CHAPTER-II

WOMEN IN INDIA: A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

“By a young girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one,
Nothing must be done independent, even in her own house”.
(Internship project; Dec. 2010-Jan.2011)

India is a multifaceted society where no generalization concerning various regional, religious, social and economic aspects is possible. Indian women also fall under the purview of the above. They are generally confined to home, restricted to the role of a home-maker discharging the duties of a mother and a wife.

A young girl is required to lead her life under her father’s restriction. After marriage, husband has all control over her. In old age, she has to follow the instruction of her son. She cannot do any work at any time independently even in her own house. Remarkable improvement has occurred in the status of women in some parts of the world in recent decades particularly in the developed west. However, norms that restrict women to the home are still powerful in many of the less developed countries including India. In such societies, there are well defined rules and norms defining activities that are deemed appropriate for women. Women in such societies are, by and large, excluded from outdoor activities. In India, a woman is ill-treated even when she has been considered as a goddess. There is no equality between men and women. Unequal gender relations existed in the ancient time and continued through medieval and modern periods despite some revolutionary movements.
such as that of Basaweshwara, who advocated for equality, a casteless society, and an improved status of women in 12th century. Later on, the great Indian social reformers provided boost to women’s legal status in the 19th and 20th centuries. Independence of the country in 1947 from British rule heralded the introduction of laws relating to improvement in the condition of women. Our constitution provided equality to men and women and also gave special protection to women to realize their interests effectively. The law also gives women equal rights in the matter of adoption, maternity benefits, equal pay, good working conditions etc.

Evidences indicate that women enjoyed a reasonably respectable position in India till Vedic Period. Decline in their status is reported to have set in some time in the post-Vedic period. In the medieval period the situation worsened for various reasons. It is, therefore, important to have an understanding of the historical background of changing nature of gender relations in India. The forthcoming sections are devoted to this. But before we delve into a discussion on the status of women in India, it is necessary to examine how the issue of ‘masculinity and femininity’ and the system of patriarchy came into existence. One of the most widely discussed explanations on the emergence of patriarchy is enshrined in the Marxist theory. Friedrich Engels, a follower of Marx, in his book ‘The origin of family, private property and the state’ has presented a very good account on the emergence of patriarchy. Geetha (2002) has presented a summary of Marxist explanation. The present account of the origin of family and patriarchal structure as suggested by Engel is largely drawn from the work of Geetha.

Early human societies were egalitarian in nature. In such societies, division of labour between men and women was based on a simple principle as a ‘pure outgrowth of nature’. Men hunted, fished, provided the raw materials for food and made the tools necessary to carry out these tasks. Women, on the other hand cared for the house, prepared food, looked after children and other
needs such as clothing etc. However, women remained in a dominant position. They were at the centre of the communistic house-hold, and sexual relationships within the household were freer than we know them now. Women could choose their men and children were in the control of their mothers. The society was based on matriarchal principles, and men were supposed to stay in the house of their women. Things remained unchanged as long as the societies were purely nomadic. With the advent of settled life, the communistic nature of society underwent a revolutionary change. Activities related to production gradually shifted outside the household and were invariably in the exclusive domain of men. Fights between groups for control over territory became common, and the division of society into two classes – masters and salves representing the exploiters and the exploited – crept into.

Gradually as these groups accumulated wealth, the relationship between men and women changed, for all the wealth was a result of production essentially a male activity. Domestic work and the household, where women had wielded authority earlier, lost its significance. Further, when production became valued then the household and household labour was devalued and women became domestic slaves. The growing significance of production created a new institution of private property. Private property was not only land, animals or slaves; soon it came to include women as well. Men wanted to own women so that they could gain control over the children, something which they needed to do, if they had to pass on their wealth to the next generation.

