

Chapter-II

STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA – HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In ancient India, though patriarchal system was highly prevalent - all male domination -- women enjoyed a position of respect and reverence. Several inscriptions make references to the status of women in that they enjoyed the freedom to make liberal gifts to religious institutions like temples, *dharmasalas* not merely for the welfare of heads of the families but for their parents as well.

Women held very important position in ancient Indian society. There are evidences to suggest that woman power destroyed kingdoms and mighty rulers. Elango Adigal's Sillapathigaram mentioned that Madurai, the capital of Pandyas was burnt, when Pandyan ruler Nedunchezhiyan killed a woman's husband by mistake. Veda Vyasa's Mahabharata tells the story of the fall of Kauravas because they humiliated Draupadi. Valmiki's Ramayana is also about the annihilation of Ravana when abducted and tried to marry Sita forcibly. The plethora of Goddesses in ancient period was created to instill respect for women. *Ardhanareshwar* (God is half-man and half-woman) was highly worshipped. Women were allowed to have multiple husbands. They could leave their husbands. In the vedic society women participated in religious ceremonies and tribal assemblies. There is no seclusion of women from domestic and social affairs but they were dependent on their male relatives throughout their lives. The system of *Sati* existed among the Aryans in the earlier period. The hymns of the Rig-Veda, the Adharva Veda show that it was still customary for the widow to lay symbolically by the side of her husband's corpse on the funeral, forced child marriages were unknown. Women could choose their husbands through a type of marriage called *Swayamvara*. In this, potential

grooms assembled at the bride's house and the bride selected her spouse. Instances of *Swayamvara* ceremony can be found in epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. This continued even in the later period in high caste families.

As the time passed the position of women underwent changes in all spheres of life. In the vedic period, women lost their political rights of attending assemblies. Child marriages also came into existence. According to the Aitareya Brahmana, a daughter has been described as a source of misery. Atharva Veda also deploras the birth of daughters. Yet, certain matrilineal elements are discernible in this period also. The importance assigned to the wives of the Raja in the Rajasuya Yaga has been regarded as an indication of matrilineal influence. The Vamsavalis or genealogies of teachers attached to the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad in which many seers bear metonymics, indicate their importance. There are references to women seers like Gagri and Maitreyi. However during this period, we see the growing tendency to stratify the Indian society along gender lines. The position of women gradually deteriorated as the Vedic ideals of unity and equality began to fade off through the passage of time. During the period of *Smritis*, women were bracketed with the Sudras and were denied the right to study the Vedas, to utter Vedic mantras and to perform Vedic rites. Marriage or domestic life became compulsory for women and unquestioning devotion to husband is their only duty. During the Mauryan period Brahmanical literature was particularly severe in the treatment of women and assigned them a very low status in the society. Buddhist texts on the other hand were much more considerate in treating them. Megasthenes testifies to the growing practice of polygamy; employment of women as palace guards, bodyguards to the kings, spies etc., permission of widow remarriage and divorce. Thus the position of women though inferior was not as bad as it came to be in the later ages.

Since women and property are bracketed together in several references in the epics, *Smritis* and *Puranas*, women came to be regarded as a sort of property. She could be given away or loaned as any item of property. This was the attitude of a typical patriarchal society based on private property. The Brahmanical law did not allow any proprietary rights to women; the provision for *stridhana* is of a very limited nature and does not extend beyond the wife's rights to jewels, ornaments and presents made to her at the time of her marriage. The practice of using veils by women of high caste families was in vogue. In South India also the position of women deteriorated. Remarriage of widows was generally not favoured. Their positions were very bad as they had to shave their heads, discard all their ornaments and eat only plain food that too once in a day and wear white clothes. If anyone goes out on some work, and faces a widow, was considered as a bad woman. They are generally not invited to witness any social functions such as marriage, naming of a child, etc., except to render domestic labour.

Women of higher status - *Agra Varnas* were given higher education while a common housewife received limited education. Nevertheless, she was very well acquainted with social morals and worldly affairs. Women were able to win the heart of their husbands, through absolute devotion, commanded respect from children and received the affection of elders. Because of these laudable qualities woman was considered as the goddess of prosperity of the family.

This brighter aspect of the high status of women in ancient India explains only one side. However, the other side of the picture of women was not so rosy. Several inscriptions and references in literature make it clear that polygamy, particularly among the kings, nobles, rich and high caste men were not uncommon. Polygamy apart,

maintaining concubines was considered a social status.

The temple dancers played an important part in promoting fine arts like dance and many inscriptions attest to the fact that the temple dancers enjoyed a position of respect in society.

Social status and general respect apart, women of the early and medieval Andhra enjoyed freedom to a considerable extent. Woman was trusted and respected in all walks of life. This can be studied from different points of view taking the statuses of women into consideration.¹

Status of women in Medieval Andhra

A brief account of the status enjoyed by women during early medieval period of Andhra is quite necessary for our understanding of the position of women in Indian society. Women of high status such as queens, princesses, and wives of nobles, courtesans and dancers were educated in different fields including that of statecraft so that they would give right advice at the right time to their husbands. At the same time, queens warranted by the exigencies like the death of their husbands took the reins of administration into their hands.

Ganapamba, daughter of Kakatiya king Ganapathy and wife of Kota Chief Beta, ruled the region after the death of her husband. Ganapamba can be regarded as an ideal woman and devoted wife who widely commanded the respect and loyalty of her subjects.²

¹ The Beauty of India: Andhra Pradesh; Chief Editor: S.A. Rehman, Reference Press, New Delhi, 2005, p.224.

² *Ibid.*

The Mogultla inscription records the gifts the queen gave to a Brahman who performed *Sraddha* rituals of death for her husband. Ganapamba was considered as an ideal wife. Her deep devotion to her husband is attested by her actions.

It is well known to the students of history, that Kakatiya Rudramadevi, an efficient administrator, diplomat and a person of remarkable valour who in spite of worst challenges and circumstances ruled the kingdom for 27 years.

Another woman, by Kansani, wife of the Viriyala chief Erra helped the Kakatiya ruler Beta I in acquiring Anumakonda-vishaya as a gift from the Chalukya king.

