CHAPTER – II

SOCIO – CULTURAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA – A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

This chapter makes an attempt to make an overview of the socio-cultural status of women in India in general and the roles assumed by women as a gender in the changing socio-economic scenario in the country. A change in the attitude of the society towards women during various periods in the history of India is also being portrayed in Section – I of this chapter. Besides these, a review of various schemes introduced by the Government of India for the welfare of women and children after the independence of the country have also been made in Section – II of this chapter.

In Section – I a review of the socio-cultural status of women, her changing roles in the society, changes in outlook that have taken place over years towards women are also being discussed here.

Section – II makes a brief review of various schemes for the welfare of women and children in India, which have been introduced by the Government since independence.
SECTION – I

HISTORY OF THE SOCIO – CULTURAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA

History of women dates back to the history of human beings in the world. Ample example can be cited with regard to the roles played by women in the history of mankind, heroines, rulers, goddesses, etc. Women were not only considered as a link in the life cycle of human beings by giving birth to offspring for retaining human life on earth for centuries together but also played active roles as catalysts in the declaration of wars, annihilation of civilizations, evolution of communities, etc. Women have assumed various roles as a gender for the suppression of emotional feelings of their opposite sex, as warriors, political leaders, administrators, goddesses, philanthropists, persons renowned or chastity and also as slaves, a product of commercial importance, etc. Women as a gender have played equally important roles in the history of prosperity and catastrophes to the mankind.

History of Indian civilization (3,200 BC – 2,750 BC) also give several instances as to the roles and status of women from time immemorial. Reminiscent from Indus Valley Civilization indicates that women folk got high respect in the society during the period. Women were worshipped in the society in the form of mother goddess in addition to them considered as a source of entertainment and housekeepers. Agriculture was the main occupation during this
age. Domestication of animals and spinning and weaving of cotton and woolen clothes were other occupations in Indus Valley Civilization.

Women were held in high esteem during Vedic age (1, 500 BC – 1, 000 BC). They enjoyed equally with men in every range in life. Without their presence, no religious ceremony could be performed. In the social and religious assembling, they possessed an important position. "There is no evidence in the 'Rigveda' of the seclusion of women and the ladies trooped to the festal gathering. Their respectable position in the society also supported by absence of 'purdha' and 'sati'. They had the right of education and had got the same kind of education as men and had been taking part in philosophical debates. During that period women had a sound knowledge of music and dancing. "Swayamvaram" system of marriage was prevalent during this age. Widows were permitted to marry again. Women were also liberal enough even to carry their husbands in indulging in making intercourse with other women. People's important occupation was agriculture during this age. Other occupations were cattle breeding, goldsmithy, carpentry, blacksmithy, weaving, dancing, hair cutting, etc.

The family was a significant unit during Epic age (1, 000 BC – 600 BC) like in Vedic period. During this age, the position of women decreased compared to Vedic period. Women did not get honour and respect from the society during this age. The important reason for the decrease was the prevalence of

polygamy** and polyandry***. The study of the epics confirms this fact. The birth of a daughter was considered as a source of misery and sorrow and the root cause of evil were assumed to be by women. This does not mean that they have no respect at all. Vasishta’s ‘Dharma – Suthra’ states that, "A wife shall not be abandoned, even though she be quarrelsome or strained by incest or has left the house or has suffered criminal force or has fallen into the hands of thieves."

Thus women’s position was quite safe during this age. There is a reference in Manu- Smriti with regard to the safety of women as “where women are worshipped, the gods shower their blessings but where they are not honoured all acts are fruitless.”

Women are referred to as basket makers, dyers, embroiders, etc.

Women were not honoured during pre–mauryan period (560 BC – 321 BC) compared to Vedic period. Buddha did not allow women for the inclusion in the Buddhist Sangha in the beginning stage of this period. This does not mean that women did not get any respect at all. They got proper education and ‘purdha’ system had not evolved as a fashion but at the same time some references as to

---

** Pandu had two wives (Kunti and Madri), in Sree Mahabharatam of Thunjatethzhuthachan published by National Book Stall, Kottayam, p. 240.

the social evils like ‘Sati’ was also followed during this period. Agriculture and cattle feeding was the main occupation of the people.

