CHAPTER - III

WOMEN IN INDIAN SOCIETY

The structure of an organ is what it is, the function is what it does, what it is for. The structure seems to have a priority, since the function of an organ could not very well be investigated until the organ itself was known. This brings us to see women in the kind of social structure they find themselves in India and the kind of functional consciousness that emerges out of the given structure, when viewed historically. Moreover, we will try to present a sketch of women in India from the earlier works. Not that at present one cannot locate both traditional and modern women exclusively. By modern is meant progressive, rational, liberal and open-minded. Though one invariably meets women who are (1) either traditional or modern, (2) going through a transitional phase, i.e. neither traditional nor modern, (3) both traditional as well as modern. However, it should be noted that the possibility for the existence of modern women in a traditional set-up and vice versa cannot be ruled out. How women in India try to resolve tensions
at various levels is interesting to examine, i.e.

(1) Tension within a woman herself

(2) Tension between man and woman

(3) Tension between woman and woman

(4) Tension between woman and society.

For a social system to function, its necessary contradiction thrives on the basis of the gap between the ideal and the real. Thus, it is essential to identify the psychological, ideological, physical and socio-economic factors responsible for the oppression of women in India. The degree of suppression experienced by women at each stage of their life-cycle and for each social class varies qualitatively and quantitatively.

A historical sketch of the evolution of social conditions of women needs to be traced in order to establish a context for the present study. However, in many cases this historical picture is not free from ideological biases.
Women's Position: A Historical Sketch

Many scholars have reflected on the status of women in India and have seen a certain pattern right from the ancient times. During Vedic times, i.e., between 2500 to 1500 B.C., the Aryans who came to the Indus Valley were a herding and warring nomadic people. Women then had complete equality with men in the realm of religion. They had a respectable position in the family and society. According to A.S. Altekar, in the Vedic period, "in the higher sections of society the sacred initiation (upanayana) of girls was common, and they used to go through a regular course of education. Some attained distinction in the realm of theology and philosophy and a considerable number of women used to follow the teaching career."

In the family, the woman's role of daughter, wife, and mother were respected too. She enjoyed freedom of movement and also had a say in the choice of her marriage partner. Divorce was permitted. Widows were allowed to remarry though within the family. During the period 1500 to 500 B.C., i.e., the late Vedic times,
the Aryans began to settle in the Gangetic Plains. Early agricultural society develops and so does private property. Women still seemed to enjoy a high position in family and society but according to some scholars the practice of sending woman out to great teachers and to centres of learning came to be discouraged. It was preferred that women received training at home from fathers, and near relatives. Hence high religious training was not available to every woman; consequently, a tendency developed to curtail the religious rights and privileges of the average woman. Many religious functions and sacrifices now were performed by male substitutes. However, when the husband was away, out on war service, etc. some rites and religious functions continued to be performed by women alone. Altekar goes on to say that the general freedom and better status enjoyed by women in Vedic period was largely due to men being engaged in conquest and consolidation. Women used to take an active part in agriculture, and in the manufacturing of cloth, bows and arrows and other war materials. They were useful members of society and could not be treated with patronage and contempt.
The position of women changed considerably in the period from 500 B.C. to 700 A.D. The Aryans had by then settled down. The Mauryan and Gupta empires rose and fell. Stratification increased in the society. Marriages between the Aryans and the indigenous inhabitants took place. Though these non-Aryan women were accepted in every way as wives, owing to their ignorance of Sanskrit language and Vedic religion, they could not partake in the religious ceremonies. Thus, women from the higher sections were withdrawn from outdoor work. Freedom to move was curbed simultaneously. The procreation of a son became a religious necessity as he alone could perform certain ritual functions. Buddhism in the meanwhile had kept up the tradition of giving a place of honour to women. They had the right to enter the Bhikshuni Sangha. Later, however, women came to be considered as unfit for freedom and deserving no independence - to be kept under the authority of the male at all stages of their life.
From 700 A.D. to 1800 A.D. further deterioration of women's status occurred. Hindu religion had become complicated. Women, who became the least educated among the people with few rights and privileges left to them, blindly followed these dictums and rules laid down by the exponents of Puranic literature. This becomes the period of Muslim invasion by Mohammed Ghori and the establishment of Muslim reign which is later followed by the advent of the British rule in India. Till the 12th century purdah was absent. However, in the face of constant invasion when menfolk were often away fighting battles, it was considered safer to keep women in seclusion. Female infanticide, child marriage and sati were the outcome of the constant political strike as protection of females become a problem. Sati became a custom when there was a religious ban on widow remarriage. Firstly, it ensured the chastity of a widow, and secondly, there was an economic benefit from the assets of the deceased by claiments other than the widow. The custom was widespread in Bengal, Rajasthan and some northern areas.