A number of inscriptions attest to the liberal gifts made to temples by the queens, princesses and wives of nobles. Already a reference has been made to Ganapamba of the Kakatiya dynasty for her generosity.

One of the inscriptions from Simhachalam dated S.1148 records, the gifts of land by Gangadevi, the queen of Biragottamu Bayyaraju to the god Narasimha. Another inscription of Panagallu dated 1124 A.D. records the gift of an *Agrahara* for the merit of Bhima by his mother Mallmamba to 108 Brahmins.³

Yet another inscription from Pillalamarri dated 1202 A.D. records among other charities, the consecration of Shiva and certain gifts for maintaining services in the temple by Aitama, the wife of the Racheruvula Chieftain Nama Reddy. She also made another gift for the memory of her mother, Gannamma. It further refers to the tank which was excavated by Vallasani, a sister of Nama Reddy.

³ *Ibid.*

Thus, we have many references to the construction of tanks, temples and *dharmasalas* by the wives of chiefs belonging to the Kakatiya period.

Religious Freedom

The foregoing brief account bears testimony to the religious freedom enjoyed by the women of high rank and social status. These generous gifts to temples and Brahmins made the elite sections of the society happy and comfortable.

Thus, it is quite reasonable to assure that the women of the royal and wealthy families were well educated. They received such instruction which included not only fine arts like music, dance and painting etc., but also literature, prosody, poetics, etc. One of the inscriptions from Panagallu refers to one Shivarani, who is described as *Kaliyuga Saraswati*. Another inscription of Panagallu refers to Mallmamba, mother of the Chief Bhima as *Vagdevi*. She has been praised by scholars as the goddess of learning. Though such references do not convey any information with regard to the scholarship of women, it can be surmised, that women of high rank and social status of *Agra varnas* were given education deserving to their position. The diplomatic part played by Nagamamba *Nayakuralu* of Palanadu in the family feud is too well known to the people of Telugu speaking to be recounted here.

Participation in Religious Rites and Rituals

We have quite a few references to the queens gifting *Shivalingam* for the *Punyaloka Prapthi* of their deceased husbands. The Bothpur inscription records that Kuppambika constructed a temple and consecrated a *Shivalingam* in the name of her deceased husband for his heavenly merit. It is believed that by installing *Shivalingas* in

temples, the donors will obtain salvation from many religious activities such as performing worships; yagas etc.

Yet another inscription from Tadikonda dated 1266 A.D. recounts the consecration of a *Shivalingam* by Pannambika for the *Shivaloka Prapthi* of her husband Manukota. These instances serve as good examples for the deep devotion in which women held their late husbands.

Onerous Responsibilities

Woman in general in ancient and medieval India had various responsibilities like looking after the comforts of her husband, bringing up children, serving elders and the infirm of the family, showing compassion to the guests and servants, etc. Though an average woman received a little education she had good knowledge of morals, religious rites and rituals to make her an ideal woman in all respects. A plethora of inscriptions unequivocally point to the fact that she enjoyed considerable domestic freedom. One of the inscriptions from Nadendla dated 1156 A.D. records the setting up of a perpetual lamp by Kommava for the merit of her parents. These instances reveal the religious freedom enjoyed by women in medieval Andhra.

Strong Family Bonds

Several inscriptions suggest the existence of strong family bonds among the members of the households. We have many instances of instituting of different kinds of services by individuals for the merit of their kith and kin. Numerous sources record several endowments made for the merit of the parents of the donors. One source indicates that Bejewada registered the gift of half of a lamp and thirteen cows to the god

Malleswara Mahadeva by one Mareboyudu for the memory of his grandfather and parents. These instances which are a few of many, clearly show the existence of excellent harmony between family members as well as the great esteem in which the grandparents, parents, brothers and sisters were held. In this context, we may recall that many inscriptions belonging to the Kakatiya period record the consecration of deities by chiefs who named them after their mothers. An inscription from Nagulpadu records that the Racharla chieftain Katarreddi constructed the temple of Nameswara.⁴

Women and Temples

There are several epigraphical references to many women associated with temples in different capacities. Most of them were musicians, engaged in decorating temples by the way of drawing *Rangavallis* and women in charge of menial work like cleaning utensils, sweeping the temple arena, drawing water from the wells, etc. These do not include temple dancers. One of the inscriptions from Nadendla gives a large list of women who were impressed by the *Mulasthan Mahadeva* temple, of whom some were experts in instrumental music and some were umbrella holders. Another source belonging to Draksharamam dated 1084 A.D. mentions that, two women were employed by the temple for pounding paddy, cleaning the temple and fetching water.⁵ Women thus employed for various purposes were paid wages both in cash and kind. Besides these facilities, they were served food and if necessary provided shelter in the temple. For the menial jobs the services of poor women were engaged. They were looked after adequately.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Temple Dancers

Several temples engaged the services of dancers and musicians. They were attached to the temples as *Sahis (Swaminil)*. Dance and music are among the sixteen kinds of *Upacharas* to be offered to god. Hence young women who were excellent in these twin fine arts were associated with temples. Andhra Pradesh is replete with a number of inscriptions relating to women who were proficient in dance and music. *Bhogam, Narthaki, Vilasini* and all temple dancers to be offered to the service of god. Even prostitutes were associated with temple service.

This implies that prostitutes were not considered as taboo but were highly respected for their accomplishments. When a girl who belongs to a family of high social status was married was given initial coaching by the prostitute as to how to attract her spouse.

Devadasis

Though the term *Devadasi* is also frequently used in the same sense in literature, it is seldom found in the inscriptions of Andhra Pradesh. According to A.Vaidehi Krishna Murthy, in ancient period there were seven kinds of *Dasis*, such as

1. *Datta* or one who gave herself as a gift to temple.
2. *Vlkanta* or one who had been sold for the same purpose.
3. *Britya* or one who offers herself as a temple servant for the prosperity of her family.
4. *Bhakta* or who joined a temple out of devotion.
5. *Hrita* or who was enticed away and presented to a temple.
6. *Alankara* is one who is well trained in her profession and profusely decorated was presented to a temple by the king and noble men, to add to the magnificence and

charm of the temple, and

7. *Rudraganika* or *Gopika* who received regular wages from a temple being employed to sing and dance.