With a woman being deemed a single man’s property, her control over her children also loosened. Earlier, children inherited through their mother, a symbol of mother-right. But when women lost their exalted status in the household, mother-rights too gradually disappeared. Over a period of time, children learnt to identify their descent and inheritance through the father. By this time, the woman and her house-hold had ceased to be central to the group’s life. At that time, the man and his house and property assumed importance and
men became valued group leaders. This is how patriarchy came into existence. With the advent of patriarchy, a woman was now bound to a single man and gradually, monogamous marriage became the norm.

**Women in Ancient India:**

As already stated, women enjoyed a very good position during the early periods of Indian history. Among the earlier settlers in the Indian sub-continent, the position of women was reasonably on par with that of men. However, after the arrival of Aryans the situation started changing. They took women from the subjugated people as their wives. Among the pre-Aryan settlers, women fought in the battlefield together with men folk. By the time of Rgveda, however, the presence of women in the army began to be considered a weakness rather that strength. In Rgveda, there are several disparaging remarks about women. They are said to have non-controllable minds. In the conversation between Urvasi and Pururavas, it is said that the friendship of women does not last, and that women have the hearts of hyenas. The Aryans abducted women on a large scale from the subjugated enemy as war booty, and turned them into wives. The word ‘Vadhu’ was used both for bride and female slave in Rgveda.

Polygamy existed during Rgveda time. The tradition continued in the later Vedic literature also. In Vedic literature, it is clearly mentioned that a person could have many wives but a wife could not have many husbands. The status of women shows perceptible decline with the passage of time. Women began to be considered as devoid of senses. They were taken as incapable of inheriting property. They were considered even worse than a sinful man. A Woman was not recognized as a legal person. The feeling of suspicion towards the fidelity of the wife also finds expression in the Vedic literature. But the picture change during the time of the Upanishads. The Upanishads represent a revolt again Vedic orthodoxy. At the time of Rgvedic era, Aryans used to take
the women of the non-Aryan subjugated people. But they did not give their women in marriage to non-Aryans. As against this, during the Upanishadic era some kings gave their daughters in marriage to persons belonging to lower Varnas, in gratitude for the higher knowledge received from the letter. In addition, the Upanishads mention examples of several scholarly women who participated in metaphysical discussion. In one Upanishad, we find that on being asked too many questions by Gargi, Yajnavalkya loses his patience and says: ‘O Gargi, do not ask too much about a deity about which we are not to ask too much. But Gargi challenges Yajnavalkya: as the son of a warrior from Kasis or Videhas might string his loosened bow, take two pointed foe-piercing arrows in his hand and rise to engage in battle, I have risen to fight thee with two questions’ (Shrirama I. D., 1999, P-182). Not only women philosophers like Gargi, but some housewives also showed their keen interest in the newly emerged metaphysical thought. Instead of taking property, Maitreyi, the wife of Yajnavalkya, preferred to know the way to immortality from her departing husband. In the Vedas, the birth of girl was considered a misfortune, due to patriarchal structure of society. But in Upanishads we find a ritual for having the birth of a learned daughter, in addition to the rituals for the birth of sons. The picture, however, changes during the time of Grhya Sutras.

By the time of the Grhya Sutras the priestly elites began systematic efforts to revive the pre-Upanishadic Vedic tradition. In the marital and post-marital rituals prescribed in Grhya Sutras, the feeling of suspicion towards the wife finds an even stronger expression. The wife is supposed to bring some evil elements with her, which can harm her husband, his forthcoming progeny, cattle, house and fame. At that time, husband performs ritual and prayers to ward off these elements from doing any harm (Deva and Shrirama, 1999:183). A strong preference for male child became visible. Many pre-natal rituals were undertaken for securing a male child. The Sutras equate mothers having only daughters with barren land and allowed the husbands of such women to bring...
in other women in marriage. The birth of a daughter was taken as insult while the birth of a son was described as the light of highest heaven. Again through the Sutra literature hypergamy was revived. The Sutras recommend hypergamos marriage along with the marriage in one’s own Vrna. In the practice a woman of lower status was taken in marriage while vice-versa was not allowed. According to Vedas a man could acquire wife without any guilt just by grasping her hand despite already being married. He was also not required to bother about the existence of the former husband of the woman. In the Brahmanas, during ritual the wives had to confess their extramarital relations, if any. This was perhaps the reason why marriage of girls was recommended at a very tender age. It is quite possible that an early marriage coupled with some kind of discriminatory practices against daughters resulted in deficit of females through a higher mortality rate among girls. An early age at marriage for girls might have also been warranted by existing deficit of females under the patriarchal structure of society. Thus, the essential attitude towards a daughter which still prevails in Indian society seems to have taken shape long ago. The birth of a daughter was considered undesirable in the later Vedic times just as it is regarded even now.

