CHAPTER 3
STATUS AND POSITION OF WOMEN IN INDIA

3.1 INTRODUCTION:

To begin with, it is necessary to have historical review of status and position of women in India from Vedic Age to present period. This may help to understand the position of women of today which is largely based upon social and cultural traditions in India.

This part is categorised as under:

i) Women in Vedic Age:

In Vedic times many Indian women have comforted themselves with the view of many scholars that women were greatly honoured and enjoyed freedom, status and learnings. [Devendra K., Page 13]

Vedic women were probably comparable to modern Indian women. In Vedic period equal treatment was given to sons and daughters. Education was mostly centred in families to daughters and sons. [Balg T.A., P.215]. The sanctity of family life was of a very high culture. The motherhood was regarded as a dream of perfection. [Everett J.M., P.65]. The position of widows in Vedic era was liberal. There were no malpractices as against the widows. [Dr.Altekar A.S., P.117].
ii) Women in Epic Age:

The position of women however did not remain the same in the Epic age which followed the Vedic Age.

The life of Hindu women slowly began to be determined by her role as a daughter, wife and mother. These roles required certain prescribed behaviour and assigned responsibilities and in return women were assured of maintenance, support and respect. Since her birth, birth of a daughter was less auspicious event than a son. The girls were deprived of upanayana, vedic studies and religious rituals. In this context, child marriage followed as a natural corollary. This mania went to such religious lengths that even little babies in the cradles would be married. [Agnew V., P.14]/

The status of a married woman vis-a-vis her husband changed gradually and she was ordered to walk behind the husband in his shadow [Kane P.V., P.556]. Religious interpretation was also changed to make it suitable to the superiority of men. The position of widows was adversely affected. A high caste widow by customary law was denied the simplest pleasure of life.

iii) Women in Medieval Age:

The deterioration of women was worst during the medieval age where women were considered as good as
'animals'.

"Our civilisation, our customs, our laws, have all been made by man and he has well cared to keep himself in a superior position and to treat women as a chattel and plaything to be exploited for his own advantage and amusement. Under the continuance of pressure woman has been unable to grow and to develop her capacities, to her fullest and then man has blamed her for her backwardness" [Mehta S., P.8]

The position of women continued to deteriorate. Though a widow could inherit the share of her husband's property, she could not get advantage of it. The position thus was like a bonded slave.

After about 11th Century A.D., lapses of women began to be treated with greater sternness. The situation worsened in the later medieval period.

iv) Women in Modern Age:

Old extreme asceticism continued for centuries but an era of rationalism and equality rose with the British Raj over India. The position of women was questioned and challenged by the early social reformists and political politicians of modern India.
The realisation that women can play a more significant role than generally permitted by the society has been a new awakening over the past decades of modern history. [D’lima H., Forwarded by Gore M.S., P.1]

The advent of British East India Company brought a number of deep rooted implications on the economy and the ideology of Indian people. The English language and English education gave rise to a newly emerging middle class elites. It provided an ideology of liberalism, individualism and equality. [Desai N. & Krishnaraj M., P.39]

The issues which attracted the minds of early social reformers were naturally of women who were tied in the clutches of religious teachings, customs and traditions. The issues of sati, ill treatment of widows, the ban on widow remarriage, denial of property rights and education to women were condemnly critisised and consistent efforts were made to create awareness and to make people sensitive to these issues.

The way to come out of it was educating women and passing radical legislations against social evils. The social reformers were partially successful in changing these practices by applying rational and humanitarian approach.

