
Women, Gandhi and Indian National Movement

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A society grows if the women grow, if they partake of the spirit of progress, for they are the proverbial domestic legislators, they are the matrix of social life. The best way to judge the position of a nation is to find out the status of women. In reality the status of women is the measuring rod for assessing the standard of culture of any age. Thus the social status of women in a country represents the social spirit of the age. But, in ancient India, right from the age of the Rigveda, as also in the Mahabharata, there are contradictory statements about women, statements of eulogy as well as of condemnation.

Humanity has advanced very far from where it had started. Many things have changed; the social position and rights of many groups have been subjected to the ebb and flow of the history. Many sections of the population, which had ruled, have been brought down with others, which were deprived, have risen to position of equality and even to political power. But the women who form nearly 50 per cent of the population are facing problems since ancient times, receiving only a small share of developmental opportunities. In this chapter it is proposed to review the familial or social, legal, economic and political position of women in the various stages of development. This position will be traced in the historical perspective from Vedic period to the modern era.

Their oppression is persistent and universal, and solutions are complicated. Woman's present status is to a large extent the product of the past socio-cultural configuration. Every society, however progressive it may be is beholden to the past. The social system and the culture of any given society bear the mark of the social system and the culture preceding it. The comprehension of the range of the contemporary variations in the attitude towards women and her place in society begs an understanding of the past feminine ideals, referents and prescriptions for female behavior.

The position of women in India was viewed by Indian and British reformers as one of the indices by which to measure the extent of modernization or traditionalism of a nation. The stereotype image of the Indian women was that of a tradition-bound, religious and servient person. She functioned in an environment which was considered by the missionaries as dull and monotonous with limited opportunity of self expression. Indian reformers, however perceived the lifestyle of the women of their society in quite a different way. They regarded the extended Hindu family as providing women with an opportunity of interaction and communication with other women, the social and religious festivities were a time for creative activity, entertainment and diversion. Women were socialized in this environment and most of them did not regard life as dull or limited and had minimal feelings of conflict or distress with their roles. A small group of women however, comprising of those who felt oppressed by conventional practices and women from elite families who were dissatisfied with the acceptable roles for women, took advantage of the opportunities that were available in this period of social change.

The position of women in any society is a true index of its cultural and spiritual level, and the attitude of a community towards her has a great social significance. In India women has always been accorded due honour and dignity. Manu, the first law giver is very particular in granting dignified and honourable position to her. He categorically says, “Women must be honoured and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands and brother-in-law, who desire their own welfare. Where women are honoured, their gods are pleased, but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields reward.” Where the female relations live in grief the family soon wholly perishes, but that family where they are not being duly honoured, pronounce a curse, perish completely, as if destroyed by magic. Hence, men who seek their own welfare, should always honour women on holy days and festivals with gifts of ornaments, clothes and dainty food.”

But in view of her emotional and physical condition he lays stress on her all around protection. He lays down, ‘Her father should protect her during childhood, husband during youth and sons in old age.’ Besides the codes of ancient law-giver bestow upon women supreme authority in the domestic affairs and also make provisions for employing them in royal services, industry and agriculture.

Hindu tradition have generally respected womanhood, though occasionally we find derogatory references to women. The history of ancient India may be said to commence from the period during which the Rig Veda was composed. In Rig Veda we find a great literary monument of hoary antiquity, containing a code of ethical life reflecting the thoughts and aspirations of the people. Vedic literature which is the prime source of all cultural manifestations in India depicts a vivid picture of ancient Indian womanhood. The Vedic society was a patriarchal one, and hence father was the head of the family. During the period we find that prayers were uttered for the birth of a son, though we do not come across any reference deprecating the birth of a daughter as in Atharva Veda. We find in the Rig Veda a number of names to denote a girl at different stages of her life. A girl is variously called *kanya*, *duhita*, *kaninaka*, *kmiyana*, *kanyala*, *putriketc*. Of all these epithets for girls, the word *duhita* seems to have been in frequent use in the Rig Veda, referring to a daughter.

But a sudden decline in their status ushered in with the advent of the Muslims in our country. The laws, customs and traditions of the new political masters lowered the status adversely affected the social and dignity of women. Deprived of the right to freedom movement, she was confined within the four walls of the house and was compelled to engage herself entirely in the domestic activities. Thus, the main purpose of the life of woman remained only to satisfy her husband and look after her children, Such was the condition of the Indian women in general at that time. The social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Ray, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and M. G. Ranade in the 19th Century, for the first time, raised their voice against unequal status of women in society. During the Indian National Movement and particularly in the Gandhian era many women came out of the four walls and worked in various ways to free the country.