The Gautama Dharma Sutras prescribes that girls should be given in marriage before they attain puberty. However, in the Sutras, the difference of age between the bride and bridegroom does not seem to be much, because a boy of seventeen who has completed his studies is described as an eligible suiter. But in Smritis the difference between the respective ages of bride and bridegroom became excessively pronounced. Manu prescribes that a man of thirty should marry a maiden of twelve, or a man of twenty-four a girl of eight. This difference of age ensured the full dependence of woman on man, and male superiority over her. The Vedic literature explains the conjugal relationship through the analogy of Dyau and Prthvi or heaven and earth. This myth of divine parents of the universe probably originated in the remote past among the
Indo-Aryans, long before they entered the Indian sub-continent. Heaven and earth are complements of a single whole. Father heaven makes the earth pregnant through rains, and beings of manifold form grow. This imputed parenthood of heaven and earth is transferred to the human couple. A mantra of Atharva Vedic recited by the bridegroom at the time of the wedding says: I am Dyau, you are Prthvi. This mantra has been adopted by many Grhya Sutras.

The implicit idea seems to be that though the earth is the mother of all beings yet beings manifest the divine father. Like the parents of the universe the husband and wife too form a single whole. In the Satapatha Brahmana it is said: the wife is indeed the half of one’s self. Therefore, as long as a man does not secure a wife, and as long as he does not beget a son he is not complete or whole. But when he secures a wife and begets progeny, he becomes complete.

The son is the manifestation of the father. The myth of divine parents of the universe is found in the Manu Smrti also. It equates the women to the field or Ksetra and man to the seed; and after some discussion as to which of the two is more important it is concluded that seed is more important because the offspring’s of all created beings are marked by the characteristics of the seed.

To further emphasize the idea the Smrti says that though earth is called the primeval womb of all created beings, the properties reflected in the created beings are not of earth but of the seed.

The role of women in procreation is minimized to such an extent that the seed of man is considered efficacious enough to produce a child even without the aid of women. In the Mahabharata we find that the great teacher, Drona, was born because of semen falling into a drone or a vessel of wood. Certain metaphysical systems which grew up in ancient Indian society provide an elaborate cosmic justification for the dependent and low status of women. Manu assigning a low status to women may appear iniquitous today; one has to remember that the norms about the status and role of women were not very different in other patriarchal societies such as those of ancient Greece and

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traditional China. This may at first look inconsistent with another often quoted dictum of Manu which says that gods dwell where women are worshiped. However, the two dicta are not necessarily contradictory. Worshipping is one thing and giving freedom is quite another. For example, the Hindus do worship the cow; but they do not leave it free. The statements made in Smrtis and in the epics show a high degree of consistency. The fundamental values of Indian society are well enunciated in them. Long inculcations about the glory of chastity, and obedience and devotion to the husband, marred the natural affectionate conjugal relation. It was expected that the wife should submerge her personality into that of her husband. The position of the wife was reduced to a pupil or a mute follower rather than a companion or a friend. Manu compares a woman to a student. He says,’ the nuptial ceremony is similar to the initiation, serving the husband is equal to living in the teacher’s house and the household duties are equal to living in the teacher’s house and the household duties are equal to the worship of the sacred fire’. (Shrirama, 1999:190). He further prescribes that like a teacher or father the husband can chastise his wife with lashes of a rope or cane on her back.

