CHAPTER-ONE

WOMEN’S STATUS IN CONTEMPORARY INDO-EGYPTIAN SOCIETIES:

- WOMEN IN EGYPTIAN SOCIETY
- WOMEN IN INDIAN SOCIETY
As we begin to unroll the scroll of history of India and Egypt, we notice that the Indo-Egyptian societies compared to other societies have a very long past. Nearly all other civilizations of the ancient world were unable to stand the onslaught of time. They lie buried in the earth with their ruined cities. However, the civilisations of the two countries continue their existence in spite of vicissitudes.

Throughout written history, women have experienced status subservient to the men they lived with. Generally, most cultures known to modern historians followed a standard pattern of males assigned the role of protector and provider while women were assigned roles of domestic servitude. Scholars speculate endlessly at the cause: biology, religion and social custom. Nevertheless, the women were always subordinated to the men in their culture. Through their artwork, tomb inscriptions, and papyrus and leather scrolls, preserved in the dry, desert air, Ancient Indians and Egyptians left evidence for scholars suggesting that Egypt and India were once a peculiar exception to this pattern.

Not only have Egypt and India a living past, but also in this long process of time, people of both countries have been exposed to varieties of tribes, races and cultures. Egypt, the seat of ancient civilisation with historical records that go back at least five millennia, has been for the last century undergoing radical changes that have profoundly affected the religious, social, political and economic aspects of the country’s internal and external topography. The Egyptian trend of thought is an outcome of social and cultural traditions throughout history: Pharaonic, Greek, Roman, Christian, Turkish, Arabic, Islamic, French, British and American. On the other hand, the Indian civilisation is unique for its uninterrupted character. It has come under many influences and been moved by many heavy impacts and the thread seems to have run with no break. That is the wonder and romance of the Indian evolution. With the passage of
time, the two societies did not remain static and stagnant. In different phases of their existence, they experienced changes in social organisation, in social relations between various component parts and also in ideology. The status of women as a vital aspect of the two societies also reflected similar changes. Anthropological evidence suggests that unusual circumstances in both culture provided for women to be given equal status to their male counterparts notably, matrilineal inheritance and emphasis on the joy of family life over maintaining ethnic purity.

The status of women in any society is a significant pointer to the level of that society. When the many existing social and economic disabilities begin to narrow down, the place of women will also fall in its rightful place. There cannot be social equilibrium and maintenance of harmony in any society in its larger class composition if the woman holds an inferior position in the society. Because it is not merely the women who are kept backward through illiteracy, ignorance, lack of opportunities and economic and social amenities, but it is the large masses of the people, men and women who share these disabilities. The deterioration in the position of woman is, in fact, the accentuation of the social divisions, which beset the society. Thus, the fall in the position of women is symptomatic of other social deterioration in the body of a nation.

The study of the past reveals that the status of women has been affected by progressive or reactionary trend, which prevailed in the society. When the former held ascendancy, women's position improved, her status elevated. However, the forces of reaction held sway and the position of women increasingly deteriorated up to the 19th century. During this phase, woman sometimes is considered a goddess and at other times a slave but never a human being with a personality.
WOMEN'S STATUS IN EGYPTIAN SOCIETY

"The woman is the greatest among God's creation; for her different roles in the history of Egypt; for her struggle, faithfulness and chasteness."

[Naguib Mahfouz]
Egypt is the cradle of a deep-rooted civilisation of which history goes back to more than five thousand years. It is the museum of history and the melting pot of the greatest civilisations throughout the ages. On its land the Pharaonic, Greek, Roman, Christian, Turkish, Arabic, French, British, American and Islamic cultures and civilisations flourished. Every inch on its land tells a tale or a legend and leaves a riddle that perplexes scientists and thinkers throughout time. On its land, there lies treasures, which reveal every day one letter of the alphabet of civilisation and mysteries of human miracles in all fields. In its land, arts grew, sciences flourished and holy religions blessed the world with the light of faith.

Ever since the dawn of Egyptian history, Egyptian women have been working hand in hand with Egyptian men in laying the foundations of one of the oldest civilizations in the history of humanity. The history of Egyptian women - a history stretching across thousands of years - is replete with great achievements. From times immemorial, women have occupied a significant position in the Egyptian society — a position unattained by women in most of the other ancient societies in the world.

Throughout history the Egyptian society has been undergoing radical changes. Nowhere has this change been more evident than in the changes brought about in the condition of women. These changes led to the offing of different and conflicting views regarding the status of women. An attempt will be made here to describe changing thoughts and rules about the women.

The issue of women date back to the day when humanity came into existence. In its historical evolutions women's life which followed a path in line with social life, and changed and developed through endeavours, sometimes of society, or rulers and at other times through those of women themselves.
Ancient Egyptian civilization is characteristic of its deep respect for the position of women, as women enjoyed social, economic, legal and political rights equal to those of men. They also enjoyed the rights to private property and full legal competence, as well as the right to run their financial matters without any form of guardianship or supervision. Women made major contributions to the world of politics from as early as the first ancient Egyptian dynasties, by reaching the highest political ranks including that of the monarchy itself.

In many ancient societies women were treated as inferior beings and in some cases the property of their male family members but the Egyptian women achieved parity with men. They enjoyed the same legal and economic rights, at least in theory, and this notion is reflected in Egyptian art and historical inscriptions. The disparities between people's legal rights were based on differences in social class and not on gender. Legal and economic rights were accorded to both men and women.

In ancient Egypt, the society ranked a person by the titles he/she held and the Egyptians cherished their titles dearly. Most women only held the title "Mistress of the House" but a few are recorded as having the title of steward, treasurer. Women were banned from government post where writing was needed so most were believed to be illiterate. An Egyptian woman's status normally depended on the rank of her male relations but she had individual rights.

During this period, a woman could own property in her own name and hold professions that allowed her to have economic freedom from male relatives. A wife was entitled to one third of any property that she owned jointly with her husband and on her death could will her property to anyone she wished. Egyptian women were equal in the court system. They could act as a witness, plaintiffs or a defendant. Women were accountable for crimes they committed and would have
to answer for them in court and if found guilty suffer the same punishment as men.

Peasant women took care of their families and work for the wealthy as servants. At home they shared the workload with other female family members. The extended family concept was present in Ancient Egypt with mothers, daughters, grandmothers, and aunts, living together or in close proximity of each other. Tombs depict women at various occupations such as singers, musicians, dancers, servants, beer brewers, bakers, professional mourners, priestess and the loyal loving wife. There are many documents that show that the importance of good hygiene and female health. Many documents deal with conception, miscarriage, childbirth and milk supplies.

Marriages were regarded as the normal process in a person's life. It was uncommon for a person to go unmarried. Most marriages (excluding the royal family) appear to be monogamous. Divorce was acceptable to end a marriage. Grounds for divorce included childlessness (this was rare most childless couples adopted a poor relative or an orphan) and adultery on the woman's part. Men left their property to their children and it was important for them to know who was biologically their child. It appears men were accountable for adultery by the community. The priesthood was a male occupation although many elite women served as priestess of the goddess Hathor, few women served other gods. A royal woman would hold the title of "God's Wife of Amun.

Royal women in ancient Egypt are never called queen. There was no such word in their language. Their female attendants held the title of "Royal Ornament", a nurse, a maid or wet nurse for their children would have held titles showing their special relationships to the royal family. Females did not inherit their father's throne it would pass down normally to a son who would then marry the eldest royal princess. In some cases a royal female ruled in behalf of a young male
relative until he came of age. Royal women were married to their brothers or, in some cases, the father to keep the throne in the family. They were never married to foreign kings or princes. Thus, women and men of Ancient Egypt held appearance in high regard.

History reveals that life was more or less equally shared by men and women in the pre-historic stage of the "hunter-gatherer" society. Women enjoyed equal rights in social, political, and religious areas during the Pharaonic period. Many women during this era were literate. They appreciated literature and art and shared many public posts. Family life was well established. In most marriage cases, a man married one wife and she had the right to ask for divorce if her husband mistreated her. Pharaonic culture was later exposed to the Greek culture during Roman times. This affected the status of Pharaonic women, as the Greek culture did not esteem them as highly.

It is uncertain why these rights existed for the woman in Egypt but nowhere else in the ancient world. It may well be that such rights were ultimately related to the theoretical role of the king in Egyptian society. If the pharaoh was the personification of Egypt, and he represented the corporate personality of the Egyptian state, then men and women might not have been seen in their familiar relationships, but rather, only in regard to this royal centre of society.

Since Egyptian national identity would have derived from all people sharing a common relationship with the king, then in this relationship, which all men and women shared equally, they were, in a sense, equal to each other. This is not to say that Egypt was an egalitarian society. Legal distinctions in Egypt were apparently based much more upon differences in the social classes, rather than differences in gender. Rights and privileges were not uniform from one class to another, but within the given classes, it seems that equal
economic and legal rights were, for the most part, accorded to both men and women.

Marriage was a very important part of ancient Egyptian society. Some people say it was almost a duty to get married. Compared to today's world, Egyptian marriages were very different; husbands could marry more than one wife, and people of close relations (first cousins, brothers and sisters, etc.) could also wed one another. For the most part, however, incest was frowned upon, except in the royal family, where incest was used to safeguard the dynastic succession.

Divorce was a private matter, and for most part, the government did not interfere, except upon the request of the "divorcees". Almost any excuse could be used to end a marriage, and an alliance could be terminated at will. Anyone who had drawn up a marriage contract would have to honour those terms, and those who hadn't could, if they wished, could invest in a legal document. Legal cases, however, were very unusual; most marriages ended with the wife moving back to the matrimonial home, returning to her family, therefore setting both parties free to marry again.

Pregnancy was very important to ancient Egyptian women. A fertile woman was a successful woman. By becoming pregnant, women gained the respect of society, approval from their husbands, and admiration of their less-fortunate sisters and sterile friends. Men needed to prove their "manliness" by fathering as many children as they possibly could, and babies were seen as a reason for boasting.