The real contributors in bringing social reforms in India were many. A few names here are necessary to
mention. Raja Ram Mohan Roy who is recognised as 'Father of Modern India' attacked inhuman practices imposed upon women. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, M.G. Ranade, G.K. Agarkar, Lokhitwadi, D.K. Karve, Durgaram and other enlightened reformers fought against orthodoxy. [Desai N & Krishnaraj M., P.39]

The movement for women's social emancipation spread soon to other parts of India. Maharashtra had a list of social reformers who boldly stood for the cause of women's emancipation. Vishnushastri Pandit, Jyotiba Phule, Dhondo Keshav Karve zealously made efforts to uplift women. What they preached, they first adopted in their homes and their wives came to help them. Savitri Phule, Ramabai Ranade and Anandibai Karve were a few illustrations in this regard. [D'lima H., Forward by Gore M.S., P.3-4] The name of Pandita Ramabai is fit to be carved in golden letters.

The unique feature of this movement is that it had created a class of elite women in India. This small group of elite broke away from the traditional patterns of life. The new elite class of women took up a new opportunities and challenges. They came forward and participated in the rapid socio-political changes that India was undergoing. They began to organise Social Reform Movement and accepted responsible roles in public life. Their efforts opened the
doors of further development in the political life as well.

The reform movement combined male and female together towards social reforms. Under the male leadership women began to rise up and an easy shift from women's traditional role to new role began to emerge on societal level in India. To conclude, one may say that a new society with new values was taking birth.

The elite reformist women however did not give up old values which were intrinsically good. They combined in them the old and the new values.

This elite class of women entered smoothly from social field to political field. The war of 1857 abolished East India Company and the British Raj with new political set up was reestablished. The social reforms continued but new changes in political field were also supplemented.

In 1885 an important landmark of political development took place i.e. the establishment of Indian National Congress. The Freedom Movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi from 1920 onwards was not merely a political struggle but a means of regenerating and rejuvenating society. He encouraged women to participate in all aspects and phases of national activity, particularly in the constructive programme and non-violent Satyagrahas
initiated by him. [Agnew V., P.34] Mahatma Gandhi had thus high regards for women. According to him it was an injustice to call women a weaker sex. [Gandhi M.K., P.8-9]

The Nationalist Movement in India enabled women to evolve from an oppressed and subordinate position to an enlightened and equal participation in the social and political affairs of the country. Emancipated women like Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kriplani, Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhay were recognised as symbols of their, 'NEW IMAGE'. To quote Sarojini Naidu, "the time is ripe when not men but women themselves should learn to recognise the sacred and inalienable trust and responsibility of their womanhood in sharing the destinies of their country. For it is the womanhood of a nation that is the true upholder of its ideals and say that it is time for us all, women of India to awake". [Agnew V., P.136]

The unique characteristic of these elite women was that being reformists, they depicted their role in politics as 'ideal Hindu women'. ' The Hindu women despite her education was expected to indentify and reflect the virtues of womanhood.

The group of women elite associated themselves with social reforms and with actual political affairs like taking leadership in freedom movements, propagating, participating
in Satyagraha; holding meetings etc. Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu addressed meetings in Bombay in 1919 to educate women in the nature of satyagraha, Kasturba Gandhi and Kamaladevi Chattopadhay sold proscribed literature on the streets.

Sarojini Naidu and Mithuben Petit joined Mahatma Gandhi in the forefront in breaking the salt law of 1930. Gandhiji organised a Congress of women at Dandi in which women were made fully responsible for organising and leading the movement against the use of liquor and foreign clothes. The 1942, Quit India Movement provided women with an opportunity to prove on a national level their ability to participate in violent, secret and underground activities.[Agnew V., P.93]

The Participation of women in Nationalist Movement' was a definite assertion of the quality which they would enjoy in independent India. The Nationalist Movement provided the necessary impetus & pull to draw an increasing number of women into political mainstream. [Muzumdar V., P.24]

3.2 Women in India in Post Independence Era:

The independence of the nation on 15th August, 1947 brought a new awakening among the Indian masses. As a consequence on the advent of independence, adult franchise, complete social and
political equality before the law became realities. India had accepted parliamentary democracy with federal set up and began to move ahead to realise its ideals like justice, liberty, and equality which new constitution provided.