That donating women to temples as dancing girls by kings, chiefs, noblemen, rich and even commoners was a well recognised practice in ancient and medieval India. Most of these girls were purchased from their parents by the donors, history also records instances of parents / grandparents donating the girls belonging to their household either in order to fulfil a religious vow or earn *Punya*. In any case unmarried girls recruited into the service of temples were quite a popular practice. The Velpuru inscription dated 1254 A.D. states that Bayyaladevi and Ganapatiraju gifted Akkamma as *Sani* - a prostitute in the service of god.

***Sanis* form guilds**

One Simhachalam inscription refers to some agreement between *Sanulu* and *Sampradaya Manikkamulus* staying at Simhachalam, according to which if *Sanis* of one group harm the other group's interests, such *Sanis* would be ex-communicated. It further says that same holds good for the *Sanis* of *Sudra* community also. The term *Sampradayam* is used during the post-Kakatiya period and restricted to the areas of Visakhapatnam and Srikakulam districts of Andhra Pradesh.

Women belonging to different castes chose to become *Sanis* in the temples. A deep sense of dedication to god coupled with proficiency in dancing and music have been responsible for the exodus to temples. An inscription from Malkapuram refers to two *Sanis*, among others, belonging to *Settis*. Therefore, it is evident that *Sanis* were recruited from respectable families often from *Agra Varnas* as well.

We came to know from the inscription of Vijayawada period that often the daughters and granddaughters of dance masters and musicians were recruited to the temple services. Naturally these young girls were dancers par excellence.

Though the foremost duty of the *Sanis* was to please the gods in temples through their dance and music, they were allotted for other functions as well, such as related to temple administration, waving fly whisks to the deities, singing *Mangala Geetams* and rendering devotional songs often in the form of *Slokas*. These *Sanis* endeared themselves to the society by their selfless dedication and service.

With regard to the function of temple administration they were mostly associated with the *Sanis* belonging to the districts of Krishna, Guntur, East and West Godavari. An epigraph from Ghantasala (Krishna district) dated 1114 A.D. states that Kota Kommisetti made a gift of perpetual lamp to the god *Jaladisavara- Mahadeva* and entrusted to Rajaraja- *Madas* to the *Sani-Munnuruvaru* who were also to maintain the gift lamp by supplying sufficient quantity of ghee. Yet another record from Kotappa Konda (Guntur district) says that a shepherd received the sheep for maintaining a perpetual lamp with the consent of the Maharanis of Kavuru and the *Sanis* of the Trikoteswara temple.

Institutionalisation of *Sanis*

The foregoing narration shows that the *Sanis* had manifold duties demanding their professional skills as well as administrative capability. There is ample evidence to show that the dancers were well taken care of by kings, noblemen, rich people who provided them with food and shelter. Arrangements were made by granting villages, lands, money, etc., to conduct regular worship and other services such as music and dance in the

temples. Apart from the wages and share in *prasadam*s, the *Sanis* were provided with houses also.

A careful study of the *Sani* institution reveals many bright aspects of it. *Sanis* belonged to noble families. Their main aim was to worship god by their music and dance. To accomplish this, they were given training right from the childhood. A number of temples had *Natya Mandapas* - dais for dancing where the *Sanis* performed dance and music gracefully. The themes are devotional. One of the inscriptions of Prataparudra Ganapaty records that the king ordered that only *Gitagovindam* dance should be performed before the god Jagannath of Puri.

The very fact that the *Sanis* were considered auspicious vouches for their sanctity. This is well attested by the practice which was obtaining in the Srirangam temple where “one of the devadasi’s adored herself after bath and stood in the *Alayamandapam* during early morning service” when the elephant and the cow were presented.

Bhogastrees (Concubines)

Several inscriptions mention *Bhogastrees* or concubines of the kings, chiefs and nobles. It is amusing to note that we find the expression *Bhogasatula* (Plural of *Bhogasati*). The term *Bhogastree* distinguishes the concubine from the legal wife who is referred to as *Kulapatni*. The *Bhogastrees*, the graceful, proficient in music and dance, and well versed in the art of entertaining men with their charms. A good majority of them are not of loose character but the *de fact* wives of the respective kings, chiefs, noble men, etc.

One of the inscriptions from Bhimavaram dated 1201.A.D. refers to Erakama-Mahadevi as *Bhogam manishi* of the chief Sammangiraju who had a son by her called

Sanikyaraju and who held Pottapinadu region (East Godavari district) as his *Vritti*.⁶ It is very strange that the term Mahadevi which is usually used to devote the chief queen is appended to the name of a *Bhogastree*. *Bhogastrees* thus enjoyed the socio-economic status of the women of higher strata of the society.

An inscription from Mukhalingam dated 1123 A.D. mentions Kasadi Suramadevi as the *Bhogastree* of Kota Ketu and records a gift by her to the god Rameswara-Mahadeva. Another inscription from Velpuru mentions *Kommasani* as the *Bhogastree* of Kota Chief Goka and her son, daughter-in-law, grandsons and granddaughters and a great granddaughter as well. This example is cited to buttress the fact that no social or economic discrimination was made between *kula strees* and *bhogastrees* and that all women enjoyed equal status and respect. These are only a few of many examples which mention the *Bhogastrees* of kings and affluent persons and their charities. *Kridabhiramamu*, the noted Telugu work refers to Machaladevi who was the *Bhogastree* of Kakatiya Prataparudra, famous for her beauty, grace and accomplishments in various fine arts.

Prostitutes

Apart from *Bhogastrees* who enjoyed the patronage of the higher strata of the society, there is another class of women known as prostitutes. They are by profession prostitutes. We do not have much information about them in the form of inscriptions but ancient and medieval literature tell us that they were condemned as totally of loose character, highly tricky and cruel enough to murder their paramours for the sake of money. They were often compared to leeches because of their nature of exacting money

⁶ *Ibid.*

from anyone who approached them. Thus, they are portrayed as most unscrupulous, unfaithful and dangerous. Nannechoda in his *Kumarasambhavam* and Palakuriki Somanna in his *Basavapurāṇalu* dealt with their greedy and tricky nature at length.

Held in High Esteem

The foregoing study drives home the point that in general, women in ancient and medieval period were held in high esteem though the part played by them in public life was next to nothing.

