



## Status of women from ancient to modern days in India

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### Abstract

Women deserves to be conferred supreme status for the reason, she is not only creature of the world but also instrumental for growth and development of the family including the progress of her husband in particular. The role of a woman as a model and ideal housewife contributes a lot for building a progressive nation tomorrow. It is to be noted that, only woman as a housewife attends all her duties regularly and punctually throughout the year for 365 days without aspiring for a single day as a holiday. The problem is, needs to be examined in the context of rights for establishment of a just and equitable social order, where nobody can be treated or exploited by another as unequal. No law, custom, tradition, culture or religious consideration should be invoked to excuse discrimination against women.

**Keywords:** women, no law, custom, tradition, culture or religious

### Introduction

The status of women in almost all parts of the world is discriminatory and prejudicial because of male dominated society's practical inequality between men and women everywhere. Women in fact, not only in a primitive society, but also in this modern global world in certain places, irrespective of rural or urban, rich or poor has been treated as a tool in kitchen room and toy in the hands of her husband and collaterals. Since the time immemorial, women as a whole in this universe were placed inferior to men as the women could not act independently and had to rely on a man for doing anything. In other words she had to take the consent of her father or husband for taking any decision <sup>[1]</sup>. It is an admitted fact that ours is a civilized society, and in our society, human relationships play a very important part. These relationships necessarily involve mutual trust, regard for each other, because without them, human relations cannot come into existence, nor they can be perpetuated with benefit to both the parties. The global problem of the present day is, gender injustice or gender inequality. There has been discrimination between men and women, male domination and suppression of women since pre-historical times. Women, who constitute half of the world's population, work 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the world's working hours earn just 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the world's property and remain victims of inequality and injustice. Consequent to these discriminatory practices, social, economic and cultural resulting in cumulative inequalities in both the developed and developing countries, the ideas and goals enshrined in various social legislations and international conventions invoking/envisaging women's equality/welfare remain unrectified. As human development moves centre stage in the global development, debate, gender equality is emerging as a major global challenge <sup>[2]</sup>.

### Status of Women in Ancient Period

Life begins from a ladies womb. The sole privilege and power to create – srijan -is what makes her lord of this world in the true sense. She is the force behind every man in one form or the other –mother, wife, sister, and daughter and so on. But all these sound mere rhetoric and speechifying when the majority

suppress and downgrades its better half, making them no more than a better half. Hinduism defines women to be a man's half-batsman. It is a clearly and symbolized through "shiv- shakti" that a man is incomplete without a women. Holy books have preached equality of both sexes. But even today's ultra-modern India the situation remains the same as it was centuries ago. Women have unique position in a every society whether developed, developing or under developed. In spite of her contribution in the life individuals human begin; she still belongs a class or group of society which is in disadvantaged position on account several social barriers and impediments. The face and style of women exploitation has changed from visible to invisible. However, the cruelty and extent is unchanged. The status of women ancient period was considered more powerful than man and treated as goddess of "Adi Shakti". The birth of a girl child in the ancient society was heralded as the arrival of Goddesses Lakshmi. Ancient texts of all religions prescribe what should be the qualities of women. Any women who do not possess those qualities are not "good" and social sanctions may be invoked against her. Manu states that where woman are worshipped, God dwells there. In order to be worshipped, she must possess worship able qualities but these qualities are understood and imposed from the point of view of the society and not the woman herself. The image building begins even before birth. She should be virtuous as defined by the society; she should be tolerant, renunciate and sacrifice to the extent the society demands of her. In other words, the woman's individuality and personality cannot blossom on its own naturally; she is cast into a mould--- an image approved by the society <sup>[3]</sup>. This image forming process has led to socio-economic deprivation and oppression. According to Rig Veda woman is the queen of house. Satpatha Brahmana says that the wife is her co-equal with each other. It was believe that is her husband's ardhagini. This epoch still retained a certain liberty of expression for women's religious aspirations. Women were glorified as "the lamp of home" and it is laid down that a home is void without a women to run it. It is also said that a virtuous wife gives a good status to her house. The status of woman decreased during the medieval

period. Women completely lost their glory. During this period there were main customs such as sati, ban on widow remarriage, child marriage she had no choice selection of life partner. In purely Indian context, Indian women have come a long way from the Vedic ages. There have been changes in every aspect of her life, yet she has miles to go before she rests<sup>[4]</sup>. With invasions of India by Alexander and the Huns, the position of women was further degraded. Their education and training came to a sudden halt. For reasons of security, movement outside was restricted which in turn denied opportunities in community affairs. With invading armies roaming the countryside, women were put behind the veil<sup>[5]</sup>.

