CHAPTER - 3

INDIAN WOMAN THROUGH TIME : THE MYTH AND THE REALITY

The status of Indian woman in society is a peculiar dichotomy of myth & reality.

On the one hand 'Manu' the law giver equates drums, rustics, shudras, animals & women and advocates occasional physical punishment for them whereas on the other hand many female goddesses like Lakshmi, Saraswati, Durga, Kali command devotion & veneration even from the men folk.

Similarly only 13.1% women are shown to be gainfully employed in the organised sectors whereas majority of rural Indian Women in addition to household chores and child rearing take up the burden of field work at sowing or harvest time and yet they are not considered as agricultural workers and their contribution towards the economy is not acknowledged.

On one hand she is considered to be weak and dependent upon men whereas on the other her emotional stability, courage and legendary patience helps to bind families through thick and thin.

Similarly though there have been several studies, several laws, researches and organisations to uplift the general condition of women, majority of them have more or less remained cloistered and confined within the four walls of home and are dismissed as “the second sex”. Relegated to the background they have faced social, economic and political discrimination and the scenario has not changed much as we move into 21st century.

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The ancient Indus Valley civilisation before the advent of the Vedic Aryans (C. 1500 B.C.) worshipped the mother goddess. Worshippers of a male god the Lord Shiva were also present but probably less important. It is possible that matriliny existed at that time and the more recent matrilineal system among the Nairs in Kerala is considered by some a vestige of this ancient pre-vedic emphasis on the female line.

The advent of the vedic Aryans introduced the principle of anuloma or hypergamy for women (marriage upward), probably as a means of preventing intermarriage with the pre-vedic Dravidians. Aryan society was patriarchal. Aryan women were gradually prohibited from marrying below their subcaste. A great emphasis on chastity and wifely fidelity developed. Divorce and remarriage of widows came to be considered evil. Child marriage & sati, or widow burning were further results of this exaggeration of chastity & fidelity. Marriage of girls before puberty was designed to ensure fidelity and legitimacy of heirs.
By the sixth century B.C. sons came to be viewed as essential for performing sacrifices to the family ancestors and supremacy of Brahmins were established. The function of women was to produce sons and they were debarred from ritual functions. Added to this the Dowry System developed, marking women economic liabilities.

The appearance of Buddhism in the sixth century B.C. acted as a temporary check. During this time, women became queens, scholars, and poets. But this golden age for women did not last long.

Arab invasion beginning the 712 A.D. introduced Islam to India. Hindu society developed tactics to protect women from Muslim invaders. This reinforced the cloistering of Hindu women in North Western India. Muslim women have been in purdah for centuries. Now both Muslim & Hindu upper class women lived in purdah secluded from the view of men.

In the 19th Century, educated Indian elites notably in Bengal focussed part of their reform effort on the status of women. They attacked the social practices of child marriage and the harsh treatment of widows through sati. Schools for women were founded to educate women. Raja Ram Mohon Roy vehemently opposed the practice of sati and in 1820 the then Governor General, William Bentinck outlawed the practice. The widow remarriage Act was passed in 1856 and the Sarada Act of 1929 raised the age of marriage to fifteen. Though these Acts were not very successful then but nevertheless they were a stepping stone towards equality.

A more important force for change in the status of women was the movement for national independence where women left the seclusion of Purdah in large numbers to participate in the struggle for independence from colonial rule.

One of the most potent agents in bringing women out of purdah and the home was the force of one man’s personality and appeal, Mohundas Karamchand Gandhi. He directed an appeal specifically to women, telling them he had great faith in their capacity to sacrifice and endure suffering.

Gradually women gained political experience and confidence and formed women's India Association in 1917 and All India Women's conference in 1927 and in 1925 Sarojini Naidu, became the first Indian woman President of the Indian National Congress.

THE POST INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

Three years after India gained independence in 1947, a new constitution was promulgated. It contains guarantees of equality, irrespective of sex and prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Several other laws were passed in favour of women. The Hindu Marriage Act prohibited polygamy and allowed divorce to either of the spouse. The special Marriage Act of 1954 permitted secular or mixed marriages, the Hindu succession Act of 1956 provided that son, daughter & widow/Mother could inherit equally. The Dowry prohibition Act of 1961 was an effort to

In addition to these various Five-year plans, the Government of India has been increasingly including more and more women's development programmes. In the sixth five year plan the perspective shifted from welfare to a development approach. The seventh plan focussed on making women aware of their rights and training them for economic development and self-reliance. The eight plan (April 1990 – March 1995) envisages providing constructive opportunities for expressing the talents and energies of women to enable them to lead life of dignity and security and encouraging development through higher participation in all elected bodies and strengthened network of women's organisations. Despite clear constitutional obligations on the part of the state, and commitments by the governments, women suffer massive disadvantages in terms of basic needs and social equity. They face setbacks, discriminations, and hardships in their early formative years that make it difficult for them to cope in life.

