

THE STATUS OF INDIAN WOMEN: YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

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Abstract

The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. The status of Indian women has radically changed since independence. Both the structural and cultural changes provided equality of opportunities to women in education, employment and political participation. With the help of these changes, exploitation of women, to a great extent was reduced. More freedom and better orientation were provided to the women's organisation to pursue their interest. The centuries of slavery were over. Today women want equality, education and recognition. The advancement of women is the most significant fact of modern India. Gandhiji once said "woman is the noblest of God's creation, supreme in her own sphere of activity". These words are blossoming now. The global evidence reveals that women have been performing exceedingly well in different spheres of activities like academics, politics, administration, social work and so on. The improvement in the status of Indian women especially after independence can be analysed in the light of the major changes that have taken place in areas such as legislation, education and employment, political participation and awareness of their rights on the part of women. The objective of this paper is to analyse the Status of Indian Women: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow.

Keywords: Status of women, traditional, modern, education, employment, political, economic, rights, equality and empowerment.

"It is impossible to think about the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is impossible for a bird to fly on only one wing".

- Swami Vivenkananda

If we gaze into the history of mankind from the very beginning, one can find that men have always utilized the services of women. Men needed the help of women from the primitive ages, when they hunted animals. They need their help even to this day.

Woman's situation today is in the state of alteration. There is a change from traditional to modern. But the 'modern' has approached without completely rooting out the 'traditional'. The traditions still linger. Thus the modern woman is a mixed bag of what is traditional plus the newly emerged 'modern'.

Obviously, she has not decided yet which values she should accept and which she ought to throw away. She is puzzled to accept all that is modern, at the same time very much puzzled to discard everything that is traditional. This transitional period has its own effects on women who are trying to combine the roles of home and work. Those who are orthodox may find the conflict of roles still highly intense.

The tide began to turn decisively in the mid-nineteenth century when such practices as polygamy, child-marriage, enforced widowhood and Sati were vigorously attacked by social reformers. The 20th century saw the birth of a strong women's movement, which became a

spearhead in the struggle against irrational orthodoxy and discrimination.

The increased opportunities of education and employment have brought about changes in her position at home and in the society. One finds that more and more women are educated, gaining economic independence and holding official positions and ranks at all levels. The traditional image of Indian woman is no doubt changing. Dube makes similar observations. One cannot expect this change to enter into practical life overnight. Traditional attitudes and prejudices still persist. This is but natural, for, social opinion takes its own time to change.

But at least in theory the status of inferiority is no longer there. Today, the situation is quite different. The Indian constitution guarantees equal status and rights to both men and women. Woman today is no more the slave of her man. She too goes out to take up gainful employment and earn money. Today her role is not limited only to household duties and rearing the children.

This freedom granted to women is greatly responsible for late marriages and independent choice. The girls are taking courage of postponing or refusing to be married and go in for higher education. Economic independence and 'Individual Freedom' are the strong factors in this change.

The participation of women in economic and social activities has been steadily increasing in all countries.

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Since Independence, women working as teachers, doctors, nurses etc., are quite common. The phenomenal progress in education made them capable of working in important fields like engineering, administration, law, judiciary, journalism, politics etc. Women also hold high managerial posts, there are women directors of many commercial firms, there are women legislators ministers and deputy ministers also.

The working woman today stands at the crossroads of social evolution at a junction of old and the new. And as the vanguard of the new generation new generation of emancipated womanhood, she stands to hardships, as the pioneers in any field must always pay a heavy price. The role of women in this field of social action is now increasing as against her subservient position in the past.

Social Status Of Women:

It is true that woman today has a status far different from the past. She has entered the field of work out of the house, and is taking active part in it. In spite of that, we cannot neglect the universal fact, that, she cannot be absolutely free from her duties as wife, mother and home-maker. She has to realise that nature has so made her that she alone can bring into being a happy home, the basic unit on which society is built.

A woman's position at home and outside home now is so closely interlinked and intermeshed that it is very difficult to separate the two.

Change of Women Roles in Family:

Right from the beginning, job is considered to be a life-role as far as men are concerned. This is not so with women. Their interests are supposed to centre around home. At home, they have their definite and decided 'roles' to play. This is true for both the married and unmarried women. For a married woman, the 'wife' and 'mother' roles are important and for an unmarried woman the 'daughter's and 'sister' roles assume more importance. The wife's role consists of meeting her husband's needs, taking sufficient interest in his work, providing him company and fulfilling his expectations.