Sati was rendered illegal by Lord William Bentick in 1829 when Raja Ram Mohan Roy carried a valiant
crusade against the evil custom. In the western areas of Gujarat and Kutch and in the northern areas of Rajasthan, U.P. and Punjab followed (i) religious dictum in favour of child marriage and (ii) foreign invasions which made protection of maidens an arduous task. Female infanticide provided escape from such activations. These customs were not practised in the South.

The Colonial Period

From 1800 A.D. to 1947 A.D. India experienced the colonial impact. The British rule in the 18th century brought a degree of political orderliness. The existing social structure was modified through legislative measures. Legislation was enacted to permit inter-caste marriages and widow re-marriage. Divorce was permitted under certain conditions. Facilities were provided for education of women. The thinkers and leaders of society advocated education of women and restoration of their legal and social rights. Socio-economic movements like the Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj lent further support to these concepts. The influence of liberal English education also helped to
spread and strengthen these ideals. Unlike in the West, the movement for social reform and women's advancement in India was initiated and led by enlightened male leaders.

At the end of the 19th century, the reform movement, to a certain extent, merged with national resurgence inspired by M.K. Gandhi, Bal gangadhar Tilak and G.K. Gokhale, with political emancipation of the country as their goal. The founding of the national Congress in 1885 provided the spring board to political and national activity for Indian women. Legislative reforms were brought about in Independent India. The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956, and the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956, were passed. Besides these four major legislative measures, a number of other laws have been passed to restrain undesirable social practices and to protect the interests of women workers. Prominent among these are the Prohibition of Dowry Act, the Suppression of Prostitution and Immoral Traffic Act, and the Factories Act, all passed in 1958.
### Summary of the Historical Trends

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Position of Women</th>
<th>Other Comments</th>
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<tr>
<td>Rig Vedic Period 2500-1500 B.C.</td>
<td>The Aryans come to India. They are herding and warring, nomadic people.</td>
<td>The position of women in this period is favourable. Education is accessible.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Late Vedic Period 1500-500 B.C.</td>
<td>The Aryans begin to settle in the Gangetic plains. Early agricultural society develops. Private Property becomes important.</td>
<td>Women are restrained from outdoor work. Education of women declines.</td>
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<tr>
<td>500 B.C. to 700 A.D.</td>
<td>The Aryans settle down. Mauryans and Gupta empires rise and fall.</td>
<td>Women of the higher classes are withdrawn from outdoor agricultural work. Her freedom to move is limited. Restrictions on religious participation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle Ages 700 - 1800 A.D.</td>
<td>Muslim invasion later followed by Muslim reign.</td>
<td>The position of women deteriorates further. Child marriage, sati and purdah increase.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colonial period 1800 - 1947</td>
<td>The British increase their hold on the country</td>
<td>Social reform improves the position of women.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent India 1947 -</td>
<td>Political independence but not economic.</td>
<td>Equality exists before the law but does not exist in practice.</td>
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Finally, we would like to point out that a nationalistic or communal idealisation of the historical past which depicts uniformly women having a higher or a lower status is simply a fallacy. What is true of the contemporary period in terms of different positions of women is equally true about the various periods in Indian history. Thus, for example, we cannot view religious activity or education of women leading to an absolute decline or enhancement of their status.

**Depiction of Women in the Sociological Literature**

Indian society is a highly complex one. Complexity breathes through the heterogeneous nature of the society with its pattern of socio-economic inequality, the existing social structure based on caste, community and class; the social, economic, political and cultural changes occurring at present, educational development and structural changes in the living styles have affected the nature of inequalities in our society. It is important to note here that any micro or macro change that has occurred in the past or is taking place, has always had both negative and
positive impact. Such diverse forces acting in our society are inevitably giving rise to ambiguities and contradictions. Whether these conditions prove to be creative is another story altogether. The processes of development, urbanization and modernization have also played a role in creating and resolving imbalances.