Indian society has been and even today is a semi-feudal society. In the Indian social structure women is practically regarded as a secondary citizen having no independent status. She is supposed to perform all duties but has a limited rights. She has no economic freedom. She has

to manage the house with whatever money the husband puts in her hand. In any financial crisis in the family, the woman is the greatest sufferer.

All most in all communities of the world, women function merely as a human incubator and inspite of her major contribution to society. She falls victim to the predicament of her unequal status. It is woman who is victimized and discriminated to the maximum at each and every stage. Exploitation of high magnitude based on the distinction of sex existed all along and is still continuing

As we know women are vital element of society. A society's progress depends a lot on them. All societies must strive to do everything possible to integrate women in all walks of life in an equitable and just manner. The Preamble to the Constitution of India promises "to secure to all its citizens justice-social, economic and political; Liberty-of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; Equality-of status and of opportunity; and promote among them all: Fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity of the National". To realise these goals the Constitution guarantees certain fundamental rights and freedoms, e.g. freedom of speech, protection of life and personal liberty etc., which may be termed positive rights. Along with these certain negative rights, prohibiting discrimination or denial of equal protection of law, are also guaranteed. A equal citizens of India, women benefit from these rights equally with men. However, since the Constitution recognized the unequal social provisions for women and children even in violation of the obligation not to discriminate among citizens. This power has been used to enact special laws for the protection of women workers in factories, mines and plantations, and to provide maternity relief to women workers in the organized sector.

According to Indian tradition since the inception of society women has been treated with great honour and dignity, though occasionally we do find derogatory references to women. While analyzing the Indian History and Purans, the facts reveal that the relationship between a man and a woman has always been in a state of fluctuation and there has been a sea change in the position, rights and status of women since the dawn civilization.

As way back as in 1980, the UN Report commented: "That women constitute half the world's population, perform nearly two thirds of work hours, receives one tenth of the world's income and own less than one hundredth percent of world's property.' Half of the Indian populations too are women. Women have always been discriminated and have suffered and are suffering and discrimination in silence. Self-sacrifice and self-denial add to their nobility and fortitude and yet they have been subjected to all inequalities, indignities inequality and discrimination."

In the early 19th century, women occupied a very low status in Indian society. They began to be kept within four walls of the house. Education was being denied to them. Customs such as sati, child marriage and polygamy were widely prevalent. Widows from the upper castes were prevented from re-marrying and their condition was pitiable. A women's place was strictly within the family, and she was ruled over by her husband, elders and in-laws with an iron hand. Practice of purdah, early marriage and dowry system came into vogue. Birth of a son was preferred to that of a daughter latter was treated as a burden on her family and as a result,

infanticide started at many places. There was little scope for self-expression apart from cooking and sewing and in well-to-do families, minor crafts taken-up as a hobby. In poorer families, strenuous daily chores took their toll-women fetched wood and water, collected roots fruits and vegetables, carried food to the menfolk in the fields. Even so, women in the lower rung of society enjoyed greater freedom not because their people were more liberal or permissive but because economic conditions did not allow them to remain indoors. Women from the middle and upper classes faced greater social constraints upon their personal freedom. However, the process of their socialisation was so strong that they seemed reconciled to this state of affairs and silently accepted their fate.

The root cause underlying all these social evils concerning women was wide-spread illiteracy and ignorance. Attempts were made during the British rule to put an end to certain evils concerning women. Even before the efforts of British Government, emperor Jahangir in seventeenth century and Raja Jai Singh of Jaipur in eighteenth century disapproved the custom of child infanticide. But nothing concrete could be done as it needed a change in the' mentality of people. The reform movements of nineteenth and early twentieth century mainly took up the cause of regeneration of Indian society.

The first men to speak out publicly against the injustice perpetrated on women in the name of tradition and religion was Raja Rammohan Roy a stout champion of women's cause who, wrote a tract condemning sati.

He started an agitation which aimed at the whole-sale emancipation of mankind. The social reforms for which Ram Mohan Roy stood were (a) Eradication of Kulinism, (b) stopping the sale of girls in marriage, (c) Abolition of caste system, (d) Introduction of widow re-marriage and (e) Abolition of sati. He also opposed polygamy and concubinage, and was the first caste Hindu in the modern age to cross the black waters.

He condemned the subjugation of women and opposed the prevailing idea that women were inferior to men in any intellect or moral sense indeed first important. Contribution to the course of social reform and with it modern Hindu social reform can be said to have started.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Devendranath Tagore and Keshav Chandra Sen also joined Brahma Samaj and worked for the Upliftment of women. On 26th July, 1856 Widow-Remarriage Act was passed (especially for re-marriage of Hindu widows) which opened the gate of a new bright life, for Hindu widows Act of 1860 raised the age of consent to ten years. The credit for getting both the acts passed goes to Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar.