The status of women in any society can be viewed in various ways. The various demographic/development indicators reinforce the fact that women are way behind men according to the yardstick of development. The sex ratio in India is 929 women per 1000 men according to the 1991 census. The declining proportion of females to males is exceptional to the general pattern in other parts of the World. Female infants die at a faster rate than male infants implying social neglect of female health.

**Figure - I:**
Sex Ratio 1901-1991
(Number of Women per 1000 Men)

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex Ratio</td>
<td>972</td>
<td>964</td>
<td>965</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>945</td>
<td>946</td>
<td>941</td>
<td>930</td>
<td>934</td>
<td>929</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Source: Census of India 1991
Table - 3.1
Age-specific death rates by broad age group for males and females, rural India, 1981, 1986.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Groups</th>
<th>1981 Male</th>
<th>1981 Female</th>
<th>1986 Male</th>
<th>1986 Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-4</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>38.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-14</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-34</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-49</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50+</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In India female life expectancy continues to increase (fig II) concurrently, the age from which age-specific female mortality rates falls below the corresponding male mortality rates has lowered from 50 to 35 years. (Table -1)

Figure - II:
Literacy Rates all Ages
(Percentages of Literates to Total Population)


Female literacy and education along with employment and income are decisive for the improvement in the quality of the family’s life and steady reduction in fertility. Illiteracy has also been the greatest barrier to any improvement in the position of women – in employment, health, the exercise
of legal and constitutional rights, in attaining equality of status and equal opportunities in education itself.

As can be seen from Figure III the literacy levels of both men and women have been steadily increasing, though in percentage points the gap between the two has not been closing but steadily widening from 21.49 in 1961 to 22.07 in 1981 to 24.44 in 1991.

**Figure : III :**
**Literacy Rates all Ages**
(Percentages of Literates to Total Population)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>888</td>
<td>892</td>
<td>869</td>
<td>862</td>
<td>864</td>
<td>851</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>916</td>
<td>926</td>
<td>901</td>
<td>914</td>
<td>924</td>
<td>899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>926</td>
<td>934</td>
<td>919</td>
<td>928</td>
<td>936</td>
<td>922</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>931</td>
<td>938</td>
<td>929</td>
<td>935</td>
<td>942</td>
<td>932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>940</td>
<td>940</td>
<td>940</td>
<td>942</td>
<td>943</td>
<td>942</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the field of education the picture is similarly bleak. Seventy five percent of the women are illiterate. Female literacy is 18% in the rural areas and 47.8 percent in the urban area. The dropout rate for girls is estimated at 55.5% at the primary stage and 77.7% at the middle school stage. Enrolment of girls in higher education has been almost static for the year 1975-85. There are substructural disparities in the enrolment of girls and boys at the university stage. In technical and professional colleges, the position is similar.

In matters of employment the female labour force has grown from about 78.6 million in 1973 to 88.9 million in 1978 and 99.4 million in 1983 and average annual addition of 2.1 million. Their participation rate, however, in proportional terms has declined drastically from 33.7% in 1911 to 20% in 1961.

### Table - 3.3

**Work participation rates for main workers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Rural Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>34.17</td>
<td>52.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R</td>
<td>35.33</td>
<td>53.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>U</td>
<td>29.61</td>
<td>48.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>36.70</td>
<td>52.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R</td>
<td>38.79</td>
<td>53.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>U</td>
<td>29.99</td>
<td>49.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>37.68</td>
<td>51.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R</td>
<td>40.24</td>
<td>52.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>U</td>
<td>30.44</td>
<td>48.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India 1991

The organised sector in India – which is public sector and the nonagricultural private sector – absorbs less than one eighth of the work force of the country.

### Table - 4:

**Percentage of women employed in organised sector**

<table>
<thead>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Directorate General of Employment & Training

The majority of the rural and urban poor are left to the vast, exploitative unorganised sector, which defies standard definitions of employer, employee, rent capital etc. According to the National Commission on self Employed
women, 94% of the total female work force operate within this sector for about 6.1 to 7.5 hours per day. This kind of work is characterised by low earnings, low productivity, low skills, long hours of work and no legal safeguards.