The literacy rate of Egyptian women was well behind that of men from the Old Kingdom through the Late Period. Lower class women, certainly were illiterate; middle class women and the wives of professional men, perhaps less so. The upper class probably had a higher rate of literate women. In the Old and Middle Kingdoms, middle and upper class women are occasionally found in the textual and archaeological record with administrative titles. In the New
Kingdom the frequency at which these titles occur declines significantly, suggesting erosion in the rate of female literacy at that time.

The Egyptian woman in general was free to go about in public and she was free to work in the fields and in estate workshops. Certainly, she did not wear a veil, which is first documented among the ancient. However, it was perhaps unsafe for an Egyptian woman to venture far from her town alone. But mores and values apparently changed by the New Kingdom.

Throughout most of the period (3500 B.C. – 600 C.E.), marriage was generally monogamous, and the position of the wife was relatively secure. A man was allowed to take a second wife, however, if the first wife did not bear children. According to the law of Eshnunna, of the early second millennium B.C., the second wife had to be of lower status _ slave or concubine _ so as not to challenge the primacy of the first wife. But the laws of marriage gradually changed and made it easier for men to have more than one wife. By the time of the Assyrians, about a thousand years later, the rulers had more than one wife and many concubines.¹ The husband became as an absolute and undisputed master of the household. Women’s position also deteriorated with regard to divorce.

Evidence from the Assyrian period indicates that by the mid-second millennium, free married women were required to comply with a dress code when they left their houses. This same law forbids prostitutes from veiling themselves and even threatens them with punishment for veiling, since this would be an act of deception. The fact that brides in recent times also wear a veil may be derived from this earlier practice.²

Perhaps seclusion of women was developed for a similar reason. The Assyrian kings of the fourteenth to the eleventh centuries B.C.E. were the first rulers to develop extensive rules regulating life within
the royal household and the duties of the palace officials. The women of the royal household lived in secluded quarters within the palace. This practice seems to have become standard in following dynasties. The women of Achamenid dynasty (559-331 B.C.) were also secluded. By the seventh century C.E., respectable women in the Byzantine and Sasanian Empire were secluded they ed in public veiled.

Ruling-class and wealthy women were freed from domestic drudgery using slaves. These wealthy women had the economic recourses, access to education, and ability to qualify for any position. As a rule, however, they spent their life in the harem. The only proper activity for them outside the household was charitable work. Side by side with the seclusion of women, an attitude had developed that a proper woman's place was within the house.

Most of the textual and archaeological evidence for the role of women that survives from prior to the New Kingdom pertains to the elite, not the common folk. At this time, it is the elite, for the most part, who leave written records or who can afford tombs that contain such records. However, from the New Kingdom onward, and certainly by the Ptolemaic Period, such evidence pertains more and more to women of the middle and lower classes. Actually, the bulk of the evidence for the economic freedom of Egyptian women derives from the Ptolemaic Period.

It is interesting that when the Greek conquered Egypt, Egyptian women were allowed more rights and privileges than the Greek women who were forced to live under the less equal the Greek system. The Greek domination of Egypt began with the conquest of Alexander the Great in 332 B.C., did not sweep away Egyptian social and political institutions. Both Egyptian and Greek systems of law and social traditions existed side-by-side in Egypt at that time. The Greek functioned within their system and the Egyptians within theirs. Mixed parties of the Greeks and the Egyptians making contractual
agreements or who were forced into court over legal disputes would choose which of the two legal systems in which they would base their settlements. Ironically, while the Egyptians were the subjugated people of their Greek rulers, Egyptian women, operating under the Egyptian system, had more privileges and civil rights than the Greek women living in the same society, but who functioned under the more restrictive Greek social and legal system.

Egyptian women's rights extended to all legally defined areas of Egyptian civilization. Women could manage, own, and sell private property, which included slaves, land, portable goods, servants, livestock, and money. Women could resolve legal settlements. Women could conclude any kind of legal settlement. Women could appear as a contracting partner in a marriage contract or a divorce contract; they could execute testaments; they could free slaves; women could make adoptions. Women were entitled to sue at law. This amount of freedom was at variance with that of the Greek women who required a designated male to represent or stand for her in all legal contracts and proceedings. This male was her husband, father or brother.

The rights and egalitarian conditions enjoyed by Egyptian women shocked the conquering Greeks. The Egyptians, in their manners and customs, seem to have reversed the ordinary practices of mankind. For instance, women attend market and are employed in trade, while men stay at home and do the weaving. Athenian Democracy mandated that the female's role in the domestic economy was the production of heirs and service of the family. The Egyptian state took direct part in neither marriage nor divorce and made no efforts to regulate the family. The purpose of the Egyptian family was apparently not the production of heirs for the patriarchal head of household, but the shared life and the pleasures and comfort it had to offer.
The Roman held Egypt from 30 B.C. to A.D. 395; after the later date it was administrative placed under the control of Constantinople, the capital of the East Roman Empire. The granting of tolerance in 313 to the Christians by the emperor Constantine the Great gave impetus to the development of a formal Egyptian Church.5

During this period, ancestors of the church differed on the status of women in the church. Clement of Alexandria (150 A.D.) confirmed that men and women are spiritually equal, as women have the same potential because men and women have the same faith in God, the same hope, the same love and the same obedience to God, and both belong to the same church. Men and women both strive towards the same salvation receiving equal grace along the way, and both have the same divine Teacher.

It must be noted that Christianity began in Egypt in the first century A.D. when some Jewish Christian converts arrived in Egypt after Pentecost. Their pioneering ministry was followed up and completed by Saint Mark, who was martyred in Alexandria in the year 68 A.D. Most Christians in Egypt belong to three main denominations: Coptic Orthodox (the majority), Coptic Protestant and Coptic Catholic. (The word Coptic means Egyptian).

Thus, the long-term trends that affected the role of women in Egypt had evolved in response to social and economic condition in the region prior to the rise of Islam in the seventh century C.E. By the seventh century, many of the basic features associated with women in Egypt such as the veil, the harem, the seclusion of women and their subordination to men were already present. A moral code of conduct that sanctioned the status and treatment was also in place. While some of these, such as severe punishment for adultery, were universally accepted and practiced, others, such as seclusion and the veil, were limited to women of the ruling class and wealthy families. Within four centuries after the advent of Islam in C.E. 610, as the
majority of the population converted, many of the older beliefs and practices regarding women were institutionalised in the religious law of Islam.⁶

Within the Islamic civilization, Egyptian women retained their prominent position, and some of the rights taken away from them by Ptolemaic, Roman and Byzantine laws were returned. Islam instated women's rights regarding holding private property and running their economic and financial affairs. Surviving documents from Islamic Egypt, particularly marriage contracts and divorce settlements, shed light on women's rights in relation to "Personal Status."

Documents in the form of papyrus scrolls from as early as the ninth century AD (third century of the Islamic calendar: Hijra) stated a wife's right to divorce once her husband took a second wife, as well as her right to visit her family and relatives whenever she wished. These documents also show us that a wife could get a divorce once she sensed harm in her marital relationship, without being directed by others whose sole form of intervention was limited to advice and attempts at clearing the air between the couple. If the wife insisted on a divorce, she was granted this right. In addition to these early documents, we find that religious court records pertaining to the Ottoman period offer similar evidence of women's rights.

In the history of Islamic Egypt, several women occupied outstanding positions in their society, such as Sakina Bint Al-Husayn who is considered one of the highest-ranking poetry critics of her time. Another prominent figure, Nafisa Bint Al-Husayn Ibn Zayd was a great source of knowledge in the domain of al-Hadith (Prophet Muhammad's sayings), Al-Ijtihad (individual reasoning) and Al-Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the Ottoman period witnessed the role played by Nafisa Al-Muradiya on the intellectual scene in Egypt, through the "Learning sessions" she held at the time.
In the thirteenth century, having participated in the victory over the French king Louis IX in the Egyptian City of Al-Mansoura, the Sultana Shajara al-Durr, who was of Armenian descent, established a new dynasty in the history of Egypt, namely, the Mamluke reign, which lasted for almost three centuries. Although the traditions of the Abbasid state prevalent at the time prevented Shajara al-Dorr from remaining a sultana, still history records that the state established by her succeeded in meeting all the dangers which the Abbasids failed to confront - both the moguls and crusaders in particular. Several women played significant socio-political roles throughout the Islamic period in Egypt.

Exposure to older cultures and contact with new population produced profound changes in Egypt many of which had serious implications for Egyptian women. But the changes occurred slowly, and their impact was not felt until a century later when the Abbasids came to power in 750. However, the remaining decades of seventh century turned into a golden age for Egyptian Muslim women. They retained the active social role they had before Islam. In addition, the regulations that the Qur'an had spelled out for women enabled them to reap fully the results of the sudden enrichment of their society.7

After the rise of the Abbasids, Egyptian Muslim women were affected by the triumph of agrarian-urban cultural traditions. Women’s role in that tradition was limited mainly to home based activities and childcare. The veil and seclusion had become the norm of royal women from the time of Walid. But with coming of Abbasids, the seclusion of women and veil became official policy.

The collapse of the Abbasid caliphate brought the Mamluk into ascendancy in 1250. The Mamluk (1250-1517) regime based in Cairo was more centralised than its predecessor and recruited its lulling class almost exclusively among adolescents imported from foreign
regions as slaves, who were manumitted on completion of their training.  

According to a treatise by the fourteenth-century scholar Ibn al-Hajj, women shaped their habits and rituals according to their own needs and participated actively in public life. During this period, gender as an important factor in shaping the strategies of the Mamluk elite for managing family property, because of the endemic violence of Mamluk politics and the consequent high male mortality, women, whose chances of surviving were better, often became caretakers of estates and supervisors of trusts. In this way, they ensured family stability and class continuity, in turn augmenting their own status in this society. In addition, women pursued education through informal as opposed to institutional channels. Many specialised in transmitting Hadith (Traditions), an endeavour that may have been permitted in part because it combined the skill of memorisation with the advantage of age.