### **Struggle for Women's Freedom in 18<sup>th</sup> & 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

The Indian setting in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century was incontrovertibly much more complex than this due to its colonial antecedents. To begin with, it must be mentioned that even a partial authentic account of the initiatives and role of women activists or reformers on this issue is yet to be documented as far as India is concerned. A fragmented version attests that the social reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century sought legal changes from British colonial administration with a view to improving the status and conditions of women<sup>[6]</sup>. The woman question was definitely as part of a broader agenda of social and political reform, need and expediency of the day. For the colonial regime it was part of a 'civilizing mission' to liberate Indian women from the indigenous 'barbaric and degenerate' tradition. In that Century, especially after the emergence of Raja Ram Mohan ray on the socio-political scenario with Swamy Dayananda Saraswathi, Justice Ranade, Sister Nibedita, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Swamy Vivekananda, Annie Beasant, Pandita Rama Bai, Mahatma Gandhi, Kasturba, Mira Ben with long struggles, attention of Government could be drawn to the said plight and exploitations of women and new legislations were enacted to save women from the victimization of crimes. The centuries have been passed but women's conditions are not changed yet. Time is a witness of all this. Helpless women are suffering in the form of discrimination, exploitations, degradation, aggression and humiliation.

### **International and Constitutional Protection for Women**

The intensification of women's issues and rights movement all over the world is reflected in the form of various Conventions passed by the United Nations<sup>[7]</sup> viz. Convention on the Political Rights of Women, 1953., Convention on the Nationally of Married Women, 1957., Declaration on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, 1967., Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1979, Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993, Vienna Conference, Beijing Conference etc. The Constitution insists on equality of status and it negates gender bias<sup>[8]</sup>. The framers of the Indian Constitution were well aware of the inequality between men and women (gender discrimination) and incorporated certain specific provisions for uplift ment of the status of women i.e., Article 14, 15(3), 16, 21, 21-A, 23, 24, 25, 39, 39-A, 42, 44, 51-A (e), 243-D and 243-T. Though the Indian Constitution provides equality of status and of opportunity to women, discrimination is persisting in one form or the other. The reason is the women's physical structure and the performance of material functions place her at a disadvantage in the struggle for subsistence and her physical well becomes an object of

public interest and care in order to preserve the strength and vigor of the race<sup>[9]</sup>. Discrimination against women continues to exist even today as it is so deep-rooted in the traditions of Indian society. The root cause for the discrimination of women is that most women are ignorant of their rights and the position of equality assured to them under the Indian Constitution and legal system. Enlightened women should fight to bring awakening in other women regarding their rights by bringing awareness about their status in society as they constitute half of the Indian population<sup>[10]</sup>. In tune with various provisions of the Constitution, the State has enacted many women-specific and women-related legislations to protect women against social discrimination, violence and atrocities and also to prevent social evils like child marriages, dowry, rape, practice of Sati, etc.--the problem, however, is in non-implementation of such laws and the lack of sensitivity of the society to deal with such issues. In particular, provisions in the criminal law, in favor of women, or in the procedural law discriminating in favor of women, have been upheld<sup>[11]</sup>.

### **Crimes against Women**

A woman plays different of roles during her life time. At the work place she is labour, farm worker, employee, sometimes employer, scientist, educator, academician and professional. She is also activist, policy maker and law maker at the social and community front. Today's women are playing multi-tasking roles. A working women nevertheless has to be all-rounder she has to constantly keep in mind home, fulfill its requirements first before she is leaves her house. In India nearly half of the population comprise of women. Yet, they are dominated, suppressed, harassed, ill-treated, subjected to mental and physical violence and sometimes even denied of their basic human rights. They are the ones who are made to sacrifice and suffer without any right of complaining for it. Females are brought up in that manner. There are different kinds of violence or crimes committed by males in the male dominated society. Violence against women is rampant in all corners of the world. Such violence is a human rights violation that manifests itself in a number of ways including violence against women in custody, Acid attack, Bride burning, Physical, Emotional, Economic and Psychological abuse, Domestic Violence, Female genital mutilation, Human trafficking, Dowry death, Honour killing, Human rights violations based on actual or Perceived Sexual Identity, Sexual Assault and harassment at work places, Rape, Kidnapping and Abduction, Molestation, Gender Based Asylum, Importation of girls, etc are rampant not only in India but at global level. A central theme the women's movement all over the world has been violence against women both in their homes and outside. This is directly linked to their unequal position in a patriarchal society cutting across both class and community. The first categories of violence focussed on were rape and murder of young brides for dowry. Rape is a crime, not only against the person of a woman; it is a crime against the entire society<sup>[12]</sup>. Dowry in the sense of the bride's price or the bridegroom's price, spread like a contagious disease and ultimately became regular practice<sup>[13]</sup>. It was released that there were other more brutal expressions of the widespread phenomenon of domestic violence which included wife beating, cruelty, torture and humiliation. This realisation made women's groups demanded that wife abuse be treated as an offence too. is then that the real picture emerges and we realize that the whole bulk of this

