Chapter 2

The Status of Women

Family\(^6\), as a social institution, is the first place where an individual is socialized. It is in the family that individual learns the various methods of living, behaviour, conversation, etc. A typical family is constituted in terms of social norms, culture and also social taboos which every member is supposed to obey. Mutual love and confidence and faith between husband and wife govern the inter-personal relationship within a family, which remains the living space for all the family members and the patriarchy demands social control of woman by man within this living space. This social control as is generally found in the family space over the individual is not restricted to within the family but is exercised even outside its precincts during the entire life of an individual.

Family is a place where several social processes operate and determine the role and status of members of the family. However, the ultimate effects of such social processes depend on the influences of social processes which prevail within other societal institutions also. Here our attempt to explore such overdetermined significance of social processes prevailing within family and market on the status of working women. In terms of our taxonomy as delineated in the previous chapter we have categorized women into different categories on the basis of overdetermined significance of social processes prevailing both within society and within market. We have tried to categorize them to derive the meaning of the concept of ‘empowerment’. Empowerment is a multidimensional concept which may be explained from different angles. It may be ‘economic empowerment’, ‘political empowerment’, ‘social and cultural empowerment’ ‘educational empowerment’, ‘legal empowerment’ etc. However, a single indicator is insufficient to understand the concept of ‘empowerment’.

The Constitution of India ensures right to equality for both women and men in every sphere of life and activity. Though, legally and constitutionally, all women have equal access to and right to venture in every walk of life, a vast majority of them suffers from gaining greater share of control over all types of resources - physical, intellectual, social

\(^6\) Note that when we are referring here family it stands for standard hetero-sexual family where male (husband) is the head and the other members of the family need to follow his wishes. There may be variation in this in today’s context. However, in the Indian context, we consider family stands for a social relationship guided by hetero-sexual relationship between (male) husband and (female) wife and sharing of work within and outside the space of such family is guided by the (male) husband as head of the family.
and economical, control over ideology, beliefs, values and attitudes, as well as control over decision making in family, market and society. This is a paradoxical situation, which must be understood and seen in its historical perspective. In India the picture of ancient as well as modern women’s participation in the decision making process is diverse and heterogeneous in nature.

It is essential to analyze social and historical reality of the status and position of women within society if we want to make a evolution of ‘empowerment’ from early Indian society to contemporary India. Section 1 will give the status of women in pre-Vedic age followed by Section 2 where we have represented their status in Rig Vedic and later Vedic Society. Further, Section 3 and 4 will represent the status of women in colonial and contemporary India.

2.1 The Status of Women in Pre-Vedic Society:

Two major religions have immense influence on Indian family system and societal norms since the medieval days – Hinduism and Islam. In both the religious codes (although Hindu religious scriptures do not have a strict code of conduct as Islam has) the reference for these codes is in terms of a typical hetero-sexual family as we find them today. And the women in family are supposed to obey the orders of the male head of the family. In both the religions, the marriage is considered as a sacred social act of exchange which should ensure transfer of a woman socially from her parental home to her husband’s home and in the latter home she will get the love of her husband and should be duty-bound to the entire family of the husband. Through marriage she is transformed from daughter of her father to wife of her husband and that would remain her identity till the end of her life unless something else happens.

Here we offer a description of the Hindu patriarchal society as it has been formed over the years since ages. Note that we have not separately taken the analysis of women and family from the perspective of Islam although as per the latest Census of India (2011)

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7 In Hinduism, one can refer to the *Manu Samhita* which categorically specifies the role of women and also of different castes in family in the context of the role to be played by the male member of the family as the Head of the family.