Egyptian Mamluk society in the fourteenth century enjoyed relative economic prosperity and political stability. Like other medieval societies, however, it experienced a large share of poverty and physical pain. Both rich and poor suffered from sickness, premature death, and low life expectancies. Daily routines and human difficulties also were transcended through the celebration of numerous religious festivities and tomb-visiting rituals, which became characteristic features of every day female life in Egyptian cities.

Appalled by the corrupt practices of the commoners (al-awamm) and the vile habits of women, as well as by the indifference and decadence of the Egyptian religious scholars, in his four volume treatise Ibn al-Hajj painstakingly demonstrated to his religious colleagues the preponderance of innovations and abominations in Egyptian Mamluk society, reminding them repeatedly of their sacred religious duty to order the good and forbid the evil. Like a good
Muslim scholar, Ibn al-Hajj took on himself the task of writing a treatise that would expose and denounce these popular practices, prescribing proper *Shar'i* (legal) rules in their place.

Ibn al-Hajj especially deplored the immodest mingling of men and women on any religious or social occasion. He saw a clear division between the public domain of men and the private domain of women. Neither should intrude into the other, and women's proper place should be restricted to the private space of the household. Ibn al-Hajj's firm belief in the exclusion of women from the outside world of men was informed by a sexual ideology that viewed the presence of the female body as threatening to the order of the male world. Accordingly, any infringement of these spatial restrictions was considered by Ibn al-Hajj to be an act promoting anarchy of chaos.

But it was the earlier government of the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim that was known for its notorious hostility to women's independence and mobility outside their private spatial boundaries. The Mamluk historian al-Maqrizi make repeated reference to al-Haikm's decree forbidding women to go out, and it is no coincidence that these anti-women state injunctions were issued at times of crisis; droughts, famines, plagues, and inflation. Women were ordered to stay home and were forbidden to walk in the markets, to visit tombs of relatives or saints, and to go to public baths; shoemakers were forbidden to make shoes for women.10

Lower and middle class Egyptian Muslim women seem to have paid little attention to the religious restrictions. Egyptian women participated actively in public life and devised strategies that enabled them to do so. Two classic female strategies that appear to have been commonly used were the denial of sexual pleasure to and the threat of separation from a husband who tried to exercise control over a strong-willed wife. Cultural and religious restrictions, however, did influence female behaviour, most evident in modest dress and in the efforts to
separate women from men physically. The Second strategy was in denouncing the existing manners and customs of Egyptian Muslim. Like other medieval urban cultures, Egyptian Muslim culture viewed the basic role of women to be within the boundaries of the household, caring for the family and managing household matters. Among the middle and upper middle classes, this view was reinforced by an ideology of strict segregation, where the female was asked not to overstep her spatial boundaries.

Female superstitious beliefs also added special significance and order to women's daily chores and practices. Believing that the performance of specific domestic practices on special religious occasions would bring about prosperity and health for their families, Cairene women followed these practices closely. The purchasing and burning of incense, for example, was a must on the feast of "Ashura", they believed this to bring blessing for the whole year, cure sickness, and ward off the evil eye. Similarly, women bought milk on the eve of the Islamic New Year to ensure household prosperity. On equinoxial occasions, both men and women, relatives and neighbours, picked camomile flowers, reciting magical formulas while cutting the plants. Wrapped in paper dyed with saffron, the camomile was then kept in a box in the house to bring affluence to all family members. Another domestic tradition, practiced by some women, was the refusal to do any housecleaning during the absence of a male member of the family, in belief that if they did, the traveller might never return. These and other female daily habits most probably were carried over from Egyptian or Coptic traditions, which Ibn al-Hajj considered harmful innovations, but which may have served the important function of giving women a feeling of more security and control over their daily lives.

The historical evidence on Cairene women gleaned from Ibn al-Hajj's treatise demonstrates the gap between prescriptive literature
and the existing reality of women's everyday life. This literary genre should be viewed primarily as an "ideal" that Muslim male scholars tried to prescribe for their societies to bring about an ideal Islamic order, which they scribe for their societies to bring about an ideal Islamic order, which they saw as lacking in reality. In trying to impose this *Shar'i* order, Ibn al-Hajj showed how Cairenes in general, and women in particular, deviated from it. Women wielded power in their immediate surroundings; they shaped their daily habits and religious rituals according to their own need in the Cairene urban context. This is most evident in the way they scheduled and organised their wide-ranging domestic chores, as well as their daily outings into the public domain of the market, the shrine, the cemetery, the mosque, and the park. Even in religious rituals, which were more rigidly defined by the religious scholars, Cairene women adapted rituals of purification, fasting, and prayer to suit their daily patterns of domestic life.14

Even though female life revolved around important domestic affairs, like marriage, childbirth, death, and social and religious festivities, this does not mean that women were housebound. Working-class women, in addition to their regular domestic work, performed all the necessary female-related services for upper and middle class women, thus obtaining some economic leverage and a greater mobility in the public domain. Exclusive female gatherings occupied much time, and must have given women the opportunity and meaningful socialising outside their homes. This can be seen in frequent female visiting, childbirth festivities, mourning periods, and *Sufi* sessions, which were held separately from those of men. Women not only were able to hold their dhikr sessions separately, but they could also be initiated into women's *Sufi* orders headed by a female *Sufi*. This is not to say that Cairene women were completely segregated from the male world, for women interacted with men on a daily basis; on their trips to the cemetery and to the market, in shops,
in the precincts of shrines and mosques, as well as in Sufi gatherings. As Ibn al-Hajj tells us, Cairene women were too easygoing in their behaviour with “foreign men”.\(^{15}\)

Unlike the stereotypical submissive and obedient wife, the Cairene women depicted by Ibn al-Hajj were strong willed and defiant of male and *Shar'i* authority. They often used classical female strategies to obtain what they desired from recalcitrant husbands. Ibn al-Hajj repeatedly mentions threats of separation or withdrawal of sexual services as the primary weapons wives used to break down their husband’s resistance. These strategies were complemented by two institutionalised practices, which may have given the women greater leverage in relationship with her man: her frequent use of the judge’s court to ensure her legal tight and her demand of a “bed fee” for her sexual services.\(^{16}\)

Given traditional concepts about the status of women under Islamic law, overt references to a seasoned ruler consulting his wife on state policy would imply a level of mutual respect inconsistent with either Quranic injunction or long standing social practice.\(^{17}\) Indeed, as historians probe the sources that describe the urban society of Egypt during the Mamluk periods, they soon discover a remarkable degree of parity between men and women who belonged to the ruling elite. Although sharp division in public roles and postures distinguished the two sexes, these do not appear to have created any appreciable differences in status. No dimension of this elite’s activity more vividly illustrates this situation than the assignment of custodianship over property and the endowment of charitable trusts. Class identity combined with pragmatic necessity to promote the mutual supervision of estates by men and women, certified by elaborate legal procedure. Quite often, women were chosen to assume exclusive responsibility for property management.\(^{18}\)
The literature repeatedly refers to women autonomously managing property acquired from male relatives. They possessed the power to initiate litigation in defence of their rights, thereby sheltering their assets. And also, women were regarded as desirable custodians of estates because of their actuarial gain over men, their junior age at marriage, and their lesser susceptibility to the violence and feuding that sapped men’s energies. As a consequence of these advantages, women were esteemed as guarantors of familial stability and lineage continuity. A woman who outlived one or more generations of her male kin often became a dowager, a revered symbol of her house and the head of her family. These readily verifiable facts go far to explain the augmented status of elite women in Mamluk society.19

Some of women in this period served as effective colleague-consorts in the administration and preservation of their male relatives’ estate. This sort of collusion in activities considered vital to ensuring the social rank and economic dominance of their class would elucidate their visibility in both the narrative literature and the documentary sources. Moreover, it is quite likely that these women were intimately involved in the unofficial or clandestine economy that provided the ruling elite with much of its funding. Qaitbay was a pioneer in attempts to circumvent his regime’s dependency on traditional taxes by creating a private fiscal preserve through artful manipulation of trust properties.20

Islamic legal and religious education was in origin and remained throughout the Middle Ages a fundamentally informal system. From the primary level to the final stages of instruction and the transmission of knowledge, one’s education depended more on a personal relationship with the teacher or teachers than it did on an attachment to any institution. The bonds between teacher and student may have been informal, but they could also prove extremely
close, and not infrequently grew out of actual ties of kinship. In such a system, women could play a significant role.\textsuperscript{21}

Many women of the Mamluk period were associated with \textit{madrasa} as benefactors, supplying the endowments necessary to establish and maintain the schools. A minimum of five such schools, founded by women, existed at some time in Mamluk Cairo. A woman could also be vested with a supervisory role in the administration of a \textit{madrasas}. Deeds of endowment establishing \textit{madrasas} normally left ultimate financial and administrative control of the institutions and their endowment in the hands of the founders and, after them, their children and descendents — usually specified as "the most rightly guided" of the descendents — their trusted retainers, powerful amirs, judges or some combination thereof.\textsuperscript{22}

Thus, the wives and daughters of the Mamluks and of the academic elite were hardly strangers to the world of institutionalised education, and they participated actively in the creation and administration of the endowments on which that world relied. Women, however, played virtually no role as either professor or student, in the systematic legal education offered in the \textit{Madrasas}.\textsuperscript{23}

In 1517, Egypt fell to the Ottoman Turks and the country reverted to the status of a province governed from Istanbul. The economic decline that began under the late Mamluks continued, and with it came a decline in Egyptian culture.\textsuperscript{24} Despite the Ottomans' great military successes, they lacked the growing technical skills and expanding economic base of rapidly industrialising Western Europe. Therefore, the Ottomans were not able to stop the European advance when the balance of power shifted against non-industrialised states by the end of the seventeenth century.