Polygamy and maintaining *Bhogastrees* were most common practices which received social recognition too. They are indulged in particularly among the royal and rich families. Another notable feature is that the kings and chiefs married women of other castes and regions to suit their political convenience. The wives of the kings, chiefs and nobles were in general literate and religious-minded as is evident from several inscriptions which register gifts made by them to the temples, Brahmins, etc. Most of the women of higher strata were well educated and talented in fine arts also.

Woman was much respected in the family. She was considered to be key person of the household. She had to discharge multiple responsibilities as a wife, mother, daughter-in-law, etc., particularly in the context of joint family system. Joint family was more a rule than exception in ancient and medieval period.

In all religious functions woman had to accompany her husband. She also enjoyed religious freedom in the sense of performing *Pujas*, observing *Vratams*, etc. She had the freedom of making gifts to temples for the merit of herself, her husband, her parents or children.

Stree Dhanam

At the time of her marriage, woman used to receive jewellery, land, etc., as gifts from her parents and these were considered to be *Stree Dhanam*. One of the inscriptions from Vijayawada lays down the convention of the *Telikis* that in the event of death of a married woman only her husband would have claim over her jewellery and not her parents. In this context, we may note that the famous law book *Vignaneswaramu* classified a woman's property *Stree Dhanam* into five categories that which is inherited, that which is purchased, that which is given as a gift, that which accrues by co-sharing and that which is unclaimed. "If father becomes bankrupt, his daughters must be given atleast their mother's property." Women's property is inherited wholly by daughters, husband cannot take her wife's property "except during the time of a powerful wind, disease, calamity or as a state duty".⁷

Though the woman of medieval periods had no equal property rights with those of men, her status grew higher than before.

We can understand from a number of references which record the gifts made by women who referred to themselves as *Bhogastrees* without any hesitation. Though concubinary was condemned as a social evil, it was not condemned as such and that it was quite common among the affluent. The sons who were born of those concubines held high positions in several kingdoms.

Thus in ancient and medieval period women in India in general and in Andhra in particular enjoyed fairly reasonable socio-economic status and were held in high esteem.

⁷ *Ibid.*

The changing status of Indian women

Within the four principal castes, there are thousands of sub-castes, also called *jatis*, endogamous groups that are further divided along occupational, sectarian, regional and linguistic lines. Collectively all of these are sometimes referred to as ‘caste Hindus’, or those falling within the caste system. The SCs are described as *varna* are “outside the system”- so inferior to other castes that they are deemed polluting and therefore “untouchable”. Even as outcasts, they themselves are divided into further sub-castes. Although “untouchability” was abolished under Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, the practice continues to determine the socio-economic and religious standing of those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Whereas the first four *varnas* are free to choose and change their occupation, *Dalits* have generally been confined to the occupational structures into which they are born. The Constitution has merely prescribed, but has not given a description of the ground reality.

With little land of their own to cultivate SC men, women, and children numbering in the tens of millions work as agricultural labourers for a few kilograms of rice or Rs.15 to Rs.35 (US \$0.38 to 0.88) a day. Most live on the brink of destitution, barely able to feed their families and unable to send their children to school or break away from cycles of debt bondage that are passed on from generation to generation. At the end of the day, they return to a hut in the SC colony with no electricity, kilometres away from the nearest water source, and segregated from all non-SCs known as caste Hindus. They are forbidden by caste Hindus to enter places of worship to draw water from public wells or to wear shoes in caste Hindu presence. They are made to dig the village graves, dispose of dead animals, clean human waste with their bare hands, and to wash and use separate

tea tumblers at tea stalls, all because due to their caste status they are deemed polluting and therefore, “untouchable”. Any attempt to defy the social order is met with violence or economic retaliation.

The perpetuation of human rights abuses against India’s SCs population is intimately connected to police abuse. Local police officials routinely refuse to register cases against caste Hindus or enforce relevant legislation that protects their own caste and gender biases, or under the thumb of influential landlords and upper-caste politicians. Police not only allow caste Hindus to act with impunity but in many cases operate as agents of powerful upper caste groups to detain SCs who organise in protest against discrimination and violence, and to punish SC villagers because of their suspected support for militant groups.

Even though India’s ancient caste system was abolished legally (caste discrimination) is still entrenched socially and politically. “People are very well aware of their caste membership”, housing is still arranged along caste lines.⁸

Status of Indian Women and the role of Legislation

Position of women in society is the index to the standard of social organisation. In ancient India woman enjoyed equal status with man in all fields of life, she received the same education like man, many Hindu religious books like Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata have mentioned the names of several women who were great scholars, poets and philosophers of the time. Wife was regarded as ‘*Ardhangini*’ which means she is half of her husband. An unmarried man was considered to be incomplete man. All religious ceremonies were performed by the husband along with the wife.

⁸ Robert Cooke, Newsday, an Francisco Chronicle, dt. 26 May, 1999.

But in the medieval period, the status of women went down considerably. She was considered to be inferior to man. Decline in the status of women in Indian society begins with the Muslim rule in India: customs of *pardha*, *sati*, child marriage, restrictions on widow marriage and prevalence of joint family system have been the factors responsible for the injustice meted out to women.

The position of women in modern India has changed considerably. Her position in modern India is equal to that of men, socially, economically, educationally, politically and legally. Her sufferings from *Sati*, Child Marriage, Institution of temple prostitution do no longer exist.

Today women have the right to receive education, inherit and own property and participate in public life. She has become economically independent. She can seek employment anywhere and remains a free individual. She enjoys the equal status with man in all.

Several factors like women's education, reform movements, women's participation in politics and many social legislations are responsible for the changes in the day-to-day life of women in today's India, some of the important statutory legislations to improve the positioning of women are:

- The Hindu Widow Re-marriage Act of 1856
- The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929
- The Hindu Women Right to Property Act of 1937
- The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955
- The Hindu Succession Act of 1956
- The Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act of 1956-57, and
- The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961.