In the teeth of severe opposition from the orthodox party, he persisted in his zeal for the fulfillment of his mission, exposing himself to the risk of being killed. And his effort was crowned with success when the Government of Lord Dalhousie passed Act XV of 1856 legalising the marriage of Hindu Widows. Towards the end of 1856, Vidyasagar proceeded to celebrate the first widow re-marriage in Bengal. That was a memorable day, when he was guarded by police force, brought the bridegroom to the place appointed for the wedding, all Calcutta came out to look at the progressive elements. After this he was advanced step by step,

firm and majestic, celebrating one marriage after another, at times at a tremendous personal cost of himself.

Later the BrahmoSamaj reformers under the stewardship of Keshub Chandra Sen, strove to raise the limit of marriagable age of girls, to abolish polygamy and to give higher education and social liberty to women. Finally they succeeded in getting a law passed, generally known as Act III of 1872 i.e. the native marriage Act of 1872, the civil marriage Act or the Brahma Marriage Act. 'The passing of this Act may be justly regarded as the crowing success of the prolonged efforts of the reformers for the amelioration of women's social life. It abolished early marriage, made polygamy penal, sanctioned widow marriages and inter-caste marriages. He started a Normal School for Girls, an Industrial School for Boys, the Victoria Institution for Women, and Bharat Ashram, a home in which a number of families were gathered together for cultivation of a better home life, and for the education of women and children.

With the efforts of B.M. Malabari, the age of consent Act was passed in 1891 raising the age of consummation from ten to twelve years. Another leading social reformer of Bombay DadabhaiNaoroji, founded Parsi Law Association for the grant of legal status to women and uniform laws of inheritance and marriage for Parsi Women.

There were several Indian women who worked for the betterment of the status of women. Pandita Bai (1858-1922) belonged to a learned Brahmin family in Karnataka. She attained the proficiency in Sanskrit language and she addressed many learned groups in different parts of the country, after the death of her parents she along with her brother traveled in the society, in 1880. She showed her boldness by marrying a man of a different caste and different language in 1880 after the death of her brother. After the Aria Mahila Samaj with the help of other leaders like Ranade and Bhandarkar. Hunter Commission, after seeing the progress of Samaj in 1882, sent her to England where she was baptized as a Christian; She went to America in 1886 and returned to Bombay in 1889. She started a Sharda Sadan for the destitute high cast widows. The Hindu leaders objected to the conversion of Hindu widows to Christianity and as a result of which Ranade and Bhandakar left the Sadan; she shifted to Khedgaon near Poona and established Muktisadan where she gave general education and vocational training to thousands of women. There were many more outstanding women who contributed to the emancipation of women in the nineteenth century.

Even after the formation of Indian National Congress in 1885, the founder leaders argued for the social reform and women's emancipation in persuance of national liberation. This ardent urge gave a birth to National Social Conference in (Madras, December) 1887. The moving spirit behind it was Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842-1901). He founded the Widow Marriage Association (1961) and the 'SarvajanicSabha' (1870) and devoted the latter's quarterly journal to the championing of social and political reform. One of the founder members of 'Prarthana Samaj' devout theist, a great scholar, and an ardent social reformer, he was according to Karve, the prophet of Liberated India, Ranade had faith in the destiny of his Nation. From 1887 to 1901, the year of his death, Ranade nursed the National Social conference with care, faith and determination in the face of opposition and columny. He had a fine sense of proportion, and would not ignore political reform for the sake of social progress. At the same time he was not

prepared to be complacent about social abuses and misery on the plea that he was pre occupied with matters political. Ranade emphasised widely over the cultural heritage of women status and used to say that the early celebration of child-marriages, the forcible defiguration of widow, and the absolute prohibition of remarriage in the higher castes, the occasional and local practices of polygamy and polyandry are all admittedly corruption of recent growth, unknown to the best days of our country's history. Further he said, that "the internal discussion, the upheaval of non-Aryan races, and the predominance acquired by barbarous scythians and Mohammedan Conquerors degraded the condition of women, deprived them of their right of inheritance and freedom and made women dependent on man's caprice, instead of being his equal and honoured helpmate. He ardently supported the cause of and participated in the activities of Widow Marriage Association founded by Vishnu Shastri.

