
CHAPTER - ONE

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND- INDIAN WOMEN ON MARCH

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1 The Status of Women

The image of a woman in Indian society arouses mixed and yet intensely complex feelings of ambivalence, ranging from sheer contempt, hatred, disgust, hostility all the way to deep fascination; at times infatuation to attachment devotion and even veneration! For the ordinary rural male, a show of contempt or pity at the mention of a woman is the expected norm of behaviour. He would even relish in denigrating her by calling her in rural parlance, "a shoe of my left foot!" etc. To the elderly male, she is an inferior or weak creature for whom he instantly assumes the role of a guardian or protector. To the youth she is an object of curiosity to be explored, teased, molested and even raped if the opportunity permits!

The concept of "status of women" is difficult to define at national or international levels. It is generally assumed that individuals who have a higher status participate in the decision making process and also have greater freedom to direct their own lives. For each individual, status becomes a configuration of the person's position within the various interrelated spheres of life and the perception of these attributes by the occupant of the position.¹

The most important changes needed for improving the status

of women are greater opportunities for developing their potential skills and abilities and providing a wider range of options for directing their creative and productive activities in developing human and material resources for the desired socio-economic advancement of the country. In the specific terms, the chances of women to raise their status depend on the following major factors. The success of adjustments envisaged in these will depend on clarification of policy and their implementation, carried out with determination to improve the existing status of women.

Ralph Linton has remarked that the place in a particular system which a certain individual occupies, at the particular time will refer to his status with respect to that system. The status represents the position of individual in the group. Hence it is clear that the status is the position which the individual occupies in the group by virtue of his or her sex, age, family, occupation, marriage and achievement. We shall try to analyse the status of Hindu women in the various ages to assess her real position today

2 Hindu Women in Ancient India

During the early vedic period a woman enjoyed a high status as she was considered a goddess and was adored. She

shared equal rights and responsibilities with her husband in the family. She was regarded as the indivisible part of her husband and her presence was inevitable in every religious function. It seems with the development of the idea of private property woman gradually lost her independent position. Her physical weakness and other disadvantages gave an excuse for the assignment to her of a definitely inferior status. Leading towards her further subordination and hopelessness, she continued to fall lower and lower in the scale till the code of Manu summed up her position thus: "The father protects a woman in her childhood, husband during her youth, her sons in old age; a woman is never fit for independence". It was Manu's code which became a part and parcel of the Hindu Law.

In the Rigveda, the husband and the wife are described as taking equal part in the various sacrifices and rites. The couple are addressed to as "Dampati", i.e., the householder and his wife who press a plant soma, rinse and mix it with milk and offer their prayers and adorations to God. In the Vedic age, many women attained eminence as did the men. In Satapatha Brahmana we find that the woman was regarded as an equal sharer, along with man, of the responsibilities and duties of the householder. The woman was regarded as having an equally important share in social and religious life because a man without woman was considered as an inadequate person.

As regards the other aspects of woman's life, we are told that she used to move about freely in the public. There are references in the Vedic texts, of women attending fairs, festivals, and meetings. The great popularity of the institution of "Samanas", an universal festival in which women participated, reveals that women enjoyed freedom of movement with men.²

Even in the matter of selecting the partner, she seemed to exercise a good deal of influence. Marriages were entered into when girls were mature and evidently they must have been done with their consent. There are also references to marriages which were of Gandharva form in which one's choice played an important part.³ Moreover, a widow was allowed to contract a second marriage.⁴ The Atharvaveda alludes to the already remarried widows who, in consequence of their remarriage, obtained the flattering style of Punerbhu - reborn, rejuvenated.⁵

It is clear from the above that during the Vedic period the position of women was not unequal to that of the men. Women got the same education as man and participated in the philosophical debates. Prabhu has remarked: "This shows that man and woman were regarded as having equally important status in the social life of the early period". On the whole, in this

period, within the framework of the patriarchal society the position of woman was high.

3 Hindu Women in Medieval Period

The medieval period of Indian history which synchronised with Muslim rule brought further deterioration in her position. The prevailing conditions in the society demanded the protection of woman from the eyes of Muslim rulers and led to the system of 'Purdah' which blocked the way of her further progress. Society having robbed her of individuality, idolised her as 'Sati', a tradition of noble sacrifice.⁶

The invasion of the country by the Muslims brought about further deterioration of the position of woman. Restrictions on her rights and freedom and her resultant hardships were aggravated. On the one hand the foreign Muslim conquerors attempted to impose their coercive norms on the conquered Hindu population; on the other hand, the Hindu society itself became more and more rigid curtailing thereby the rights and freedom of the lower castes and women. Due to this two-fold reason, the medieval period - the third phase of development - is one of the darkest periods for woman in Indian history. The steady deterioration of her status continued till the 19th century. During this period, we also find the evils of

prostitution, female infanticide, polygamy, 'Kulinism' and early marriages.⁷

Polygamy and the Purdah were two of the most important social institutions of the Muslim conquerors of India. Under the Purdah system, not only were women required to live in a secluded apartment in the house but also they had to dress in an apparel which completely covered their body excepting the eyes.⁸

