

“Women Activism - A Pragmatic Analysis”

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“OPPRESSION OF INDIAN WOMEN – A PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE”

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to acquire an understanding and analyze pragmatically the oppressed status of women in ancient India. In recent years the role and status of women have undergone some drastic changes, maybe due to globalization and commercialism. To render social transformation a reality, it is imperative for women to break free from the oppressive shell that has taken shape through centuries and seek empowerment.

Unlike oppression, which curbs personal growth and development, empowering implies building the self-esteem of every woman in society, irrespective of education, social status and other factors, rather than limiting the focus to celebrities. To feel less oppressed and more empowered, there are certain factors that play a seminal role.

Education is one of the most important requisites, wherein an educated woman is less likely to feel oppressed owing to being sufficiently qualified to seek employment and enjoy some degree of financial independence. Provision of equal opportunity, particularly in context of gender discrimination, can make a big difference because it would enable women to take proactive part in decision making and achieve their objectives. Ease of access to vocational programs, especially in rural areas, can effectively foster self-employment and entrepreneurship, and in the process, reduce oppression. Social protection, through prevention of female feticide and infanticide, and monitoring and regulating social practices like marriage, divorce, dowry, harassment and so on can negate social oppression. At the same time, awareness in terms of legal rights and human rights, saving schemes and rehabilitation programs would enable women to fight against oppression, both at the personal and social level.

Key Words: women, society, gender, discrimination, oppression, empowering, social practices In ancient India, women were revered and made significant contribution towards the welfare of family and society. They were accorded a high status within the society and felt gratifying and content.

“Everyone needs to be valued. Everyone has the potential to give something back.” – Princess Diana

INTRODUCTION

The “female”, constituting about half of the planet’s population has witnessed more downs and ups since time immemorial. The official and domestic status quo of the women is curbed by the continuing male patriarchy, based on rights, duties, marriage, occupation, achievement and what else and what not. Bearing in mind the different sections of discoveries and developments, be it ancient ages, mythology, histories of various nations, literatures of varying kinds, etcetera, the position of women is always decided upon by men. The freedom that should have been the birth right of every individual on the basis of humanitarian grounds has been denied to them time and time again.

Women are taken to be more as impediments to the progress of civilization. They have been straddled with

the duties of marriage, nurturing children and serving husband and his family. The position of women irrespective of race, religion, caste is still at the bottom of the socio-economic structure which actually hinders the progress of not only the respective civilization but globally, from a scale as minuscule as unnoticeable to the markedly high one.

DISCUSSION

Empowerment /Improvement In The Status Imply:

Empowerment is not only about increasing opportunities in the necessary fields as and when required, but also believing that this is a fundamental right which should be appreciated and not accorded. This belief should not be restricted to social media and paper academics but has to be implemented in the daily lives.

Women empowerment begins with the awareness about their rights and capabilities. The ability to control their own fertility is a rate limiting step in their empowerment and equality. In many countries, not only in India, women face lot more hindrances and problems than men in acquiring the necessary skills in utilizing the same opportunities.

Despite many international agreements affirming human rights, women are still likely to be more poor, illiterate and oppressed than men; they are far less likely to be politically active and far more likely to be the victims of domestic violence. The status of woman is not merely a figure to anyone. It represents the culture of any age. So let's try to analyze the status of Indian women in different eras.

Ancient Times / Scriptures

During the Rig Vedic period, women in India enjoyed high status in society and they were revered, respected and appreciated. In royal families, women were given respect and they contributed significantly in decision-making and administrative functions. They felt gratified and contented. Women at that time and till quite late in Indian society, were allowed to organize "Swayamvar" – the right to select one's life partner.

The freedom with which women could take part in public activities indicates the high status enjoyed by women during Vedic period. Women never observed "Purdah" but their dignity was not tarnished as in 21st century. Maybe at that time or period they were considered to be very vulnerable and so were treated with respect and love.

Women who were Mothers were considered no less than GOD.

Though female feticide didn't exist that time but in weaker sections of society the male child was more welcome and the polygamy existed. But they were discriminated and treated indifferently in the later Vedic times. Then and even today women are not allowed to take any decision about whether they want to conceive or not. The right to decide about conception was never given to them. WHY???