Joint family system was prevalent mainly during Mauryan period (323 BC – 185 BC). Some families were divided because of the custom of polygamy. The account of Megasthenes and ‘Arthasasthra’ of Kautiliya provides so much information about the position of women during this period. They did not have a high and respectable position in the society during this time when compared to the Vedic period. They were considered as a source of recreation and luxury and ‘purdha’ system was in existence. Megasthenes considered women as a commodity for bargaining and were sold and purchased freely. Dowry system was also popular. In order to get justice on her claim over dowry, property and presents, women had the right to went to the court. In the case of widow marriage and divorce also, women had the right. There was provision of punishment for those women who stepped out of their homes without the approval of their husbands. Some women were well versed in music, dance, painting and other fine arts. There were female bodyguards to Chandragupta Maurya. The social status of women was not as high and respectable during this period as at present. Agriculture was the main occupation of the people and cloth industry flourished well, providing employment to hundreds of helpless women through weaving.

---
* Balaraman and Sreekrishnan gave ‘Sreeedhanam’ in connection with their sister, Subhadra’s Marriage, with Arjuna.
* ‘Bharatha Samgraham of Swami Dayananda Theertha Published by National Book Stall, Kottayam, p. 148.
During the period of Satavahana (28 BC - 225 AD) women had a high status and respectable position in the society. They got more freedom than during the Mauryan period. They got more opportunities for higher education. There were certain instances where women had even taken over the administration. Mothers were highly honoured. Women were also participated in the religious functions with their husbands. Widows were given due regard in the society. Agriculture had continued to be the chief source of livelihood. People especially women were engaged in different crafts such as potters, weavers, oil pressers, artisans, etc.

During Gupta period (320 AD - 540 AD) the position of women had largely deteriorated in certain respects. There were pre-puberty marriages prevalent during that period. Women had no voice in the settlement of their marriages. Most of the womenfolk did not get the opportunity of higher education due to early marriages. Women could participate with their husbands in religious and social functions as there was no 'purdha' system. Cultural and literal education was conferred to girls of higher families. In administration also, they took active part. There was no favouritism with regard to widow marriages. The system of 'sati' was gradually coming into the society. Agriculture was the main occupation

---

"Satakami died, both of his sons Vedrasi and Shaktisri were minors, administrative charge was held by Naganika, the queen of Satakami, Chapter II, K.L.Khurana, Published by Lakshmy Narain Agarwal, Agra 'Political and Cultural history India', p.187.

* Chandragupta married the widow of his brother, Chapter XXXI of VD Mahajan, 'Ancient India', p. 407.

** The wife of Goparaja, burnt herself along with her husband. Chapter XXXII of VD Mahajan, 'Ancient India', p. 465.
and cotton industry was the main industry during this period – Architecture, painting, sculpture, gold smithy and black smithy were the main professions of people.

Women folk got great honour and respect during Rajput Period (650 AD – 1,200 AD). They enjoyed full liberty. Women took active part in public life and were educated. They were also actively involved in playing dances and paint portraits. Active participation of women in discussions of various subjects and instances where they had defeated men could also be seen during this period. They were also well versed in warfare. They learnt how to use swords and spears. They were capable of holding pen with as much facility as the sword. Emergence of efficient women administrators, could also be seen during this period. ‘Sati’ system and child marriage were prevalent. Women had great feelings of patriotism and women like Akkadevi had been shot up to prominence as a warrior and efficient administrators.

During Islam period (1,200 AD – 1,536 AD) many Muslim conquerors married Hindu women, princesses and queens. Alauddhin, for instance, married the Hindu princess Kamala Devi, wife of Karna Deva, the then Raja of Gujarat. Divorce became impossible in Hindu society. Remarriage of widows were also rare in Hindu society. The birth of a girl was considered as an unfavourable event, and as such infanticide was widely spread among Hindus.

---

* Sankaracharya, the great Brahmin Scholar and Advaita Philosopher was defeated by a Brahmin lady who was the wife of Mandan Mishra, Chapter XXXVII of VD Mahajan, ‘Ancient India’, p. 530.

* Akkadevi, the sister of Vikramaditya, the Solanki King. Chapter XXXVII of VD Mahajan, ‘Ancient India’, p. 530.
Many rich and socially respected Hindus were compelled to offer their daughters to marry the Turkish Sultans, their nobles and followers. The evils like ‘purdha’ system, seclusion of women from the society, etc., were introduced largely into the Hindu society. Child marriages were continued to prevail in the society. The deterioration of the status of Hindu women in the society had led them to be highly dependent on their husbands or other male relatives. Women could not get equal rights with men and were prevented to participate in social functions and ceremonies. They were expected to observe strict faithfulness in their marriage life. 'Sati' was widely prevalent throughout the country among Hindus. Among the Rajput royal families women slaves were offered as dowry.