Modern Period

In the modern period, the status of Indian women can be divided into two distinct periods, the British rule, i.e., Pre-Independent India and the Post-Independent India. The British Rule in the 18th century brought in some degree of political orderliness, but the social structure, customs and practices remained unchanged. It was mainly during the 19th century that the reform movement undertaken by enlightened thinkers and leaders of Indian society like Raja Rammohan Roy who understood the importance of women's participation that the status of Indian women started changing for the better. Though initially all the leaders were men, women gradually came into the scene and played their role not only in changing history but also the society as a whole, through their efforts in different areas of work such as education, politics and freedom movement. Mrs. Annie Besant, Dr. Sarojini Naidu, Kamladevi Chattopadhyay, Mrs. Nellie Sengupta, Durgabai Deshmukh and many others gave a change and betterment. Indian women actively participated in the freedom movement to highlight the importance of the elevation of the status of the Indian women which also had different thrusts. The founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885 and Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent movement not only led to the political emancipation but also was a step in the direction for social reconstruction. Women took equal initiative and participated in all types of struggle for national freedom, i.e., non-violent movement advocated by Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, as well. Women's enthusiasm in participating in the armed revolution helped Netaji Subash Chandra Bose to set up the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army. Women's participation in the freedom movement was very extensive. Smt. Kasturba Gandhi, Madam Bhikaji Cama, Sarla Devi, Muthu Lakshmi Reddy, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kriplani, Durga Bai Deshmukh, Priti Lata Waddedar, Captain Lakshmi and

Janaki Davar of INA, Jahanara Shahnawaz, Randhabai Subbarayan, etc., are only a few to have out of the many.⁹

Growing Need for Women Empowerment

Throughout history and in many societies including India, gender inequality was part and parcel of an accepted male dominated culture. Atrocities and discrimination are the two major problems, which the women face in the contemporary India. The traditional mentality assumes that women are mainly confined to the household activities like “kitchen and kids”. They have been considered as the sex object and inferior to men in different spheres of life. The ‘Sati Pratha’, ‘Pardah System’, ‘Child Marriage’, ‘Dowry System’, etc., have been some forms of atrocities and discriminatory attitudes against women. Even after six decades of Indian Independence, women are still one of the most powerless and marginalised sections of Indian Society. The 2001 Census shows that the sex ratio for India is 933, which is lowest in the world. Percentage of female literacy is 54.16 (2001 Census) against male literacy of 75.85 per cent. In India, women’s representation in Parliament and in the State Assemblies has never been beyond eight and 10 per cent respectively. Most of the working women remain outside the organised sector. Mere 2.3 per cent of women are administrators and managers, 20.5 per cent professional and the technical workers all of whom collectively earn 25 per cent of the shared income. Violence against women is on the rise.

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the state to adopt

⁹ Jayaprakash Devavrinda (Internet).

measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women. Another Constitutional Amendment (84th Constitutional Amendment Act 1998) reserving 33 per cent seats in Parliament and State Legislature is still in the pipeline. It is still a distant dream.

Parliament passed various legislations to safeguard Constitutional Rights to women. These legislative measures include, the Hindu Marriage Act (1955), The Hindu Succession Act (1971), Equal Remuneration Act (1976), Child Marriage Restraint Act (1976), Immoral Trafficking (Prevention) Act (1986) and finally Pre-natal Diagnostic Technique (Regulation and Prevention of Measure) Act (1994) etc. Apart from these, various welfare measures have been taken up by the Government from time to time to empower the women. They are Mahila Samridhi Yojana (1993), the Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (1992-93), Indira Mahila Yojana (1995), DWCRA Plan (1997) and Balika Samridhi Yojana (1997). On 12th July 2001, the Mahila Samridhi Yojana and Indira Mahila Yojana have been merged into the integrated self-help group programme i.e., Swayam Siddha. The Government of India in 1953 established a Central Social Welfare Board with a nation-wide programme for grants-in-aid for women, children and underprivileged group. A separate department of women and child development was set up at the Centre in 1985 to give a district identity and provide a nodal point on matters relating to women's development. National Commission on Women was created by an Act of Parliament in 1992. Besides these, India has also ratified various International conventions and human rights.

Socio-Economic and Political status of Women in Andhra Pradesh

Though the early and medieval Andhra society was a male dominated one, women enjoyed a position of respect and reverence. Many contemporary inscriptions make it particularly clear that they enjoyed the freedom to make liberal gifts to religious institutions. Women of higher status were given good education though to a limited extent. Nevertheless, she was very well acquainted with moral and material affairs. She was also able to win the heart of her husband by her absolute devotion, command respect from children and from other members of the family. Through her selfless service, she was regarded as the most important person in the family. Because of these laudable qualities woman was considered to be the very goddess of prosperity (Lakshmi) of the house.¹⁰

Social Background

However, there is also a darker side to this rosy picture polygamy prevailed particularly among the kings, nobles and the rich and having concubines who were often referred to as *Bhogamanishi*. Another important institution referred to widely in several inscriptions was the Devadasi or temple dancer. The temple dancers played a very important role in promoting arts like music and dance. These dancers enjoyed a position of respect in society.

Women, in general, enjoyed high status. We have the best example of an efficient administrator, diplomat and a person of remarkable valour in Kakatiya Rudramma who in spite of worst challenges came out victorious and ruled the kingdom for 27 years.¹¹

¹⁰ Raheman, S.A. (ed.) (2005). "The Beautiful India: Andhra Pradesh," New Delhi, pp. 223-40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Various Responsibilities

Woman in general, as stated above, had various responsibilities like looking after the comforts of her husband, bringing up children, serving elders of the family, showing compassion to the guests and servants, etc. Though woman received education to a limited extent, she had good knowledge of religious rituals, as she sat with her husband in offering worship and attending temples. A plethora of inscriptions unequivocally point to the fact that she enjoyed considerable freedom.

A large number of women made liberal gifts to many temples for maintaining various services. An inscription from Srikurmam dated 1266 A.D. records the gift of one perennial lamp (*Deeparadhana*) by Bhagaladevi who was a musician. Another inscription from Mukhalingam (1185 A.D.) records the monetary gift given to a temple by one Duggamma in memory of her husband.¹² These instances reveal the religious freedom enjoyed by women in early and medieval Andhra.

In general, women were held in high esteem though the part played by them in public affairs was very little. Polygamy and *Bhogastris* were very common till the advent of 20th century. It was considered to be a status symbol for men of rich and high caste families to maintain concubines. The wives of kings, nobles were in general literate and religious minded women.