During this period, seclusion and the veil system were still practiced and that they limited the ability of women to become active outside the household. But opportunity for women who determined to
break the conventional mould was not totally absent. Some women managed to circumvent the limitations imposed on them by engaging in activities that promoted their financial well-being. Women in general were not helpless, submissive victims of tyrannical fathers and husbands, but could indeed exercise some control over their lives. In short women felt a sense of self-worth and were aware of their rights.25

Within marriage, women were treated with dignity. They were full partners in the marriage contract. Their marital rights were defined according to one of the four major Sunni schools of law. While the parents arranged their daughter's marriage, the woman entered marriage voluntarily. In addition, they were the recipients of the mehr, or bridal gift, and their absolute right to this settlement could not be challenged or removed by anyone including their fathers. Women took recourse in the judicial system when their rights were threatened.26

Turkish rule also introduced the "Harem" system, which reached its peak when all the Turkish Sultan Khalifa's wives, mistresses, concubines and women servants (between 300 and 1,200 women) were isolated and under the authority of the Sultan's mother, guarded by eunuchs. Although this "Harem" system was officially abolished by the end of the rule of the Turkish Sultan Abdul Hamid in 1909 A.D., it still has its effect on the "value" of the woman today. The expression "Harem" is still in use in some societies of the Arab countries. If a woman visits Saudi Arabia from any other country in the world, she will not be allowed in some parts of Saudi lands except with her "Mahrem" or a man to accompany her in order to protect her. This man is either her father, husband or brother.

At the dawn of the modern age in the eighteenth century, many patterns that regulated women's behaviour remained; they had been set by the Shari'ah in the first three centuries of the Islamic era and
had been declared immutable. Of course, the change had affected these patterns, but only unobtrusively.

The year 1798 saw the Egyptian women’s participation hand in hand with men in confronting the armed forces of the French campaign on Egypt led by Napoleon Bonaparte. Several Egyptian villages and towns witnessed the effective involvement of women in acts of resistance against the campaign as recorded by the historical sources of the time. Historians refer to the acts of national and popular resistance that broke out across the country from the minute the French soldiers set foot on Egyptian soil, and historical sources document women's significant contribution to the resistance movement.

When the French forces landed in Alexandria in July 1798, Egyptian men and women carried guns and gathered along the fences and in the towers with the purpose of defending their city.

Moreover, when the French forces reached Al-Menufiya in August 1798, the inhabitants of the villages of Ghamreyn and Teta courageously confronted the invaders. The same month witnessed an uprising in Al-Mansoura and its neighbouring towns, as people rebelled against the French garrison in the city and succeeded in destroying it completely. As the French campaign continued its march into the country, women continued to play active roles in the resistance movement.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, or roughly the period from the middle part of the eighteenth century up to the present, the history of women in Egypt has been inextricably bound up with the changes wrought by an encroaching world economy as well as various forms of European imperialism including settler colonialism. Women were part of this change in the ways they experienced it and shaped it.
Prior to the Mohammad Ali period, (beginning in 1805), peasant women were active members of village society and their tasks included fetching water, gathering firewood, tending animals, gleaning and, upon occasion, labouring in the fields. They not only worked but also enjoyed legal rights to farm implements and to the land. But after the Mohammad Ali development projects, certain patterns had been set; men continued to be recruited for agricultural labour on the large estates while women were relegated to the shrinking family plot. They were also squeezed out of the textile sector.

Upper-class women held a more central position in the urban economy of the country. As members of wealthy and powerful families, women were important holders of urban land. All the available studies of sales and purchases of urban land, waqf, transactions, estate partitions, and merchant activities, arrive at similar conclusion: upper-class women owned considerable property, controlled large amounts of money, and managed some businesses themselves.27

Although the women of the upper classes (wives and daughters of the ruling group and wealthier merchants) remained sheltered in the harem quarters of the great household, they still might participate in the economy. Using agents to conduct their business outside the confines of the harem, women were especially active in business connected with immovable property: speculation in, and management of, urban properties were common features of women's activities in Cairo.28

In the nineteenth century, the ground was also sown for the later entry of women into the liberal professions. As early as the Mohammad Ali era, the government sponsored a school to train women health officers and a separate palace school to educate women of the harem in reading, writing, geography, and drawing. Foreign
missionaries also established schools for girls as early as the 1830s and the Coptic community followed suit in the 1850s.29

Women also participated in the politics of the period outside the ranks of power and prestige. From spontaneous peasant revolts and rural uprisings in the early part of the century to more orchestrated, anti-autocratic, and nationalist movements in the later period, women of various social backgrounds joined in political action. In the series of urban revolts in Cairo beginning in the 1780s and lasting until Muhammad Ali consolidated his power, lower class women took part in street fighting against Mamluks and French occupiers. Wealthier women might also take to the streets if their interests were threatened. When Mohammad Ali abolished many tax-farms and interfered in waqf affairs in 1814 the wealthier women launched a street demonstration because they were likely to suffer the effects of such measures. In the countryside as well, in the series of rural revolts in Egypt from the 1820s to the 1860 women were visible participants. However, the 1922 Egyptian Constitution explicitly denied women the right to vote and they were even barred from attending the opening of the Parliament they had struggled for, except the capacity of wives of ministers and high officials.

Such political exclusion fuelled the growth of feminist movement. The emergence of public women’s organisations with feminist demands in the early part of the twentieth century is best viewed, as the culmination of nineteenth century developments as well. Economic, political and social developments of that century including urbanisation, state reforms of education, improved transportation, and an emulation of Western styles of the upper class. Upper class women, still secluded and veiled, began to question the strictures they faced. After the turn of the century, middle class women like Bahitha al-Badiyya (Malak Hifni Nasif) and other women
called for increased education and access to work for women as well as legal reform to control divorce and polygamy.

The exclusion of these women for the benefits to political independence provided the ground for the founding of women's organisations with implicitly feminist agendas and launching their struggle for women emancipation and equality with men. Attempts to revolt against and better their status, were led by women who dedicated their lives to bring about a better future for Egyptian women on political, social, cultural and economic levels, etc.

Egyptian women participated in the Orabi Revolution, culminated in the infiltration of British in Egypt in 1888. Amidst the relentless efforts exerted by Egyptian women in raising funds, the creation of groups preparing bandages and necessary equipment to cure injuries to send them to the battlefield was very striking. It's worth mentioning that their positive stances adopted in supporting the demands of the leader Ahmed Orabi. They maintained feelings of national patriotism when their leadership was threatened by Khedive Tawfik.

Those pioneering women were involved in a variety of issues and problems including education, labour, political and social family rights apart from their struggle for national independence. The list is long to cover here, but there are some significant milestones in the history of the Egyptian women.

Malak Hifni Nasef was the first to obtain a teachers' training diploma from a government school. She was the first woman orator and the first to represent women in a conference in 1911. She did not only write articles advocating the emancipation and education of women, but also adopted a strong political approach to that end. As a woman of mission, she recognized the important role of women in society.
Hoda Sha'rawi was the first woman to lead a women's demonstration as part of the 1919 Revolution. Jointly with Malak Hifni Nassef, she established the Intellectual League of Egyptian Women, then the "Wafd Central Committee on Women" which was entrusted with the task of supervising Egyptian women's participation in the national movement.

Hoda Sharawi gave expression to the cause of Egyptian women abroad where she participated in various international conferences. She was acclaimed and welcomed in cultural, political and social circles due to her concerted endeavours for boosting the status and improving conditions of Egyptian women. She breathed her last in 1947, as she was getting ready to chair a woman's meeting dedicated to the cause of the Egyptian women.

Siza Nabarawi's real name was Zainab Mohammed Muradi. She participated in the 1919 revolution demonstrations. Later, she joined the Egyptian Peace Movement and was chosen as member of the World Peace Council: an international humanitarian movement struggling against the aggression on peoples. She also served as editor-in-chief of "L'Egyptienne", a French-language magazine, designed and aimed to inform the world on Egypt and Egyptian women. She was imprisoned twice in 1931 for involvement in demonstrations against Sidqi Pasha's government and in 1958 for protesting against the torture of Algerian freedom-fighter Jamila Bu-Hraid. Following the abolition of the 1936 Treaty, she set up the first women committee for popular resistance.

Safiyya Zaghloul was married in 1896 to Saad Zaghloul ' the Nation's Leader'. Although she belonged to the Egyptian upper class, she lived with her husband 30 years as any Egyptian plain housewife. In 1919, she participated in the first women's demonstration against the British acts of oppression. After Saad Zaghloul was exiled, she requested the occupation authorities for leave to join him but they
refused. She opened her house for revolutionaries and members of the Egyptian delegation as avenue for their deliberations. She believed that women should equally defend their independence. Even after Saad Zaghloul's death, she continued her struggle for national independence and women's issues until she died in January 12, 1940.

Bint ash-Shatie or Dr. Aishah Abder-Rahman as commonly known by her pen-name is an outstanding landmark in the history of Egyptian culture. In the time of harem, this lady forged her way to the university and to the broader circles of cultural life open-minded thoughts and comprehensive visions. She took up her pen name 'Bint ash-Shatie "Daughter of the Coast" because tradition at that time did not allow girls' names to be mentioned in public. She turned down an offer to grant her the title of the Lady of Damietta', her birthplace, arguing that she was no better than those mothers who had sacrificed their lives for the sake of the country.

Latifa Az-Zayat was elected secretary-general of the National Committee of Students and Workers, formed by patriotic intellectuals and workers to organize efforts of anti-colonialist activists in what came to be known as the Students and Workers Revolt against British occupation of Egypt. She played a significant role in the Egyptian political and cultural life. She headed the Committee on Defence of National Culture, established by her in 1979. She was a member of the World Peace Council as well as member of the first board of the Egyptian Writers Union and the literary editor of the left-wing Tali'ah (Vanguard) magazine.

Amina as-Saied was an activist of the 1919 Revolution. She was editor-in-chief of 'Hawaa' (Eve) magazine. She was influenced by her family traditions and political thoughts in national struggle in addition to its liberal approach to educating girls on equal footing with boys. Amina as-Sai'ed was dedicated to women's problems. To her,
writing was not a luxury but a means of defending women's rights and elevating their status in the society.

