

EDUCATION AS A LADDER FOR INDIAN WOMEN-AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

Women encounter more challenges than men. These challenges stem from education, religion, age and personal values. Indian society is a unique mix between religion and culture, traditions and customs which poses difficulties for the government over education for women. Hence a clear understanding of socio-economic and political environment of India enables to understand a woman status and position in Indian Society. Fight for gender equality in all productive sectors is the need of the hour. The position of women in the society of some rural, semi rural and semi urban areas of some states is still complicated as they have to face a lot of barriers to attain education in the male dominated society. Accessibility and the quality of formal and informal education however now available to Indian women have improved rapidly in the past two decades, resulting in an increased literacy growth rate among women. This paper explores some of the restraints and achievements of women in the field of education in India today.

Key Words: Women's rights, Education, Accessibility, Challenges. Gender equality, Barriers Formal and informal education.

Geographical and Cultural Context:

The diversity of India is unique. India has retained its diversity from an ancient time to till date. Being a second highest populated next to China in the World, India presents infinite varieties of physical features and cultural patterns. It is a land of diversity in race, religion, caste, language, landforms, flora, fauna and so on. In short, India is "the epitome of the World". Although it has been noticed that there is the absence of a uniform pattern of culture throughout India at any given time. We come across the phenomenon of very complex cultures coexisting with others in various stages of evolution throughout different parts of India, all through its history, depending on their ecological set-up.

Position of women in Indian Society:This paper analyses Indian **women** position in Indian Society since ancient time. The objective of the paper is three-fold as follows:

- First, to highlight the current status of women in Indian society in general and, in education, in particular;
- Second, to throw light on social problems of women education in India; and
- Third, to stress the progress achieved so far in women's education as well and to explore the changes in women's education that will be vital to the economic survival of the country in years to come.

In recent years, no sector of Indian society has been subject to more debates and discussions than the Women Issues sector and their role in the development process. Moreover, issues regarding women's rights

and responsibilities in that development have been equally controversial among both conservatives and progressives in India.

One of the major problems of India society is the inferior position accorded to women. They do not enjoy equal status and their condition is far from satisfactory. The condition, status and position of women were different in different period, viz. Ancient, Medieval, British and Independent period .

Ancient Period:

The Ancient Indian women enjoyed a comparatively high status during the early Vedic period (2000 B.C. to 1000 B.C.). The Rig Veda accorded the highest social status to qualified women of those days. Women were appointed at important positions. In that period, marriage was not compulsory. It was considered a social and religious duty, and was generally undertaken at an advanced age. On the whole, during this period the women enjoyed high status. However, the status and position of women declined in the later Vedic and epic periods. They were not considered equal to men and did not enjoy the same rights and privileges as men.

Medieval Period:

The condition and status of women in India declined with the passage of time. During the medieval period, woman was given a position subordinate to man. Law and religion did not recognize the equality and equal rights of man and woman. The women's place was confined for domestic work largely regarded as being in the home.

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British Period:

When the British came in to contact with the Indian people in the latter half of the 18th century, the position of Indian woman had deteriorated to the insignificant level. Ideologically, women were considered a completely inferior species, having no significance, no personality. Socially they were kept in complete subjection, denied all rights and were suppressed and oppressed.

Improvement in condition and revival of status of women during the British period:

The early years of the 20th century witnessed rapid progress in breaking down prejudices against women education. A number of women societies sprang up. The Women Indian Association was founded by Mrs. Annie Besant in 1917, with the primary aim of promoting women education. Maximum percentage of women took to studying Formal and Informal courses to improve their socio - economic status in the existing modern society. Social hindrances began to disappear gradually. Purdah system almost became an invisible tradition of the past. In the social and political fields, men and women started working together. Educated girls began to marry by choice and some of them took to the stage. Music and dancing were assiduously cultivated and some of the women achieved world fame in the arts.

The Social Status of Indian Women:

Women held high status and position in Ancient times. In later ages, her status deteriorated. Evidently, a majority of the women still do not enjoy equal status. Women position in the family very much depends upon the level of their education. Higher the level of her education, greater equality she enjoys in the family.

The Relative Status of Women and Men:

Patriarchal" is the word most commonly used to describe the traditional Indian family and the gender relationships within it. It is said that a woman must first obey her father, then her husband, and then her son; this seems to be the normal pattern as she goes through life.