Most of the foreign travellers referred to the absence of the practice of the widow remarriage in the Hindu society. The widow was either burnt or lived the life of complete self-denial. Before the Muslim conquest the Brahmins had not followed the custom of Sati, but after it, instances of Brahmin women who practised Sati are also recorded. The practice of Sati was also extended to the southern parts of India.⁹ Even during this darkest period when the black cloud of social reaction completely submerged the freedom of woman, a silver lining was visible. Some of the Mogul emperors through social reforms tried to relieve the hardships of women.

The Hindus did not assimilate the customs like divorce, widow remarriage and a larger share of property for women, which governed the Muslim society. The Hindu society had become so

static and rigidified that their contact with the Muslims, whose social relations were relatively democratic, did not prompt them to adopt the democratic elements of the Muslim society.¹⁰

To maintain purity of blood, the Brahmans made the rules very strict for man and woman alike. During this period the conception of chastity became very strict. Education of women in whatever form came to be stopped. Pardah system and child marriage started. Restrictions on widow remarriage were stopped. Only the women of low castes were given freedom to move out of the house. During this period, woman's husband was regarded as God even if he was devoid of any virtue because he was the centre around which the thoughts of the woman were woven. During the middle ages, the position of women in Hindu society further degenerated. A number of problems arose for Hindu women in the Mughal period. The Hindu society continued its old pattern of life based on the principles and directives of Manu.

When the Indians came in the vital contact with the British in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the position of the Indian woman had reached the maximum degree of deterioration. Ideologically woman was considered a completely inferior species, inferior to the male, having no significance, no

personality; socially she was kept in a state of utter subjection, denied any right, suppressed and oppressed. The patriarchal joint family, the customs of polygamy and its concomitant Koolinism, the Purdah, the property structure, early marriage, self immolation of widows (Sati) or a state of permanent widowhood, all these contributed to the smothering of the free development of woman.

The religious movement of the 19th century has made an important contribution towards the betterment of the status of women in India. Ramanujacharya, Swami Madhavacharya and his followers exerted a great influence on the thinking of the people. As a result, the doors of religion were opened to women. Rajaram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar made pioneering efforts for the upliftment of the status of women. With the achievement of the independence, our constitution was drafted and we became a democratic, secular and welfare state. A number of social legislations protect the rights of women, such as, 1) Hindu Widows Re-marriage Act of 1856, 2) The Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1937, 3) The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, 4) The Hindu Married Women's Right to Separate Residence and Maintenance Act of 1946, 5) The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, 6) The Hindu Succession Act, 1956.

4 Hindu Women in Modern India

The change of traditional Hindu society to modern society is perceived in the importance given to the role of wife in a family. There has been a reversal of the importance of the roles of women in an urban society. The intimate companionship between husband and wife, which superseded all other companionships, is an important aspect of modernization in the family relationships. There has been a change in the priority of roles between the mother and wife. Although modern women have come to attach greater importance to the wife's role, they seem to be very much concerned about the proper performance of the mother's rule. Status and role serve to reduce the ideal patterns for social life to individual terms.

In the urban society, majority of educated women try to get gainful employment unless they are married immediately after the completion of their education or they want to continue it further. A few decades ago employment of women was considered as obnoxious or undesirable. Even the educated women were prevented from taking up jobs outside the family setting. Now-a-days, more and more women with higher education are trying to get paid employment, though opinion is not fully in favour of female employment. In urban society the income of middle-class families is not sufficient to fulfil the needs of the entire

family. These families aspire for a better standard of living. It is becoming increasingly difficult for the only earning head of the family even to make both ends meet in the present days of spiralling prices of essential goods. So, married women also with a desire to add to the income, come forward to take employment.

The assertion of Hindu philosophy that a woman is a Sahadharmini, i.e., one who shared the challenges of life with man and a helpmate in all his work, had remained merely a saying of the scriptures till recently when women started feeling and becoming competent to work in every field along with men.¹²

The educated urban middle and upper class working women constitute comparatively a recently emerging social group. Its emergence, in itself, is an indication of the significant socio-economic and politico-legal changes taking place in our country. The new social situation has emerged in many phases. Before World War II and even till a little later it was considered derogatory for a girl, more so for a married woman belonging to middle and upper classes, to take out-of-home gainful employment. But gradually it was only under dire economic necessity that such employment was accepted by society, though women taking up jobs were pitied for their misfortune

and were mostly widows, divorced women or the ones who had to support themselves.