The report of the world conference of the UN Decade for women (Copenhagen, July 1980) has a sentence. “While women represent 50% of the world adult population and a third of official labour force, they perform nearly two-thirds of all working hours, receive only a tenth of world income and own less than one percent of world property”.

In view of the fact that despite development planning and the special status accorded to women in the Indian constitution, there has not been a substantial qualitative improvement in their status, a core group was set up by the department of Women and Child Development in the Ministry of Human Resource Development, to make an in-depth study of the problem. Based on the findings a National Perspective Plan for women for 1988-2000 was presented to the Government of India. It was concluded that the presence or absence of a political will was a crucial factor in determining the success or failure of a programme along with social will.

Development today is no longer synonymous with economic development, it has social and political ramifications also. This has to be a two way process. Women cannot contribute meaningfully in the process of development until their own development is taken care of and for this a holistic approach to women's development including employment, health, housing, support services, education, communication, women's organisations etc. has to be formulated.

An overnight change in the position of women is not possible. The process of change will necessarily be a gradual long drawn one. Women, who have been discriminated both as a sex and as a class, have to fight discrimination at each step. More Important they should realise their own worth and inculcate a sense of pride in themselves.

It is therefore, essential to harness women power by creating conditions conducive to their development & growth. For it is a fact that countries cannot forge ahead if women lag behind.

MASS MEDIA AND MODERN WOMEN

The content of communication at any given time reflects the pattern of values of the society. The way subjects dealing with women are treated, indicate to a great extent the prevailing attitude of the society towards its women. In any country women who are half the population are half the audience. The success or failure of development plans in education, family planning, community development, health and nutrition depends upon the involvement and participation of women. Since formal education is a costly and long term process it is essential to harness the mass media. However, incidental studies on the impact of the mass media indicate that women's exposure to the media is often marginal and unsatisfactory. It appears that the mass media has not been an effective instrument to inform and prepare women
to play their new role in society. Since government controls a significant section of the mass media it should set the pace”.

These words more or less sum up the relationship between women and media in India. The representation of women on the media are false and few. They are few as far as the women decision makers and policy makers are concerned and false as they are represented on the media.

THE BEGINNING

The development of the international women’s movement during the 1970s combined with the impact of international women’s year (1975) and of the United Nations decade for women (1976-1985), led to action by women in a number of different spheres in the international milieu:

a) Monitoring the portrayal of women in the traditional media and lobbying for a more realistic presentation.

b) Pressuring the traditional media to employ more women and especially to increase the number of women in decision making and management positions.

c) Creating alternative women’s media like newspaper, journals, audio visuals, books and publishing houses.

d) Establishing women’s networks, news and press agencies across the globe to help increase the flow of information and news about women within and between all parts of the world.

e) Conducting research, not simply into the portrayal and participation of women in the media, but into media polices and structures and new media technologies affecting women.

Asian communication specialists, media experts, educators and social scientists in various conferences and seminars have been expounding in one form or another on the revolutionary phenomena which have been gripping most of Asia for the last decade or so – the mass media revolution.

There is no doubt that the media have produced such a tremendous impact on the lives of people East & West. Before one can really answer what the mass media can do for women and what women can do for mass media, mass media as phenomena should be seen in their total perspective.

The development of mass media and communication education has a bearing on social change. Women have a role in affecting social change via the development of mass media and communication education, but women who have been involved, their contribution has not been sufficient.

To elicit a wider involvement of women in media development and education:

1. Resources have to be sensitized and mobilized.
2. These resources in turn has to sensitize & mobilize women.

Resources can broadly be classified under the following groups:

1. Those in the Government
2. Those in the non-Government (private profit making organisations)
3. Those among the general public

The attitude of the above three groups are reflected in the mass media through the various policies or lack of them.

Any nation on the path of development cannot neglect nearly half its population. The success of all development plans and programmes depend upon the active involvement and participation of women. For this women and girls should be provided with information, knowledge and skills to facilitate their active and equal involvement and participation in the nations development programmes and activities.

Since formal education as the path to human development is both costly and a long term process, in a developing country like India it is important that mass media and other forms of communication including folk forms brought into use.