All the works of the revivalist era adhered to the norms established by Manu. The ideal established for the wife is to serve her husband with mind, speech and body, though he is poor, sickly or foolish. A number of supernatural rewards have been promised to the women who steadfastly adhere to these norms, while the deviators have only suffering in store for them. Manu says that a woman who through her thought, speech and actions remains dutiful to her husband gets the highest heaven with her husband, besides worldly renown; whereas the violator of the norms of duty becomes a she-jackal and remains afflicted with diseases.

The Mahabharata contains several stories of devoted wives who acquire divine power by serving their husbands. Through her tremendous supernatural power Savitri retrieved her husband from the clutches of Yama, the god of
death. A young hunter, who being stricken by lust tried to approach Damayanti, fell dead by her curse. Sandili attained celestial regions by virtue of obedience and devotion to her husband. Gandhari had powers to burn up the universe and stop the movements of sun and moon. All these stories provided the psychological motivation for bearing the disproportionate load of a large number of odd jobs that were deliberately prescribed to preoccupy a wife.

Thus, the patriarchal elite stratum of ancient India through its conscious efforts, and perhaps unconsciously too through the instinct of self-preservation inherent in culture itself, evolved a strong normative pattern for the subjugation of woman, so that she was prevented from becoming a threat to the solidarity of the patriarchal joint family. These norms were justified and buttressed by law, religion and metaphysics. The system thus evolved not only met successfully the inner and outer challenges but influenced all the people who came in contact with it.

It cannot be clearly stated whether equal rights between men and women prevailed or not during the Vedic period. But available sources show that liberal attitudes and practices pertaining to women did exist. Women were actively involved in religious and social matters. They had some freedom to choose their partner in marriage and a widow was permitted to remarry. As India started taking steps towards civilization, social discrimination increased. Jainism and Buddhism emerged as potent religious reform movements. According to Buddha, women’s spiritual capacities were equal to men’s. “Buddhism began as a religion that treated women as equal to men in their capacity for personal spiritual development.” “The universal prejudices against women, who are said to be weak-minded, fickle, treacherous and impure are shared by the Jains and expressed in several passages of the canon and in the form of maxims.”

The high status that women enjoyed during early Vedic period gradually started deteriorating in the late Vedic period. Lineage began to be traced in the
male line and sons were the sole heirs to family property. As the economic and social status of sons began to rise, the position of women saw a steep decline. The position of women reached an all-time low during the age of the Dharmashastras. It is during this age that codes of conduct prescribing behavior norms for women were evolved. This period saw the exclusion of women from both economic and religious sphere. During the period of Dharmashastra, child marriage was encouraged and widow marriage was looked down upon. The birth of girl child was considered as an ill omen and many parents went to the extent of killing the female infants. The practice of Sati became quite wide spread because of the ill treatment meted out to widows.

Women in Medieval India:

The medieval period is spread over four centuries from the 12th to the first half of the 16th century. The real history of India in the middle ages is a struggle for political power and economic supremacy between two systems which were totally different in their outlook. The incursion of Muslims in India began with the Arab invasion of Sind in the beginning of the 8th century A.D. The large majority of Muslims who came to India were Turks, Afghans and Persians. And thus for the first time in recorded history Indian religion and social customs were faced with a system which was equally formulated and definite. The caste system became more rigid in the medieval period. Occupation now began to be determined by birth. Such a situation brought about a lot of conservation in the Hindu society. Those who were low in the social scale of Hindu society found in Islam an opportunity to assert their dignity. The more sensitive among them were attracted by its democratic appeal. This is one of the reasons why Islam spread very fast in certain parts of India. Another reason was that two options were given to the Indian prisoners of war by Muslims: either acceptance of Islam or slavery obviously most of
them preferred the first. Dependence of women on their husbands or other male relatives was a prominent feature of this period. Devoid of avenues of any education having lost the access to *streedhana* or dowry, they virtually became the exploited class with disastrous results for themselves and the nation. Indian women were politically, socially and economically inactive except for those engaged in farming and weaving. This inactivity in a way contributed to their subordination. Most of the women accepted meekly the idea that the proper place for them was their home. This diffusive awareness which was ideologically stereotyped obviously on the wrong lines was their undoing during this period of darkness, thus proving the veracity of the statement that there are three dimensions to subordination of women – the political, the ideological and the economic – which may co-exist in different balance with one another.