In Vedic period it was a custom of giving cow (Dhenu) to Brahmins as a remuneration of sacrifice. Beautiful young girls were also donated to Brahmins as remuneration. In printed versions of Hindu holy book Ramayan, Valmiki has mentioned that, "in Kalyug, girls will be labelled as 'impure' because they will converse with boys without hesitation" which shows how people had the mentality of putting the entire responsibility of any unacceptable social change on women.

Discrimination had always existed whether we accept it or not since time immemorial. But they were considered trivial things like – girls above the age of ten or menstruating girls were not allowed to go to temples or appear in front of the males of their families. This can be noticed even in Mahabharata, when

Draupadi showed her reluctance in appearing in the court after her spouses lost her in the game to Duryodhana. But no such restriction has ever been imposed on men of any society. It is always stated that the wealthier classes believed in polygamy, but monogamy was prevalent.

Ironically, polygamy was prevalent in the society in Ramayana-Mahabharata era. King Dashratha had multiple marriages. There was also the custom of having multiple husbands of one wife like Draupadi. Can this be considered as an example of equality or exploitation of the women's dignity and existence? Paradoxically, the Ramayana was Lord Rama's fight against the Lanka King Ravana who had abducted his wife Sita. The entire theme seems so engrossing that we tend to ignore the fact that the same Lord Rama was compelled to disown Maa Sita after winning her back, because her 'purity' was in question by some countrymen, because he is our respected "Maryada Purushottam", Shree Ram'. The point here is not to blame our Lord Rama but how vulnerable was the position of women even during Satyug.

Also, Rama and Lakshmana conveniently insulted Surpanakha who was the sister of Ravana and cut her nose off, because she evidently showed her interest in courting Lakshmana, who was the brother of Rama. Sita's repeated ordeals prove that there was no empathy for women in the society, thus portraying that a woman who vocalizes her desires is a witch.

Had the status of women not been twisted till the extent of "discussion", they enjoyed independence in that time as it is narrated in Ramayana that Surpanakha proposed to marry Rama and Lakshmana simultaneously. Many similar mentions are to be found in the same and as a Hindu society has developed respect for the discrimination mentioned in these holy books so much as to not question them absolutely.

So, if the women were given opportunity to attain high intellectual and spiritual standard so what happened as times changed, society developed the position and respect of women deteriorated? Why is it so that now women need to fight for reservations and their rights? All this suggests only of one thing that the status of women has deteriorated from good to worse.

PRE VEDIC PERIOD – A Blissful Period

It is impossible for a bird to fly on only one wing.

Patriarchy and gender discrimination was not visible as women enjoyed freedom in education, decision making, property rights, remarriage, and so on. The Aryans brought with them the concept that women should serve her husband, in-laws, take care of the children in order to secure a seat in heaven, leading to deterioration in the status of women with opposition to widow remarriage, education of girls, encouraging child marriages, sati, and forced widowhood and the rest of the illicit affairs we witness every day.

In the Rig Vedic society, women were revered and appreciated, but they were being discriminated against in the later Vedic period. The discrimination was observed primarily in terms of acquisition of education and other rights and facilities. The position of women further experienced a decline with the prevalence of child marriage, sati, polygamy and the Purdah system. Women were primarily equated with property in the epics and the Puranas.

MUGHAL PERIOD

Beginning of Purdah System was marked with the arrival of the Mughals. Evil thoughts seeped in the minds of men during this period and eventually led to the "PURDAH" system. But could it control the perverted mind set of the Mughals or other men? The condition worsened as women were confined to homes due to fear of them being kidnapped and taken away by their soldiers and courtiers.

The Mughals treated women as objects of sexual enjoyment, and women en masse were placed under their 'harem'. Nobody criticizes Akbar the Great, who had five thousand women in his harem. It led to the creation of the custom of Jauhar, a custom wherein wives, daughters of the soldiers and king of the lost kingdom burnt themselves in the fire to prevent men from touching them.

One should study the position of women under different circumstances, like in peace time and in war time to ascertain their real position in the society, because during wars the attitude of the society towards them was truly unsympathetic. In case the women had the misfortune of falling into the hands of the enemies, the situation was bad. They found it impossible to get re-admitted into their family and society.