8 However, note that Hinduism unlike other existing major religions of the world including Islam and Christianity is characterized by diversity in terms of religious practices, rituals and even in religious cultural norms and values. But that woman’s role must be confined to her husband’s family and she should be always duty-bound irrespective of her own desires and choice is universally accepted norm in all these diversity-driven Hindu cultural ethos.
Muslim community constitutes 13 percent of the total Indian population and India today is the third largest country after Indonesia and Pakistan as far as total number of Muslim people is concerned. We have only considered the family and its tradition from the perspective of Hindu scriptures as Hindu population is the majority in the country and over the years, Hindu and Islamic cultural ethos and traditions got intertwined together at the ground level as we have found during our field survey in the district of Murshidabad. And most of the Muslim families that we could survey adhere to the stringent rules for their women in the family, which are the following: (a) a woman’s identity is always in terms of the family (i.e. husband) to which she belongs after marriage, (b) she has to be bounded by the loyalty to her husband and other family members (by personal love at least given to her by her husband) and (c) she is not entitled to any decision making power and in many cases to private property rights (although the present Constitution of India does not make such provision).

The ideas regarding the earliest pre-historic societies may be formed from the archaeological evidence of remnants. From such evidence one finds that during the pre-historic hunting-gathering stage, gender stratification in terms of division of labour between men and women was perhaps non-existent (Learner 1986). World’s first religious scriptures the Rig Veda was composed between 1400 BC and 1500 BC. During the pre-Vedic age the hunting-gathering societies used to collect food for survival and women used to take active part in it (Marx and Engels, 1983). Hence, women’s work was not less important than men and it was not considered secondary to men’s work unlike what it is today in most of the hetero-sexual family space. Women also appeared to have combined their role as mothers with their activities as gatherer. So hunting-gathering societies as far division of labour between men and women and hence, gender stratification is concerned seems to be more egalitarian as the documents and historical evidences in this respect suggest. Women in their nurturing roles as mother has been identified as the figure of a Mother Goddess - the life giving mother appeared to have power over both life and death. This in other words mean women as care-giver in the society was acknowledged even in the pre-Vedic societies and later this care-giver role of women made her work and status in the family in particular and the society in general secondary to men’s status and role.

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9 Women’s participation in the hunting was visually represented in cave painting in a Mesolithic site, dated to roughly 5000 BC (Lerner, 1986).
However, it appears that during the pre-Vedic days a woman’s work was not devalued as it became so later.\textsuperscript{10}

2.2 Status of Women in Rig Vedic and later Vedic Society:

\textit{Rig Vedic} society was mainly characterized as pastoral; it was a simple and largely egalitarian society (Chakravarty 2009). There was no evidence for birth based distinction. At the level of production and social division of labour, women were not excluded from production. Women used to take care of the cattle and men were supposed to take care of enhancing the (cattle) wealth. It seems now women were forced to engage themselves within domestic chores from this time onwards. However, they were not excluded from any social activities whether it was economical, political or rituals. Indeed their participation was necessary. Women used to participate in various local functions and institution like ‘Sabha’, ‘Samity’, ‘Vidatha’ and ‘Gana’ in the \textit{Rig Veda} which were the local bodies that exercised deliberate, religious and various military functions (Chopra 2001). We had women sages like Lopa Mudra, Biswabara, Apala, Ghosa, Indrani, etc who composed Vedic hymns. However, \textit{Rig Vedic} society later gradually witnessed a social division of labour on the basis of occupation and it was mainly in terms of sex-gender based social division of labour.

In that period, the institution of marriage was established. Domestic happiness and conjugal affections were constant topics of allusion in the \textit{Rig Veda}, and the seers of the \textit{Samhitas} spoke of the bond between men and women for a happy home where women’s role would be that of a contended wife (Kapadia 1966 and Upadhaya 1941). This sweet harmony was at the root of the wife’s dominion in the family. The ideal of marriage was conceived as \textit{dharma}. As per the creators of \textit{Grhyasutra} (ca 800 B.C) as well as the \textit{Dharma sutra} a higher status was conferred on women in terms of her privileged position as wife in the family. However, in the later phase, women lost their right to participate in ‘Sabhas’ which got replaced by the participation of (male) nobles and Brahmins (Mandal 2012). The character of the village organizations started changing on sex-gender line and

\textsuperscript{10} Since no written evidence as such exists regarding the Harappa culture or Indus Civilization, we cannot therefore draw any definite conclusive judgment about gender stratification during this period. However, the findings of the recent studies indicate the existence of a fairly stratified society and complex system of food production and food distribution. Under such complex socio-economic contexts it would be difficult to imagine that women’s sexuality was not already under some form of control by men in the then society (Chakravarti 2009).
women were rendered a derogatory position vis-à-vis men in the society. Within family also, father’s or husband’s domination became discernible.