A woman's identity first appears in relation to her father's family's identity card. Later, if she marries, she will be added to her husband's card or, in the case of her father's death, to that of her nearest male kin. In Indian society in general, it is believed that the role of women was basic to maintaining the structure of the family and therefore of society. The opinion of the male head of household is especially important in the arrangement of marriages, because in most religious communities these are effectively marriages between two families. At such times, romantic preferences get little consideration. It is the male head who typically controls the family's finances.

At present, in Indian society women need to learn to relate to one another and treat each other as sources of knowledge. Since Indian women, as all women in any given society, differ in their class, race, and cultural background for them to challenge gender inequalities there is an urgent need to cross borders and ignore their cultural and class differences. These women unite and collaborate with each other to overcome male dominance in the society.

Struggle for Women Education in India:**Education:**

While the country has grown from leaps and bounds since independence where education is concerned. the gap between women and men is severe. While 82.14% of adult men are educated, only 65.46% of adult women are known to be literate in India. The gender bias is in higher education, specialized professional trainings which hit women very hard in employment and attaining top leadership in any field.

The girls are very useful at home for carrying out domestic duties and so mothers are reluctant to send them to school. A large number of children in the rural areas are undernourished. They hardly have a square meal a day. Unless the parents are given some kind of economic relief, it will be impossible to achieve the targets. In India, the vast majority of the population is poor. They cannot afford to give education to all their children. When the choice comes, they prefer to invest on the education of sons, rather than their daughter. It is believed that the sons will side with the father in old age and on the other hand after some time the girl will get married. She will go to some other family. Therefore, do not care much for women education.

Domestic Duty:

Many societies and a vast population in India still believes that proper place for women is to remain at home, serve the husband and his family and give birth to the children. This function can be performed irrespective of the fact whether the girl is educated or not. In fact, they feel that educated women begin to get some enlightenment and start demanding. Especially in a poor section of the society they are required in bring potable water, take food to fields for parents engaged in work and look after their young siblings, besides some are required to work as paid and unpaid workers.

Social Factors

The marriage of girls is a determining factor in women education. Particularly early marriage in UP, MP, Bihar, Rajasthan and Gujarat has been responsible for depriving girls from attending classes. Millions of literate girls are

given a way in marriage even before they are in their teens. Today, however, early marriage is not so common and women education has been encouraged by its increasing demand in their marriage markets especially among the upper and middle classes. Thus due to socio-economical reasons, women in India are still not coming in as much in number in the educational institution. The task ahead is difficult. The very fact is also that education among women education in urban India is widespread and more and more number of women is going to school and colleges.

Conservative Mentality

In India, women education has been linked with employment. In other words, the children are educated simply because they are to get some employment. Those people who are not in favour of sending their daughter for employment do not feel the necessity of educating them.

Lack of Girls School or Co-educational Aspects

The numbers of women's educational institutions is much less as compared with institutions engage education in the spread of male education. Therefore in many cases, particularly in remote the village the women are supposed to travel some distance, before reaching an women education institution. Many people do not like that their daughter should leave the village for going to school. Many people still condemn and dislike the idea of co-education. They feel that when both boys and girls study together in a same educational institution, corruption is bound to breed. They, therefore, are not prepared to send their daughter to a co-education institution.

Lack of Adequate Education Facilities

Non-availability of a school within walking distance of the girls, particularly in backward areas and the unwillingness of many parents to send their daughter to mixed schools beyond the age of 9 plus. Lack of separate sanitary facilities for girls in the mixed schools and lack of suitable school buildings and equipment which tend to create a poor school environment and the crisis of no of girls' hostel in near the schools.

Lack of Women Teachers for Women Education in India

The lack of women teachers in primary and middle schools has been very largely responsible for the low enrolment of girls, especially in the nine backward states. It is an accepted fact that the primary schools should be staffed by women teachers. At present the proportion of women teachers to men teachers is very low.

Lack of Supervision and Personal Guidance for Women Education

The development of women education in the different States have been seriously hampered because of the inadequate machinery to look after the various programmes in this field which require concentrated attention, special care and individual guidance. The number of lady officers is far too small to shoulder the responsibility of speeding of the progress of women education as envisaged in our plan. The officers are poorly staffed and ill-equipped. They do not have suitable conveyance facilities which would help in maintaining regular contacts within their field of work.

