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The status of women in Indian society

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Abstract

India has always been a land of paradoxes and contradictions. Woman in India has from time immemorial been a symbol of power and divinity and at the same time has always been considered to be a weaker sex who must be nourished under a male domination. Times have changed and so also the society but the role of women happens to be the same- Fight for equality seems to be unending – No doubt, with changing trends, a new horizon has dawned upon India and its women have earned much liberty. Today women in India have gained social, economic, educational, professional and political freedom of some sort and their status has thus elevated in society. In spite of all this modernity, a question still lures on our mind “Are the women really equal in this androcentric Indian society”?

Keywords: woman, paradoxes, power, divinity, weaker sex, male domination, new horizon, freedom

Introduction

“You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women”, said Jawaharlal Nehru. If this is true then what picture of India can we describe? India has always been an ambiguous nation, the more we try to understand it, the more confusing we become. This sounds more real when we attempt to describe the role of woman in India. A.S. Altekhar expresses that “the degree of freedom given to move about in society and to take part in its public life gives a good idea of the nature of its administration and enables us to know how far it had realised the difficult truth that women too have a contribution of their own to make in its development and progress”.

Woman in India has from time immemorial been a symbol of power and divinity. She is worshipped as ‘shakti’ and looked upon as the ‘giver of life’. The Indian civilization has produced greater women ranging from Brahmavadinis (lady Rishis) to states women, from ideal wives to warrior queens. Today’s India too offers a lot of opportunities to women, with women having a voice in everyday life, the business world as well as in political life.

Women in India work and contribute to the economy in one form or another, much of their work is not acknowledged or documented in official statistics. Women plough fields and harvest crops; weave and make handicrafts while working in household industries; sell food and gather wood while working in informal sector. Additionally, women are responsible for the daily household chores. Nevertheless India is still a male dominated society. Although the cultural restrictions women face is changing, they are still not as free as men to participate in the formal economy. They are still considered to be a weaker gender that can only flourish under the male domination. Even when the world says that women and men are equal, there still exists discrimination between them. Obviously a dual perspective study is required. This study is motivated by the need to integrate the fragmented, sometimes contradictory view on the individual’s perception on the status of women in Indian society. The present study is based on secondary data collected on line and as well as in library.

Historical Perspective

In the ancient Indian writings the feminist principle is part of a cosmic whole and the woman is seen as a co-equal being at the spiritual level; means she is honoured and dreaded as a goddess. Additionally, the epics contain innumerable feminist role models. There are evidences to suggest that woman power destroyed kingdoms and mighty rulers. Mahabharata tells the story of the fall of Kauravas because they humiliated Draupadi. Ramayana is about the annihilation of Ravana when abducted and tried to marry Sita forcibly. The plethora of Goddesses was created to instill respect for women. Indian texts essentialize women as

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devoted and self-sacrificed, yet occasionally rebellious and dangerous. In the Vedic society women participated in religious ceremonies and tribal assemblies. As the time passed the position of women underwent changes in all spheres of life. Considering women to be a weaker gender, she was in the name of her safety and security forced to accept and follow the laws that were created by the male members of the society. Hence the birth of rituals like child marriage, sati, ban on widow remarriage, jauhar, purdah, devadasis, prohibiting a girl the right to education and many more such practices took place which held a woman captive from her birth till her death. The practice of these rituals became so routine that women too started believing that if not for these practices their life would be a waste. Women started confining themselves to their homes, following their parents, proving their loyalty to their husbands, obeying the in-laws, bearing and rearing children and falling dependent on one or the other male relative of theirs. We owe thanks to reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Jyotirao Phule, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, M. K. Gandhi to name a few for raising their voice against these practices and bringing to light the rights of women. In spite of these odds, women strived hard to prove their worth and we have some best epitomes in the name of Kittur Rani Chennamma, Razia Sultan, Rani Lakshmi Bai, Savitri Bai Phule, Captain Lakshmi, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Sarojini Naidu to name a few. In Indian culture women have been represented as and raised to the level of goddess, but unfortunately the patriarchal family system and other socio-historical factors resulted in the subordination of women. The position varies from religion to religion, society, environment and culture of specific region.

