Socio-Economic Status of Women in India: A Review

Any assessment of the status of women has to start from the social framework, social structures, cultural norms and value systems that influence social expectations regarding the behaviour of both men and women and determine women’s roles and their position in society. A society is composed of many institutions and most important of them are the system of decent, family and kinship, marriage and religious traditions. They provide the ideology and moral basis for men and women about their rights and duties and their status and role.

2.1 WOMEN: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The historical background of Indian society reveals that in Vedic times a woman was given a high status. It is an old saying, “Where women are honoured, gods reside there.” She was known as ‘Ardhangini’ – one half of husband’s body. At the time of marriage, she as a bride was entitled to procure certain solemn vows from the bridegroom before the ritual fire. No religious ceremony by the husband could bear fruit without her participation. As a mother, wife and sister she occupied an honoured place. She is the epitome of courage and boldness, love and affection, sacrifice and suffering.
However during the course of history women lost their honoured place due to social, economic and political factors. Evil customs like sati, *Purdah*, child marriage, enforced widowhood, dowry system, crept in the society and this led to decline in women’s status inside and outside the home. During the last few years, sexual harassment at work place, eve teasing, abduction and female foeticide has given an inclination of the horrible behaviour patterns prevailing in the society. Majority of women live a life of dependency that does not possess any self-identity. Struggle for equality, justice and parity between women and men continues with more and more literature appearing on the subject on empowerment of women.

‘Matri Devo Bhavo’ (Mother of Goddess) is an old sentiment shared by the Indians. From time immemorial, women have been considered as goddesses like Durga, Parvati, Kali, Shakti, Vaishnomata, Bhairavi so on and so forth. Indians put them on the pedestal and offer prayers and sacrifices. In contrast, more ‘goddesses’ are being killed in womb, burnt alive for dowry, harassed in workplaces and streets, raped, abducted, exploited and discriminated. Indian citizens venerate and salute this country as ‘Janani’ or mother. On one hand, they worship this mother and on the other hand, they disregard their sisters, mothers and wives.

2.2 THE STATUS OF WOMEN

Women form about half of the population of the country, but their situation has been grim. For centuries, they have been deliberately denied opportunities of growth in the name of religion and socio-cultural practices. Before independence, women were prey to many abhorrent customs, traditional rigidities and vices due to which their status in the society touched its nadir and their situation was all round bleak. They were victims of widespread illiteracy, segregation in the dark and dingy rooms in the name of *purdah*, forced child marriage, indeterminable widowhood, rigidity of fidelity and opposition to remarriage of widows turning many of them into prostitutes, polygamy, female infanticide, violence and force to follow Sati, and the complete denial of individuality. Besides, the economic dependence, early tutelage of husbands and in-laws, heavy domestic work-load which remained unpaid and unrecognized, absence of career and
mobility, non-recognition of their economic contribution, poor work conditions and wages, and monotonous jobs which men generally refused to do was also responsible for their pitiable conditions. At the socio-political plain, women suffered from the denial of freedom even in their homes, repression and unnatural indoctrination, unequal and inferior status, rigid caste hierarchy and untouchability. Consequently, most women were reduced to dumb cattle and had led to inhuman beastly life.

The religious traditions and social institutions have a deep bearing on the role and status of women. A multitude of derogatory attributes have been ascribed to Hindu women by the writers of the Smiritis. Like the Shudras, she is forbidden to study the Vedas or perform any sacrifices. According to Manu, “In childhood a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband and when her lord is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent.” (Jain et al, 1997: 39). She is viewed solely as mother and wife and never as a woman or a person, and these roles were idealized. Practices like giving away of daughters in marriage and the importance attached to sons for maintaining the continuity of the line have strengthened the patrilineal social structure of Hinduism. A widow is regarded as inauspicious. She cannot participate in social-religious ceremonies. Re-marriage was not permitted for high caste widows. But the Hindu male is not subject to such restrictions (ibid: 39).