During Mughal Rule, (1526 – 1827) the position of women deteriorated due to the strictness of ‘purdha’ system. But there were some notable, great and learned women during this period. Hindu womanhood maintained its tradition by receiving its strength from religion and usage, yet with regard to general advancement, this period showed little evidence due to suppression and slavery of progress. Sati, infanticide (Kulinism), child marriage, dowry system, polygamy, etc., were quite popular among Hindus during this period.

During British Rule (1765 – 1947) the position of women had gradually developed through the abolition of infanticide, Sati system, child

---

* Mughal Princess Jahanara the partisan of Dara; Roshanara, the partisan of Aurangzeb; Zebunnisa, the daughter of Aurangzeb; Taraba, the regent by Maharashtra; Nurjahan the empress and Jijabai, the mother of Shivaji were some of the notable great and learned women during the Mughal Period.

** Sati system was abolished by William Benetic Prabhu in 1829, Manorama Year Book, 2000, p. 76.
marriage, remarriage of Hindu widows, and polygamy. Women's education have been promoting by Christian missionaries and all the Indian reformers. During this period Hindu women had started discarding 'pardha'; Muslim women had also began to discard it. In 1925, the Government had passed an Act declaring 'devadasi system' as illegal. Slavery system was also abolished during 1843. All these have contributed towards the empowerment of women and had made the womenfolk to enjoy equal privileges as menfolk, at least in certain spheres of activities.

---

** Increased the age of marriage of women as 14 and Men as 18 in 1930, Manorama Year Book, 2000, p. 82.

---

** Abolished remarriage of Hindu widows in 1856, by Caring Prabhu, Manorama Year Book 2000, p.78.

***** Thousands of Missionaries, Roman Catholic and Protestant - Chapters, Book 'Evolution of Indian Culture', B.N Luniya, Published by Lakshmy Narain Agarwal, Agra, p. 433.

* In temples Devadasi system came to an end by passing an Act in the Parliament, Manorama Year Book - 2000, p.82.

** Slavery System was abolished by British, Manorama Year Book, 2000, p. 77.
SECTION – II

GOVERNMENT SCHEMES FOR THE WELFARE OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN INDIA

After independence the needs of women were considered by the planners, starting from the 1st Five Year Plan, but they were viewed merely as beneficiaries of various welfare programmes. This outlook was on the assumption that the benefits of development would percolate to men and from them to women and children. A separate identity to women was neither given nor were the specific needs of women projected as a development issue during this period.

In 1950, there was enactment of important specific legislation like the ‘Equal Remuneration Act’ and amendments in the existing legislations were introduced to protect the interests of women and extend their benefits to them.

In 1970, it became evident to the Government that unless women’s development needs are specifically considered, they will continue to lag behind in all the social and economic sectors and will become increasingly marginalized. In 1970, a separate Bureau of women’s Development in the then Department of Social Welfare and the setting up of a National Committee was done, with the Prime Minister as the Chairman of the Committee. At present there is a separate Department of Women and Child Development.

In 1974, the Committee on the ‘status of women in India’ recommended the establishment of statutory women’s Panchayats at the Village level with autonomy and resources of their own for the management and
administration of welfare and development programme for women and children as transitional measures to break through the traditional attitude that inhibits most women from articulating their problems and participating actively in the existing local bodies. They could be directly elected by the women of the village and should have the right to send representatives to the Panchayat Samiti and Zillah Parishad. The report of the committee generated a lot of interest among researchers, policy makers and the media. The debate it generated received a further impetus on account of the observance of the International Women’s Year in 1975 and the subsequent International Women’s Decade.

The Integrated Child Development Service Programme (ICDS) was launched in 1975 as a comprehensive scheme which not only aims at enhancing the child survival rate but also tends to bring about an improvement in the health, nutrition and educational status of pre-school children and their mothers in a whole-hearted manner. National Plan of Action for women, 1976 advocates a holistic approach for the development of women.