Women’s sexuality was not free; rather it was under the control of the clan or community whose leadership was patriarchal (Chakravarty 2009). This was not a sudden and dramatic new development. Later Rig Vedic society was stratified along the axis of lineage. To maintain purity of the clan or caste in society, sexuality of women should be guarded. A man’s position became fixed in line and with reference to men’s position women’s position in society got started to be defined. So women are only transmitters, never the carrier of a line. In addition, over the period of civilization war among the clans reduced the number of male members. Due to huge loss of lives in battlefield, upholding the number of member was a dare need for the sustenance of the clans. Therefore, controlling women’s sexuality was a vital issue. Apart from a small number of women theologians, greater chunk of women, the common women, was thought to be inferior in quality and thus deserving domination of male citizens. The later Vedic texts for example - ‘Satapatha Brahmana’, express fears regarding the sexuality of women not directly under the control of men especially husband. As the endogamy is required for the sustenance of clan or caste, therefore the entry of woman – as a stranger new entity into the clan needed to be carefully selected and controlled. Roy (2002) examining the major Brahminic texts of the period B.C. 800 to B.C. 400 shows how ‘varna’ stratification, control over production and control over reproduction were sought to be legitimized by the rituals outlined in the Brahminical texts and performed by the kings on one hand and head of the family (yajamana) on the other. Thus the process of patriarchal control over both production and reproduction was sought to be established. Evidence from the Buddhist and Jain texts for the period ca B.C. 600 to B.C. 300 is useful to understand the process of class, caste and gender stratification in more detail (Mandal 2012).

Women’s general subordination was essential in order to control her sexuality effectively. This process of control was advocated in the script like ‘Manusmriti’ around second century AD. Women had started to lose their freedom and to find restriction that tended to deprive her from her traditional status in the Manusmriti (Singha 2010). It was possible for women to become scholars only so long as they were allowed to be initiated for Vedic study. But Grhyasutra (family life) also provides that though the privilege to become educated was not denied to a woman, simultaneously, there is also a categorical plea for
her early marriage. This matter creates the base of next step to deprive her from having any access to the source of knowledge. Once she deprived from this right, she was on a par with a Sudra, and in the ‘Bhagavad Gita’ (400-500 A.D.) she was equated with the Sudra. The study of the Vedas came to be confined only to male children, the females being entitled to only one sacrament, namely marriage. Once women were prohibited from access to the Vedas, they were, as a natural corollary, only permitted to participate in religious rites as passive partners. Naturally a wife is not independent with regard to the fulfillment of the sacred law (Kapadia 1966). Therefore the status of women gradually began to decline and religious texts started giving dictums which adversely affected women’s freedom and rights.

Manu enunciated the ideal of wifehood which in essence meaning the negation of her personality (Singha 2010). A good wife desirous of living in this as well as the next world with her husband must never do anything that would displease her husband, either alive or dead. To serve and worship their husbands with respect and obedience is their only duty.

Manu therefore wanted woman to be under the surveillance of her father in her childhood, her husband in her youth and her sons in her old age. “Pita rakshati kaumare vartta rakshati youbone, rakshanti stobire putra n stree Caitramohortee” (as cited in Singha 2010).