Protest movements within the Hindu fold, like Buddhism, Jainism, Vaishvanism, Veera Shaivism and Sikhism contributed to some improvement in the status of women, particularly in regard to religious activities. However, they continued to regard women primarily as mothers and wives, and inferior to men in society. The advent of Islam brought further deterioration in the status of women. Even in the early British period her condition remained as before. From the middle of the nineteenth century reform movements like Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, etc., championed the cause of women, but nothing concrete could be achieved. It is significant to note that upliftment of women was an important item in the agenda of Mahatma Gandhi. Pyarelal, his secretary, tells that Gandhi often used to say that he would like to be reborn either as an untouchable or a woman. These two symbolized for him the oppressed and the suppressed sections of humanity (Ibid).
2.3 EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN

A woman in Indian society has been victim of humiliation, torture and exploitation. There are many episodes like rape, murder, dowry, burning, wife beating and discrimination in the socio-economic and educational fields. Indian society is predominated by men, hence women are a victim of male domination in the respective sphere of life; especially in economic life, for instance, over decision making on resources, on utilization of her earnings and on her body. Hence a woman’s life lies between pleasures at one end and danger at other end. In daily life women are routinely defined by sex and they are potential victims of kidnapping and rape.

The human species has made significant progress in several spheres of life. But man has not grown enough to overcome the self-made mental slavery to the laws of the jungle. Since time immemorial the laws of physical strength thrives at the expense of the weak and has made women the primary under-dogs of an exploitative society. In the lower socio-economic level of society, women do more hazardous manual labour than men. Women do more than half the agricultural works in India. Still men are considered to be the “bread winners”. This sense of women being inferior is passed on from one generation through psychological conditionings.

The most widespread and de-humanizing discriminations and assault against women are on the psychological level. The female psyche is being crushed at the very childhood. The female psyche is brutalized long before bodily violence is inflicted on her. They are conditioned to accept inferior positions in society. Women from childhood undergo a slow unconscious process of destructive or denial of their self worth. Society, through a process of conditioning, creates in girls at home and in school certain thinking patterns, which ascribed to the female sex an inferior status. Besides, society gradually trains them to make this value system their own. Usually baby girls are given bangles, anklets etc. thus communicating a sense of fragility.

Another result of the social conditioning is that man either as father; brother or husband considers women as socio- economic gift of his household. A woman’s value judged, not so much in terms of her worth as a person with rights and dignity as in terms
of her utility to man. Expression of this mentality is found in different language and society. For example, in Hindi, girl is called “paraya dhan” and boy “apana dhan”.

2.4 THE VULNERABILITY OF RURAL WOMEN

The condition of women is more miserable in the rural India with respect to various socio-economic aspects.

a) Poverty

Rural poverty is one of the important characteristics of India and nearly 45 percent of rural people are below poverty line. Most of them are just surviving with day-to-day earnings. If we take International poverty line (1994) into consideration in India there were 47 percent of the population at below $ 1 a day category and 87.5 percent at below $ 2 at a day category (Vijaya Kumar et al, 2002). Under such circumstances, within the family, the worst sufferers are needless to say women and girl children. For this category of women, neither credit nor skill training is accessible. Better health care and higher educational opportunities are far reaching dreams for their children and there is no need to say about the status of girl child in such families. She (girl child) is treated as a “silent lamb” born to suffer all evils in the male dominated society. So far much has not been done for this vulnerable sub-culture of the society.