In 1978, Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) was introduced with the basic objective of identifying rural poor families to augment their incomes and cross the poverty line through acquisition of credit based productive assets. It was stipulated that at least 30 per cent of total beneficiaries should be women under this programme and the same had been revised to 40 per cent from 1990-91 onwards.

In 1979, the Government of India introduced another programme known as Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSEM) as self-
employment for poverty alleviation and to train rural youth from the target group of families in skills so as to enable them to take up self-wage employment. This scheme emphasized that out of the total beneficiaries, at least 33 1/3 per cent should be women. The percentage of women beneficiaries were enhanced to 40 per cent from 1990 - 91 onwards.

The programme of Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA), which was introduced in September 1982 aims at improving the socio-economic status of the poor women in the rural areas through creation of groups of women for income generating activities on a self-sustaining basis. CAPART (Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology) was also set up in September 1986 to examine DWCRA products, sales tax and other licensing requirements associated with the above scheme.

National Health Policy (1983) and National Policy on Education (1986), was introduced in order to identify women as vulnerable groups requiring support for their welfare and development.


Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY) introduced in April 1989, was a wage employment programme with its main objective of generation of employment in the lean agricultural season to the unemployed and underemployed rural people living below the poverty line. 30 per cent of the employment opportunities generated through the JRY scheme were reserved for women. JRY, the largest single special employment programme in the country, was launched in 1989 through the merger of the two ongoing employment programmes such as the
National Rural Employment Programme (October 1980) and the Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (15th August 1983).

JRY has been restricted and renamed as Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana in 1996 – 97. With the results of changing the composition of JRY, the components of India Awaz Yojana and Million Wells Scheme were separated as special programmes and separate allotments were provided.


The first step for the political empowerment of women has been initiated with reservations of 33.33 per cent of the total seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions under the constitution (73rd Amendment) Act 1992.

National Nutrition Policy 1993, have identified women as vulnerable groups requiring support for their welfare and development.

In 1993, Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (National Credit Fund Women), established by Government of India with a capital contribution of Rs.31 crore aims at economic empowerment of poor women by meeting their credit requirements.

Mahila Samridhi Yojana Programme was also introduced in October, 1993 with the objective to make affirmative discrimination in favour of women. It enables women to exercise greater control over household resources and to increase their limited access to market, factors of production and financial resources.

The Swarna Jayanti Shahari Rozgar Yojana (SJSRY), which came into operation on 1st December 1997, sub – summing the earlier urban poverty
alleviation programmes, viz., Nehru Rozgar Yojana (NRY), Urban Basic Services Programme (UBSP) and Prime Minister’s Integrated Urban Poverty Eradication Programme (PMIUPEP). The scheme aims at providing gainful employment to the urban employed or under employed poor by encouraging the setting up of self-employment ventures or provision of wage employment. The scheme gives a special emphasis for the empowerment and upliftment of the poor women and launches a special programme, viz., the Development of Women and Children in Urban Areas under which groups of urban poor women setting up self-employment ventures are eligible for subsidy up to 50 per cent of the project cost.

With effect from 1st April 1999, Government of India have made certain modifications and changes in the contents and approaches of centrally assisted poverty alleviation programmes. Integrated Rural Development Programme, Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas, Training of Rural Youths for Self Employment, Supply of Modern Tool Kits to Rural Artisans, Ganga Kalyan Yojana and Million Wells Scheme, these six self employment Programmes have been merged and a new scheme, Swarna Jayanthi, Gram Swarojgar Yojana introduced.

The spectacular advancement in the areas of science and technology, increase in literacy rates and the explosions in the areas of information technology and wide popularity of television and other means of mass communication and the positive attitude of the Government have enabled the womenfolk of India to come out of their shells to involve in dynamic, innovative entrepreneurial activities as an individual or as a group by taking up challenging
opportunities which were hither to the monopoly of menfolk rather than confining to the traditional, low paid, low skilled, low technology and low productive activities. One can see a prominent, attitudinal change even at the household and social level towards the women in taking up or involving in productive activities when one makes an overview of the history of the extent of involvement and status of women in the Indian Society.
REFERENCES


2. ibid, Chapter 5, p.38.

3. ibid.

4. ibid.

5. ibid., Chapter 6, p.52.

6. ibid.


9. ibid, Chapter 10, p. 163.

10. ibid., Chapter 8, p.104.


13. ibid.


15. V.D. Mahajan, op. cit., Chapter, XXXVII, p.530.

17. ibid.

18. ibid., p. 326.