Now who is Manu? Who wrote Manusmriti? Generally, Manu is that scripture composer who shackled the social system, leading life of citizens of post-Vedic age. Now was he a single scripture composer or a group of scripture composers? Dutta (1968) has discussed the matter in his book ‘Manu’s Barnashram’. According to him it is impossible to find original Manusmriti. Over the period of time, a lot of addition and subtraction has taken placed slowly in this jurisprudence or law book. He stated ‘religion’ is not the doctrine of philosophy rather it refers the cultivation and constant application of laws, rites, proper and improper duties, rules and regulations of those customs which are weapons of social managements/organization. Jurisprudence/law book is a special type of sacred script. It is the code of law that an individual must obey. Therefore, cultivation of this law book left deep impression in the mind of an individual. All these law books were fabricated in verse. Usually verse should be memorized s verses have immense impression in mind.
According to Dutta (1968), Manu was not a name of an individual or a group of people. Rather it was the designation of an office. Manu had been transformed into the complete institution that has been controlling the culture, customs, and rites of entire Hindu society since post-Vedic age.

Now if we treat Manusmriti as a designation of an office, then definitely the economic, cultural, political and legal processes that associated with the Manusmriti were masculine as far as the code of conduct (both in terms of caste and gender) for individual is concerned. It asserts that all these processes must influence the status of women both in family and society. Manusmriti had left great impressions in the mind of a citizen and in the society. Manu fabricated woman as a love of scandal and lust of sex. The position of woman was defamed as a passive partner. Manu further ordained that “there are no specific sacrifices for woman independently of the husband, nor vratas nor fasts without his consent.” Being prohibited from securing knowledge Manu had ended the path of manifestation of woman’s humanity. Marriage was considered as the only resort or the destiny of a woman.

Through marriage the family reproduces the social structure - the family, the lineage, the property system and the Brahminical order. It is media of exchanges of a newly recognized commodity- that is girl. The Hindu script composers of the time discussed eight modes of acquiring a wife (Brahma, Daiva, Arsha, Prajapatya, Asura, Gandharva, Rakshasa and Paisacha), of which four were said to be dharmya, and the others non-dharmya (Singha 2010). Among these four modes undesirable marriage, Raksasa and Paisaca can never be approved of as proper modes of marriage. They pertained to the abduction of a woman by force or her seduction when unconscious. The third is called Gandharba, marriage by choice. Selection of a husband by a princess in what is known as swayamvara was known from very early times. But it was not always marriage by choice. Sometimes, the princess was given over to a person who succeeded in performing a particular feat. The approved modes, on the other hand, were those in which a girl was given over by father to a suitable partner. The main idea behind these modes was that the bride was given as a gift. This theory of marriage was first discussed in Dharmasutra (as cited in Kapadia 1966). It suggested that marriage being primarily a gift from the father; it was he who decided to whom the gift should be given. Therefore, there was little scope for woman’s voice to prevail in the selection of her spouses. Not only that, though Manu
ordained the girl to be ‘svayamvara’ in case of failure of her father to meet the exorbitant demands of the person whom he selected as her daughter’s partner,

Then why Manu prescribed that a ‘svayamvara’ girl could not receive any gift from her parent’s house? Therefore, women who selected her partner independently must be deprived from getting any financial gift from parent’s house. As a consequence, woman was not fit to be independent. In the Hindu society from the time a fetus is laid, to the moment of a man’s death every stage in his life is marked with some sort of ritual or samskaras (Kapadia 1966). It is evident that a female child was not considered worthy of all the samaskaras, and the only samaskara to be performed in her case was marriage. Serving the husband is equivalent to the residence in the house of the teacher, and the household duties to the daily worship of the sacred fire (Kapadia 1966). Women’s general subordination was essential at this stage because it was only then that the mechanism of control upon women’s sexuality could actually be effective. The mechanism of controlling women through three devices and levels: the first was ideology; the second was the right to discipline and keep women under control granted to their kinsmen; and the third was the power of the king to discipline and punish them for their errant behaviour. Chakravarti (2009) stated that the success of any system may be seen in the subtle working of its ideology and in that sense the ‘pativrata’ concept can be regarded as the master stroke of the genius of the Hindu normative order as expressed in its cultural values for women.