Contemporary literature too tells us that a woman was much respected in the family. She had to discharge multiple responsibilities as a wife, daughter-in-law, mother, mother-in-law etc., particularly in a joint family which was more prevalent in those days.

¹² *Ibid.*

In all religious duties, she has to accompany her husband. The practice of dedicating young girls to temple services (*jogini*) was in vogue. Woman also used to get “*Streedhanam*” which is exclusively for her use. Thus, women in Andhra during ancient and medieval period enjoyed considerable social status, economic security and commanded respect from the society.

Since the British period, the three regions of Andhra Pradesh continued to reflect three different specific life styles and cultures. During the British rule in India, the Coastal Andhra region could raise its wealth enormously through utilisation of water resources thanks to the constructions of dams on the rivers Godavari and Krishna; while Rayalaseema region was alienated from modern development for want of water on the one hand and prevalence of factionalism on the other though it was part of British India; whereas Telangana region remained backward as it was under the rule of rigid feudal Nizam rulers.

Inter-Regional Differences

The inter-regional differences and disparities created dissatisfaction, disbelief and fear among people to unite as one State. Therefore, Sribagh Pact (1937) with Rayalaseema and Gentlemen’s Agreement (1956) with Telangana was made to get confidence of the people of these regions and ultimately the State of Andhra Pradesh was formed as a linguistic State on 1st November 1956.

The inter-regional disparities naturally affected the status and conditions of women in respective regions. In Coastal Andhra, the issues of women’s education, child marriages, bride price, widow remarriage, dowry, divorce, property right and right to vote

had been addressed owing to the influences of reformist as well as nationalist movements. However, certain problems could get legal guarantees and solutions. In Telangana, in the context of women's active participation in the Telangana Peasant Armed Struggle, the issues, particularly feudal oppression and exploitation were seriously addressed and the Telangana women could get liberation from feudal, sexual exploitation.

The issues that were addressed in Coastal Andhra resulted in the personal development of women's lives. Consequently, the women could enter into modern development. In Telangana, though the liberation from feudal exploitation was secured, it did not incorporate the primary aspects related to personal development of women. For a greater part of period, the Nizam state - the present Telangana - was under the Muslim rule. Hence in this region of Andhra Pradesh much development towards the advancement did not take place. As a result, Telangana women remained relatively backward when compared to Coastal Andhra particularly from the view point of modern development, though the Rayalaseema region was a part of Madras Presidency along with Coastal Andhra, the development did not encompass this region. Thus, the people in general and women in particular of Telangana and Rayalaseema were distant from the fruits of modern development.

Demographic Aspects

Demographic aspects also form part of the international standards to estimate the status of women. The concepts of Female-Male Ratio (FMR), Maternal Mortality Rate, and Girl Child Mortality Rate are useful to understand the question of women. The observation in regard to trends in Female-Male Ratio in Andhra Pradesh as well as India

reveals the fact that it is always less than unity over a period of five decades from 1951 to 2001. Females who are 986 for 1000 males in 1951 in Andhra Pradesh continuously show a declining trend and reached 972 in 1991. However, it shows a little rise to 978 in 2001. Moreover, FMR in Andhra Pradesh is relatively better when compared to All India.¹³

It is important to notice that the FMR has exceeded in certain districts of Andhra Pradesh according to 1991 and 2001 Census reports.¹⁴ They are Srikakulam, Vizianagaram and Adilabad as per 1991 Census while Karimnagar is added to them in 2001. The FMR is lowest in Hyderabad in 1991 while this position is occupied by Rangareddy district in 2001. The districts like Srikakulam, which are known for economic backwardness, could show progress in terms of gender development while the districts like Hyderabad and Rangareddy, which are forward in terms of economic development, but backward in gender development is a contradiction. Thus, there is no positive correlation between economic progress and gender development. The expression of unwillingness in different forms towards the birth of girl child reflects in low FMR.¹⁵

Though maternal mortality has been identified as a serious problem as early as in 1951, it still remained unsolved. This is indicated by the inclusion of this goal in New Millennium Declaration. One study in Andhra Pradesh (in 2000) revealed that 200 women die in every one lakh deliveries. This is due to lack of availability of adequate medical facilities. This problem can be solved only through the provision of ensuring births in hospitals. As per 1991 Census, the hospital births are only 38 per cent.

¹³ "Facts and Figures of Andhra Pradesh", *Directorate of Economics and Statistics*, Government of Andhra Pradesh.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Therefore, the Millennium Development Goals state that measures should be taken to improve the situation.

In Andhra Pradesh, even in 1998, as many as 69 girl children died for every 1,000 births. However, girl child mortality rate is slightly low when compared to male child mortality rate. This is because of the fact that several methods are followed to prevent the birth of girl child. If these disguised deaths of girl child were added, the mortality rate of girl child would have been higher. This phenomenon is called 'missing women' by Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen whose study revealed that the number of 'missing women' in India was as high 37 millions in 1986. This includes the share of Andhra Pradesh also.

LITERACY

Literacy has been recognised as a basic human right. Its availability is a key aspect in the determination of women's development. The female literacy rate is always low when compared to male literacy rate. In 1961, in Andhra Pradesh, female literacy rate is as low as 12.03 per cent. It reached 15.65 per cent in 1971, 24.16 per cent in 1981 and 35.72 per cent in 1991. However, it suddenly jumped to 51.02 per cent in 2001. It is to be noticed that the female literacy rate was never equal to male literacy rate which clearly indicates gender inequality. Further, rural-urban and caste-wise variation can be noticed in regard to female literacy rate. In 1991, in Andhra Pradesh, rural female literacy rate was 23.92 per cent while it was 56.41 per cent in urban areas. Moreover, SC female literacy rate in rural areas is as low as 16.19 per cent and it is 7.29 per cent for ST women. Thus, SC and ST women stand last in regard to literacy.¹⁶

¹⁶ "Facts and Figures of Andhra Pradesh", *Directorate of Economics and Statistics*, Government of Andhra Pradesh.