protective legislation is a very modest attempt to combat the deep-rooted and all pervasive evil of horrendous crimes that are committed against women every day. The list of crimes that are committed against women seems amaranthine, varying from simple harassment, physical and mental torture to even denying them the very right to exist. Scientific techniques are misused to kill girls even before they are born or else crude methods like feeding them the juice of berries are used to sniff out life soon after they are born <sup>[14]</sup>. The places where these crimes are committed and the persons by whom they are committed are also endless. These are crimes that are committed within the four walls of the house, those that are committed at public places right in the glare of the public. In spite of the plethora of protective laws the index of these crimes touching dizzying heights. The incidence of these crimes is very high, it knows no barriers of caste, class, religion or socio-economic strata. Earlier, it was thought to be the preserve of the uneducated people of lower castes but now-a day's women from all social strata and professions are victims of these crimes. Professionals like doctors and judges, executives and lawyers etc. Most of the women are still treated as second class citizens. The media exposure and the laws have very little impact; they are themselves contradictory and often betray the pro-male bias. Crimes against women are as old as civilization and equally ancient are the efforts to combat and arrest them. These efforts have not succeeded and crimes are still maintaining their upward trend. These are records of women being raped, abducted, beaten and subjected to humiliating treatment. Women have been subjected to socio-economic and cultural deprivations for such a long time that there is a general indifference and lack of awareness for crimes against them. Women are reared in an atmosphere which slowly but positively helps in the development of a feeling of inferiority, they become used to the institutional legitimating of their low status and find nothing wrong in some of the crimes that are committed against them. Most of the protective laws fail because of defective enforcement; proper implementation of these laws will go a long way in curbing crimes against women <sup>[15]</sup>.

### **Patriarchal system impact on Women:**

Indian society is male dominated. Man occupies a superior status and the women are merely his appendage. A woman is never an entity in her own right, she is "first the daughter, next the wife, and last the mother of a man". Men are consciously taught to be aggressive and tough while women are conditioned to be submissive and docile <sup>[16]</sup>. In India sub-continent there have been infinite variations on the status of women diverging to cultural malice's, family structure, class, caste property rights and morals. Patriarchy is a popular system all over the world. In literal sense it is the dominance of the father, which in turn means domination of the male gender. Such domination was not on women. It included the vulnerable comprising of children, slaves, etc. Therefore the patriarch could dominate over other men as well if they were in a lesser status and a vulnerable situation <sup>[17]</sup>. At the core of patriarchy lies a relative power equation. Patriarchy, therefore, is not class or caste specific. In the male dominated society, a female, right from her birth is treated unequally. Amongst the large sections of the Indian population and especially weaker sections of the society, a female child is unwelcome and is treated as a liability. Killing of female child and even female foetus is still

prevalent in India. One of the reasons why a female child is unwelcome is, the parents dread the cost of marrying a daughter as notwithstanding enactment prohibiting the system of dowry in India, dowry is still prevalent in India either directly or indirectly not only amongst the poor, but even amongst the middle classes and rich families also <sup>[18]</sup>. The girl child, a perpetual burden to the family, particularly in the rural areas, has to work from the morn to night on and do every duty possible. The routine of work of a girl of poor rural families and of lower-middle class urban families is simply staggering. Even a not too exhaustive list of their work is sure to take one out of the one's breath <sup>[19]</sup>. But, unfortunately, discrimination goes on unabated whether it is in the field of survival, health, education, employment or in other broader perspectives of social life. All these are culturally determined as culture demands that a boy is more valued than a girl. This psychology is very much prevalent even in times of natural calamity and / or disaster. Even if the infant mortality rate in India today is not alarming, the survival of the girl-child still remains very precarious. Owing to the deliberate neglect of the girl in respect of food, nutrition and education, her inability becomes very much constrained. Growing up in such an atmosphere of discrimination the personality of a female child often is affected and being subjected to further discrimination when she goes out and faces the outside world. Her personality often becomes totally impaired and she starts believing that being a female she is inferior to a male and accepts the act of discrimination as quite normal and obvious.

