



# Status of Women in India: A Journey From Past to Present

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You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women - Jawaharlal Nehru.”

## ABSTRACT

The present study is about status of women in Indian society from ancient India till today. Men and women are two basic components of our society. Women are always considered inferior to male. They are always dependent on their family members. But in Ancient or Rig Vedic period woman enjoyed equal status with man in all fields of life. Wives were called Ardhangani (better half). Women were also considered as Devi. In the later vedic period the status of women began to decline. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Jyotiba Phule and many social reformers worked for enhancing the status of women in society. Women in independent India are comparatively in a more respectable position. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar brought a revolutionary change because of which in today's world the position and image of women in the society have changed. Now they are also considered equal to men and no discrimination is done between men and women. The status of women-social, economic, political and common sphere in India today is much higher than in ancient and medieval periods. Though the status of women has been raised in the eyes of law, but they are still much far from equality with males.

Key notes: Women, Status, Ancient, Socio-religious reform, Post- Independence.

## Introduction:

In our traditional Indian society women is not given much importance in comparison to men. A girl child is always considered burden on the family because economic condition of family gets disturb due to dowry system in girl's marriage. After listening news of birth of girl child family members become unhappy. Most of the parents opt for abortion when they know that child in abdomen is female. If it takes birth somehow,

parents even throw the girl child mercilessly. Women are always considered inferior to male. They are always dependent on their family members. They cannot take any major decision. A woman faces many physical and mental tortures inside as well as outside the family. Girls face many problems when she belongs to a low socio-economic class, if she is illiterate, and not economically independent. Economically independent women are also not in a better condition. They also feel helpless. They take care of entire family, send children to school, pack their husbands' lunch and go to the work places. The household work and childcare are not considered "work". Severe incidents of wife – beating cases are seen in our society. Even when the girl child goes to school she faces many sexual assaults by teachers, tuition masters, distant relatives, passerby bus conductors, auto drivers etc. they even not feel safe in their own home. Women are treated as second class citizens. Women face torturing from cradle to grave (Mohapatra, 2015).

The roots of Hindu religions are in Aryan society of Patriarchal system. The birth of a son was welcomed within the Aryan family for the son's presence was essential for many ceremonies like lighting his parents funeral pyre. *Garuda Purana* says, "there is no salvation for a man without a son" This is the one of the common traditional practices based on gender discrimination with girl child birth and female sex ratio remains always very low. 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". 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 (Thanavathi, 2018).

Aim of the Present paper is to see the status of women in India a journey from past to present. The methodology of this paper is purely descriptive and analytical in nature and required information is collected from different articles related to women.

### **Status of Indian women from Ancient to Modern India:**

Women held very important position in ancient Indian or Rig Vedic period. In Rig Vedic period woman enjoyed equal status with man in all fields of life. There was no discrimination on the bases of gender, instead of that women were honored by society. At that time women were considered as Janani which means mother, even in Hindu scripts women are considered as Devi. They used to enjoy their full basic rights. During that period, women used to live equal life just like men used to live (Roy,2022). No religious ceremony could be performed unless the wife was present. Women could choose their husband in a ceremony, called the 'Swayamwara'. There was no *sati* system or early marriage. Widows were permitted to remarry. Divorce was however not permissible

to them. Even men did not have the right to divorce their wives. Women were given complete freedom in family matters. They were free to receive education. As per Paranthaman et al. (2019), women were also confined in writing Veda's and Sanskrit texts that were well versed in the society. There were two types of scholarly women firstly the Brahmavadinis, or the woman who never married and cultured the Vedas throughout their lives; and secondly the Sadyodva has who studied the Vedas till they married. Panini mentioned of female students studying Vedas. Ashoka got his daughter, Sanghamitra, inducted into preaching Buddhism (Anand,2021). Women pandits included Ghosha, Lopamudra, Vishvavara, Appala, and Urvashi. According to ancient Hindu scriptures no religious rite can be performed with perfection by a man without the participation of his wife. Wife's participation is essential to any religious rite (Chattopadhyaya, 2009). Wives are thus called Ardhangani (better half).

The role of women in administration was also seen. Megasthenes mentioned the Pandya women running the administration. The Satavahan queen "Nayanika" ruled the kingdom on behalf of her minor son. Prayabati, daughter of Chandragupta II, also ruled on the behalf of the minor Vakataka prince. At the end of Gupta period, queens used to rule in Kashmir, Orrisa and Andhra Pradesh. Princess Vijaybhattarika acted as the provincial ruler under the Chalukya King ,,

"Vikramaditya I". Women were provincial and village administrators in the Kannada region too (Neelam,2015).