ECONOMIC STATUS

Usually status of any individual is determined on the basis of economic status which is attained through utilisation of rights, opportunities, and participation in decision-making. Again the economic status enhances the capacity to exercise rights, utilise opportunities and active participation in decision making. Provision of employment is the basis of economic status. Though women work continuously throughout their lives, women who are in paid work are only 30.44 per cent in female population in 1991. The percentage share of men in total workforce was to the tune of 64.9 per cent while it was 35.1 per cent for women. Out of them, women who work in rural areas were 38.90 per cent, while in urban areas they were only 18.7 per cent. During the same period, 60 per cent of women were working as agricultural labourers, 35.1 per cent as main workers and as high as 86.9 per cent were marginal workers. All these statistics clearly show that the majority of women are finding their livelihood in unorganised sectors. Moreover, majority of them are either agricultural labour or marginal workers. Thus, they find no guarantee for their jobs and income and have been marginalised in the society. Most of the SC women in rural areas are engaged in agriculture as workers. While in towns they take more work as servant maids or employed in factories on daily/weekly wages.¹⁷

Inter-regional variation can be noticed in regard to women's work participation rates. Telangana stands first in this regard followed by Rayalaseema and Coastal Andhra, respectively. Women's work participation rates are related to unorganised and marginal sectors. Therefore, work participation rates will not indicate women's development at

¹⁷ Facts and Figures of Andhra Pradesh, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Andhra Pradesh.

any cost. Further, this reveals the fact as to what extent they are subjected to exploitation. Owing to this poor economic status, women are forced to accept any work, at any wage, at any conditions showing their helplessness. In regard to this helplessness of women, Telangana stands first, Rayalaseema comes next and last place goes to Coastal Andhra. This is a clear evidence of inter-regional disparities as reflected in terms of women's work participation rates. The helpless women who work in unorganised sectors are usually exposed to more problems. Thus, Telangana women are subjected to more stress and strain from this viewpoint.

Participation in economic decision-making is one of the three dimensions of Gender Empowerment Measure. Percentage share of women in higher technical, professional and managerial, executive positions-high percentage share of women in the positions which take vital decisions as regards the economy indicates women's empowerment. The data pertaining to this aspect related to Indian economy reveal that the percentage share of women in these positions did not exceed 4 per cent. Thus, it is clear that mere higher work participation rates of women will not make women move towards empowerment.

Long Working Hours

Women work for more number of hours when compared to men though majority of them are in low paid jobs. It has been estimated that women work for 7.6 hours per day while it is 6.5 hours per day for men (2000). Thus, women's work time is 117 per cent in terms of percentage share of men's work time. Moreover non-market activities done by women are to the extent of 65 per cent while it is only 8 per cent for men. Most of the women's work is unpaid though its intensity and stress is severe. Consequently,

they remain as dependants. 'Work full, earnings nil' is the essence that emerges from the life experiences of women.

Occupational hazards is one such health problem usually women are subjected to Beedi workers who work sitting in same posture hours together results in neck pain, backache, clipped fingers, impaired eye sight, etc. Moreover, as they work with tobacco throughout the day, they are prone to lung related diseases. In Telangana beedi work is the source of livelihood for a majority of women. Moreover, the burden of domestic work intensifies their disease. Further, in a majority of cases, this is the only source for the maintenance of household. Thus, most of them are single women. Therefore, they are subjected to extra stress, strain and emotions. Insufficient or low earnings will not permit them to take care of their health.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Participation in political decision-making is another indication that determines the status of women. Equal representation in parliamentary institutions is a pre-condition for this. Though Indian women got right to vote on par with men, contesting elections and getting elected to Parliament and Legislatures is an exceptional opportunity to women. Till today, women's representation in Parliament did not exceed 8.8 per cent. Moreover, the Bill related to 33 per cent reservation to women in Parliament is subjected to discussion for the past one decade. This shows the gender discriminatory nature of politics in India. However, in Andhra Pradesh, because of 33 per cent seats reserved in local self-government bodies; the participation of women at this level naturally shows a rise especially since 1990s. But, it is a well-known fact that this phenomenon is determined, dictated and directed by mainstream politics of men. From decision to

contest elections to taking political decisions and exercising power after occupying public position stage and at all levels, men control women. Assembly elections held in 2004 in Andhra Pradesh were best example for this. In order to project their progressive nature, certain political parties gave more number of tickets to women. Consequently, disappointed men who expected party tickets have created violence and tried to damage party offices. In certain cases, where husbands were denied and wives got party tickets, the women who got tickets requested the party leadership to re-allot them to their husbands to preserve peace in the family. Such instances are widely prevailing almost in all political parties with some rare exception here and there.

Rape is another serious problem confronted by women where they are victimised irrespective of their age (from 4-5 years to old age) from the ugly sexual desires of men. However, nowhere and at no time women find safety. A number of incidents of atrocities are reported in the case of girls who belong to socially and economically backward classes and who study in residential schools. In a majority of rape cases, women belonged to SC and ST families. Reports show that dalit women in Telangana face relatively more oppression and exploitation. Men use rape as an instrument to show their power and authority to establish male domination.

Sexual harassment at places of work is another serious problem confronted by women. It has been recognised by the time of Beijing Conference. A proposal came forward to make national governments responsible to protect women's rights and self-esteem at the places of work. In 1997, Supreme Court issued certain guidelines in this regard. As per these guidelines, every institution should create a complaint cell under the leadership of women. Women should constitute half of the members of the committee.

In order to ensure impartiality, members are to be drawn from voluntary organisations and social activists who are aware of the women's problems. A report should be submitted to the government every year. Thus, the programme was formulated perfectly and strongly. But, no institution created the cell and in the institutions where they started the cell they remained unfunctional. Patriarchal nature of the owners of the institutions as well as lack of initiation and courage on the part of women to complaint against men are the causes for making the guidelines futile.

In addition, prevalence of *jogini*, *basivini* in lower castes of Rayalaseema and Telangana regions pose serious problems to women. To eliminate this cruel tradition in which women are converted into joint property for the sexual needs of men, however, the government initiated certain rehabilitation programmes. Still the problem has not been solved. When these women try to come out of this misdirected practice and like to lead a respectable life, patriarchal society humiliates and harasses them.