But that is not only reason why a female right from her birth and childhood has a suffer discrimination. The other most important reason for which a female has to suffer such discrimination not only in the Indian society but world over including in the so-called developed countries is a preconceived notion that a female is inferior to a male both physically and intellectually although there is no medical and scientific basis of such a notion <sup>[20]</sup>. At home a female child is not treated equally to male child and is discriminated against in the matter of food, clothing, education and other matters. In this realm of the patriarchal domination, women are treated as chattels and upon marriage dominion over them was transferred from the father to the husband within the confines of perpetual tutelage <sup>[21]</sup>. This discrimination very often arises from the traditional mind-set that the real life for a female starts after her marriage and it is the duty of the parents to rear up the daughter till she is given in marriage. Because of such deep-rooted pre-conceived notion a female not only suffer discrimination at her parental home, but also suffers the same outside the home when she goes out and faces the outside world in various spheres of life, including the educational institution. Later on even in the work place, she suffers such discrimination. She is not only subjected to sexual abuse but she may also be subjected to ridicule, apathy, and sensitivity. The unkindest cut, because of such discrimination by the society, a woman suffers, if she is a victim of sexual harassment and rape. She, although is the victim and not the accused, she suffers further humiliation from the society and in fact she is ostracized by the society. Women's health is affected by many factors, including biological differences and social conditions, discrimination and lack of access to and inadequate health care and other services. Lack of food, deficient housing and inadequate access to safe drinking water pose a threat to rural and other women's health. Morbidity and

mortality rates of women, due to inadequate reproduction health, are still high.

### Conclusion

Since women comprise the majority of the population below the poverty line and are very often in situations of extreme poverty, given the harsh realities of intra-household and social discrimination, macro-economic policies and poverty eradication programmes will specially address the needs and problems of such women. There will be improved implementation of programmes which are already women oriented with special targets for women. There is a need for targeted efforts to ensure that rights of women in difficult circumstances who include destitute women, women in conflict situations, women affected by natural calamities, women in less developed regions, the disabled, widows, elderly women, single women in difficult circumstances, migrants, women heading households, those displaced from employment, women who are victims of marital violence, deserted women and prostitutes, etc. For the emancipation for women in every field, economic independence is a paramount importance. Along with economic independence, equal emphasis must also be laid on the total development women---creating awareness among them about their rights and responsibilities---the recognition of their vital role and work they do at home. It is unfortunate but true that discrimination against the female starts when she is still in the womb, through female foeticide. Apart from foeticide, there are many other issues and one of them which is a cause for anxiety, is trafficking in women and girls. It is a gross violation of their human rights. Women are being treated as chattels and commodities. Crimes in the form of trafficking of the girl child, prostitution, domestic violence and incest are on the increase. Take integrated measures to prevent and eliminate violence against women. Provide women with access to saving and credit mechanisms and, institutions. Study the causes and consequences of violence against women the effectiveness of preventive measures, Legal literacy of women by creating awareness of rights among women through media, published literature and voluntary agencies. In tune with various provisions of the Constitution, the State has enacted much women-specific and women-related legislation to protect women against social discrimination, violence and atrocities and also to prevent social evil like child marriages, dowry, rape, practice of Sati, etc. Let us resolve to empower women, for in that alone lies the progress of the society.

A girl child is not a burden but an essential constituent of the society. The key to her empowerment lies not in her being killed in the womb but in her receiving education and becoming economically independent. Most of the women in our country are illiterate, and in comparison to males, are ignorant of basic law. Most of the times, they do not register a case against those persons who violate their persons or commits crimes against them. Lack of awareness, political participation, poverty, traditional oppression and customs, place an Indian women at a receiving end. Though violence stalks women's lives everywhere, law can do little unless present cultural and social perceptions change. This calls for a resolve from all of us. Awakening of the collective consciousness is the need of the day. Change of heart and attitude is what is needed. If women were to receive education and become economically independent, the possibility of many pernicious social evils dying a natural death may not remain a

distant dream. Laws are not enough to combat the growing menace of gender injustice. A wider social movement of educating women of their rights is what is needed. Human rights for all must be made the focal point in good governance. To ensure progress of the nation and usher in a just and caring society. There can be no doubts about the inevitability of the human rights regime as the foundation of a good value based society---For human rights take a backward step, if gender justice is not achieved. Women's equality in power sharing and active participation in decision making, including decision making in political process at all level will be ensured for the achievement of the goals of empowerment. The society must respond and change its attitude. Gender equality concerns each and every member of the society and forms the very basis of a just society. Human rights issues, which affect women in particular, play a vital role in maintaining the peace and prosperity of a just society.

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