During Gupta dynasty that emerged in the period of the third century AD in India, a famous Chinese pilgrim Fa-hsien (399-414 AD) visited India and gave an elaborate account of the people and their economic, social and cultural life. From his writing it is known that women did not have the access to independent sources of livelihood both in pre and post-Gupta period. Women lost property right. The main reason behind their subordination to men can be traced as the complete dependence on husbands for their livelihood and maintenance (Mandal 2012).

After the Gupta era the whole of North India was under the rule of one or other of the foreign tribes which domiciled there. In this period women started to face another complication due to growing sex morbidity. Women became the objects of sexual gratification. Previously, the aim of Hindu Marriage are said to be dharma, praja and rati. Their role became that of a passive partner in religious duties. To check this tide of sex morbidity Hindu Brahminical system wanted a halt to the state of moral decadence. The
social ideal of monogamy contributed to accelerate the concept of early marriage. A further impetus was given to it by attracting social prestige. It was a matter of pride and prestige that one’s child was sought after at a tender age. Under the operation of these various forces early marriage became popular. In the nineteenth century also we found some pundits and the leaders of society married pre-puberty girls. Therefore, religious, social and psychological attitudes made infant marriage a rule and an obligation.

So the position of women further deteriorated in the medieval period and their subjugation in the religious and legal spheres increased. During the period of foreign invaders, the magnitude of misery was enhanced. The ‘purdah’ (curtain) system, which was not practiced as a rule in the Indian society, became prevalent. At that time it was the family which provided economic security to its female members. Being economically dependent on the members of her husband’s family, she faced exploitation within family based on oppressive gender process.

During that period the structure of family was so that the head of the family i.e. father used to hold the property, other members of the family only had moral claims upon it which the father could ignore if he desired so.

A distribution of property made by the father amongst his sons, whether equally or disparately, is lawful, for the father was the lord of all. Wives, sons, slaves and other attendants were dependent. The father’s control over the property was generally favoured in the smrīti period. Davala mentioned “on the father’s death, the son shall divide among themselves the father’s property” (as cited in, Kapadia 1966). So with regard to the control of property as well as performing religious rites, it was the son who was the successor. Girl had no right to be a heir. The last smrīti writer, Katyayana in the seventh century AD talked about the division of property among his son during his (father’s) life.

However, the intellectual like Varahamihira in the sixth century AD raised argument against the defamation of woman and stated the fact that men treated marriage vows lightly while women acted up to them (as cited in Atlekar 1938). According to him it is the height of impudence and ingratitude to say that women were fickle, frail and faithless. The woman, on the other hand, who was a pawn rather than an offender in this mischievous game, was held up as the embodiment of lust and depravity.
During the medieval period, some social reforms started taking place in India. This period had its share of great women in the fields of politics, literature, education and religions. We had examples of Razia Sultalna, empress Noorjahan, Chand Bibi, Maharani Jija Bai, Rani Padmini, Jahanara Begum, Princess Zebunnissa, some princess of Mughal Courts and like. However, all of them belonged to the higher social strata. The saints who flourished in different parts of India in the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries propagated the ideal of equality between man and woman as well as between man and man, and some of them even went forward in propagating against the existing caste based hierarchy and oppression in the Hindu society. These saints came from all layers of society including the lower strata and also, including some women. They raised their voices against the caste and sex based social division of labour – profound evidences of which can be traced to the devotional songs composed by them during this period. The equality and freedom for women implied in these social movements marked a progressive landmark in the history of Hindu womankind (Atlekar 1938). However, the basic attitude of these saints was conservative because they conformed to traditional beliefs and values. As they dealt with ascetic and devotional turns of mind, they ignored the concrete realities of life. A woman to them was a great obstruction in the way of spiritual realization. They remained mostly silent about a woman’s ability to achieve spiritual freedom despite having female saintliness, and the traditional approach to woman ruled their thoughts. However, these saints meekly tolerated and implicitly accepted injustice in the social system in spite of being persecuted by the member of higher castes who ruled the society. Thereby, the primary convulsion in the Hindu society failed to bring about any significant alteration in the status of women (Kapadia 1966).