In addition to domestic and social violence, women are subjected to state violence in certain regions and in certain special conditions. State itself is a powerful structure. It will not tolerate individuals and institutions that question its power. In view of its nature of patriarchal culture, women become target in the process of oppression. These women might be directly related to democratic movements or related to the persons/families who participate in movements. Sometimes they need not be related to movements also. It is an in-built culture of the State, which perpetrates sexual violence on women as part of the oppressive methods to attack the enemy. In Telangana, to suppress the spread of revolutionary movements; State adopted the above methods to attack women sexually. In certain cases, women are subjected to police violence when police doubt that they are

extending help to Naxalites. Thus, atrocities and sexual harassment are very common in the process of exercising extra powers in the places of police camps. This kind of violence is now spreading to Coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema regions also where a majority of the victims belonged to Chenchu tribal women.

With the rising consciousness in regard to women's problems during 1970 and 1980s, almost all the political parties have created women's wings to work on the issues of women. Left parties are relatively more active in this regard. Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samakhya, Andhra Pradesh Mahila Organisation, Progressive Organisation of Women [POW] (*Stree Vimukthi*), Andhra Pradesh Mahila Chaitanya Samakhya, *Sthree Vimukthi Sanghatana*, *Aadajana Samakhya* etc., came in this direction. All these organisations developed movements against domestic violence, atrocities, and liquor issues, problems of women workers, State violence, beauty contests and imperialist culture.

The consciousness on women's problems is on the rise due to the awareness programmes and mobilisation of women organised by various organisations working for the cause of women. Consequently, a positive trend has been developed where local people move spontaneously to solve the problems of women wherever the problem occurs. The pressure ultimately led to the enactment of several legislations.

Many organisations brought out several studies on issues of women with the experiences of their participation in social activities. The issues that could not be quantified, diversity of women's problems that emerge in different forms with different angles, have been qualitatively analysed by these organisations. All this resulted in the emergence of new instruments with which women's problems can be examined

scientifically and objectively on the basis of social reality. New concepts and new consciousness have been developed.

Parallel to this, during the same period, many Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) emerged mobilising funds from individuals, governments and foreign institutions and selecting a thrust area pertaining to women. These organisations play a crucial role in mitigating the seriousness of problems. However, in these organisations, individuals are the centre and mobilising funds from different agencies at the cost of service. This trend is on the rise in recent years. One criticism against these organisations is that they divert the attention of people from finding out real solution by questioning the root of the problem.

Among the various programmes introduced by the government for women, DWCRA has been popularised nationally and internationally. In this programme, rural poor women are mobilised as thrift groups and assisted financially to start economic activity. This is expected to generate employment as well as income. 'Self-reliance is the basis for women's empowerment' is the underlying principle in this programme. As it is a collective programme and group activity, women meet regularly and this will give them an opportunity to share their experiences as well as pleasures and pains. This enables them to understand common nature of their problems. In certain cases, this programme raised their consciousness where they tried to solve even the so-called individual problems collectively. However, in recent years, the programme is confined to restrain them as thrift groups so as to transform them from effective consumer's to create sufficient market for the multinational products. Women are caught in the vicious circle of consumerism. Moreover, women are now directly addressed, mobilised and

converted into instruments for the interests of power politics. This is a tragic reality. DWCRA programme is seriously criticised on the grounds that it makes women distant from developing consciousness to move for their self-liberation through captivating them to the mainstream political interests.

Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation are strongly established in India as well as in Andhra Pradesh for the last 15 years. It resulted in the transformation of Indian economy into a big market and domination of multinational corporations. In addition, WTO agreements resulted in serious disturbance in the Indian agricultural sector. This led to either migration of farmers in search of livelihood or committing suicides. On the other hand, the government's welfare programmes in general and food security programmes as a part of it have been reduced to a large extent. Rural poverty increased. This made the life of rural women critical. Several studies proved it. As a consequence of men's migration or suicides, women remained as single parent to bear the entire burden of family as well as debts and subjected to severe pressures. The structure and nature of the crisis in women's lives has been revealed by various studies.

Why are women and children among the world's poorest? Jayati Ghosh, well known for her research and writings on social and economic issues, explores many aspects of female work and wages using the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) data. This work is informed by her profound knowledge of the Indian conditions.¹⁸

¹⁸ Jayati Ghosh (2008). "Never Done and Poorly Paid – Women's Work in Globalising India", Women Unlimited, New Delhi.

Disparity

Ghosh explains how globalisation can depress wages in a country such as ours, when governments compete for international investments based on lower wages in the host country. The differential treatment meted out to roving international capital can reduce wages and benefits, and seriously impinge on workers' rights. Outsourcing, subcontracting and changes in management attitudes mean that corporates are no longer rooted in communities or feel any obligation to them. Among these neglected workers, women with their differential access to endowments (education, exposure, inheritance, and so on) are more susceptible to the demands of mobile capital in a weakly regulated labour market. The data indicate that between 2000 and 2005, female wages, as a per cent of male wages, have actually dropped - whether in urban or rural areas, regular or casual employment.

Exploitation

If profit-seeking corporates are exploitative of women's vulnerabilities, is the government any better? Ghosh cites three sectors - pre-school care, education, and health care - to show how our government was requiring women to work for long hours and shoulder huge responsibilities to earn about Rs.1,000 a month in most cases. An anganwadi worker's job description requires her to look after pre-school education and take care of some basic health checks of children. Similarly, for nursing and pregnant mothers, she needs to provide information on health and nutrition. In some cases, anganwadi workers also manage self-help groups. As Ghosh puts it, "These anganwadi workers currently are among the many unsung heroines of India."

In case after case, we see that women have low income expectation. According to an NSSO study, women own 39 per cent of the unorganised manufacturing enterprises having working owners. These women are willing to accept returns of less than Rs.1,000 a month as “remunerative”. In the case of home-based workers exploitation is possible because of their inability to move too far from their homes.¹⁹

Migrants Rights

Some problems relate equally to both sexes. It is obvious that governments need to do more to protect the rights of migrants, whether of the international or internal category. With international migration, the government seems to wake up to taking action only after an atrocity occurs. These are ad-hoc and piece meal measures to protect their capital investments in foreign countries.

¹⁹ Cauvery Bopaiah. “Working Conditions of Indian Women”, The Hindu, dt. 5-5-2009.