Political subordination includes the exclusion of women from all important decision-making processes with the advent of Muslims in India; the social movement of Indian women was restricted. They were prohibited to attend public functions and were not free to participate as men’s equals in religious functions like Yajnas, obviously indicating a degradation of her role as she was getting wrapped in isolation. Another social evil that existed in society during this period was child marriage. These pre-pubescent marriages adversely affected the health of the girls. These child brides were denied all intellectual, physical and spiritual development. It virtually punctured the fragile psyche of Indian girl child. Her self-image was mercilessly locked in the echo chamber. Similarly most of the women made them believe that the ideal place for them was home. Thus, they were persuaded by circumstances to accept their inferiority and secondary position. Men being providers, women became dependent on them economically, for their subsistence except for them economically, for their subsistence except for the labour classes, where both men and women participated in subsistence forming and other occupations.
Many social evils like female infanticide, sati, child marriages, purdah system or Zenana (i.e. the seclusion of women) developed during the middle ages, due to the political instability of northern India, especially due to various invasions. The seclusion of women was encouraged mainly by Rajputs and the other upper castes like Brahmins. Polygamy was the first reason which contributed to the subordination of women. Women came to be regarded as instruments of sensual satisfaction. For the Hindus there was no limit set to the number of wives a man could take. Marriage in Islam is a contract. A Muslim man can have as many as four wives. Thus even religion encouraged the abject subordination of women for the reasons best known to it. Islam also made husband the head of the family and insisted that a wife should obey all his commands and serve him with utmost loyalty, whether he was worthy of it or not.

Another social evil that existed in medieval India was female infanticide. A son began to be considered as the maintainer of the race. So in most of the noble families the female child was killed either by poisoning or by burying her alive. Some of them were drowned to death. Even among the Muslims the birth of a daughter was ominous.

“The midwife who receives a son deserves a gold coin to make a ring for her nose,

But you! Oh midwife! Deserve thirty stokes of the stick! Oh! You who announce the

Little girl when the censorious are here!”

Purdah gained popularity with the advent of the Muslims. Many writers feel that the purdah system existed among kshatriyas in the period of Dharma Sastras. But the Hindu women veiled only their face or sometimes only covered their heads with sarees or dupattas. But for Muslims it meant complete veiling. Purdah actually is a Persian word which means curtain. According to Patricia Jeffrey, Purdah is a part and parcel of stratification in India. It becomes
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the mental foot binding; the frogs in a well syndrome; the submissiveness of the young bride and the inability of adult women to cope with the world outside. Dowry system was a common phenomenon. It actually meant ‘stridhana’ which included gifts, ornaments, property, and cash presented to her by her father or her relatives. But in the medieval period the term acquired special significance. It meant money or Dakshina which was actually presented to the bridegroom along with the bride. In Vadic times it ensured some sort of security for her. But during the middle ages she was not free to use it as it was owned by her husband and his kith and kin.