2.3 Status of Women in the Colonial Period:

The British Rule in the 18th Century brought in some degree of political orderliness, but the social structure, customs and practices remained unchanged (Kapadia 1966). During the 19th century, some enlightened thinkers and leaders of Indian society understood the relevance of women’s participation and the necessity of increasing status of women for their betterment. Initially leaders of such reform movements include men and women like Pandita Ramabai and Jyotiba Phule. The British rulers introduced English education in India to serve their own colonial interests. Pioneers of Bengal Renaissance like Raja Ram Mohan Roy realized that the liberal and democratic ideals of English education could be
used not only for the participation of the people in the administrative and political life of the country, but to transform the social system also (Paranjpe 1938). The very condition of women that first attracted his attention was the plight of woman, her immolation and enforced widowhood. He remained instrumental in the legal abolition of Sati Daha Pratha (forcible burning of young women when their aged husbands died). The reforms he started culminated in legislation pushed forward later by Vidyasagar in terms of legal introduction of Hindu widow re-marriage. Vidyasagar devoted himself strenuously to the propagation of female education. Though British Government lent patronage to these reform measures, public apathy prevented the movement from making much headway (Tribedi 1934). It was due to the efforts of C. P. Hobhouse, the then Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University, the girls could appear at the entrance examination from 1877 onwards. By the close of the century, public opinion in Bengal was gradually formed in favour of the primary and secondary education as desirable for girls. However the progress of enhancing the status of women within society was very gradual during the years that followed. The goal was to make the girl students good wives, good mothers and neighbours (Desai 1936). Agitation against the social injustice inherent in the Hindu social system began to gain in strength when Mahadev Govind Ranade put forward the idea of a National Social Conference so as to organize a social reform movement against social injustice, particularly against sex-based inequality (Kellock 1962).

The Indian National Congress, which was formed in 1885, drew a certain number of women into the vortex of the country’s political life. The Indian National Social Conference provided a forum for discussion about the changed position of Indian Womanhood and pleaded for the urgent need for reorienting the traditional institutions in response to this change. “The change which we should all seek is thus a change from constraint to freedom, from credulity to faith, from unorganized to organized life, from bigotry to toleration, from blind fatalism to a sense of human destiny.” (Desai 1936)

The Freedom Struggle brought women from their hearths to face the violence against them by the colonial rulers and gave them not only a consciousness of their own strength, but a new vision of their true place in society. Initially some women left their homes for public life in the national cause. As soon as they started to raise their voices against sex-based injustice in both home and society, they were faced with greater challenges to establish their status. An organization was incepted - the All India Women Conference- led by some
notable women leaders of the time, which strives to establish equal rights and opportunities for all citizens of India regardless of sex (Kapadia 1966). However, the members of this organization hailed mostly from the upper income strata family and the talk of women’s emancipation remained confined within these strata of society with very little influence on the majority of women who belonged to the lower income strata families (Sinha 2000). A survey conducted by Kapadia (1953) asserted that the majority of graduate teachers believed that the primary duty of women was proper management of home and she should get involved in public life only if they got time after performing her domestic chores and if her public activities were not in conflict with her domestic chores. In totality the social perspective pertaining to the social image of women started changing but the idea of modern women remained confined within the upper strata families of the society. Most of these women were involved in some kinds of social activism, but it failed to garner economic independence for the majority of women in the society. Though woman’s interest in property was recognized by Hindu Woman’s Right to Property Act of 1937 and there was a rapid progress of female education during 1930s, women were still deprived of their economic independence. G. K. Deodhar and D. K. Karve concluded the possibility of improving their status in home and in society was meager in the absence of economic independence (as cited in Kapadia 1966).