The picture described in the sociological literature is that of women's suffering. In spite of the constitutional provisions for women in India, they face tremendous amount of insecurity and helplessness as is obvious from the declining sex ratio, life expectancy, literacy rate, internal migration rates and economic participation. Their enrolment in schools is much lower than boys. Though women have access to all avenues of learning and public appointments, in actual practice, small percentage of women in India are either highly educated or are holding positions in Government and private organisations. Many scholars have been reflecting on the position of women in India.

However, general trend of the propositions can be summarised as follows:
1. Though the awareness about the role and status of women has increased but the women's question is still confined to the elite sections of the society (S.C. Dube).

2. According to M.N. Srinivas, the career women are quite visible at least among the elite and generally people seem to have accepted their new roles.

3. Veena Majumdar points out the fluctuations in the process of evolution in the status of Indian women. The developments since Independence are seen as one of rapid but steady progress in education, legal reform, entry into professions, the creative arts and cultural activities, employment in the organized sector and gradual disappearance of purdah. The decline in sex ratio and the continual gap in the life expectancy of men and women because of higher mortality rate, the neglect of female children by their higher rate of death indicates the existence of invisible forces which are affecting women's lives.
4. Romila Thapar identifies the cultural milieu, family structure, class, caste, property rights and morals as the source of infinite variations of status.

5. Neera Desai points out that the Indian women's movement has not taken a violent form like the one in the western countries. The wider perspective gained by many women leaders and the decision to work for the liberation of all the oppressed and the exploited rather than for the women alone prevented the Indian movement from a self-defeating and alienating elitism of its western counterpart.

6. A. Beteille says that Indian society must first be broken down into its basic divisions to examine the place assigned to women in them. Rarely does marriage and motherhood allow the full participation of women in social and cultural life. Work, for example in the rural sector deteriorates the status of women. The work conditions have to be altered.
7. Suma Chitnis surveys the trends in urban female employment and shows a higher participation rate of women in female occupations and the problem is largely a problem of unemployed educated women. She advocates the redefinition of sex roles. [10]

8. Imtiaz Ahmed points out that men are the basis of women's participation in politics. Without the support of a husband, father or son, they can't go to polls. [11]

9. Devaki Jain emphasizes that status lies in the eyes of the beholder. She recommends the removal of obstacles such as immobility, optionless occupation of menial tasks, humiliation in terms of non-participation in decision making for the improvement in women's status. [12]

10. Alfred D' Souza identifies fertility performance and the birth of sons which give women a social standing. High fertility becomes less a personal choice of the women than an outcome of a combination of socio-economic factors such as poverty, high infant mortality, the requirements of the family work-force and old-age security.
Inspite of over two decades of planned economic development the structure of employment opportunities for women in rural areas remains relatively unchanged. [13]

11. Promilla Kapoor gives emphasis on the middle class women facing role conflict. [14]

12. Gail Omvedt feels that the housewives do not generate a woman's movement. [15]

However, most of the scholar agree on the point that India thus provides a conflicting situation for women in India, where the old and new are co-existing. Maria Mies has very aptly classified women according to the social and psychological problems they face. [16]

Further, in the last decade, there has been an influx of women's studies. Most of these either involve a statistical exercise or are descriptive studies with emphasis on the external dimension of the women's question, which fall beyond the intended scope of our study. We shall not make detailed references to
these works, some of which are mentioned in the bibliography.

Let us briefly review the findings of the report of the committee on the status of women in India. This report, no doubt is a collection of data on important social and economic variables affecting the personal development and patterns of social behaviour of women in India. However, it fails to touch upon the subjective dimension of the status of women, which to a considerable extent determines their decisions. This report documents a decline over the years in the actual position of women relative to women: a rising life expectancy but an increasing gap between male and female life expectancy; an increase in the rate of dowry; the persistence of traditional notion about women's place at home; an absolute decline in the labour force participation and agricultural work; a rising percentage of farm labourers. Fewer women are political leads since independence though voting participation is rising and there is an absolute rise in the number of illiterate women although the development of women's education since independence has
been described as phenomenal in comparison to past figures.