In the later vedic period the status of women began to decline. During the medieval period after invasion of Mughals the position of women further deteriorated. Women were deprived of social and religious rights. They 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. Women were considered subordinate to men and were denied their rights. Child marriages were common. Polygamy was common in the families of ruling and big zamindars. Purdah system was common in both Hindu and Muslim families. Life of widow was pathetic. The remarriages of widow was a rare phenomenon and not encouraged. The practice of 'Sati' was very common. In this, the widow burnt themselves on the funeral pyre of their husband. The women who did not perform Sati led the most miserable lives. Their heads were shaven off; they were given only one meal a day, they were not allowed to attend any family or social functions and were treated as servants. The property rights' of the women were also restricted. They were denied the right to education and generally led a life of ignorance and fear. Manu dictated a woman would be dependent on her father in childhood, on her husband in youth and on her son in old age. Apart from child marriage and Sati, prostitution and Devadasi system became widespread.

On the advent of the British Empire the status of the Indian women was very miserable. Customs like polygamy, the parda system, the denial of property rights to property child marriage, sati pratha and denial of remarriage to widows were everywhere. Women were considered inferior to man.

Inspite of miserable condition some women became prominent in the field of politics, literature, education, administration and religion. Some famous personalities of this period were Rani Durgawati, Rani Karunawati, Kurma Devi, Rani Laxmi Bai, Jijabai, Razia Sultana, Nur Jahan, Jahanara and Zebunnisa. Many

great women like Sarojini Naidu, Dr. Annie Besant, Vijaylaxmi Pandit, Rajkumari, Amrit Kaur, Kamla Nehru, Sucheta Kriplani, Kasturba Gandhi, Aruna Asaf Ali, etc. participated in Indian Freedom Movement with all their might and potentials. Razia Sultan, Iltutmish daughter, was unique in the history of the Delhi Sultanate. She was the first and the last women Muslim ruler of the medieval world. She was a brave and intelligent woman. She possessed all the qualities of a great ruler. Nur jahan married Jahangir. She was a beautiful and intelligent woman. Jahangir used to take her advice on everything that was important. Mirabai was wife of the crown prince of Mewar. She gave up her life of luxury and became an ardent devotee of Lord Krishna. She composed many devotional songs called Bhajans. She led Bhakti movement in North India. Rani Lakshmi Bai took up arms against the British in the revolt of 1857.

### **The Changing Scenario:**

The socio religious reform movements of the 19th century stressed the need of improving the status of women. All the major reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Jyotiba Phule had undergone number of challenges and worked to enhance the status of women in society. They attacked the malpractices like Satipratha, child marriage, and denial of widow remarriage and advocated for emancipation of women.

Raja Rammoham Roy's Brahma Samaj, worked for the emancipation of women. Brahma Samaj condemned Sati, was against Purdah system, opposed child marriage and polygamy. It led movement in favour of remarriage of widows and education of women. His effort bore fruit and Lord William Bentick abolished the practice of Sati in 1829. Due to efforts of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 passed. He also opened 35 schools for girls in Bengal with his own money. Rebel's champion of women's rights was Pandita Ramabai. She founded 'Sharda Sadan' a school for widows in Bombay and a shelter home 'Mukti' near Pune. Due to efforts of Behramji Malabari the Age of Consent Act was passed in 1891. Subbalakshmi was the first Hindu Widow to study upto graduation. She opened widow homes, female schools and a teacher training institute. Savitribai Bhule was the first women teacher of modern Maharashtra and she opened five schools for girls in poona. Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain also encouraged education among Muslim women. Mrs Anandibai Joshi was the first Indian women to become a doctor.

### **Status of Indian Women and the Role of Legislation:**

Several factors like women's education, reform movements, women's participation in politics and much social legislation are responsible for the changes in the day-to-day life of women in today's India. Some of the important statutory legislations to improve the positioning of women are: The Hindu Widow Re-marriage Act of 1856, The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, The Hindu Women Right to Property Act of 1937, The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, The Hindu Succession Act of 1956, The Hindu Adoption and

Maintenance Act, 1956 , Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, Maternity benefit Act 1961, Equal remuneration Act 1979, Prohibition of domestic violence Act 2005.

There are many Government women Empowerment schemes to improve the status of Women such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme, One Stop Centre Scheme, Women Helping Scheme, UJJAWALA: A comprehensive Scheme for Prevention of trafficking and rescue, rehabilitation and re-integration of victims of Trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation, working women hostel, SWADHAR Greh ( A scheme for women in difficult circumstances), Support to Training and Employment Programme for women (STEP), Mahila Sakti Kendra, Mahila Police Volunteers, Mahila E.Hatt etc.