Changing Role of Women in Independent Modern India

The role of women has been changing over the years in various fields around the world and India is no exemption. The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. From equal status with men in ancient times, through the low points of the medieval period to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. Women in India now participate fully in areas such as education, sports, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology, etc. Indira Gandhi, who served as Prime Minister of India for an aggregate period of fifteen years, is the world's longest serving woman Prime Minister. Indian women have put their foot in varied areas and have made a remarkable name and identity for themselves in the society. After Independence the Constitution of India guarantees equality to women by introducing (Article 14, 15 (1) and 16) which ensure rights of women that is no discrimination by the State, equality of opportunity etc. Not only the above mentioned Articles but also during the 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India provided for reservation of seats (at least one-third) in the local bodies of Panchayati Raj Institutions and Municipalities for women. Another Constitutional Amendment (84th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1998) reserving 33 per cent seats in Parliament and State Legislatures is in the pipeline.

The present Indian women have honed their skills and jumped into a battlefield of life fighting against social restrictions, emotional ties, religious boundaries and cultural clutches.

She is seen working on par with men in every field, be it media, information technology, medicine, astronomy, aeronautics, aviation etc., Some of the women achievers of modern India are: Arundhati Bhattacharya, the first woman chairperson of State Bank of India, Kalpana Chawla, first Indian to go in space, Indira Nooyi, Chairperson and CEO of Pepsi Co., Mary Kom, Chanda Kochar, and many more. The list seem to be endless but yet the number of Indian women achievers are less than the list of men achievers.

Paradox of the Status of Indian Women

As compared with past women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality they have to still travel a long way. Their path still has hurdles which are difficult but not impossible to be removed. The Indian women have left the secured domain of their home and are now in the open battlefield of life, fully armoured with their talent. Despite some basic changes in the status and role of women in the society, no society treats its women as well as its men. Consequently, women continue to suffer from diverse deprivations from kitchens to key-boards, from the cradle to the grave across nations. But, as Kofi Annan stressed, no development strategy is more beneficial to society as a whole than "treating men and women alike".

In India, men have greater cultural rights to autonomy, social freedom, and mobility outside the home than women. Women's domestic responsibilities and their culturally and socially specified roles, hinder them from entering into and fully participating in an organization, unless they receive extra support to overcome such barriers, which is usually considered a liability to an organization and hence, limited. Moreover, a gender division of labor in society (for eg, a natural split between productive and reproductive roles) means that women's roles and positions in an organisation are equally determined by the assumption that women are good at certain tasks but not at others. When an organisation emphasizes in bold that it is an "equal opportunity" employer, it is basically just an illusion. This is just the tip of the iceberg. The other end is unimaginably horrible.

What started as a simple practice at a local level have today emerged as horrifying ogre that is devouring the entire female community. No woman in Indian society is absolutely liberated. She is bound to face one or the other obstacles that hinder her from achieving the equal rights. This paper attempts to mention a few of those discriminations:

Selective abortion and female infanticide is the act of aborting a foetus because it is female. Foetal sex determination and sex selective abortion by medical professionals has today grown into a Rs. 1,000 crore industry. According to the decennial Indian census, the sex ratio in the 0-6 age group in India went from 104.0 males per 100 females in 1981, to 109.4 in 2011. This practice of female infanticide infact started as a government initiative in 1970s to stop the birth of girls which were thought to be the root cause of growing population (satyamevjayate episode 6th may 2012). Today girls are forced by the husband and the in-laws to find the sex of the foetus and abort it if it is a girl. The women does not have the liberty to give birth to her baby, rather the birth is decided by the gender of the foetus.

Dowry and bride burning is one such common issue that it no longer shocks people when they come across it. The practice of parents bestowing gifts to their daughters in

marriage to make her life ease has now made it miserable. Demands are often made on the bride's family with not the least amount of compunction. It is no surprise then that this is one of the main reasons why families prefer to put girls to sleep in the womb. The cavernous greed of the groom's family is sometimes not even satiated with the booty it acquires on marriage and iterative demands are made thereafter. The worst casualty in this is the dignity of the young woman as well as her family. Non fulfilment of demands sometimes spells death for the woman.

Domestic violence is endemic and widespread. It includes any form of violence suffered by a woman by male members of her family or relatives. This form of domestic violence is most common of all. One of the reasons for it being so prevalent is the orthodox and idiotic mindset of the society that women are physically and emotionally weaker than the males. Though women today have proved themselves in almost every field of life affirming that they are no less than men, the reports of violence against them are much larger in number than against men. The possible reasons are many and are diversified over the length and breadth of the country. (Youth kiawaz, Feb 07, 2010).