Nothing much has changed from then to now. Today the victims of rape find it very difficult to be a part of the society and expect acceptance from her friends, family members and the society. This is one big reason for many rape cases to go unreported in India especially. Many countries in Middle East punish and ostracize women who have been raped in some way or the other.

We may have been successful in attaining top positions in the organizations, companies but the acceptance of a female with any untoward incidence in her life is practically zero.

STATUS OF WOMEN IN ISLAM

In the prestigious religion of Islam, women have been regarded as one of the most precious beings. It is believed that a woman when she is the daughter she opens the doors of Paradise for her father, when she is a wife then she completes half of the faith of her husband and when she is a mother Paradise lies beneath her feet.

Men are the Protectors of women not because the women can't protect themselves but they are something that are more precious and need to be guarded (because by logic, something that is being guarded is more precious than the one guarding it.)

Ironically, and a very grave one –

- i. Triple Talaq system exists and the Muslim women have to struggle for the abolition of this evil practice despite government's efforts to implement UCC. What is worse is that women are not allowed to divorce their husbands under any circumstance.
- ii. Polygamy exists – right bestowed by the RELIGION. The worst part is remarriage as a punishment exists in the religion as NIKAH HALALA, for the females. Why???
- iii. Fatwas against female players, artistes for doing what they wanted to do.

The list goes on. In every religion a woman is been considered a very pious and an important part of the family which people don't understand in this chauvinistic society; the worst part is, this is applicable for both the genders in many cases. British influence on India caused considerable deterioration in the status of women. Even in India the Muslim women are far more backward than their Hindu, Christian and Sikh counterparts.

The rich and prosperous men of Islamic countries keep scores of wives in their harems. Even till late 20th century, women were relegated to being a plaything of man, an ornament to decorate the drawing room. Serving, knitting, painting and music are still her pastimes and cooking and cleaning her business. But what a paradox that the Indian film industry is flooded with Muslim women not confined to Purdah nor doing the traditional work defined for them by their community men. Looking at this, the society cites these examples to prove that the status of women has improved.

STATUS OF WOMEN DURING BRITISH RULE

The position and status of women saw no change till the advent of British rule in India post East India invasion around 1600s. All the evil practices like – Child marriage, Forced marriage, Sati, Devadasi, Purdah, Dowry, Female Feticide, and Polygamy were prevalent in Indian society when the British came to rule the country.

Socio-Religious Reform Movements and the Acts were introduced due to the efforts of Indian social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekanand, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Justice M.G. Ranade, Annie Besant; government took initiatives to improve the status of our Indian women.

The Sati system, which stated that widow should be burned along with the dead husband on the same funeral pyre, was abolished. Widowhood condemnation was replaced by widow remarriage and traditions like child marriage was declared illegal. Our social reformers introduced reforms to abolish all the evil practices prevalent in the then Indian society, but the British also took advantage of the situation and openly abused the women and officially created brothels, called “Chaklas” in the name of giving economic independence to the poor Indian women.

The social, familial and even the economic position of Indian especially Hindu woman was greatly improved in British period by way of banning many evil practices. During this period, women found roles for themselves as social campaigners, artists, explorers, wives, medics, missionaries and virtually every other profession. So we can say that everyone is an opportunist.

Status of Women Post- Independence

Post-Independence various laws were passed for the betterment and uplifting of women and the important ones were Article 14, 15 and 16.

1. Article 14 provides Equality before the law, it states that “The State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India.”
2. Article 15 states “Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.”
3. Article 16 states “Equality of opportunity in matters of public employment.”
4. Many other laws related to medical termination of pregnancy, adoption of child, dowry prohibition, succession rights, right to property, equal pay and remuneration were passed.

Status of Women in recent eras

As per the Global Gender Gap Index Report 2020 published by the World Economic Forum, India ranks 112 out of 153 countries with a score of 0.668 out of 1. Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) consists of four dimensions and as per the computational mechanism of GGGI, highest performance score on each of these four dimensions is 1, namely:-

1. Economic participation and opportunity – 0.354
2. Educational attainment – 0.962
3. Health and survival – 0.944, and
4. Political empowerment – 0.411

> Educational attainment

- A/c to 2014 data, girls made up for more than 50% of those 75 million children denied primary

education.