It must be noted that the process of the emancipation of women in Egypt began in the 19th century. For example in 1832 with the encouragement of Muhammad Ali, the reformist leader of Egypt, a school to train women to be medical assistants was opened. A little later in the 1860s Ali Pasha Mubarak and Sheikh Rif'a al-Tahtawi paved the way, in two books, by educating the Egyptian public for the need for female education. The first state school for girls opened in 1873, though, of course, at first, only girls from families of state functionaries availed themselves of the opportunities, and even though the education programme and subject matter taught was not the same as in boys' schools. Even the celebrated University of al-Azhar, the centre for Islamic studies, showed significant interest in the education of women, especially in the writings of the influential Muslim reformist Muhammad Abduh.

Perhaps the greatest advocate of women's rights was Kasim Amin [1863 –1908]. During his stay in Paris, Amin realized that the raising of the social status and living conditions of women was one of the most urgent social questions that needed to be faced if the Islamic world was ever to witness a renaissance. But it was evident that every attempt at reform would come up against the traditionalists who considered every change and innovation an affront and outrage to tradition and religion in general. With courage, Qasim Amin pressed on and wrote two works that provoked the ire of the conservatives: *Tahrir al-mar'a* (The Emancipation of Women, Cairo, 1899), and *al-Mara'al – jadida* (The New Woman, Cairo, 1901). Using both rational arguments of a juridical nature (he was a trained lawyer) and emotional ones, he pleaded for a more dignified social position for women by advocating educational equality, the abolition of the veil, revision of the marriage laws with its two most iniquitous aspects,
polygamy and unilateral divorce. Unfortunately, Amin never lived to see his dreams of equality realized; it was only in 1922 that the suppression of the veil was allowed, and the first secondary school for girls was created in 1925 with a programme and subject matter similar to those of the equivalent for boys.

Besides Muhammad abduh and Qasim Amin, a group of male strivers and activists advocating development of the Egyptian nation encouraged Egyptian women renaissance throughout the Modern Age during the 19th and 20th century, some of them were:

Rafa'a al-Tahtawi called for exerting relentless efforts to educate boys and girls on equal footing particularly girls, as education bestows on them more reason and politeness; and enable them to share opinion and discussion with men. He also called for warding off unemployment among women as work approaches them to virtue. He said also that strict upbringing creates good morality.

Abdallah Al Nadim considered women—who did not receive adequate education— the reason of corruption and the encroachment upon social rights of Egyptian women. He advocated the importance of joining religious with civil education to portray a sound reasonable image of women.

Salama Moussa was the most struggler who brought about the issue of women emancipation and the importance of mixture based on bonds of fellowship and mutual respect between men and women in all fields. Consequently, he called for gender equity centred on financial income through equity in work and production.

Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the conservatives in Egypt have pressed for more and more Islamisation, which in practice means fewer and fewer human rights for women and non-Muslims (usually the Christian Coptic minority). Bowing to Islamist pressure the Government passed a constitutional amendment in 1980 whereby Islamic Law was enshrined as Egypt’s main source of legislation. This
only emboldened the men who were able to revert to the barbaric tradition of being able to divorce their wives with a simple oath. Up to now, women were obliged to take their case to the courts if they wanted divorce, but this often took up to six years. Those who suffered most were battered women. According to survey done in 1995, a third of Egyptian women are subjected to physical abuse, sometimes of the most horrible kind. In recent years there has been an increase in attacks on women by men using sulphuric acid, that often leaves the victims permanently scarred physically, and totally traumatized emotionally. Often the men are let off lightly or even never pursued in justice.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, feminists continued to work on demands to improve the social and economic conditions of women and vied for leadership with political feminists who advocated direct political participation by women and reform of the Personal Status Law, as well as laws regulating marriage, divorce and child custody. Many fruits were gained by women, especially in education and working fields.

The 1952 revolution started a new phase in the life of Egypt, as the new constitution of 1956 gave women the right to vote. From 1956 on, women were given more and more opportunities in Egyptian public life as many Egyptian women started their own businesses, entered the Parliament, and were appointed to Cabinet posts. Article (40) of the constitution of 1971 stipulates that citizens are equal in rights and general obligations with the elimination of all forms of discrimination on the basis of sex, race, beliefs and convictions. Article (10) of the constitution stipulates that the State provides childhood and motherhood protection as well as caters for offspring and youth providing them favourable atmosphere to develop their faculties. Article (11) stipulates that the State provides harmony between women's duties toward their families and their works in
society beside gender equity in political, social, cultural and economic fields while adhering to the provisions of Islamic Sharia.

The enactment of these laws resulted in the appointment of a woman in 1977 as Minister of Social Affairs and was succeeded by another two women, one after the other. Another woman became an ambassador, and others are in the lower level of the diplomatic sphere. There are women teaching at all levels in education. There are now female bureaucrats, journalists, writers, artists, pilots, airport police officers, airhostesses, lawyers, etc. Women occupy posts in most life activities.

Women’s status was further improved when the government stipulated the law no. (100) in the year 1985 whose items are as follows:

Woman whose husband gets married with another one, shall have the right to ask for divorce in case she is consequently harmed financially or morally and the new wife shall have the right to ask for divorce in case her husband hid his first marriage from her. Husband is obliged to give prior notice to his wife or wives when newly married to enable them to ask for divorce due to polygamy, he is also obliged to give the name of his wife or wives in the new report of marriage.

The divorcing husband is to register his certificate of divorce at the registration office during 30 days as of the date of divorce stating clearly the notice given to his wife. Woman- divorced without her consent and without prior reason- shall have compensation in addition to her "idda" alimony for 2 years at least with respect to the financial and social condition of the divorcing husband, the circumstances of divorce and the period of marriage.

The divorced woman is awarded custody of her boy child up to the age of 10 years old and of the girl up to the age of 12 years old; and the judge is allowed to keep the boy child to his mother’s custody.
till he is 15 and the girl till she gets married for her best without any payment.

The divorcing husband should provide a favourable place for his divorced wife and her children. Wife is entitled to ask the judge of divorce in the following cases:
Absence of the husband for more than 1 year without reasonable cause, which may harm his wife.

By 1988 religious extremists called for working women to go back home and to stop women from mingling with men in public life, and to give men more of a chance to get jobs by means of preventing competition between men and women for the limited job opportunities available. These steps would also lead to more care for the children and homes.

It is true that for any working woman, moving between the various circles outside and inside her home requires many transformations both internally and externally. A working woman may feel torn between the conflicting demands, as everybody wants more than she can give, especially if she is not equipped with the necessary facilities for life, such as decent transportation to and from her work, and good kitchen facilities.

To sum up, the issue of women's status in the Arab world has, for the last century, oscillated between two extremes of opinion: the conservative, which sees that women's only function is to bear and rear children and care for the home and husband; and the progressive, which sees them as equal to men, with the same rights and duties. This progressive view gained an overwhelming victory through the 1952 Revolution, when women won many of their rights. They not only gained equal opportunities in education, employment, promotion, training and scholarships abroad, but pioneered areas previously restricted to men, such as the foreign service and the
police. They also gained the right to vote and to representation in parliament.

The recommendations of the three national conferences on women, in 1994, 1996 and 1998, where Egyptian women from all fields were brought together to subjectively discuss problems they face, are work plans for the responsible authorities to follow. Among these recommendations are the amendment of laws to eliminate, in accordance with regulations, all that debases women, the simplification of legal procedures in matters of divorce, custody, etc., the offering of judicial assistance to women and raising their awareness of their rights and duties.
REFERENCES

2. Ibid, p. 33
3. Ibid
4. Ibid, p. 34
5. Encyclopaedia Britannica, vol. VI, P. 390
7. Ibid, p. 34
10. Ibid
11. Ibid, p. 102
12. Ibid, p. 103
13. Ibid, p. 105
15. Ibid, p. 118
19. Ibid, p. 136
20. Ibid, p. 136-137
21. Ibid, p. 143
22. Ibid, p. 145
23. Ibid
27. Ibid, p. 80
28. Ibid
29. Ibid, p. 82
WOMEN IN INDIAN SOCIETY

When you educate a boy, you only educate an individual. But when you educate a girl, you educate a whole family, for she will marry and bring up a family over whose destiny she will preside. [Mahatma Gandhi]
GENERAL HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The evolution of women status in India has a continuous process of ups and downs throughout the history. In the entire classical literature on the status of women, there is almost consistent opinion among great scholars that during Vedas the woman’s status was equivalent to that of man. Though it is difficult to specify the exact chronological time as to when the deterioration in woman’s status started one can state that gradual changes appeared during the age of Brahananas, (1500 B.C to 500 B.C) and by the age of the later Srutis (500 A.D. to 1800 A.D) the status had deteriorated considerably.

As the status is intimately connected with the role of an individual, the term ‘status’ refers to the expected link of social behaviour associated with a particular social position. For instance, a ‘teacher’ is, thus, associated not only with a role, which includes all the activities of teaching, but also other associated items of expected social behaviour. Similarly, the position of ‘daughter-in-law’ in Indian society is associated with certain expected roles including obedience to husband (Pati Parmeshwar), proper behaviour towards his relatives, and taking full care of his old parents; it changes with age and parity.

The determinants of social status are likely to vary from one society to another. Though sex and age continue to be important factors in status ascription, with modern industrial development, the occupational determinant of status has achieved unprecedented importance. In Western societies, education and occupation provide reliable indices of social status. In rural India, caste, community, age, sex, influence and reputation of a family and land ownership may also have different influence on social status. In brief, the social status is
significantly related with aspirations, value orientations, adoption of new practices and fertility. In urban societies, among the determinants of social status, education and occupation seem to be the most important. In rural societies, sex, religion, caste and age may have additional influence on status.

As for the status of Indian women, there are two viewpoints. The first view is that the Indian woman is a paragon of purity, a fountainhead of faithfulness and a symbol of submission to her husband. The second view is that she is backward and behind the times, suppressed and subjected to double standards of morality. An objective evaluation of the position of the Indian woman in contemporary society is rendered difficult to generalise about India. At one end, there is matriarchy and at another polyandry. In addition, there are many castes and communities, many cults and religions, many languages and traditions, and many levels of cultural, social and regional development.