3.2(A) Rights to Women under the Constitution:


iii) Directive Principles of State Policy to be followed by the state, Article 42 - provision for Just & Humane Conditions of Work & Maternity Relief, Article 44 - Uniform Civil Code for citizens. [Devendra K., P.161 to 163]

On the basis of the constitutional set up many laws were made, from time to time to uplift women.

3.2(B) Laws for Women:

The laws passed by Indian Parliament concerning women are as follows:

1) The first radical step that took place immediately
within five years was the passage of Hindu Code Bill (1955). By this the principle of monogamy for all Hindus including Buddhists, Jainṣ and Sikhs is legalised. The Special Marriage Act and Hindu Marriage Act also provide for divorce. The legislation introduced during the international women's decade was 'The Family Court's Act, 1984.

ii) Dowry:

The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 was passed to curb the social evil of dowry which affects the dignity of women. The Act was amended in 1984 by the Government. The dowry death is considered as a crime.

iii) Abortion:

The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act was passed in 1971 and it has legalised abortion.

iv) Maintenance:

The Right to maintenance forms a part of personal law & hence is not uniform.

v) Inheritance & Succession:

The Hindu Succession Act, 1956 brought far reaching changes by giving them the same rights in the matters of succession as a male.
vi)  Prostitution:

Buying and selling of girls under 18 for the purpose of prostitution is prohibited by the Indian Penal Code. The Suppression of Inhuman Traffic in Women & Girls Act, 1956 sought to bring uniformity in its laws, to curb prostitution.

vii) Criminal Laws:

Many sections in the Indian Penal Code reflect women's inferior position. Some changes have been made recently. In case of rape, molestation, insulting the modesty of a woman by word, gesture or act is a punishable offence. By the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 1983 the punishment to the rape cases was made vigorous. [Desai N., Krishnaraj M., P.312 to 319]

3.2(C) Policies of the Government:

Apart from the legislations, mentioned above, the Government is keen for the uplift of the fair sex by various policies and programmes.

The Central Social Welfare Board was established in 1953 which involves itself in the development of womanfolk at the national level.
The Central Social Welfare Board works primarily at three levels - (1) policy, (2) programmes, (3) implementation. The Board frames policy at the central level through links with voluntary women’s organisations and makes its own development programmes through its Welfare Extension Projects which reach remote areas of the nation.

For co-ordination State Social Welfare Boards & Local agencies were also established for the same purpose.

Social Welfare programmes in the beginning were directed to provide a few basic curative & rehabilitative services. Over the years, especially from the last decade, programmes are orientated towards providing preventive, developmental rehabilitative service to children, women, the disabled, the aged & the maladjusted. [Desai N., Krishnaraj M., P.329]

For Social Welfare of Women, five year plans provide money because without money plans cannot be realised. The table below indicates the money spent by the Government.
Table 3.2(1)
SOCIAL WELFARE SCHEMES UNDER NATIONAL PLAN
(Rs. in Crore)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plan</th>
<th>Centre</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Union Territories</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Plan</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Plan</td>
<td>5.49</td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>13.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Plan</td>
<td>12.84</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>19.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Plans</td>
<td>7.76</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>11.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth Plan</td>
<td>65.71</td>
<td>9.67</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>76.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth Plan</td>
<td>43.52</td>
<td>13.60</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>58.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Plan</td>
<td>19.06</td>
<td>9.38</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>29.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Plan</td>
<td>17.82</td>
<td>12.23</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>30.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth Plan</td>
<td>258.87</td>
<td>150.52</td>
<td>14.85</td>
<td>424.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: India 1985, P.168.

The Planning Commission defined three major areas in which they have paid special attention to women's development: education, social welfare & health. The study of all Five Year Plans reveals that much emphasis is given for the development of women in all these fields which may lead their active participation in political process. This was the hope behind all these efforts.