During the middle ages the term ‘stridhana’ acquired huge dimensions. The Hindus and Muslims favoured this custom of dowry. It could be paid in cash or kind along with the bride. During the vedic ages it was given with the intention of providing security for women when a crisis occurs. She was free to make use of this Dhana. But the middle ages witnessed a sudden transformation. The Stridhana received by the groom belonged completely to the in-laws. The bride did not have free access to this wealth, which rightfully belonged to her. Dowry system existed even among the Muslims, especially among the shias. As years rolled by dowry became an integral part of the marriage ceremony. This in a way contributed to female infanticide, as it became a heavy burden on the poor. The birth of a girl became a nightmare to the majority of the population. Another negative effect of the dowry system was that the Indian women lost her importance as a worthy human being. She began to be regarded as movable and removable property by her husband.

Created by the so-called law-givers and upholders of religion in the medieval age it literally induced physical as well as intellectual damage on women in medieval India. It took away her fledgling morale which was expectedly delicate. Above all it resulted in the emotional break-downs and the traumas of a serious kind. Thus her self-concept received another lethal lash at the hands of the dark forces that ruled that roost.
The condition of the Hindu widows became more miserable during the medieval period. Rigidity of caste system denied them the right to freedom and social mobility. Inhuman treatment was offered to the widows. She was forced to lead a life away from worldly pleasures. A widow was isolated from the society as well as the family. Another pre-requisite for a widow was shaving the head. She was thus humiliated mercilessly by contemporary society. The condition of the Muslim widow was slightly better owing to the fact that she could remarry after a certain lapse of time following her husband death.

The feudal society of the time encouraged sati which meant self-immolation of the window. By burning herself on the pyre of her husband, she proves her loyalty. Even the child widow was not spared from this gruesome ritual. According to Saroj Gulati because of the continuous wars, there were chances of too many widows young and old, and a big question was how to accommodate them without bringing stigma to the family or creating problems for society. And sati was considered as the best course even though it was the worst crime perpetrated on Indian women from many angles of reason or humanity.

Prostitution became a recognized institution. The devadasi system which was prevalent among the Hindus and the courtesans, who adorned the court of Muslim rulers, degraded the status of women in society. Under the devadasi system women were the brides of Gods. But they were supposed to entertain kings, priests and even members of the upper classes. The fact that they were exploited by the existing male-dominated society is clearly revealed in the testimony of Alberuni.

The system of Purdah which was prevalent among royal families, nobles and merchant prince classes prior to the advent of Muslims spread to other classes also. During the medieval period, practices such as polygamy, sati, child marriage, ill treatment of widows already prevalent during the Dharmashastra age gained further momentum. The priestly class
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misinterpreted the sacred texts and created an impression that all these evil practices had religious sanction.

**Women in Modern India:**

At the time of British rulers, the status of women saw many changes. The East India Company (EIC) was mainly a trading company involved in trade in India. For dealing with civil matters, the EIC consulted *Moulavis* and *Pundits* for dealing with civil matters. At that time, the customs were devised and sustained by male members. Women were not even consulted. Women’s wrongs formed the theoretical basis for men’s rights or more properly male duties towards moderating women’s lust. Women were not given equal rights in matter related with matrimony, property, widow’s remarriage, adoption and divorce also. This situation was severely criticized by the colonial authorities. The 19th century is often termed as the century of social reforms. The criticism angered the people of India and caused a serious threat to the longevity of colonial rule in India. Hence, the Queen’s Proclamation of 1859 declared that British authorities will not interfere in religious matters of the people. To bring reforms smoothly in India, legislations transforming the family structure were introduced in Princely States without much opposition. Baroda was the first to introduce divorce provision. The Princely state of Mysore enacted the Infant Marriage Prevention Act of 1894. Keeping pace with these princely states, Malabar part of Madras Presidency and Travancore introduced reforms. But the major drawback was that the Princely States could not stop violation of these laws across their borders.