In ancient India, women were accorded a high and honoured place. She enjoyed a very important position in the family and society and shared full rights and responsibilities with her husband in dispensing her duties in the family and community. Even the Hindu gods are, by and large, monogamous and faithful. According to Abinash Chandra Das:

"The Rigveda reveals a stage showing that Aryan women, at any rate of the higher and better classes, enjoyed equal freedom with men in all matters, social and religious. It was this feeling of equality and freedom that evoked the highest virtues of the Aryan womanhood and lifted society to a high state of culture."1
However, 'the Vedic society was a patriarchal one' and 'the birth of a daughter was looked upon with disfavour', the daughter was entitled to all the privileges given to a son. In the matter of education, the daughter was not discriminated against the son. The Rig-Veda testifies that women of early Vedic Age were quite advanced. Though female education was not compulsory, girls were allowed to acquire knowledge on literature and various fine arts. Some of the high-class women were highly educated and actively participated in intellectual philosophical discourses. One comes across references to lady sages like Gosha, Apala, Lopamudra, Indrani, Gargi and Maitreyi.

During this age, girls and boys were initiated into the Vedic studies by performing a rite of passage called *upanayam* ceremony. No less than twenty women were among the composers of the Rig Vedic hymns. Gargi and Atreyi were the leading philosophers of the time. It is believed that during this period, there was a class of women known as *Brahmavadinis*, who continued their studies even for the whole lifetime. Gargi was one of the renowned scholars who challenged *Yagnavalkya* and asked many subtle and intricate questions. Rig-Veda also includes a conversation between *Yagnavalkya* and one of his wives Maitreyi over the division of property at the decision by the sage to renounce the world. The passages in the Vedas show that women had other careers open to them apart from a mere literary career. They entered fields of teaching, medicine, business, military and administration.

During the Vedic period, a woman enjoyed to a great extent freedom along with man and her sphere of role was not circumscribed by too many restrictions. At home, generally the mother was the mistress of the house. She had her usual routine of cleaning and sweeping the house with cow-dung; decorating the house with lime
powder, washing vessels; cooking food; looking after children; serving food to others first; welcoming and entertaining the guests.7

The *Rig Veda* enjoins husband and wife to be equal partners in marriage. The wife always enjoyed with her husband the performance of important religious rites such as *yajnas*, which could not be performed without her. She regularly participated in religious ceremonies with him. In fact, such ceremonies were invalid without the wife joining her husband. Dandekar describes concisely the significance of women’s participation in religious activities very aptly:

“A man’s religious life is considered to be essentially deficient without his wife’s active participation in it ... without a wife ... the psychological and moral personality of man remains imperfect. She is his constant companion in his religious life, preparing for him his sacred articles used in worship, accompanying him on pilgrimages, present at all ceremonies. ... And finally, in her role as the mother, women regarded as divine, respected many times more than the father and the teacher. She was called “jaya” because one’s own self is begotten in her.”8

In fact, no religious rite was complete without the presence of the wife. She was called ‘ardhangini’ or the other half. The *Mahabhrata* declared:

“... in truth, a householder’s home, even if crowded with sons, grandsons, daughters-in-law and servants is virtually a lonely place for his life, if, there is no housewife. One’s home is not the house made of brick and material, it is the wife who makes
the home. A home without the wife was is like a wilderness."

During this period, the groom brought the bride to his own home where she was imbibed the traditions and customs of the family. The bride’s major duty was to make efforts to merge her personality with that of her husband’s in matters both mundane and spiritual and also adopt herself to the traditions and sentiments of the family, which she had become a full fledged member. Her position was one of honourable subordination. She had to adjust herself to her mother-in-law, her husband’s sisters and the wives of her husband’s brother. Even in present times, at the time of marriage, the husband takes the vow to give his wife a place of honour in the family. This is the reason why as a mother, a nourisher, and a sustainer of life was respected and given at most times a worshipful adoration in religion and poetry. The wife in many of the higher civilizations was accepted as the helpmate of man and given a position of due honour.

During the Vedic age, Child marriages and the seclusion of women were unknown. Young girls led free lives and had a major voice in selection of their husbands. In addition, marriage was not always obligatory and those women who wanted to remain unmarried could do so. The Vedas also include references to unmarried female rishis like Apala and Aiteriya and some of them received co-education. The Rig Veda and the Upanishads give little or no evidence of caste, child marriages, a girl’s inability to choose her life partner, ban against widow remarriage, and other such deplorable practices, which crept into the Hindu society later.

In politics, however, women were not allowed to meddle in, yet their opinions often carried weight. There is no mention in the Vedas, of any women actively engaged in body politic. According to earlier texts, politics was completely men’s game because of its drastic
consequences. The logic behind this conclusion was the unstable condition of the society, which still retained its nomadic characteristics often resulting in serious clashes with different clans. Moreover, to think in the modern sense of politics, the early Vedic Age lacked a well-defined, organised "politics" of its own. Then it was the struggle for existence, not the struggle for power of the modern age, and it was often so hard, that the soft nature of women left them peacefully preoccupied with their domestic affairs.

All these indicate that during the Vedic period, a woman held a status equal to men and there were considerably less restrictions on her activities outside the home. She could enjoy freedom of movement and attend fairs, tournaments and other public functions equally with men.

There is no doubt, however, to accept the continuity of Vedic traditions till the rise of Buddhism. The Dharmshastras reveal the process of change in the life of the Aryans that took place during a long period and Manu Samhita depicts the pattern of life, which became more or less fixed and was further conceived as the ideal for the Aryans. The Mahabharata also indicates this process of change. Other Smriti writers contributed towards idealizing and giving fixity to the pattern. Buddhism historically emerged as a powerful social revolt against the earlier Aryan pattern of the society sought to be made immutable and eternal by lawgivers at an earlier stage. But the brave effort of the Buddha had a limited and short-lived victory. This temporary progressive phase was followed by the reactionary orthodox traditions described in law books and the Puranas. The genius of Shankaracharya gave a final seal to the orthodox pattern. During this phase, the social life though remaining basically frozen became more and more decadent.

With the advent of Manu (presumably a pseudonym for the earliest compiler of the Hindu moral code), about or shortly before the
time of Christ, women lost their quality and were relegated to an inferior status. Pre-puberty marriage, polygamy, divorce (or suppression under certain limitations), voluntary sati and ban against widow remarriage — all tragically found acceptance in Manu Smriti. To Manu is reserved the dubious distinction of being the most reactionary anti-feminist in the history of India. The role of women conformed to the dictum laid down by him that a woman should be subservient in all stages of her life “in childhood to the father, in youth to the husband and his elderly kin and to the sons when widowed.”

In addition, to these beginnings of Hindu reaction towards women were added the difficulties consequent upon the Muslim invasion and the rule that lasted some eight hundred years until Queen Victoria’s sovereignty over India in 1858. The resulting wars, political instability, social chaos and economic stagnation led to the intensification of purdah and other social evils. The women of India had lost their freedom, their status and almost all their rights. The only pleasant interlude for the country was during the reign of Emperor Akbar (1556-1605), but it is doubtful whether the women of India reaped directly the blessings of his rule. According to a brilliant, objective and neutral observer:

“The impact of Islamic invaders on India was altogether different from that produced by the previous intruders. Hinduism was able to absorb and assimilate in its social fabric Greek and Saka, Kushan and Hun. However, the Muslims it could not absorb. Nor was Islam able to uproot Hinduism and destroy its ideas and institutions. Hitherto, Hindu society was divided horizontally; but with the intrusion of Islam into India, society was split
vertically, living in two parallel but separate worlds, divided one from the other by differences in outlook, ideas, religion and social philosophy, dress manners and customs."

Under the Muslim rule both Hindu and Muslim women lost all their liberal activities and became a property of their male masters. They became nothing more than chattels of men. "The facilities of education which the Vedic period and the Buddhist provided vanished." The subordinate position of women became an accepted cultural norm for the majority section of the population until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The woman as bearer of children and symbol of peace, plenty and security lost her status and became associated with causes of strain. In these completely changed conditions, rearing and bringing up a horde of children under economic pressures became difficult and the woman lost further ground as she was unable to discharge her responsibilities of bringing up healthy and intelligent progeny.

She no longer partook in outdoor cultural and political activities fully, and remained completely preoccupied with domestic problems. The social pattern changed and women being more in *pardah* lost all their rights and hence their hold on family and society. The system of polygamy, which prevailed in medieval India, helped to bring down further her status, making her position insecure and dependent on the goodwill of the man. The woman as an individual had no independent existence, nor had she equal economic rights with man. Her life was bound to the hearth with a big family hanging round the neck. Hence, she was helpless and had to look up to her husband for support. It was against this background that the need arose for regaining the lost status of women. Neera Desai describing women's status during the Muslim rule in India says:
“Polygamy and the purdah were two of the most important social institutions of the Muslim conquerors of India. Under the purdah system, not only were women required to live in secluded apartments in the house but also they had to dress in an apparel which completely covered their body excepting the eyes.”

During this period, the Indian society remained a patriarchal society with father at the helm of all domestic and social affairs and hence all efforts were made to secure the birth of a son, which finally resulted in polygamy and ill-associated marriages. Not only the women’s status deteriorated during this period and became more and more aggravated but also definite customs emerged which further accentuated her subjugation. This period with its ‘intellectual stagnation’ manifested in decay of knowledge and learning coupled with social degeneration, worsened the conditions of Indian women. Polygamy among the wealthier sections, early marriage, killing of female children, throwing the first child into the holy water etc. became rampant. The most inhuman custom of Sati reached its climax during this period. Neera Desai says:

“Before the Muslim conquest, Brahmins had not allowed the custom of Sati, but after it, instances of Brahmin women who practised Sati are also recorded.”