b) Violence

Indian society has been bound by culture and tradition since ancient times. The patriarchal system and the gender stereotypes in the family and society have always showed a preference for the male child. Sons were regarded as a means of social security and women remained under male domination. Due to her subordinated position, she has suffered years of discrimination, exploitation and subjugation. She became the victim of several evils like child marriage, sati, polygamy, Purdah system, female infanticide, forced pregnancy, rape etc. In such incidents/recorded cases surprisingly mother-in-law are also taking active part (forgetting the fact that they are also women and some time back they also played daughter-in-law role). This discrimination and violence against women had an effect on the sex ratio in India also (Table 2.1). The main causes of
violence are unequal power-relations, gender discrimination, patriarchy, and economic dependence of women, dowry, low moral values, negative portrayal of women’s image in media, no participation in decision-making, gender stereotypes and a negative mindset. The Hindustan Times, New Delhi (May 10, 2005) reported, ‘‘Delhi is not only the rape capital of India; it has now taken lead in all types of crimes against women. As against 135 cases (number of atrocities against women at the hands of their husbands and relatives) reported in 2003, the figure jumped to 1211 in 2004. Crime records compiled for 35 mega cities in December 2003 by National Crime Records Bureau, shows that Delhi accounts for 30.5 percent of the total crime against women”. If such is the magnitude of domestic violence against women in Delhi, the capital city of India, it would not be surprising if the situation is worse in other areas. Uttar Pradesh reported the highest cases of cruelty by husband and his relatives against women (15%) in the year 2001 (see Status of violence against women in India: Decadal trends 1991-2001, NIPCCD). The information Brochure published by SWAYAN, an NGO, has shown that in 1994 there was a rape every 42 minutes, a molestation every 22 minutes, a dowry death every 106 minutes and a criminal offence every five minutes — all that does not include the innumerable cases that go unreported. Data of 2001 also reveals that every hour there is a case of one sexual harassment, one dowry death, two rapes, four molestation and six cases of cruelty by husband and his relatives. Dr. Brenda Gael Mcsweeney, UN Resident coordinator has rightly remarked — “we must ask ourselves when the female half of the world is living with the daily threat of physical violence or mental violence, are we truly free?”.

c) Economic Exploitation

On the world level, women and girls together carry two-third of the burden of the world’s work yet receive only a tenth of the world’s income. They form 40 percent of the paid labour force. Though women constitute half of the world’s population yet they own less than one percentage of the world’s property (UNDP Human Development Report 1995). According to UN Report (2005): ‘women constitute half the world’s population, perform nearly two-third of its work hours, receive one-tenths of the world’s income and own less than one-hundredth of the world’s property’.
The condition of women in India is more miserable in every field of social life. They are paid half of three-quarters of the money while their male counterparts earn for the same job. In India a predominantly agricultural country, women do more than half of the total agricultural work. But their work is not valued. On an average, a woman works 15 to 16 hours a day unpaid at home and underpaid outside.

According to National Committee of Women, the growth in the percentage of women labour force in the organized sector is minimal in the last sixty years i.e. 3.44 percent in 1911 to 17.35 percent in 1971; besides, the work load either in the field or in the factories or offices, the women have to do the household such as cooking, washing, cleaning up the house etc. The younger women, besides all these, have to carry the burden of early pregnancy, childbirth and breast-feeding. In terms of help offered to people for their various functions women seem to receive the least attention from the society.

The status of women is intimately connected with their economic status, which in turn, depends upon rights, roles and opportunity for the participation in economic activities. The economic status of women is now accepted as an indicator of a society’s stage of development. However, all development does not result in improving women’s economic activities. Pattern of women’s activities are affected by prevailing social ideology and are also linked with the stage of economic development.

d) Educational Deprivation

In India the literacy rate of women is much lower than men because boys receive more schooling than girls. T.P. Sechan says that there are parts of India where the literacy rate of women today is as low as 3 percent. So stark is the gender inequality in India that it is one of the 43 countries in the world where male literacy rate are at least 15 percent higher than female rates. Educational deprivation is intimately associated with poverty. The UNICEF Executive Director Mr. Carol Bellamy says; “No country has ever emerged from poverty without giving priority to education.”(Indian Currents, 13 June 2004).
However, modest improvement is gradually coming up in educational level of women. After independence many steps have been taken to improve the lot of women. Many laws have also been passed. A National Commission on Women was setup to act as a watchdog on the matters concerning women in 1992. Many programmes in the areas of education, health and employment have been initiated for development of women, rural as well as urban. As a result, literacy rates are going up and fertility rates coming down. Universalisation of education, elimination of drop-out from schools, promotion of Balwadi’s and Crèches, Girls Hostels, Technical Institutions for women and distinct emphasis on health, nutrition and family welfare programmes etc. are some such initiatives.