Sati was never a religious obligation, but it was believed that by burning herself on the funeral pyre, a widow sanctified her ancestors and removed the sins of her husband. A widow’s life for all time was more painful than death for one time. The first serious challenge for the reformers was the problem of ‘widow immolation’ or ‘Sati’, where Hindu widows climbed the funeral pyres
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of their husbands; an ancient tradition, prevalent in Bengal, Rajasthan and the South Indian kingdom of Vijayanagar. She was believed to ascend to the heaven on committing Sati. Strong social pressures on the widow and the status of widows among the Hindus were also factors which helped the growth of this custom. Sati was first abolished in Calcutta in 1798; a territory that fell under the British jurisdiction. Raja Ram Mohan Roy fought bravely for abolition of sati and with assistance from Lord William Bentinck, and a ban on sati was imposed in 1829 in the British territories in India.

The status of widows in India was deplorable in that they were not allowed to participate in any religious and social functions. Their lives were worse than death; one of the reasons as to why many widows opted for Sati. The upper caste widows were most affected by the then prevailing customs. Prohibition against remarriage of widows was strictly observed only amongst upper caste Hindus. Attempts to make laws to facilitate remarriage of widows by the British were vehemently opposed by the conservative Hindus. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who wrote *Marriage of Hindu Widows* relying heavily on the *Shastras*, fought for widow remarriage. Reformers like Mahadev Govind Ranade and Dayananda Saraswati also actively participated in the reform movement, resulting in the enactment of the Hindu Widows Remarriage Act XV of 1856. The major drawback of the Act was that it was only applicable to the Hindus. Also, people showed little enthusiasm to implement the provisions of the Act. In Maharashtra, social reformers like Pandit Vishnu Shastri, Sir R.G. Bhandarkar, Agarkar and D.K. Karve have made significant contributions in this regard.

There was a lot of ambiguity on the question of the rights of a widow to property which made it difficult for a widow to remarry. Before the ‘Hindu Women’s Right to Property Act XVIII of 1937’ and the ‘Hindu Succession Act XXX of 1956’, the *Dayabhaga* and *Mitakshara* Laws laid down that a widow could become a successor to her husband’s estate in the absence of a son, son’s
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son, of the deceased and the estate which she took by succession to her husband was an estate which she held only during her lifetime. At her death, the estate reverted to the nearest living heir of her dead husband.

Another serious problem that women faced was that of child marriage. Small kids and in some cases even infants in the cradle were married off. Early marriage affected the growth and development of the children. Fixing the minimum age of marriage of men and women by law was voiced as early as the mid-19th century by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Keshab Chandra Sen. Vidyasagar argued that early marriage was detrimental to the health of women, their efforts, coupled with that of Mahatma Gandhi, resulted in the passing of the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929.

A girl is considered a burden by parents. Since a girl child would be going to her husband’s place upon marriage, the parents did not want to waste their resources on her upbringing. Again the demand for large dowry and the huge wedding expenses caused a lot of hardship to the parents. So, the parents preferred a male child as they would be able to bring in large dowry. These considerations led to the practice of killing the girl child once she was born. The practice of female infanticide was common among certain castes and tribes in India, especially in the north and north-western states. The custom of infanticide was particularly prominent among communities which found it difficult to find suitable husbands for their daughters and an unmarried daughter was considered a disgrace to the family. The difficulty was exacerbated by the extravagant expenditure which conventions demanded on the occasion of a daughter’s marriage.

The earliest efforts to stop female infanticide were made in Kathiawar and Kutch. In 1795, infanticide was declared to be murder by Bengal Regulation XXI. The evil of female infanticide was ended by propaganda and the forceful action on the part of the British Government. Through the efforts of Keshab Chandra Sen, the Native Marriage Act of 1872 was passed, which
abolished early marriages, made polygamy an offence, sanctioned widow remarriages and inter-caste marriages. In 1901, the Government of Baroda passed the Infant Marriage Prevention Act. This Act fixed the minimum age for marriage for girls at 12 and for boys at 16. In 1930 the Sarda Act was passed, to prevent the solemnization of marriages between boys under the age of 18 years and girls under the age 14 years. However, even today, the Act remains merely on paper on account of several factors.