### **Status of women in Post Independent India:**

Women in independent India are comparatively in a more respectable position. Problems such as child marriage, practice of 'sati', prohibition on widow remarriage, exploitation of widows, devadasi system, purdah system, etc. have almost disappeared. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the chairman of the constitution drafting committee, introduced and took some drastic steps in favor of the Indian women and campaigned against social discrimination and brought a revolutionary change because of which in today's world the position and image of women in the society have changed. Now they are also considered equal to men and no discrimination is done between men and women. The constitution provides for equality of gender and offers protection to women against exploitation. It has given the voting right to women and in no way treats women as second grade citizens. After Independence, the educational rights of women were promoted and they were made aware of the value of education. The ratio of women pursuing higher studies and taking education improved gradually since then. The government provided several benefits to women such as scholarship, loan facilities, hostel facilities etc. who wished to go out to pursue higher education. By getting such benefits a large number of women are able to pursue higher education today. Separate schools and colleges have been established for women alone. Separate universities have been also established which are among the prestigious universities today and admits the girls obtaining merit ranks. There are many engineering and medical universities in India especially for girls.

It is highly significant that women in independent India have achieved great progress in all walks of life. Mrs. Vijay Lakshmi Pandit was elected as the president of the U.N. General Assembly in 1953. Sarojini Naidu a poet and a freedom fighter was the first Indian woman to become the president of Indian National Congress and also the first woman Governor of India. 20th century brought great changes in the lives of women all over the world. The Late Raj Kumari Amit Kaur was a minister in the first central cabinet of free India. Sucheta Kripalini had successfully fulfilled her responsibilities of Uttar Pradesh so as Padmaja Naidu as the Governor of West Bengal. Smt Nadini Satpathy of Orissa state was also one of the able chief Ministers. The nation witnessed in Smt. Indira Gandhi, one of the powerful prime ministers who gave her leadership to the country for more than a

decade. Mrs Pratiba Patil, was first Honourable president of our country. Ms Jai Lalita was former chief minister of Tamilnadu, Ms Mayamati, former chief minister of U.P., Ms Mamta Banerjee present chief minister of West Bengal, Mrs Rabri Devi, former chief Minister of Bihar, Mrs Sonia Gandhi, Mrs Mira Kumar are the most powerful and inspirational lady of this nation . Mrs Nirmala Sita Raman became our first finance minister. Mrs Shila Dikshik became chief minister of Delhi for ten years. In 1992, an amendment (73rd) was brought to the constitution according to which one-third of the seats were reserved for women at the panchayat level. There are many women Members and chairmen of local bodies and legislatures.

Women today occupy high ranking posts like IAS, IPS and also in our defence services. Mrs Kiran Bedi was the first female IPS officer. The modern Indian women participate in various sports and games like football, hockey, cricket, table tennis, lawn tennis and also in athletics namely Saniya Mirza, Saina Nehwal, Gita and Babita Phogat were first wrestler Women, Mary Kom was first Boxing champion etc. The contemporary women in India serve as MLAs, MPs, Governors and Ministers. Many women in recent times Ms Pratibha Patil, Lata Mangeshkar, M.S. Subhalaxmi, Sushma Swaraj, Indira Nooyi, Chanda Kocher etc. have achieved International fame. Moreover, women are joining the field of Science and Technology also (Sharma, 2016). Mrs Kalpana Chawala was first Indian women to go to in space. Saint Mother Teresa who was a citizen of Netherland but devoted her entire life for serving Indian people.

The number of working women has also steadily increased. Women have been recruited in all posts such as teachers, doctors, nurses, advocates, police officers, bank employees in all major cities of India. 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. In free India, the status of women has under gone profound changes. By their sheer ability and capacity for hard work, Indian women can now exert their influence in every sphere of human activity. They have already demonstrated that they can successfully discharge their duties as an administrator, ministers, and ambassadors and so on.

## **Conclusion:**

The status of women-social, economic, political and common sphere in India today is much higher than in ancient and medieval periods. Though the status of women has been raised in the eyes of law, but they are still much far from equality with males (Mainwal, 2014). There is no prevalence of acts like Sati but there are acts like gender discrimination, female infanticide and female foeticide, violence against women, and unequal pay, poor health conditions and lack of education continue to be major issues. Women's safety and security are also a significant issue, with many incidents of sexual harassment and assault reported each year. The status of women has improved because of the quality education they have acquired. However, the condition is not very good.

The present Central government has provided legislative approval in parliamentary election for the reservation of women though it has not been applicable immediately. Women representation in services in Bihar

has been made in all appointments in 33% of government services. In education field fifty percent of appointments of teachers are being reserved in Bihar. This will improve their status and standing in our society. Even the patriarchal ideology of the home being a woman's 'real domain', and marriage being her ultimate destiny has not changed much. In conclusion, the status of women in India has improved significantly in recent years, but there is still a long way to go.

Dr Radhakrishnan the Late President of India, once said" The progress of our land towards our goal of democratic socialism cannot be achieved without the active participation of our mothers, wives, sisters and daughters".

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