2.5 SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC STATUS OF WOMEN

The ratio of female to male population in India has been low. As per Census data, sex ratio of women to per thousand men is as given below:

**TABLE 2.1: SEX RATIO OF WOMEN TO PER THOUSAND MEN**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sex Ratio</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>946</td>
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<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>641</td>
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<td>1971</td>
<td>930</td>
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<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>933</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the above table it is clear that the ratio of female to male population in India has been low for a long time and this has been declining since 1901. According to 1991 census it declined sharply again and touched the lowest ever recorded 927. The growing female infanticide in the rural India might be a cause for this. But the 2001 census shows the modest increase (933) which is a good sign but nothing in comparison to 946 of 1951 census. The census 2001 comes up with an alarm of the sharp decline in sex ratio among the children in the zero-six age group. In this category the country’s sex ratio decline from 945 (1901) to 927 (2001).

2.6 THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN UTTAR PRADESH
The state of Uttar Pradesh, though rich in both human and natural resources, however economic growth faltered in the recent years as the State failed to seize the opportunities created by liberalization of the economy. It is also the most populous state in the country with a population of 175 million people accounting for 16.4 percent of the country’s population. It is the fourth largest state in geographical area of the country, encompassing to 94 411 square kilometers and comprising of 83 district, 901 developments blocks and 112804 inhabited villages. The density of population in the state is 173 persons per square kilometer as against 274 of the country. 80 percent of the population in the state consist of the rural poor making it one of the most deprived economies. An estimated 8 percent of the world’s poor live in the state.

Uttar Pradesh’s economy is one of the most deprived economy in the world and that is equal to one of the most deprived countries like Ghana. Uttar Pradesh is characterized by huge disparities and unequal distribution of wealth and resources. One of the major reasons of this disparity is the caste system, which perpetrates injustice; abuses and exploitation of the vast majorities of deprived who have become totally marginalized.

Uttar Pradesh characterized by huge disparities in terms of gender, caste and distribution of wealth and resources. Heterogeneous population consists of various caste and social groups, inhabit the villages in Uttar Pradesh. They are a conglomeration of hamlets is representing a particular caste with distinct social and economic character. Dalit in particular are the most deprived group, suppressed by caste system, untouchability, Zamindari system etc. a large number of Dalits or untouchable souls, irrespective of whether they are men or women, remained as subordinate citizens since several centuries. The status of Dalit women is grim and they are subjected not merely to gender bias but also to indignities arising out of the age-old tradition of untouchability. They are treated worse than stray animals without any fault of theirs.

With the rich and poor alike, the status of the women is much lower than the men. Among all the major Indian states, Uttar Pradesh has the highest under five-mortality rate, the second highest crude death rate and third lowest life expectancy figure. The number of maternal death per 10,000 live births in Uttar Pradesh was estimated to be as
high as 931 in the mid thirties. Only five countries in the world among those, of which official figures are available, had higher estimated maternal mortality rates at that time are Somalia, Bhutan, Ghana, Gambia and Congo.

The reason for disadvantageous position of women is extreme social restriction of freedom of movement and activities. Women are socially and physically suppressed. They are confined to the domain of the household and suffer from various restrictions even within that domain. Low female participation in education is one aspect of this general pattern of women limited interaction with the outside world. Women’s limited opportunity to acquire education and information is bound to affect their ability to play an informed role in the family and in the society.

One aspect of the ‘inertia’ that accounts for slow social progress in UP is the apathy of the state but an equally important factor is the failure of civil society to challenge oppressive patterns of caste, class and gender relations.

The social scenario shows the dismal picture of women with less than 25 percent of literacy rate among women in the region. The actual baseline survey reveals that literacy rate in rural areas of the North India is even less than 10 percent. In certain areas it is as low as 1.5 percent (Gender and Development, UKSVK: 1999: 2).