When the women play the mother's role, to look-after the children their health, education, character-building are her major concern. Beside these, a house-wife has certain obligations as a 'woman' of the house. She is the one who is expected to perform such obligations towards the elder members of the house, guests, attending marriages etc.

Now-a-days, in addition to these roles a new role has emerged, i.e., an occupational role, this consists of a number of activities. It is obvious that some role conflict is sure to persist. The reason is she has to divide the available time between these two roles.

Change in Structure of the Family:

The peculiarity of the Indo-Aryan culture has been its joint family system. There are certain advantages and disadvantages of it. But now the joint family is changing and giving place to unit or nuclear family or at least to a modified joint family.

The disintegration of joint family has given rise to many problems. The nuclear family is very small. It cannot provide a satisfactory social life. When this is so, woman's life is more affected than men. But as the economic burden has to be shouldered by husbands only, in times of need, the wife has to add to family income, especially among middle class families. The unmarried daughters have to help parents.

About the number of children, women today have much less than they used to have in former days. In the bygone days, she used to have more number of children. Now the number, especially among the middle – class families, has come down to two to three children.

In India, the age at marriage has considerably changed. The girl takes her education and the period of gap between completion of education and marriage is usually filled by employment for a majority. Most of them take up a job to support their family. Some may take up employment for dowry, still others for utilizing for their education, some because an earning woman may be accepted by the other party concerned in marriage, and a few for pocket-money, too.

Change in Family Ideology:

In Indian Society, men enjoyed a superior status and position in marriage and family. With the spread of education among women and equality of status guaranteed by constitution to them, there is a tendency in the opposite direction. It is yet to be ascertained as to whether educated women make better wives and mothers than otherwise. However, one thing is clear; education of women has facilitated them to take-up a job.

Previously, man was dominant in family decision-making, and he was the bread earner of a family. This ideology is passing through a gradual change. Both these changes are interrelated and interdependent. As more and more women started taking up employment, the ideology that gave men the superior position as the 'sole provider' of family income started changing gradually.

Economic Status of Women:

Indian woman as an economically productive human source has now come to stay. However, it is still far from the situation, where, they have effective place in

the production. While the working women of industrially developed countries like USA., & UK., constitute almost 1/3 of their respective female population; in India, only 13 percent of female population constitutes as working women, i.e, only a few millions in absolute numbers.

Women both married and unmarried are entering in the field of employment in large numbers. Apart from the traditional fields of nursing and teaching, other fields have also experienced an increase in the employment of women irrespective of their marital status.

Economic Independence:

The basic and most fundamental flaw in women is their ineffectiveness in demanding a monetary remuneration for work done at home. Without their monetary remuneration, her legal status is reduced to a dependent. She is not a contributor to the gross national product and by law she is living under the protection and provision of her husband.

Most women are still unaware of the subtle brain washing and deprivation to their own sex. When husbands become member of clubs, it does not occur to her that membership should be on both names. When the name plate is put on the door she will not realize that her name should be added. When a couple prospers as a husband and wife team, she will not care to point out that property; car, etc. should be on joint names. When a marriage breaks, the convenient remark of the husband is 'get out of my house'.

Among weaker sections of society of underdeveloped countries like India the monetary repercussions are manifold and male domination almost complete.

Change in Income:

Industrialization affected the economy in such a way that all men and women had to come out for service. Men have moved from the Small Scale works and farms to offices. Similarly, but rather gradually, women also have entered into the 'white-collar' jobs. First to come in this field among women were the unmarried. Then the married women increasingly started taking up out of home jobs. Women more or less, everywhere, including India, is benefited and freed from inferiority complex.

Today, there is not single job, which a woman cannot perform. The more advanced education of many women has further increased their usefulness to employers. "Cultural change, therefore, has allowed mothers' increased free time, has added incentive and simultaneously has provided extensive employment opportunities".

One of the main reasons for women to work may be that they belong to nuclear families. Some people are of the

opinion that the purpose of female education transcends preparation for future employment. The primary concern of girls' education is not with the money she will earn, but with the life she will lead.

Educational Status of Women:

A highly educated woman is more likely to get a white-collar job than a less educated woman. The chances of an educated woman securing well paid job are also brighter. From a social point of view, it is usually assumed, if not always accepted, that one of the primary aims in encouraging women to go in for higher education is to equip them for obtaining a job so that they can be self-sufficient. Not only women joining in even greater number in the universities, but they are also generally showing better results in their examination than male students.

