Preface

There are several clear indicators of the fact that Indian women continue to be discriminated against: the sex ratio is skewed against them; maternal mortality is the second-highest in the world; more than 40 per cent of women are illiterate; and crimes against women are on the rise. Yet, the women's movement which gathered strength after the 1970s, has led to progressive legislation and positive change, spurred on by the participation of women in local self-government.

It is a paradox of modern India that women wield power and hold positions at the topmost levels, yet large sections of women are among the most underprivileged. Some women from the upper classes head political parties and command large followings, yet women's representation in the Parliament and state legislatures has not been more than 10 per cent.

The roots of discrimination against women lie in the religious and cultural practices of India. The beginning of changes started with the reform
movements in the nineteenth century, which addressed practices like sati, child marriage, life of the widows, etc. The status of women in the contemporary context is reflected in the state of their health, education, employment and life in society.

Poverty, early marriage, malnutrition and lack of health care during pregnancy are the major reasons for both maternal and infant mortality. In rural India almost 60 per cent of girls are married before they are 18. Nearly 60 per cent of married girls bear children before they are 19. Almost one third of all babies are born with low birth weight.

In 1951, shortly after Independence, the Census recorded that only 25 per cent of men and 7 per cent of women were literate. By the 1991 Census, female literacy had risen to 39 per cent. Census 2001 provisional figures indicate that 54.16 per cent of women are now able to read and write. Still, 245 million Indian women cannot read or write, comprising the world's largest number of unlettered women.
National averages in literacy conceal wide disparities. For instance, while 95 per cent of women in Mizoram are literate, only 34 per cent of women in Bihar can read and write.

Since the majority of India's unlettered people are female, literacy and education programmes need to focus on girls and women. Yet progressive government programmes like the Mahila Samakhya, that designed a scheme to conscientise and empower rural women and motivate them to educate themselves, have been distorted in recent years. The District Primary Education Programme focuses on enrolment but not on the retention of girls in schools. In the absence of an enabling and empowering environment, girls are unlikely to stay on in school, say critics of the large World Bank funded programme.

It is well known that women and children work in huge numbers in bidi-rolling, agarbatti-rolling, bangle making, weaving, brassware, leather, crafts and other industries. Yet, only 3 per cent of these women are recorded as labourers. They are forced to work for pitiable wages and are denied all social
security benefits. A study by SEWA of 14 trades found that 85 per cent of women earned only 50 per cent of the official poverty level income.

In writing this research researcher has drawn freely upon available literature on the subject. Every effort has been made to make the research up to date to extent possible.