However, even in this dark phase the Bhaktas, the great humanists who took heroic efforts to remove or at least substantially reduce the oppressive character of the Indian society and initiated numerous Bhakti movements endeavoured to democratise the social relations including the woman’s status. Nevertheless, since no fundamental change occurred in the very foundations of social

49
structure their influence too was temporary and limited as Neera Desai describes:

"... The attitude of the saints towards woman as a personality was not at all different from the prevailing one, which might perhaps be due to the fact that they considered Moksha as the basic objective of life and called on men to eschew whatever obstructed the attainment of that objective. In spite of this limitation the new opportunities gave a different purpose to the life of woman."\(^{14}\)

In order to give a proper estimate of the women's status in contemporary India, it is necessary to take into account not only the achievements and their effects as are to be observed at the present day but also the age-long story of the hopes and aspirations as well as the endeavours and frustrations which have culminated in the present position. In the previous paragraphs of this chapter such an attempt has been made.

The task is rendered difficult by the warring ideals that India's conquest and subjugation by less spiritually advanced nations has let loose on a people whose best traditions have subordinated the welfare of this worldly life to the ultimate goal of spiritual salvation.

A heritage of noblest philosophies of the world, however, was not able to protect them, owing to the failure of its adherents to the pangs of hunger and degradation has never been experienced before by a civilised people. It is not surprising, therefore, that Indian women, in recent times, with their emaciated children and frustrated partners, should sometimes have looked towards the Western world for a better way of existence, having lost faith in their own ancient ideals of patience, submission and devotion.
The deteriorated traditional orthodox attitude towards woman continued until the advent of the British in India. When the British established their political hegemony in India, the conditions under which Hindu women lived and endured were indeed harsh and pitiable. The status of women was then too depressing that, a British traveller could write home that, “the only thing female that is respected in India is the cowl.”

In view of the official policy of non-interference in the existing laws of both the Hindu and the Muslims, the British adopted a foreigner’s stand of neutrality toward Indian social and religious practices and did not want to interfere with indigenous cultural mores but the British government could not remain aloof. After all, they needed social reforms in their own country too, and they came to India not to save but to milk the country. Their concern was with markets, not reform, with profits, not souls.

In any civilised community, the status of women is one of the national yardsticks of social, economic and political development. None of its current problems in the field of health, sanitation practices, controlling population growth, preventing family disorganisation, bridging the gap between rural and urban areas, problems of youth, creating responsive public opinion, and other social issues can be solved unless women consciously and constructively share in some of the decisions. This sense of active responsibility for the well-being of others inspired the renaissance in India and the awakening of women was an integral part of it. “The forerunner of our times” Raja Ram Mohan Roy set the ball rolling as Neera Desai quotes:

“The advent of Raja Ram Mohan Roy in the arena of Indian social life is a very significant event in the Indian History. He was the man who heralded
a new age and welcomed the new culture to India. He is the first great representative of the intelligentsia who absorbed the new philosophy, viz., Liberalism.  

It was the activities of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and that of those who followed in his wake that brought into existence the women pioneers of the 19th century in India. It was again their attitude, approach, and that of those who came after them, which even now distinguish the women's movement in India, from its counterparts in the Western world. This is particularly so in respect of the UK where women had to win a strenuous battle before they could establish their franchise rights.

Circumstances made it unnecessary to have a narrow suffragist movement in this land. What was required in the early days of the pioneers continued to be the main hurdle even now, so far as the vast majority of women are concerned. The two facets on which the early pioneers had laid special emphasis were, firstly, the need to discard the customs which had grown up through the centuries and like weeds were choking up the life blood of the nation, so that women and other weaker sections of the people may enjoy their full rights of equal opportunity and equal status. The other important facet was that, women must secure the rights of education and training on equal level with men.

In both above-mentioned matters, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the Brahmo Samaj established by him and later the Arya Samaj, in many parts of the country, were the pathfinders. The change in the status of women in India is a slow, steady and continuing process. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and his followers focussed attention on emancipation of Indian women from the clutches of social evils and
costumes, which not only hampered progress but also enslaved women to harsh customs.

It was due to Ram Mohan’s effort that not only the tragic custom of ‘Sati’ (the custom of the wife being burnt on the husband’s funeral pyre) was abolished by law, but also it was his vigilance and that of his friends — they used to visit the cremation grounds to see that the law was enforced — that the custom actually disappeared.

The Regulation prohibiting Sati in 1829 was the first legal step in the direction of social reform. India at that time was slowly stabilising under the British rule. Criminal law was being codified. Society being divided into communities and castes, no ruler, let alone a foreign ruler, was expected to interfere into civil rules and customs, which were considered sacred, and of divine origin. Even then, men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others felt that the cruel system of immolation of widows must be stopped. It was with the backing of such enlightened reformers that Lord William Bentinck could enforce this regulation. Then, because of the fear of penalties involved, this legal measure became a success.

Raja Ram Mohan had a magic touch in bringing social reform, which was seen much later when Gandhiji operated, and brought about the disappearance of the custom of Purdah. It was also the effort of Raja Ram Mohan that had brought the change through which education and training opportunities became gradually available to a larger number of women. It was again his effort through which the degrading custom of dowry was totally given up (dowry money paid to the bridegroom’s family by the family of the bride) once and for all by those who joined as his adherents.

These social reformers were responsible for the legislation to abolish Sati, validate widow remarriage, raise the age of consent, restrain child marriage and raise the legal age of marriage. In the pre-independence legislatures attempts were made from time to time to
modify customary laws, which deprived women the right to inheritance, to hold property, demand maintenance, etc., but piecemeal legislation did not go very far to do away with the anomalies and harsh injustices which had accumulated over the years. It was left to free India to deal with these things in rational way.

As pointed out earlier, girls in ancient India received an education that was nearly equal to boys and their high educational status was one of the glories of the ancient Indian civilisation. Nevertheless, times change, and from the tenth century onwards with successive foreign invasions, life in India became insecure and the education of women was increasingly neglected up to the nineteenth century during the British rule. But then, thanks to the pioneering efforts of dedicated educationists and social the need of women to receive modern education was accepted. And with the founding of the first women’s college in India in 1848 by Mr. Bethune, Member of the Governor-General’s Executive Council — the Bethune College in Calcutta — women gradually began to receive college education.

The Arya Samaj also initiated reform and encouraged girls’ education. But they found their raison d’etre in the ancient past when women were free and not bound by the existing evils, and these later were regarded as a violation of the true traditions of India. The efforts of Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj were supplemented by the attempts of the foreign Christian missionaries to open schools for girls. These three agencies played a significant role in changing the status of women in India.

A great deal of criticism has been directed at the efforts of the Christian missionaries to raise the status of Indian women belonging to the lower levels of society. However, many missionaries have done a great deal of good and have brought happiness, self-confidence and a sense of dignity to the women of the poorer tribes and classes. One
would wish that the missionary institutions like the Ramkrishna Mission were doing similar work on a larger and more intensive scale.

In 1854, Sir Charles Wood sent a dispatch to the Governor-General to open primary schools both for boys and for girls. In spite of India’s cultural advance, it was not considered proper for girls to attend any school; rather it was considered derogatory to the family’s social dignity. However, despite public censure, Jagannath Shankersheth sent his daughters to schools. He even provided a room in his bungalow for opening a girl’s school.

As a result, many women were trained as teachers and nurses. In contrast, Western women had to fight for the right to enter the portals of universities. This was not the case with our universities, but pioneer women like Pandita Ramabai, Dr. (Mrs.) Anandibai Joshi and others had to face severe public criticism for their attempt to acquire higher education. Turning to the profession, the women pioneers in medicine and law have helped women to gain a definite footing in this line. More recently in engineering and architecture, business, trade, commerce, and journalism we find women gradually coming forward and playing a notable part. In the late 19th century, one of the first newspapers was started and edited by Swarnalata Devi and her daughter Priambada Devi belonging to the distinguished Tagore family.

Another act to raise the status of widows was passed in 1856. It was known as the Hindu Widow’s Remarriage Act. Even though Sati was abolished, the lot of Hindu widows was the most pitiable. Remarriage was a taboo and widows were even disfigured by tonsuring. Stray incidents of this kind can be found even today. This Act legalized widow remarriage, but the latter remained more an exception than a rule.

Unfortunately, the enthusiasm and liberal attitude of the British rulers changed drastically after the mutiny of 1857. The
masses became illiterate and even after independence the percentage of literacy is still very low. There is undoubtedly progress in women's education at all levels but there is a great lag between boys and girls. Nobody now questions the necessity of adult literacy and primary education as necessary equipment in life for everyone to fulfil his different roles, including that of a citizen. It will be of great help toward raising the status of women if intense efforts are made to spread literacy among the people, especially women. Free and compulsory primary education is an imperative.

Speaking of women who earn their livelihood, there is a very large number of working class women in the plantations, mines and employed in agriculture. Since independence, labour legislation has brought some relief for them. However, the large majority who work in the unorganised sector where appalling condition of work exists need immediate attention, so that they can claim even the marginal benefits of the organised working class.

To ensure economic independence to a certain extent, Married Women's Property Act was passed in 1874. Earnings and wages by married women were to be their separate property. The importance of this Act is fully realised when we bear in mind that joint family with joint property was the norm in those days. It also created a natural trust in favour of the assured wife and children, in case the husband was insured.

The spread of education and dissemination of Western liberal ideologies had given impetus to two important movements. Educated men all over the country joined hands and started political and social movements. The Indian National Congress and Indian National Social Conference were begun the same year in 1887. The cause of social disabilities was taken up by the latter conference. Among other items, this body gave attention to reforms relating to women. Inter alia, they urged imparting of primary, middle and higher education for women.
They also recorded their strong disapproval of child, old and very young marriages, dowry, polygamy and entertainment by ‘nautch’ girls on ceremonial occasions. Inter-cast marriage received encouragement at their hands.