A strong patriarchal society with deep-rooted socio-culture values continues to affect gender equity and women’s empowerment. In spite of the Constitutional provisions and 73rd amendment, women continue to be treated as lesser human beings irrespective of caste, creed or religion.

There is a persistent gender discrimination against women in education mainly because of certain stereotypes and beliefs deeply embedded in the society. The girl-child is somebody else’s property, and hence should remain indoors to carry out the household chores. The boy child is preferred because of the patriarchal values attached to the boy in performing the last rites and as an insurance against old age. Girls are not preferred because of the financial burden they would bring due to the prevailing dowry system. Thus women are treated as commodities.

There is foeticide, infanticide and discrimination in feeding and nutrition, which affect the natural sex ratio adversely. According to the Government of India statistics of
In 1991, the probability of a newborn female child dying before the age 2 is more in Uttar Pradesh. We have a declining sex ratio with Harayana having the lowest (865/1000) and Uttar Pradesh (879/1000) (Gender and Development, UKSVK, 1999: 2).

Because of the socio-cultural factors, women have no say in decision-making, which result in lack of control over their own bodies, sexuality and reproductivity. Early marriage and lesser decision-making capacity in marriage matter, early motherhood, repeated pregnancies, lack of accessibility to family planning services, affect a woman’s health and even life expectancy. This is evident from our field study.

As per our survey, 70 percent of the girls are married off by the age of 16. About 95 percent of them become mothers by the age of 18. The fertility rate in Uttar Pradesh is 5.1 which is much higher than Kerala (1.8). The average birth gap in Uttar Pradesh is 15-25 months and for the rest of North India is 25-30 months (ibid).

Access to property, both public and private, is systematically denied to women. In Uttar Pradesh, a woman has to spend an average of 5 to 6 hours a day fetching firewood or fodder or drinking water, which also stand on the way of schooling of a girl child or even on her share of the cooked food.

Men universally own the family assets and women have no say, in buying, selling and owning of land, which is evident from our field survey. Re-marriage of widows to the brother of her husband is solely aimed at retaining property entitlement. Male relatives in the rare cases use coercive force where women own property. Though women contribute substantially towards the running of the house and subsistence of the families, her mobility in controlled. There is a gender division of labour and women are expected to perform the reproductive role. The burden of household chores and subsistence responsibility leaves hardly any opportunity for productive role. Lack of skill and knowledge limits their access to labour market (ibid).

The following factors accentuate the negative self-image that the women have inherited along the way.

- Women are considered as Shudras.
- Menstrual blood is dirty and polluting.
• Late marriage begets shame to her family.
• Women’s sexuality is dangerous to society.
• It is woman’s fault if she gives birth to a girl child.
• In addition, early signs of illness are neglected.

Women are generally deprived of Intangible resources such as information knowledge; skills, self-confidence and articulation are integral elements in getting access to entitlements to material resources and in asserting their rights.

There are certain innate qualities like self-confidence, self worth, communication skills, etc. are culturally suppressed and not fostered in women by patriarchal society.

Women come into the political system with many gender related handicaps like illiteracy, responsibility of house work, child care, social and familial oppositions to their involvement in public life, poor self image, lack of self confidence and ignorance about the political system.

Thus in spite of the 73rd amendment participation of women in local government of parliament always remained less than 10 percent. There are certain key areas where women are perpetually marginalized, hence need to be empowered:

• Lack of access and control over the public resources and institutions.
• Lack of access and control over community affairs.
• Lack of control over political process and decision making in households.
• Lack of access and control over income.
• Lack of control over their bodies.
• Lack of access to intangible resources such as information and influence.