5 Jobs in Offices

Later on, even when due to various reasons middle class women started taking up jobs, they were supposed to take up jobs in professions which were considered to be 'respectable', for example, the teaching and the medical professions. Working in the offices or shops, side by side with men, specially as clerks, was considered to be most 'disrespectable' and women who took up such jobs were looked down upon. It was only when the first rationing system was organised in 1943 and more so after the partition of the country in 1947 that middle class women stepped out en mass to serve in the offices. Thus the taking up of jobs in the offices as clerks and officers in various capacities is almost a post-independence phenomenon in India.¹³

It is almost universally accepted that the woman's primary role is that of a home-maker and it is for the man to provide subsistence to his family. Under certain conditions, in addition to the role of a house-keeper, women also participate sometimes in the gainful activity of the community. Thus we find that some women work and some do not. The question - "Why does a man work?" is not a significant one because he

is regarded as the natural bread winner, therefore, he is expected to provide subsistence to his family. But the question - "Why does a woman work?" assumes special significance when the whole range of her activities centres around household chores and she only works, if at all, as secondary bread winner in the family. Another important question that arises in the same context is the influence of outdoor work on the behaviour pattern of women. Hence it is intended to seek answers to two questions: 1) What are the reasons that some women work? and 2) How does participation in gainful employment affect the behaviour pattern and life styles of women?

6 Problems of Working Women

The problems of the educated working women are multiple. The role-conflict is felt mainly because, a) indicated by the various studies, the married working women's own, their husband's and society's perception of their role as a home-maker and mother has not undergone much change as a consequence of their contributing economically to the family. The social norm is still that the prime and foremost role of a woman is that of a wife and mother, that for her the internal needs of the family come first and that it is her career that is to be fitted into the interstices of duties of home.

Another problem arises out of the tension created by the

contradictory role expectations from a working wife while she is at work and at home. On the one hand, she is expected to be in employment and to be assertive, confident, independent and successful and efficient working woman. On the other hand, at the same time, she is expected to be unassertive, submissive, dependent, obedient and very efficient while carrying out the traditional role of a wife and mother.¹⁴ The problems of educated working women may be grouped as the socio-psychological problems and the other as practical problems. These two classes of problems can be experienced or forced in two situations: at work and at home. The case of educated employed women in this matter is rather distressing. They have to stay outside the house for a number of hours and find it difficult to devote enough time to their children. This is the greatest problem the employed mothers have to face. It is a constant source of worry. Their guilty conscience is enough to sap their strength and energy and deprive them of the joys of life for a considerable period.

7 Women in Contemporary India

Women in contemporary India are strong, determined and despite great difficulties go out to work. They need support and the one person that matters to married woman is her husband, and parents to unmarried girls. Only a few husbands help, many

do not because their ego is hurt when their wives earn. With the spread of education women are trying to be both housewives and career women. It is difficult to look to career after marriage. Educated working women have great difficulty if the husband too ignores the practical problems of his wife. If they return completely exhausted from work and form the same suffocating atmosphere at home, where should they go to release their tension? The Indian constitution had no doubt provided for equal rights and privileges for women. But it was felt that the duty of women to see that these were translated into practice could not be done without women's first being properly conscious and awakened about their rights, and they could develop this only if women were educated and without tension.

Indian women are now expected to work at home and also outside it. Their tensions and problems multiply, their duties multiply and they have to find their own solutions for their problems. The Central Social Welfare Board conducted a number of State level seminars to study the real needs of women. The Board brought out special numbers of its magazines, Social Welfare and Samaj Kalyan, in connection with International Women's Year. The National Plan of Action for women stressed the need to educate women and the need for equality of

opportunity. It suggested that education would help Indian women to fulfill their multiple roles as citizens, housewives, mothers, contributors to family income and builders of a new society.¹⁵ The Government of India has done much to raise the status of Indian women through legal enactment. It is now the duty of Indian society to accept the changes brought about by the various enactments. It is an admitted fact that the Hindu Code Bill aimed at removing the legal disabilities of Indian women. The Ministry of Education and Social Welfare still takes interest in the problems of women. State governments started special departments for women's welfare.

International Women's Year provided an opportunity to the Government of India and to focus their attention on the problems of women. The importance of women welfare services hardly needs emphasis. 'Woman' is the mother of race and is the liaison between generations, Indian culture attaches much importance to this section of the society; therefore, India has been symbolised as Mother India, keeping in view the exemplary qualities of women, viz., patience, endurance, love, affection, sympathy and generosity. Jawaharlal Nehru once said, "To awaken the people it is the woman who must be awakened. Once she is on the move the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves".

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