Sexual harassment is the most profound of the crimes read about during these days in our country. Among the worst countries in crime, India has an abhorrent track record in all forms of sexual exploitation. In homes, on streets, in public transports, at offices, even on vacations. No place is safe. And the most terrible fall out of this is the lack of self-worth and feeling of degradation following the emotional and physical trauma that constant harassment creates. Such is the recurrence of these incidents that Delhi has earned the ignoble nickname of the 'Rape Capital'. While most cases go unreported as it is considered an act that puts one to shame, only 20% of the registered cases for sexual harassment reach actual conviction.

In every 10 rape cases, 6 are of minor girls. Every 7 minutes, a crime is committed against women. Every 26 minutes, a woman is molested. Every 34 minutes, a rape takes place.

Every 42 minutes, a sexual harassment incident occurs. Every 43 minutes, a woman is kidnapped. In the case of sexual harassment, a victim is the one who is blamed from all corners. In India, a woman finds it hard to establish her chastity once her virginity is lost out of wedlock. This also becomes a root cause for the parents to kill their girl child in womb.

Apart from the above mentioned discrimination, women are also prone to problems like unequal property rights, unequal pay for equal work, glass ceiling, inadequate nutrition, child marriages, disparity in education to mention a few. The gross under-representation of women and the attitudinal bias against women is strikingly reflected in several areas of employment like the police, the judiciary and the law. Despite the awareness of these problems among us, we seldom come across those who fight or raise their voice against these discriminations.

Need for Women Empowerment

Women empowerment is the ability of women to exercise full control over their actions. This ensures full control over physical assets, intellectual resources and even ideologies. It involves, at the psychological level, women's ability to assert them which has, so far, been constricted by the 'gender roles' assigned to them. The origins of the concept

of empowerment go back to the civil rights movement in the USA in the 1960. In this contemporary world, women need to gain the same amount of power that men have. In spite of the various measures taken up by the government after Independence and even during

British rule the Women haven't been fully empowered. (Dr. Shruti Singh, 2013) [2] The Empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century not only at national level but also at the international level. Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient to achieve this goal. Society must take initiative to create a climate in which there is no gender discrimination and Women have full opportunities of Self decision making and participating in the Social, Political and Economic life of the Country with a sense of equality. Women's empowerment in India heavily depends on many different variables that include geographical location, educational status, social status, and age. Policies on women's empowerment exist at the national, state, and local (Panchayat) levels in many sectors, including health, education, economic opportunities, gender-based violence, and political participation. However, there are significant gaps between policy advancements and actual practice at the community level. As a result of a vibrant women's movement in the last 50 years, policies to advance human rights for women in India are substantial and forward-thinking, such as the Domestic Violence Act (2005), and the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution that provide reservations for women to enter politics at the Panchayat level. There are multiple national and state level governmental and non-governmental mechanisms such as the Women's Commission to advance these policies, and the implementation of these policies is decentralized to state and district-level authorities and organizations that include local non-governmental organizations. The policy/practice gap in India cuts across all sectors and initiatives as a result of rampant corruption and lack of good governance practices. In addition to corruption and inadequate resources for implementation of initiatives at the community level, women's empowerment in India is negatively impacted by the pervasive discrimination of women in the family and the community. Empowerment for women in India requires a crosscutting approach and one which addresses the diversity of social structures that govern women's lives.

Conclusion

It is time now for us to make a difference and effect a mindset change in the oppressively male-centric scheme of things and bring about true socio-economic empowerment of women across regions, regions and classes. The journey of emancipation of women has crossed many milestones. But affirmative action is required for women to play their rightful role in the society. The task ahead may be long and tortuous. But let us make a beginning immediately. Although it's evident that women have left nothing unaccomplished the percentage of women achievers to men achievers is comparatively low. Women are subject to prejudice by the dominant patriarchy and are in turn left out from supremacy. Despite creating a dignified position in this male dominated society; the struggle for each and every woman is far from over. I personally feel, India might be the only country on this earth that lives with paradoxes that act like the two faces of the same coin.

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