A special committee was appointed on the "Status of Women In India" in 1971 to undertake comprehensive examination of all the questions relating to rights and status of women in the context of changing social and
economic conditions in the country and also the new problems relating to the advancement of women and to play their full and proper role in the building up of the nation. The Committee submitted its report entitled 'Towards Equality' in 1974. In 1976 Government framed a National Plan of Action for women based on its suggestions & U.N. World Plan of Action.

A number of committees & bureaus were established during the period 1977-78 to 1983. A few of them are as follows: (a) A working group on employment of women, (b) National Adult Education Programme for women, (c) Working group of Self-employment for women. (d) Ministry for Women and Social Welfare, established in 1983. [Desai N. & Krishnaraj M., P.331] This shows that the decade has thus brought a tremendous momentum to respond to the U.N.O's appeal to the cause of women. One of the major contributions of the decade which took place in the academic field was the introduction of Women's Studies in the Universities. Part 3.3 deals with it in brief.

3.3 Women's Studies in Academic Institutions:

'Women's Studies' is a new discipline, incorporated under 'social science' in academic institutions and Universities in India. The idea is derived from western institutions but women's movements, women's organisations, their agitations, constitutional provisions and the changing nature of the Indians towards equality
have helped to incorporate the subject in the educational fields.

In U.S.A. many courses were started from 1960, exploring the status of women and discrimination experienced in private and public life. 'Women's studies' examines the world & those who inhabit it in the light of women's own experiences of that world. It complements & corrects established disciplines as well as constituting a discipline of its own [Hunter College: Women's Studies Collective, P.15].

In India Women's studies as a subject was introduced after 1975. From 1976 Indian Council of Social Sciences and Research considerably encouraged studies on women.

The S.N.D.T. Women's University, established in 1916, dedicated itself for all these years to uplift womanfolk. Though the first 'Women's Studies' was established at Juhu in Bombay in 1974, it grew during the decade & today it is recognised as a major centre for Women's Studies in India, with U.G.C's special assistance. The Centre is assisting many educational institutions imparting Women's Studies all over India. It often holds Conferences, Seminars & Workshops. Its objectives are to encourage and support action programmes for the improvement of women. Through these, it tries to raise consciousness & greater awareness in influencing attitudes to strengthen the data base for better analysis & more effective policies.
A National Seminar was organised in 1985 in Bombay, on the topic "A Decade of Women's Movement in India - A Review of Achievement & Issues'. This Seminar was funded by the Ministry of Social Welfare to debate on whether the necessary infrastructure has been built in to sustain the movement once the decade is over, the issues that will generate solidarity of women across class/caste barriers & to devise plans for the future course of action [Krishnaraj M., P. 1 to 13]

Indian women, researchers & activists attended The Nairobi Conference in 1985 organised at the end of women's decade to analyse the impacts of decade. [Indian Association for Women's Studies, News Letter, No.12, P.13]

The Research Centre for Women's Studies has set an ideal example in India. The Academic push given to women's problems may increase more awareness in future. In April 1982, Indian Association for Women's Studies was established to provide & establish information centres in the country for the promotion of women's studies [Indian Association for Women's Studies, News Letter, No.12, P.1]

The decade has brought a tremendous momentum to respond to the U.N.O's appeal to uplift women. In fact, more attention was paid since 1975, to the problems of women. The report of the committee on the Status of Women was submitted a year before. These two factors together have brought a realisation that special
efforts are necessary to change the position & status of women in India. Thus the launch towards women's development began from 1975, with more & more programmes to uplift women.

On the background of this, the research work studies the role played by women elites contributing in the development process of women of India. The term elite, the theory of eliticism is briefly discussed in part 3.4 of this chapter.