Regarding the law, the gap is between the ideal as laid down in law and what has been achieved in practice. The committee has pointed out the reforms that are needed, the most important of which relate to Muslim Personal Law and laws regarding polygamy, divorce, inheritance, adoption, child marriage and dowry. It observes the participation of women in the unorganized sector of the Indian economy and are characterized by helplessness, disabilities, or various types of exploitation. They are outside the reach of most laws that seek to protect the security and working conditions of labour. Labour organizations are mostly absent. However, we cannot consider the position of women in isolation from that of family and society. Thus, let us now view the role of women in the family structure.

Social structure, cultural norms and value systems have an effect on the social expectations regarding the roles of men and women. System of inheritance family, kinship, marriage and religious traditions are some of
the important institutions having an impact on the roles of women also. They provide an ideology for the expected behaviour. However, urbanization, increasing population, educational advance and technological revolution leave normative standards far behind.

**Women and Family: The Indian Situation**

Family is one of the basic institutions of the Indian society which preserves the societal values and performs the tasks essential for the survival of society. Here, we shall not go into the controversy about the family in India as to whether it is becoming nuclear from joint because of industrialization and urbanization or whether extended family is more relevant to the Indian situation but rather try to see the role of women in the family.

The traditional Indian family drew its values from religious teachings. The individual had to accept an assigned role in the family hierarchy and fulfill his obligations. Individuals were not encouraged to pursue their own interests. The father enjoyed the highest authority in the family. Depending on ther
chronological position, the sons, had varying rights and corresponding responsibilities in a hierarchical order. The mother reigned supreme in the family over her daughters and daughters-in-law. According to the Hindu scriptures, the father should take into account the needs of all. A great deal of resentment lies buried underneath the adjustment pattern existing in the family.

Women have played a passive role in the family hierarchy. Now one sees a few changes taking place. Economic pressures have forced women to work and men have accepted it. A woman who contributes towards the family income wants to actively involve herself in the family affairs. It remains questionable whether she is free to choose or has individual status. Housewives and working women are aware of this aspect. Women are becoming assertive whether they contribute to the family income or not. At present, in the urban areas, there is a tendency to establish nuclear families owing to personal and economic reasons.

Traditionally, when a bride joined her new household, she was expected to adjust according to the
husband's family. Now, women like to be assertive and set up their own homes. Conflict arises in practically every field. Comparisons between daughters-in-law, between sisters and sisters-in-law become quite unpleasant. The man finds it difficult to take sides, often being ambivalent. The mother who is emotionally tied to the son finds the daughter-in-law very threatening. In the traditional family, this state of affairs was accepted by the daughter-in-law as inevitable. With the increasing self awareness about her role, a modern woman does not submit easily. [18]

In the traditional joint family the interaction between the parents and children is quite complex. The child has many role models and the interaction is not very intense whereas in a nuclear family it is the opposite. The socialization pattern changes completely in a nuclear family where expectations and demands on each other increase. The performance in education becomes highly valued and there is intense pressure on women to take care of the development of the children.

In the Indian setting today, R.K. Mukherjee has pointed out that where the unit of production and
service is an individual, the differential earnings of brothers may generate tension in a family in reference to consumption which in a joint family is to be collective. This tension may be reciprocated by the brothers or by their wives with reference to their respective families of procreation. In some cases the tension subsides because of economic inability to form separate households. But, generally the brothers are likely to separate, firstly, if their respective families of procreation consist of children, daughter-in-law and grand-children only or secondly, if they refer to conjugal units only. [19]

R. Lannoy emphasises the mother-son relationship in the Indian family: "No affective relationship in the Indian family is warmer or more intense than that between mother and son. It has been so since the establishment of the joint family system in the late Vedic period and it continues to be so even in the urban middle-class nuclear family. There is one important qualification. However, extreme intensity in this relationship is generally focused on only one son, often but not invariably the first born, while the father is supreme in his authority, the mother is the
centre of domestic life; this is ensured in fact by the segregation of women and the aloofness of the father. Prolonged unilateral dependence from infancy up to the age of three or more, and the inculcation of passivity, docility, obedience and respect, especially when reinforced by excessive indulgence, all tend to encourage a son's very deep attachment to his mother. Women, he adds, are unsure of themselves, socially immature, emotionally undisciplined and inclined to be hysterical. A bride feels her prestige and status in economic terms and is hardly regarded as a woman with a personality of her own.