2.7 THE RELATIVE BACKWARDNESS OF U.P. WOMEN IN RELATION TO ALL INDIA AS PER CENSUS DATA
On several aspects, the census data shows that the plight of U.P. women is much worse compared to all India situations.

i) Population

The female population in the country increased from 330.78 million in 1981 to 407.09 million in 1991 registering an increase of 77 million over the decade. In Uttar Pradesh the increase is about 13 million during this period. The population of schedule caste in India in 1991 is 138.22 million while in Uttar Pradesh it stands at 29.27 million. As regards the share of females in this category in Uttar Pradesh, it is 13.67 million. It accounts for 21.01 percent of the total female population of the country, which is by no means of small magnitude. The female literacy rate in the country jumped from 24.8 percent in 1981 to 39.29 in 1991 percent registering an increase of about 15 percent. This achievement by any standard is not very small. In case of Uttar Pradesh the female literacy stands at 25.31 percent, which is much less than the national literacy rate signifying the definite backwardness of the state in this regard (S. K. Singh 2000; 59).

ii) Literacy

The literacy rates among Schedule castes 37.14 percent in 1991 showing an increase of over 16 percent to 1981 percentage is encouraging. The female literacy in the country stands at 23.76 percent registering an increase of more than 13 percent from the 1981 percentage. This percentage of female literacy is very near to total female literacy rates in Uttar Pradesh but much below the national female literacy rate signifying the poor educational status of Schedule caste females (ibid).

iii) Health

The health of the nation is of crucial importance and is reflected by birth, death and infant mortality rates. In India, the 1991 census shows the birth rates as 28.5 percent while it is 36 percent in Uttar Pradesh signifying higher fertility rates among women on the state. The death rate in the country stands at 9.2 percent in this period while in Uttar Pradesh it is 11.4 percent, which is much higher than national average. The infant mortality in the country is 74 per thousand children while it stands 93 per thousand children in the state. The higher death and infant rates in the state depict the poor medical
and health facilities for the people in general and children and mothers in particular (ibid).

**iv) Poverty**

The number of persons below poverty line in the country stands at 2376.7 million showing a percentage of 29.9 of the total population. This is of vast magnitude, almost every 3rd person in the country being below the poverty line. In case of Uttar Pradesh the population in the category is 448.3 million giving a percentage of 35.1 of the total population of the state. This shows the economic condition of the people of the state where more than 1/3 population stands below poverty line (ibid).

**v) Employment**

The economic development of females depends upon the type of employment, which they are able to procure. The total female workers in the state stood at 4.85 million in 1991 which shows a clear increase of more than 2 million over 1981. This simply shows the awareness of the females to their economic independence. This may be a result of increase literacy rates but the national figure in this respect is much higher to show that Uttar Pradesh is still lagging far behind. The main female workers are mostly engages as cultivators and agricultural labours. Their number is 2.33 million and 1.73 million, respectively. Another sizeable number, i.e., 0.17 million are engaged in house hold industry. This clearly depicts that female workers in the state are still not well placed in matters of employment in comparison to states like Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, etc. (ibid).

A closer look at the present trends suggests that in spite of these positive signs there is no reason to rejoice: the new millennium is unlikely to bring about a qualitative improvement in the position of women in the labour market rather Indian women appear doomed to continue being crowed in the limited number of low paid, low productivity, uncertain jobs which hold out little prospects for advancement and career building. It appears that government policies regarding women empowerment could enhance the role
and status of women through ensuring their equal participation in administration, management, decision making process and overall in development process. However, for their educational and occupational empowerment special focus is needed.

2.8 CONCLUSION

The review of the status of women in India tells the story of a fall in the status of women to an abysmally low position from a relatively high status and nobility of the Vedic times. The fall in status has led to a socio-economic and religio-cultural deprivation of women. From the womb to tomb women are victims of violence and deprivations. The vulnerability of women in rural India and that too in Uttar Pradesh is worse compared to the all India levels. Of course, there are certain initiatives in the country, especially after the Independence towards raising the status of women. However, there are miles to go in order to reach the goal of gender equality.

Apart from this general condition of gender inequalities, the situation seems more miserable in case of Dalit women. They are victims of a double deprivation. One, on the gender front, and the other on the caste front. We shall briefly discuss this problem in the next chapter.