Indians wanted a nation state after independence in which women had a right to vote. Unlike the British and American women, Indian women did not face great difficulty in securing franchise. Gandhiji stressed on the need for active participation of masses during the freedom movement, including women. He encouraged total participation of women resulting in the emergence of a large number of women freedom fighters. The Swadeshi movement, the non-Cooperation (1920-22) movement, the Civil Disobedience movement (1930-34) and the Quit India (1942) movement drew large number of women. Such participation helped women to voice the need for women’s participation in the legislation process. Annie Besant, Madame Cama and Sarojini Naidu formed the Women’s Indian Association. But, women still constitute a mere 10% of the legislators in the Parliament and State Assemblies. According to the 1955 International Parliamentary Union Survey, women hold just 11.7% of all seats in Parliament around the world. Success at the Panchayat level based on reservations for women convinced women’s organizations that it is the correct time to extend these reservations to the higher levels. It is a different matter that even at the Panchayat level women members face lot of opposition in as much as the male members of the Panchayat do not consider them as equals. Women face opposition from the family members, often resulting in their resigning their membership. Karnataka and West Bengal are good examples where women have exceeded the reserved 33% with 42% and 39% respectively. These examples show that given a chance women can excel in

Muslims constitute about 13.4% of India's population (2001). But their influence on the Indian society is much stronger. Even before Islam was established, Arab traders and travellers arrived on the southern coast of India, establishing trade relations with the local rulers. The Arabs settlers married local women resulting in their progeny growing up speaking the local language as their mother tongue, despite practicing Islam and having their own places of worship. A fair amount of acculturation took place, with Muslims following the local cultures and traditions. Most of the Indian Muslims are converts from the lower castes of the Indian society, resulting in the perpetuation of the caste system among the Muslims, although there is no caste system in Islam. There are also converts from upper castes, who were influenced by Islam. Others are descendants of those who accompanied the Muslim rulers. The different categories of Muslims who accompanied the Muslim rulers remained in India, marrying local women. Because of the differences in the origins and other reasons like adoption of different cultures and traditions of the areas in which they lived, Muslims of India do not constitute a homogeneous lot.

Muslims of India are mainly divided into two main sects; the Sunni and the Shia. Each sect has different schools of thought. Different Indian communities who adopted Islam in different ways have different community names. They include the Bohras and Khojas of western India, the Mappilas of Kerala, the Lebbais and others. The absence of Muslim women from the public life is one of the reasons for the lack of information on Muslim women’s social history during this period. Purdah was a distinct feature of Muslim women and Muslim women’s education was generally restricted to religious knowledge. Although Muslim girls and boys were educated in maktabs (primary school) girls were completely absent from madrasas (schools of higher learning). Several Women of the Mughal royal families received private education.
Babur’s daughter Gulbadan Begum, author of the *Humayun Namah* was the first Mughal woman to document the social realities of Muslim women. Zeb-un-Nissa, Emperor Aurangzeb’s eldest daughter, was an eminent theologian and poet. Polygamy was practiced within the Mughal royalty. The loss of the last Mughal emperor created a power vacuum. The British East India Company took over the rule of Delhi and in 1835 and introduced English. Muslims reluctant to learn English took to Persian. But, the demise of Persian language affected women’s education. Muslims were left with a feeling of inertia.

The situation has undergone significant improvement since independence. Women in India now participate fully in areas such as education, sports, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology, etc. The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality and provides for no discrimination by the State on the basis of sex. Equality of opportunity and equal pay for equal work are the hallmark of the Indian Constitution so far as the efforts for improvement in the status of women are concerned. In addition, the constitution allows special provisions to be made by the State in favour of women and children. It renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief. The central as well as state governments have launched several schemes which directly aim at improving the material conditions of women and girls. The results can be seen in improvement in the mortality conditions of women vis-à-vis men and resultant differential trends in life expectancy. However, gender inequality persist despite all the above particularly because of long-standing patriarchal mindset and misplaced emphasis in the government schemes and programmes.