

STATUS OF WOMEN: YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Dr. Thomas Joseph Parathara
Vice Principal & Assistant Professor,
PG Department of History & Research Centre,
Assumption College, Chanaganacherry.

Abstract

A woman is an essential component of the universe. She has marched shoulder to shoulder with the male of the species and shared her endeavor in every field of life. Women play a vital role in every sector without which we cannot think of socio-economic development of the country. The constitution of India guarantees equality of status to women in Indian society and provides protection for their human rights. Even though there are laws and acts ensuring their protection they face so many discriminations. She is exploited both at home and outside. Due to such circumstances, women fail to create an identity for themselves, socially or politically. This paper addresses the reflections on the status of women yesterday and today and is a reflection of their position in our society.

Key words: Status, Discrimination, Patrilineal, Ardhangnis

Introduction

Women's problems are global issues. A country's total growth depends on the contribution of the women who are almost half of the population. . In spite of the equality guaranteed by the Indian constitution, women are still suffering in all sections of society. Socio- cultural patterns, taboos and stigmas prohibit most of them to seek the help of law and get exposed. They are disproportionately disadvantaged and face unique challenges because of their gender. They have been subjected to discrimination on the pretext of social, cultural, religious and numerous other factors. Their position in matrilineal as well as patrilineal societies is of subjugation and powerlessness. Many women in many countries still have no power. In spite of the equality guaranteed by the Indian constitution, women are still suffering in all sections of society. Socio- cultural patterns, taboos and stigmas prohibit most of them to seek the help of law and get exposed. They are disproportionately disadvantaged and face unique challenges because of their gender.

Discrimination a Fatal Issue in Indian Society

Discrimination of women is a very real problem. It is seen in all the strata of society in various forms. Discrimination against women starts at birth. As per the literature, the female child has been treated inferior to male child and this is deeply engraved in the mind of the female child. Some argue that due to this inferior treatment the females fail to understand their rights. Thus it has received less scholarly attention in the past decades.

Discrimination means unequal or different treatment or harassment that causes harm. It treats a person unfairly because of who they are or because they possess certain characteristics. In English, to 'discriminate' means to distinguish, single out, or make a distinction.

Early Indian Society: Position of women

In India, from pre- historic to modern times there were distinct stages of rise and fall in the status and role of women. During Vedic age, position of women was considered to be fairly satisfactory. The society as a whole showed proper concern and respect for women allowing them considerable freedom in different activities of the social and political life. They were allowed to fairs and festivals, attend important assemblies and take part in state functions without hindrances. None of the hymns of Rigveda considered the birth of a daughter as inauspicious. The Rigveda praised the father of many daughters. She was described by the vedic sages as an ornament of the home. There was no custom of sati and Purdah was also unknown. Women as daughters, sisters, wives and mother had equally honourable places in the family, society and state alike. Thus in all aspects they had equal rights with men and were their equal partners, friends and helpers all through. They enjoyed freedom in selecting their mates. Widows were permitted to remarry. In household, they enjoyed complete freedom and were treated as Ardhangnis (betterhaves). They were not treated as inferior or subordinate but equal to men.

Post – Vedic Period: Status of Women

The positions of women in the society during 1500 B.C were perceptible changes. During this period there was a gradual decline in women's education. Girls were not allowed to go to the centres of education but were taught only by near relatives like father, brother or the uncle. Therefore, only the girls of rich and cultural families received religious and other training. As a result, there appeared a tendency to curtail privileges of women in general. The social and familial status of the daughter deteriorated in the post –Vedic period. The following line depicts the position of the daughter. A wife as a comrade, a daughter is a misery and a son a light in the highest heaven. Early marriage became a hindrance in the education of girls. Women came to be regarded as being of the same status as the Sudra. She lost all her social freedom. At the in – law's house the woman was expected to serve all the inmates without a murmur, and bring forth male children. There was a definite deterioration in the women's status during Manu's period. Manu believed that a woman did not deserve freedom and she should be dependent on man throughout her life.

From 11th century onwards, the position of women further deteriorated. All kinds of progressive opportunities were denied to them in the field of education, equality and liberation.⁶ Foreign invasions and impact of Muslim civilization brought deterioration in their status. Women faced a number of hardships and cruelty due to evil practices like child marriages, purdha system, Sati, widowhood, infanticide etc. These social evils took deep roots in Indian society and women's lives were imprisoned within the four walls of the household. It was the darkest period so far as women were concerned.

The Latest Era – A Radical Change

With the advent of independence, Indian women were guaranteed political equality with men. When the Indian constitution was formulated, it granted equal rights to women, by considering them as legal citizens of the country. Article -14 of the Indian Constitution stresses on men and women to have equal rights and opportunities in political, economic and social spheres. Article -15 also prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex etc. Article -16 (1) of the constitution guarantees equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state. Article 51 (A) 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. Besides, with the process of modernization and increasing education which the free India opted, their mental horizon has broadened and they have come to know the outside the world. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of Our Nation, is considered a great proponent of gender equality. He held the view that men and women are equal, and never swerved for a moment in any direction with regard to the fundamental principle of equality between sexes. He opined that if the husband is a God, the wife is a goddess. She is not a slave, but a friend and companion with equal rights. He regarded them as equals spiritually and mentally but physically and emotionally/ sychologically slightly different and hence, fit to be complement of each other. One cannot live without the other's active help.

Today the world is changing rapidly. In this change, women have not lagged behind. She has marched shoulder to shoulder with the male of the species and shared her endeavour in every field of life. Today, we can see women taking active part in all fields. Though their number is not very high, but their capacity in administrative and political matters has been recognized. They have been Women Prime Minister Women Ambassadors and Delegates to International Bodies, Women Governors, Women Chief Ministers, Ministers and Legislators who have shaped the history of our country.

Conclusion

Men and women are two basic components of our human society. Both share equal responsibility in the making of society and hence both are supplement to each other. Statistics point out that women are half of the human race. But they are not treated with respect as in the ancient Indian society. A large part of the society believes that men are more capable to earn more than their women. Even though there are constitutional provisions, women are not enjoying their freedoms, equalities, privilages on part with their male

counter parts. . Woman as mother take care of their family, advice and guide their children and mould the character and personality of men. They are not only teachers of children performing all the domestic tasks but they also take part in various economic activities. In public life women are considered more competent and pragmatic than men. Narrow mind set of the society is the main reason behind this problem. Education and mass media can play a vital role to solve the problems of low statues of women in the society. It is good to remember the words of Swami Vivekananda that, it is impossible for a bird to fly on only one wing, similarly it is impossible to think about the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved.

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