Social Adult Women Education

The problems of women enrolment is very closely connected with the problem of social women education of adult women. In fact, the success of women education depends in a very large measure on the successful implementation of social women education programmes for adult women, especially in rural areas. The percentage of literacy for women in India is 65.46%. The figure for women's literacy in rural areas is much less. The ignorance of women and the lack of communication create mental barriers and shunt out a very large percentage of adult women from the outside world.

Lack of Adequate Incentives for Women Education

The poor enrolment position of girls, especially in backward areas, cannot be improved unless special incentives are provided. Special schemes sponsored by the government of India have been adopted in several states. Although the schemes have been implemented, they do not cover a very wide area and the total results thus fall short of expectation. In order to ensure that these special schemes provide adequate incentives to the students, it is necessary that they are adopted in larger measures and over a wider geographical area with special priority to the backward districts or pockets.

Defective Curricular and Policies of Women Education

Although equality of sex has been enshrined in the Constitution and guaranteed in the laws of the land, there has been gender bias in curricula provisions. The topics have been given in the text-books depicting girls as home makers, wives and mothers. Even in some states Mathematics is given as an Optional subject at the secondary stage. Girls are shown as non-achievers, passive, timid and dependent whereas boys are shown as high achievers, courageous, daring and active participants. The National Policy on Education 1986 has, therefore, suggested for removing sex biases in the curriculum for all irrespective of all barriers. All these

factors coupled with ignorance, poverty, and mass illiteracy has contributed to the poor progress in women education.

Women Trafficking

Women trafficking as the act of recruiting, transporting, transferring, harbouring or receiving persons through the use of force coercion or deception for the purpose of exploiting them. This concept is accepted internationally but, in our view, it tends to place too much emphasis on movement. We see women trafficking as a form of modern-day slavery, where people profit from the control and exploitation of others. Every country is affected by trafficking, whether as a country of origin, transit or destination. It is a lucrative criminal industry, second only to drug trafficking, generating billions of dollars annually. A wide range of trafficking occurs in which this is not the case. Often, there are much more subtle forms of coercion or force within families and communities. Broadly speaking, there are two main types of women trafficking: sex trafficking and labour trafficking. The latter type includes things like domestic servitude, field labour, child soldiers, factory labour, bridal and reproductive slavery, and organ trade etc.

Child Labour

The term girls' child labour is often used synonymously with 'employed girl child' or 'working girl child'. In this sense, it is co-extensive with any work done by a child for a gainful purpose. Children are engaged in various forms of activities ranging from help in domestic work; work in a household enterprise to wage work.

Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination has been a major obstacle in granting equal opportunity for women in Higher Education. It has been identified as a crucial category and deserves attention in the education-equality paradigm. Today, women's education has become an issue of debate within which it is now necessary to shift the focus from women's intellectual development to women's autonomy in decision-making, freedom of expression and control over resources. Empowerment is the manifestation of a redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology, transforming the institutions that reinforce or perpetuate gender discrimination. The parameters of empowerment have been identified as Developing ability for critical thinking; Fostering decision-making and action through collective processes; Ensuring equal participation in developmental processes; Enhancing self-esteem and self-confidence in women. The time has arrived to realize the relevance, in a rapidly developing country like India, of education for leadership-building, especially for women

—something which can be achieved only through Higher Education.

Women and Education

In India women education never get its due share of awareness. From the medieval India women are debarred from the educational field. According to medieval awareness women require just household education and this perception of medieval India still persists in villages of India even today. Girls are supposed to fulfill domestic duties and education becomes secondary for them whereas it is considered to be important for boys. Although scenario in urban areas has changed a lot and women are opting for higher education but majority of Indian population residing in villages still live in medieval times. The people of villages consider girls to be curse and they do not want to waste money and time on them as they think that women should be wedded off as soon as possible.

The main reason for not sending girls to school is the poor economic condition. Another reason is far off location of schools. In Indian society virginity and purity is given extreme importance during marriage and people are afraid to send their girl child to far off schools where male teacher teach them along with boys.

The lack of education is the root reason for many other problems. An uneducated mother cannot look after her children properly and she is not aware of the fatal diseases and their cure, which leads to the poor health of the children. Uneducated people do not know about hygiene this lack of knowledge of hygiene may lead to poor health of the whole family.

We are talking about the consequence of women exclusion from a full share in the making of what becomes treated as our culture. This paper is not about stressing the patriarchal nature of Indian society in particular; rather, it is about explaining the consequence of excluding women from public life and constraining their educational choices.