Swami Dayanand, the founder of Arya Samaj stood against early marriage, widowhood, purdah and staunchly supported the education of women. Arya Samaj became very popular social movement and its message reached masses as well as intellectuals.

In the last decade of the century, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) also gave a great impetus for the liberation of women from seclusion and bondage. He said, "That country and that nation which did not respect women have never become great nor will ever be in the future." He advocated the liberation of women and equality on the basis of the vedantic ideals that state. "One and the same self is present in all beings." According to him, the helplessness and dependence of women on man are due to the training given to her by men. In case she is not governed tyrannically her hidden power will make her a lioness. He emphasized that proper education will enable her to solve her problems and having independent thinking.

Swami Vivekanand advocated women's upliftment through Rama Krishan Mission started in 1897, he was against all sorts of superstitions, illiteracy, purdah and early marriage. He entrusted- sister Nivedita with the responsibility of girls education mission created both social and political awakening among women. Gopal Krishna Gokhale was against seclusion of women and worked for their education as according to him, education was the only means to improve their lot. Servants of Indian Society founded by him in 1905 aimed at *inculcating* the spirit of service to society and nation among men and women.

The keen interest was taken by Dhono Keshavkarve for the cause of Hindu Widows. He himself married a widow and founded Hindu Widows Home Association. He also started Women Welfare Association, Ananth Balikashram Mahila Vidyalaya and Nishkam Karam Math. His great contribution was in the field of female education and greatest achievement in the sphere was the foundation of Women's University in 1916.

Briefly the following laws were passed to ameliorate the *condition* of women before advent of Gandhi.

- (a) The Bengal 'Sati' Regulation (XVII of 1829) and, Bombay and Madras 'Sati' Regulation (1830) with the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy for abolition of practice of 'Sati'.
- (b) The Hindu Widows Remarriage Act (XV of 1856) by the efforts of Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar, for widow remarriage.
- (c) The Bombay Hindu Heir's Relief Act (1866) laid down that no person who had married a Hindu widow shall merely by reason of such marriage be liable for any of the debts of any prior deceased husband of such widow. The Act thus encouraged widow-remarriage.
- (d) The Native Converts Marriage Dissolution Act (1886) directed the husband, under certain condition, to furnish the wife with funds to prosecute or to defend a suit and for her maintenance.
- (e) In 1888 the Madras High Court held the adoption of a daughter by a dancing girl to be valid (provided it was not for the purpose of prostitution).
- (f) In 1891, the Age of consent Act was passed and fixed the marriageable age for girls as 12. The Act sought to check infant marriages in India (and enforced widow-hood) and control the age of marriage of Hindu girls. It is interesting to note, while a large number of Hindu girls benefited from this Act, the legislation was largely due to the ceaseless efforts of Behramji M. Malabari, a Bombay Parsi.
- (g) The Indian Penal code contained provisions aimed at protecting the modesty of women. Kidnapping girls under eighteen years of age was made an offence.
- (h) Criminal procedure code (1898) and the civil procedure code (1908) gave further rights to women especially to protect them from coercion.

The Anand Marriage Act (1909) validated marriages solemnized according to the Sikh Ceremony called Anand.

In 1917, Annie Besant (1847-1933), enlightened British women who settled down in India since 1803, launched the Home Rule agitation for the liberation of women. She was elected the President of the Calcutta Session of the Indian National Congress. In 1918 The Calcutta Session opined that the eligibility to all elective bodies concerned with the local Government and Education." In 1919 the Nagpur Session was attended by about 200 women delegates. This was also a striking evidence of the political awakening of the Indian women. Mahatma Gandhi encouraged thousands of women to participate in the political movement. Gandhi's fundamental faith in the equality of women was based, "on non-violence, women have a much right to establish her own destiny as man has to establish his." He contradicted the preaching of Dharama Sastras for the injustice done to women. He expressed his opinion about the religious texts written after 300 B.C. that they advocate social inequality, promotion of child marriage and widowhood till death. According to Gandhi only the preaching of the Dharmasatras need be followed that advocate social equality and social justice, between man and man and between man and woman. He openly said, "I passionately desire utmost freedom of our women."

By the end of the nineteenth century the women not only became teachers in girls schools, they also entered the profession of nurses and doctors. The entry of women in professions indicated the marked change in the outlook of men and women in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Considering the progress made by the girls; education, it is beyond any doubt that the credit goes to Rammohan Rai who advocated for the women education in the beginning of the century. The nineteenth century may be called as a period of social change. In the beginning of the century, sati was prevalent and thousands of women were burnt at the funeral pyres of their husbands whereas by the end of the century, parents willingly sent their daughters to schools and also to work as teachers, nurses and doctors.

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