3.4 The Rise of Elite Women after independence pertaining to theory of Eliticism:

The study of elites was established as part of political Science in the late nineteenth & early twentieth centuries largely as a result of the work of two Italian Sociologists, Vilfredo Pareto [1848-1923] & Gaetano Mosca [1858-1941]. It tries to theorise about the nature of control & the role of leadership in society. [Parry G., P.15]

In all societies - from societies that are very meagrely developed & have barely attained the drawings of civilisation, down to the most advanced & powerful societies - two classes of people appear - a class that rules & a class that is ruled.

The first class, always the less numerous, performs all political functions, monopolises power & enjoys the advantages that power brings, whereas the second, the more numberous class, is
directed & controlled by the first, in a manner that is now more or less legal, now more or less arbitrary & violent & supplies the first, in appearance at least, with material means of subsistence & with the instrumentalities that are essential to the validity of the political organism. [Mosca G., P.50]

The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences describes elites, "All societies need authorities within & spokesmen & agents who are also symbols of the common life & embodiments of the values that maintain it. Inequalities in performance & reward support this arrangement & the inequality in the distribution of deterence acknowledges the differences in authority, achievement & reward'. [Sills D.L., Vol.5 & 6, P.26]

In every political system political power thus tends to be concentrated at the hands of a few or a minority. In a democratic political system oligarchic tendencies also grow.[Doughlas V.V., P.10] Realisation of this political truth has led social & political scientists to write on the significance of the elite theory in contemporary political analysis as indispensable study of Political Processes [Eds, Laswell H.D., Lerner M., P.4]

Maurice Duverger advises that the formula 'Govt.of the people, by the people', must be replaced by another formula, 'Govt.of the people by an 'elite sprung from the people'. There is unanimity on the inevitability of the minority rule. [Ball A.R., P.258]
Thus elite, literally meaning, 'chosen element', consists of those persons who sit at the top of the society over others lying at the bottom or in the middle stratas, by virtue of having, a 'silver spoon in their mouth'.

The existence of an elite depends upon the foundation of social grace. As modern societies, developed or developing, are becoming more & more critical of the traditional values, the elite has come to assume a broader complexion to include not only those who are at the top but also those who constitute the strata of society from which leaders usually emerge.[Eds Lawell H.D., Lerner M., P.6]

Karl Marx first attempted to throw light on how political power is distributed in society & how power is unevenly distributed. The ruling elite class owns means of production. This class is economic class as well Pareto, Mosca & Michels challanged Marxistist conception of elite class.

According to Pareto there is an increasing movement of the emergence of elite. He regarded history as a graveyard of aristocracies'. Robert Michels calls it as "mass mind". Ortega Gasset developed his theory of political elites on the basis of his superficial reverence to the dogma of the masses. The revolt of masses against corrupt aristocracy is to have a competent aristocracy. [Varma S.P., P.233]
American Social Theorists Burnham & C.Wright Mills had also contributed to elitist theory. Burnham has developed an economic approach in certain respects. To C.Wright Mills, the elite is the product of the 'institutional landscape' of the society.

An elite, thus, appears to combine some of the characteristics of both an oligarchy (Govt. by few) & an aristocracy (Govt. by the best) but is not to be confused with either. It is a minority like an oligarchy, & consists of superior people like an aristocracy, but there is neither the sense of self perpetuation & selfishness which surrounds the former nor the pomp & grandeur which often is associated with the latter. [Johari J.C., P. 454 to 457]

The elite theory identifies democracy with a static political system in which elite rule is sanctioned by periodic election. Such elected elites are always collectively responsible to the people. In India the elite class emerged out of many factors, showing change in the patterns of its processes & character. Immediately after independence the socio-political ideology of the elites was based on nationalism, liberalism & religio cultural reforms. The second phase of the pattern of behaviour of elites was in getting rewards from a political office. The third phase was of chaos in which the political power was placed in the hands of new-breed of elite - petty landlords, traders,
businessmen, professionals etc. The fourth phase represented lower caste, small farmers, middle class professionals etc.[ Ahuja R., Ed. Sachiananda., P.124-125 ]