These social reformers were responsible for the legislation to abolish Sati, validate widow remarriage, raise the age of consent, restrain child marriage and raise the legal age of marriage. In the pre-independence legislatures attempts were made from time to time to modify customary laws, which deprived women the right to inheritance, to hold property, demand maintenance, etc., but piecemeal legislation did not go very far to do away with the anomalies and harsh injustices which had accumulated over the years. It was left to free India to deal with these things in rational way. It must be said to their credit, however, that whenever Indians social reformers arose and demanded change — all the way from Raja Ram Mohan Roy to Mahatma Gandhi — they conceded it and eased specific difficulties. The role of Western education, British liberal ideals and Christian missionaries in liberalising the Indian attitude to women and their problems cannot be over-emphasised, though it is somewhat unpopular to refer to them today. And then came the Mahatma’s unique contribution of bringing out the latent capacities and energies of Indian women to use for the freedom struggle. As Neera Desai remarks:

“The National movement started by the liberals in the last decade of the nineteenth century and supported by the small section of the people, the intelligentsia, in which practically no woman was to be found, developed into a middle class movement under the militant leadership in which still woman in large number did not take part because of the absence of an appropriate programme. In the next
phase of its evolution, the nationalist movement under the leadership of Gandhi became a mass movement. This was due to the fact that Gandhiji evolved a programme, which facilitated as well as demanded the participation of both the masses, and the mass of women for its fulfilment. A large number of women enthusiastically responded to the call of Gandhi."16

She further says:

"In the Quit India movement, of 1942, women in thousands participated in the struggle, courted jails, faced lathis and tear gas, became victims of the bullets went underground and used apparatuses like underground paper and radio also."17

The idea that women should become equal partners of men in political life as well as administration of affairs as a matter of right is alien to the Indian way of thinking. Women for the home and men for the world was more or less the law of the world till women raised the standard of revolt in the U.S.A. and the U.K. Their achievement in fact paved the way for similar demands by women in India. Political radicalism side by side with social reformism has been characteristic of the Indian scene all along. During the days following the arrest of nationalist leaders in 1942, women came forward as leaders and dictators. Women showed no inhibition in venturing forward into the storm of the struggle. In the freedom struggle of India, women worked shoulder to shoulder with men in the Civil Disobedience, Non-Cooperation and other movements. Thus, acknowledgement of equal rights for women in law and the constitution was a foregone conclusion and their enfranchisement on an equal level was assured.
AFTER INDEPENDENCE

India is a living democracy and its survival will largely depend upon the capacity to shake off historical conceptions and traditional attitudes towards women who form more than half the population in some parts of the country. If the creative and regenerative forces of the half of the nation is suppressed, or not given its full outlet, it not only bottles up talent and capacity but discourages the spirit of responsibility as well. Those who suffer lose their sense of dignity and self-reliance, thus sufferings have to be done away with. Freedom has two-winged concept; negatively it means the removal of hurdles and positively the creation of opportunities, which would enable the individuals to reach a desired goal.

With the dawn of independence, a change has taken place with regard to woman’s place in Indian society. Social changes, especially in tradition-bound societies, are accelerated by political convulsions. Yet it will not be incorrect to say that the participation of women in the freedom movement by itself could not have speeded up the pace of the change. It was uprooting and displacement of vast populations as a consequence of the political settlement which made the change urgent and necessary. Just as in western countries, wars and revolutions have been instrumental in changing women’s status, because they give opportunity to women to demonstrate their competence and thus change the attitude of male.

Since Independence, India has tried, by and large, to bring our women to a level of equality with men, ending age-old prejudice and discrimination based on custom, religion and tradition. In fact, the Constitution of India, Part III, dealing with “Fundamental Rights” spells out prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth. “The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only on religion, race, caste, sex, place or any of them.” Article 16 assures equality of opportunity in matters of
public employment without reference to sex. "There shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State." In addition, "No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence of any of them be ineligible for, or discriminated against, in respect of any employment or office under the State." Article 19 guarantees the "7 Freedoms of speech and expression; of assembly; of association; of movement; occupation; trade or business."

Right to equality is one of the inherent fundamental principles on which the new Indian society is being built up. Article 14 of the Indian Constitution guarantees "Equality before law" in other worlds, right to equal treatment in similar circumstances, both in the privileges conferred and in the liabilities full participation by all sections of the population, and opportunities for full development of the potentialities of women. This is also the keynote of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination of women.

Moreover, equality does not signify that everybody has to be physically, intellectually, or spiritually equal or can be made so. Nevertheless, it does justify that unnecessary and unequal restrictions have to be removed so that each one, within his or her own limitations can enjoy equally with others the benefits, which may be derived from the society. This is emancipation — equal opportunity for all with the removal of political, social, economic, cultural barriers. Backwardness or degradation of a group does not arise out of any inherent failings in it but is principally due to the lack of facilities, which they may be allowed to enjoy.

Since independence, all theoretical rights in regard to equal opportunity for women entering any profession or vocation have been ensured. What is more, equal rights in social laws have been guaranteed for the vast majority of women in India. Changes in the
social laws took much longer because the movement to remove the legal disabilities of women came up against the formidable opposition of the orthodox elements particularly in regard to giving equal rights of property to both the son and daughter. Improvement of service conditions, provision of child-care service for working women; supportive measures of adequate security of working women etc. improved the situation in India. The Maternity Benefit Act of 1961 was also an effort in the right direction.

After independence, enactments were made which improved the social status of women in our society. To do away with the then existing inequality in the sphere of marriage and divorce, the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, was enacted and enforced, which prohibited plural marriages. The passage of the Hindu Succession Act conferred inheritance right and status to women, which was hitherto unknown. The female relations of the deceased were elevated to a position, which was unknown in the history of legal thought in India. It recognised for the first time equality of men and women in respect of property rights. However, though women attained new legal rights, a large majority is still not availing these rights. Rural women should particularly be oriented and educated to an awareness of their new status to secure for themselves their legitimate rights.

In fact, the development of a society requires full participation by all sections of the population, and opportunities for full development of the potentialities of women. Because legislation by itself cannot change society but it must be emphasised that law does serve some useful purpose in promoting an improvement in the social status. If legislation reflects the social and legal advance of the country, the degree of advance in the sphere of women's emancipation is not mean.

More than a hundred and fifty years of social reform movement and five decades of freedom movement have not stirred Indian society
to its depths. A prime minister, a chief minister and a few ministers here and there may catch the eye of the world in wonder. However, the fact remains that the vast majority of Indian women, shut away from the main stream of development for decades. They are still unaffected by the changes ushered in by western education, the impact of western ideas, international efforts to change the status of women, the promulgation of a constitution guaranteeing equality of status with men and the legislative enactments to change their status.

A great evil persisting in India that has brought much hardship to women is the dowry system practiced both openly and stealthily. The Prohibition of Dowry Act in 1961 was an enactment penalising the giving and taking of dowry. In spite of this Act, the custom is not only still rampant in the Indian society to such an extent that even those sections of people who did not indulge in this pernicious custom in the past have now taken to it as it has become a prestige issue to follow for them. A bride failing to bring home such a fare is often made to suffer dire consequences. Therefore, one is justified in doubting whether substantial progress in desirable directions, to the extent necessary to change the status of women, has been made.

Though a number of women are taking a due and honoured place in the professions, in research, in teaching, in the services, in managerial work, in social work, in politics and in many different avenues of services to humanity, but this represents only a small section of women of this country. Other countries have achieved over 90 per cent female literacy.

It must be noted that when you educate a boy, you only educate an individual. But when you educate a girl, you educate a whole family, for she will marry and bring up a family over whose destiny she will preside. With the advent of modern psychology, we have learned anew how profoundly true it is that "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world." While the education of a man is necessary to
enable him to obtain gainful employment and become a successful breadwinner, the education of a woman is essential for the immeasurable dividends society will reap from an enlightened wife and mother.

Today, less than 60 percent of girls of school-going age go to schools. This shows that mere legislation or a statement of policy by government will not always lead to desired results. Public opinion has to be created which will make it imperative for every parent to see that not only his sons but his daughters too go to schools and that his sole concern should not be to get her married to the first bachelor — eligible or otherwise — that comes his way. Society should feel that girls should not only be educated but should be given an opportunity for employment before they are married.

Very little is known about the relative participation of women in decision-making process within a family. However, inter-spouse communication, which is a prerequisite for adoption of family planning, is less frequent in rural joint families. Younger the couple is, the greater seems to be the barrier to inter-spouse communication in a joint family. Besides, the ascribed roles of women such as modesty and obedience to husband and elderly members of family act as barriers to voluntary public participation by women in decision-making.

In addition, women as compared to men are less frequently exposed to mass communication. There are also indications that the aspiration pattern of women varies from men. While men are more concerned with economic considerations, women are more concerned with old-age security, having male children, and problems of child rearing. These mean that women are not likely to respond to any one approach in the same fashion as men do. There is need for different approaches and appeals for reaching the women. A major focus may be to prepare the women through personalised approach and bring
them at par with men so that inter-spouse communication and decision-making is facilitated.

We also find that the percentage of the representation of women in the Parliament, Assembly and the Municipalities and local Panchayets is not gone up to the level. In the Parliamentary elections, being held recently, the number of women nominees put up by all the different political parties together is negligible and most disappointing. This is a sad reflection on the position even after the observance of international Women’s Year in 1975.

To sum up, there has been a revolution in the status of Indian women since independence. But it has not affected or even been felt by the vast majority of women who are illiterate, tradition-bound and normally averse to change and therefore lack the motivation to appreciate and adopt programmes for their welfare. The majority of Indian women still have to be satisfied even with their domestic affairs. Working women still are looked down upon by their own sisters. In urban societies, women breathe in much liberal atmosphere but in villages, the situation is almost the same as it was before. Though a number of schools and colleges have been established for girls, yet no proper attention has been paid for their real education. They remain as ignorant about their rights as before.

The movement for social emancipation of Indian women that started in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries still has a long way to travel before it reaches its desired goal. In addition, the prime requirement for this achievement is the zeal and tenacity evinced by the nineteenth century reformers.
REFERENCES

1. Das A. C.: *Rigvedic Culture*
3. Ibid, p. 86
13. Ibid
14. Ibid, p. 41
15. Ibid, p. 62
16. Ibid, p. 145
17. Ibid

65