Sacrifice: Source of Strength

In Indian culture, 'sacrifice' has been institutionalized as the central value of life. An Indian woman, thus, expresses her needs for power in an indirect way by 'endowment'. The ultimate creative forces, Shakti, is feminine, and in mythology, women are depicted as wielding considerable power. The female consorts of the gods Shiva and Vishnu are more
active than these males. The Goddess Kali is enormously aggressive who is only satisfied after lasting human sacrifices. Women are usually seen as powerful but danerous and therefore, their freedom has been curbed. Now that women are becoming assertive, hence, they are seen in the various power processes within the family and outside it. The yielding and self-sacrificing women often mask a strong urge to power by passively being superior. It becomes a way of recognition. Conflict arising from this passivity gets covered up by being silently obedient. Sometimes women become very acquisitive so that later they can distribute the resources to their loved ones. The distance maintained by women from others would indicate a sense of power to them.

Achievement: Source of Strength

The role of mothers and home makers will always be important. However, we have and will have more and more women who, without rejecting the value of parenting would want to widen their sphere of activity. Change of such a nature often results in the disequilibrium of the existing set of pattern producing
discomfort. Not only do women have to face an inner turmoil of what they want, who they should be, but they are also confronted by external pressures. This sometimes confuses the women and a distorted self-image is projected. Since the women today are being pushed and pulled in all directions, they not only set themselves against men but also against women.

Women who want to attain power within the family by direct means become aggressive and active. A woman who wants to attain power by direct means is quite aware of her contradictions, ambivalences and limitations. She doesn't get her security by controlling others. Since she invests most of her time in self-development activities and requires privacy, therefore, such a woman becomes a great threat to the Indian family. [21]

Preference for Sons

A son is still a cherished possession, the successor to the family wealth, performer of family rites, protector in old age, source of financial
assistance and the object of family pride in the eyes of others. The son preferring culture is a source of severe conflict for women who are sonless or even childless. The husband can try to get a child or a son from another woman but the wife cannot try to rectify her position by producing a child or a son from another man.

On the feminine identity in India, Sudhir Kakar observes that for women motherhood is the source of identity and a son is both a certification and a redemption. Her identity, he adds, has evolved out of the particulars of her life cycle and childhood, out of the dailiness of her relationships as daughter in her parents' family and out of the universals of the traditional ideals of womanhood. Thus, her identity is wholly defined by her relationship to others. Here, however, we feel that religion and career play an important role in defining and understanding a woman's identity in India. Women's involvement in religious activities or career enables them to form social networks in their localities and places of work. This forms a basis which makes them identify, share and communicate with others. Religion and career, thus,
become important constituents of their consciousness and strengthen their identity.

The concept of female in Hindu ideology presents an essential duality. On the one hand, she is fertile, benevolent, the bestower, and on the other, she is aggressive, malevolent, the destroyer. Hinduism provides a conception of the world in which women are powerful and dangerous. Traditionally, this power and danger have been checked through religious prescriptions which kept women under the control of men. Thus, woman as mother in Hindu thought controls and becomes the women in control of herself. For those who seek pleasure or those who seek liberation the worship of the all-powerful goddess is essential. She is the mother of the universe, pervading the whole world.

Many studies have revealed the changing attitudes regarding women's roles and statuses of the educated women in modern India. There is a tendency for 'accretion of statuses', i.e., multiplicity of roles—especially in the urban areas. Thus, family and marriage are indirectly being affected. The study of
the employed mother in India is summarized by saying that the traditional asymmetric husband-dominated family is changing towards a more symmetric family where the mother is employed, indicating a major role- conflict resulting in a chain of consequences. Relationships are becoming more reciprocal as has been noted by P. Kapur, though the expectations of educated women still remain unsatisfied.

Today, the Indian situation is more complicated because India is going through a transitional period where both the old and new are starkly visible. India's capital Delhi, is highly representative in this respect. Women in Delhi have bearings within the traditional social matrix but at the same time are reaching out to elements which are subject to change. So, if one aspect of their life changes, there automatically follows a change in other aspects. Contradictions in our society have always existed and will continue to remain. Women feel and suffer the stress of contradictions even when they remain silent about it.