The problem of women education in India is one which attracts our attention immediately. In our country, due to conservative traditionalism, women's status has, through ages, been considered to be lower than that of men. During the later part of the Vedic period the Aryans had sealed the fate of women culturally and socially by denying them the right to study Vedas and thus half of the population was deprived of one of the most fundamental human rights.

They were regarded as the bond slave to men for their economic dependence on them. Even today, in spite of the recognition of women's status equal to that of men,

the majority of them suffer in primitive ignorance as ever before. Illiteracy and ignorance is prevalent more in women folk than in men-folk and this evil is rampant specially in rural areas and backward communities.

The importance of women in matters of building the character of the citizens, economic reconstruction of the country and social reforms is being realized. Under the fast changing conditions in the country in the recent times increased attention is being paid to their education. Though different Commissions and (Committees appointed at times, suggested for the solution of the problems of women's education and for its expansion, even then there are certain problems still persist in that field.

The main problems facing their education are:

- I. Development of immorality;
- II. Suitable Curriculum for the education of girls;
- III. Lack of social consciousness among women;
- IV. iv) Scarcity of lady teachers;
- V. Lack of proper physical facilities;
- VI. Unwillingness of lady teachers to serve in rural areas;
- VII. Financial difficulties;
- VIII. Problem of transport;
- IX. Problem of wastage and stagnation;
- X. Problem of co-education;
- XI. Lack of enthusiasm and interest of the officials in charge of education

The education of girls and women is an integral part of national development. Steps that are being taken to improve and expand their education will not recede to the background due to lack of finance. It must be remembered that there is still a big gap to be filled between the education of the boys and girls. It is essential; therefore, that at least the programmes for girls and women that have already been included in the current plan are not disturbed.

Progress Achieved in Social Change for Women

Although the education of women is important, the dignity and value of being a wife and a mother should not be diminished by the concept of equality and educational opportunity. There is no either-or binary with regards to women's social participation and education. There is no contradiction between being a mother and a professional working outside the home. Women deserve to be able to make this choice. Education among Indian women has been strongly encouraged by their illiterate mothers. further; mother is the pivot of family life in India. Our way of life depends on her.

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 organization 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.

From its very inception in the 19th century, the Indian National congress included women and elected Mrs. Annie Besant as its president. One of the proudest moments of Indian womanhood was when Mrs. Vijay Lakshmi Pandit was elected as the president of the U.N. General Assembly in 1953.

In the National movement, hundreds and thousands of women shed their veils and left their sheltered homes to work side by side with the man. In free India, the status of women has under gone profound changes. Remarkable progress has been achieved in the field of administration, science and technology, sports, education, literature, music, painting and other fine arts.

It is highly significant that women in independent India have achieved great progress in all walks of life. We can confidently assert that India is the only nation among the developing countries of the modern world where so many women occupy high administrative positions quite successfully. 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.

Women in the field of Education:

After Independence, women of India took to education in a relatively large number. For example in 1901, the literary level of the females in India was just 0.6%, it increased to 39.42% in 1991 and to 64.1 in 2001. Various benefits such as free-ship, scholarship, loan facility, hostel facility etc are being given to women who go for higher education in many towns and cities, educational institutions meant only for female children have been established.

The educational performance of girl students particularly at high school and college level is proving to be better

than that of boys. We have today some universities exclusively meant for women. Girls' students are getting admitted on merit basis to the prestigious engineering and medical colleges in a relatively bigger number during the recent years.

Conclusion

Higher education in India is expected to become a part of global education with new directions, challenges and aspirations. Women could rise to administrative position in tertiary education only if they enter higher education qualifying themselves with the required academic credentials and experience. Indian women did not have access to higher education in the pre-independent India. After independence, the strength of women candidates in colleges and Universities and the number of Women's Colleges also have increased considerably. But the gender discrimination was obvious in advocating different curriculum for girls and boys. The number of women administrators however dwindle in the rising hierarchy of administration. Yet women are rising to management cadre because of their enrolment in higher education. A 'career success' either for women or men should be redefined, integrating heightened gender awareness, a deeper sense of academic and social values and responsibilities, and a rewarding responsiveness from the educational system.

Educated women are just on the threshold of transition from tradition to modernity. The women themselves desire that their status and position in society should rise higher. Though a proper climate for such a change is still wanting, yet there have been many structural and statutory

innovations for the improvement of their position. The traditional status and role sets of women are breaking up and new role-sets based on achievement, independence and equality are gradually coming up.

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