The class of elite women emerged in India during the pre-independence era. The stereotype image of a woman was bound by traditionalism & religious misinterpretations. The nature & extent of female participation in the nationalist movement operated at the three levels - i) The class of women, at mass level, participated in satyagraha. ii) A small group of women took part in social reform activity allied with Gandhian Politics such as living in ashramas or involving in the campaign for Khadi or village industry etc. iii) A very small group of elite women were attracted to the movement in its entirety. Women in leadership roles were few & were given special privileged status in the movement. [Agnew V., P.10-11] Thus the mass participation of women in the nationalist movement in the late 19th & early 20th century was unique as it was for national independence & social commitment.

After independence a class of elite women in the political process had a different role to play. The elites had to capture power & position through the popular mandate. One of the common characteristics of the women leaders in the political process during the period immediately after independence was their experience of participation in the freedom movement. A few of them were members of the Constituent Assembly. Those who were
elected became the chief spokesmen of the women's cause on the floors of the legislative bodies & played an important role in mobilising public opinion in support of the social legislations that changed the legal status of women within the first few years after independence.

The situation however seems to have changed when women elites entered into political process because of their work in the social field & contribution within the party structure. [Muzumdar V., Towards Equality, P.298]

The U.N.O's World Plan of Action & the fourteen objectives to be achieved by each nation during the 'international decade for women' brought a new awakening towards women's issues. The Committee on the 'Status of Women in India' presented its report. The social legislations were passed in favour of women by the Government. The welfare policies were framed by the Government. All these factors brought an acceleration to bring overall change in the status of women in India & gave rise to a new class of elites.

Women elites arose out of a new generation. Majority of these women were educated & were from the middle & higher classes. A large section of women elite leader$ sprung & they became conscious of their role in the political process. This new class of educated elites joined the political mainstream to search for women's new identity & self assertion. The rise of these 21st
century political elites was out of their efforts for 'new identity'. They not only symbolised themselves as new patterns of elites but propagated the new waves of thoughts at the larger level of society through political platforms. Such class of elite women rose in Bombay & represented in Bombay Municipal Corporation, Maharashtra State Legislature & Union Parliament.

These women political elites not only stepped into the political field, but also jumped into the social field for the cause of women. A new awareness was created among women. They began to organise themselves in autonomous organisations to struggle collectively against the social evils & to inculcate new values through revolutionary means in the Indian society. They also emerged as the office bearers of the women fronts of their parties. This consciousness brought a class of feminist elites whose main demand was for equal status of women. The present research work embodies the role of these women elites in the political & social areas.

The increasing employment opportunities & the need for economic self sufficiency brought a class of self-employed & employed women elites. These women became conscious of their rights like equal pay for equal work, maternity benefit etc. The emergence of elite women in the trade union activities was a new dimension to the scope of women's capabilities. This class of elite women emerged primarily to raise their voice against women's problems through trade unions. Bombay provided a right
ground for the emergence of such elite class because women work in the private & public sectors on a large scale. These elites are educated & come from middle & higher middle classes. The unorganised sectors are brought under the trade unions which give a few examples of the elites from the poor class & of partially educated women.

The emergence of the women elites is out of a new consciousness which was created by the Government, political parties, mass media & education. Employment provided a capacity of independent judgement to women & allowed them to freely participate in the social & political activities. The ties of traditionalism have been replaced by new ideas & ideals. The mass resistance of women against social evils were sympathetically recognised by the people. The personal capacities of these women, in rising as elites, cannot be overlooked. One of the prominent factors for their emergence is the family support rendered to them by the family members. In fact this is common to the elites emerged before independence & after independence. The backing, encouragement & active participation of husband, father or brother has given a helping hand in the emergence of this new elite class of women.

The following chapters in the research work throw light on the actual role of the elite women from Bombay during the decade in greater details.