- 8% of all enrolled undergraduate students in India are women.
- 7% of all enrolled PhD students are women.
- 6% of women and 81.3% of men over age 15 were literate by 2017.

> Economic Participation and Opportunity

- Gender pay gap in India refers to the difference in earnings between women and men in the paid employment and labor market.
- For the year 2016, the gender pay gap in India was estimated to be 24.81%.
- A report by the world economic forum highlights that in the corporate sector in India, a woman is paid only one-third of what a man in same position is paid. Further, while analyzing the level of female participation in the economy, this report states that India has skipped 28 places to be one of the bottom 10 countries on the list.
- Uttarakhand is the state with lowest pay gap with females earning only 9% less than men. Punjab and UP are also states with a lower gender pay gap, following with 10% and 15%, respectively.
- In 2015-2016, women comprised 26.7% of all rural workers, down from 31.8% in 1972-73; 16.2% of all urban workers, a small increase from 13.4% in 1972-73.
- 4% of Indian working women have a regular salaried job (2013) compared to 21.2% (2011-2012) of working men (aged 15–59).

> MISCELLANEOUS

- As informed by National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), a total of 3,582 number of cases of domestic violence between April, 2021 and June, 2021, as against a total of 3,748 number of cases between April, 2020 and June, 2020, were received.
- Women held only 15.6% of elected parliamentary seats in the world in 2017.
- According to WHO, one woman dies in childbirth every minute of the day, according to data of 2016.
- In 49 countries there is no specific law against domestic violence, in 45 countries there is no legislation to address sexual harassment, and 112 countries do not criminalize marital rape.

ANALYSIS

The main factors responsible for gender inequality in India are or have been:

1. Late and incomplete convergence of capabilities where women and men have to be on equal footing as regards to education, health, and nutrition domains
2. A predisposition to prefer sons, family members engrossed in economic, religious, social and emotional desires, dreams and norms
3. Absence of gender equity in economic well-being.
4. Lack of opportunities to give voice to one's voices.
5. Little participation in decision-making.
6. Unequal investments and allocation of resources, energies and time.
7. Impact on male dominance and the dominant ideology of patriarchy.

INFERENCE

1. Nothing has changed in the present society as regards to women being oppressed, treated as objects of sexual enjoyment evident by increased trend of having increased obscene dance numbers in movies, inappropriately dressed up to incite the male libido and arouse the male hormones. The mindset

remains the same, the only difference is now we are not vocal about all this and we superficially condemn it.

2. Different times, similar circumstances for women. Their existence is compromised and this fact is even less affected as their “monetary needs” are fulfilled or taken care of by practices like alimony or meher.
3. Polygamy may be still practiced if the law permits. One of the reasons why polygamy was practiced was the inability of the women to conceive (neither justified, nor appreciated) but now we have better methods to correct or overcome those problems through either surrogacy or in -vitro fertilization etc.
4. Confinement to homes may not be practiced but increased numbers of sex workers, human trafficking and demand of Indian women for marriage in Middle East countries definitely says nothing has changed.
5. Day by day increased number of molestation and rape cases conveys both – that there is no change in the thought process of men and that women are still struggling for their right to live with dignity.
6. Women have been ‘given’ a ‘lot’ of ‘freedom’ nowadays. The price paid is increased divorce rates, kidnapping, acid attacks, character assassination, etc.
7. In a first ever global study on female infanticide by Asian Centre for Human Rights, a Delhi-based NGO dedicated to protection of human rights, it has been revealed that preference of son over daughter is a major reason for female infanticide in many countries around the world.
8. Though laws have been formed, their implementation on the individual level was not attained. Women were considered as birth giving machines as a result of which we increased our population from 34 crores during independence in 1947 to 68 crores in 1981 i.e., we created a second India within a span of 34 years, which touched 100 crores till 2001.)
9. Women comprised 48.5% of the population of India in 2017. According to the latest National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data, released by the Indian government recently, there are now 1,020 women for every 1,000 men.

Despite everything we do for the status of women, the evils of illiteracy, dowry, ignorance, and economic slavery would have to be fully removed in order to give them their rightful place in Indian society.

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