functioning position and to control their lives must be given to them. They should be made agents of their own development and be able to set their own aims and be strengthened to challenge and change their inferior position in the society. Then they will be made free from exploitation, social injustice and inequality.

Women empowerment is not an automatic and spontaneous process. It requires efforts deliberately and consistently from all human beings in all walks of life.

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