It is evident from different studies that mass media so far have not been very effective to inform and prepare society about women's new role in national development. This is mainly due to a limited reach of mass media among woman and girls, specially in the rural areas. Even this limited exposure is in the form of film & film based programmes and not educational or informative programmes which are not attractive enough for common men & women. Thus the modern media can also be a hinderence to change by propagating stereotyped attitudes, if there is no well thought out communication policy for women.

Studies reveal that there is a noticeable association between backwardness or underprivileged condition and deprivation of communication resources. A study of the rural poor who are the largest beneficiaries of the integrated rural development programme, revealed that an overwhelming majority were not exposed to any mass media, only five percent regularly listened to the radio.

**PROMOTIONAL POLICIES AND PLANS**

The National Plan of action for women drawn up, in 1976 urged vigorous campaigns of "education and action". These included use of mass media for a mass education programme, publicity campaigns and innovative use of non formal learning facilities. But the objectives were not clearly stated, as a result of which the years that followed saw an increase in quantity of women's programmes but not in the quality.

Learning from the previous mistakes the sixth five year plans were more precise. A separate chapter on women & development was incorporated in the plan for the first time and it spoke out clearly the need to integrate
objectives for women’s development with broader national objectives. In referring to the need for an improved data base regarding women, it also implied the need to invest in developing feedback mechanisms to monitor the worth of communication & education effects. This plan mentioned the need to effectively involve rural women — if programmes for transformation of rural society were to succeed. It improved on the 1976 blueprint of Action. This also gave clear guidelines to state media services on what the content of their communication should be.

The sixth plan the chapter on communications, Information and broadcasting contained only an oblique promise to use research in order to provide more imaginative intermeshing of the various programme elements (VI-Plan, chapter 18 pt 22). The ministry of information and broadcasting reports of the plan period, by and large, continued to list programmes for women alongwith those for selected backward sections of society.

The seventh Five year Plan (1985-90) thought more clearly on the issue of women’s development. It stated “The long term objective of the development programmes for women would be to raise their economic and social status, in order to bring them into the mainstream of national development. This section goes on to list among key strategies extensive utilization of the various mass media and the adoption of an integrated multi-disciplinary thrust encompassing employment, education, health, nutrition, application of science and technology, etc. as well as the changing of educational programmes and school curricula to eliminate gender bias. In the listing of major programmes that should involve and benefit women-agriculture, livestock, farming and horticulture, rural and urban small scale industry and training in technologies related to these are given high priority.

The seventh plan chapter on communication information & broadcasting picks up some of these causes. Among the priorities are raising the level of people’s consciousness, enriching the social and cultural life making them better informed citizens. It commits the media to being a vehicle of education & extension to narrow information gaps faced by different target groups. It lists youth, women & children and ‘weaker sections’ as key target groups for special programming.

THE IDENTITY CRISIS & THE MODERN WOMAN

The largest oppressed group in Indian society as recognised by the Indian policy makers happen to be the Indian women. This oppression limits their capabilities both in their conventional roles as a home maker as well as the wider roles in the society as a bread earner and responsible citizen. Ignorance about resources have limited women to use what is available, where as lack of self confidence have inhibited them from using whatever resources they have at their disposal.

Women in India find it difficult to grow out of prejudices ingrained in their minds for centuries and passed on from one generation to the other. On the one hand these prejudices have perpetuated themselves among some women whereas in others it has helped to raise significant questions.
Among the institutions perpetuating these prejudices, the mass media happens to be one of the important vehicles. The passivity of female character in films & television remains a major cause of concern. The ideal woman is shown to be the demure, dependent, indecisive and selfless woman whereas any exhibition of authority or confidence in women are considered to be a negative trait. In addition to these even children are stereotyped according to their sex. Where as the little girl is always coking and helping out mother the boy seeks adventure and solves problems.

Even women specific programmes on Radio & TV. Perpetuate sex stereotypes and cater to women as housewives & mothers, rather than provide knowledge & skills for their role as economic contributors.

The print media has also perpetuated the neglect of and damage to women. Till recently embroidery, cooking & home management skills dominated the contents of any woman's magazine or women's page in any newspaper. Atrocities against women from eve teasing to wife beating are described in neutral terms.

To overcome these problems the individual has to start with self awareness Personal involvement is an important prerequisite to a more effective sensitization process where response to stimulus would be a favourable one. If more people respond in the same manner a group can then be organised and made ready for action and there many yet be reason to be optimistic about a greater involvement of women in media development & education.

REFERENCE :