There is a positive co-relation between the level of education and economic status. Higher the level of education, higher is the economic status. The struggle for the uplift of women took place mainly in three fields: i) legislation, ii) education, iii) politics.

Women in Religious and Cultural Events:

In this respect, Buddhism was most important for it had the greatest impact on women's status. Buddha's compassion and respect for mankind raise the position of women. Buddhism tried to retrieve and restore the position of women in society; they were admitted to the Bhikshunisangha, which opened avenues for their socio-cultural attainment. As Buddhism believed in the individual independence and right to ultimate liberation, women became truly unshackled.

The other big religious reform movement was Jainism, closely following Buddhism. It offered women the best opportunities for intellectual and aesthetic cultivation.

Changes in Life Styles:

When women are employed and have only limited time at their disposal for household work they may adhere to a fairly rigid programme, one which shortcuts many of the household chores previously performed by their mothers. Modifications in the ritual behaviour appear most directly related to women's employment. It is the women's attitudes towards the rituals, which permit the changes.

Highlights of Women:

Yesterday:

Women from past centuries have changed the world in many different ways and have also paved the way for future women. During historical times, many women achieved many different goals but still remained unequal and inferior to men. The historical woman could not vote,

hold normal jobs, or even have a place in politics. Historical women mainly managed the home front, including the children and all of the homemaking responsibilities. Women were not in charge of many catered to men and their every need while ignoring their own needs for freedom and opportunity. Many important historical women changed the way women are viewed today, including giving women rights and opportunities they never had before. Historical women will never be forgotten for the positive changes they have made for womanhood. Such historical women include Susan B. Anthony for granting women the right to vote, Jackie Joyner-Kersey for introducing women into the Olympics, and Helen Keller for educating the world about women with disabilities.

There have been many prominent women who have distinguished themselves in political, literacy and artistic fields in our country. Samyogita the daughter of Jaychandra of Kanauj, Rani Padmini of Mewar, Tera Bai of the Solanki tribe, Rani Durgawati of Katanga (in MP), Mira Bai, Rani Gangadevi of Vijaynagar, Rani Umayamma of Travancore, etc., are some names that come to mind readily. There have been many others over the centuries, who have risen above their social turmoil and restrictions, and have shown brightly with their powers in their chosen field. More recently, Sarojin Naidu, an ardent, versatile and dynamic genius was also a poet, a dreamer, idealist and a politician. The Indian freedom movement has generated many other noteworthy women crusaders.

Today:

Women today are much different than historical women. The modern woman is consumed with many obligations, duties, and responsibilities on a daily basis. Women are now stepping out of their historical role of mother and housewife to obtain a higher quality of living. The modern woman has a much different lifestyle with many different choices. Modern women also look, dress, and act much differently than historical women. Just like other creatures in the world, women have also evolved over the centuries and are continuing to adapt to the new environment. Although many women in foreign continue to keep their traditional roles, women in America are breaking the old boundaries and are changing with the times.

The modern women of the 21st century are focusing on themselves and their own lives more than historical women ever have. Goals and opportunities are more abundant for women and the modern woman is taking advantage of them in a positive and healthy way. Women of the 21st century are so amazing because of all of the things they can offer to themselves, to other people and

to the world. They are overcoming more demanding and difficult responsibility than ever before. The 21st century woman is so amazing for many reasons.

Toaday Women can vote and decide the fate of a Govt, they have a place in politics and government ,they have career choices.

Great examples of women empowerment :

Chandra Kochhar – ICICI Bank Managing Director & CEO. Shikha Sharma – Axis Bank Managing Director & CEO. Arundhati Bhattacharya – SBI Chief Managing Director. Naina Lal Kidwai- CA & Business Executive. Kalpana Morparia – Many leading companies Chief Executive officer ,to name some we have Indira Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, JayaLalitha,, Prathibha Patil, ,Mamatha Benerji ,Saina Nehwal, sindhu Mary com, kalpana Chawla, etc have proved women to be great achievers in every field in the present era. They have held high offices including that of president, prime minister ,speaker of the lok sabha, ministers, chief ministers and governors.

Tomorrow,

women should be seen equal in all respects with men. There is no field where women are unsuitable or incompetent. Women will replace men in all fields.

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