Women in the Freedom Struggle for Independence participated in non-violent activities like Satyagraha Movement inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and also in violent terrorist activism. After 1930s a rapid stride of education had a great significance for Indian womanhood which rendered many women economically strong and assertive. But social taboo against the women in general still prevailed in the society which restricted their participation in market or public domain and viewed such women who were then joining the market as exceptional. When women started entering the market they came into contacts with different people of different communities, different ideals, different tastes and aptitude and obviously with different outlooks. However, the traditional values still dominated mind of the male national leaders of the nation which viewed women participation in public domain as something exceptional. To some extent women were permitted to do the jobs that were similar to their domestic chores like teachers, nurse, midwife, typist, telephone operator or a personal assistant. And hence, a stereotype normative image of women jobs emerged.
On the other hand, during this period at the same time upcoming young educated men were no longer satisfied with a wife who would only be the acquiescent slave of his desire and the begetter of his children, but wanted from her intellectual co-operation and participation in the pleasures and joys of his own life. The educated wife was expected to be a companion who would represent the interests of their husbands, would go with him to clubs and film, sports and parks and thus be united emotionally with him (Kapadia 1966). This was more prominent trend among the upper and middle income strata urban family of the time. Note that this new pattern of wifelihood had to be matched with the demand of the young educated men as husbands. Neither urban living standard nor higher education in itself could have significant dent on the masculine or patriarchal traditional values as far as womanhood was concerned in the society.

The Second World War hit the middle and low income strata of the society (irrespective of their caste, creed and religion) so hard economically that some women from these types of family backgrounds were forced to join the market for the first time in order to supplement their dwindling family income. Types of employment also altered. Women were now in such jobs or occupations which were unthinkable otherwise in traditional customs and norms. Census of India, 1951 brought out the wide variety of jobs which women took up at that time. Women were in administration, political services, finance, legislation, trade and business, etc. In fact, one of the avowed objectives of India’s Five Year Plan which started in 1951 was modernization and the First Five Year Plan document clearly stated that modernization did not imply only setting up of modern factory-based industries, technological upgradation and urbanization but also change in societal outlook in favour of women participation in the market/public domain – considered as one of the crucial elements of modernity which was shaped by the typical Western liberal tradition of that time.

There is no doubt that education did spread among women and gave some of them the opportunities to go-out of the confines of their homes and put them into contact with the Western liberal and democratic viewpoints. It gradually deferred the age of marriage in the urban areas and also enabled some women to select her life-partner without the fear of deprivation from father’s property.

The Constitution of India further strengthened, at least on paper, women’s status in terms of its declaration in the form Fundamental Rights —“no citizen shall on ground only of
religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any of them, be ineligible for, or discriminated against in respect of, any employment or office under the State” (Article 16(2) of the Constitution of India). Previously, in 1923 the Central legislature granted Indian women the right of vote. And the Constitution of independent India continued with this right to women suffrage. Women found places in Parliament, Government delegations and embassies, according to their capabilities.

Armed with economic, political, administrative and legislative power, Indian women de jure received equality and freedom vis-à-vis men. However, as we have argued already in the previous chapter in terms of our class-focused approach based taxonomy of women’s status and empowerment a great diversity and heterogeneity remained in tandem with the economy as disaggregated and decentred spaces in terms of different class processes.

2.4 Gender in Contemporary India:

The contemporary Indian situation as far as women and gender are concerned is to be understood in terms of India’s colonial legacy and psychology and to a certain extent, also by the age-old gender norms within and outside family as evolved over time. The concept of women’s emancipation emerged in modern times during the colonial period and in that positive role of some of the Bengal Renaissance leaders cannot be undermined – especially that of Vidyasagar. However, as said above women’s liberation in terms of her education and also, in terms of allowing her to take part in public life outside her family (say, in the Freedom Struggle) did not directly challenge or contest the prevailing patriarchy and women continued to perform the double burden of her domestic chores and public domain works. But the women who got the opportunity of modern education and could come out in the open (either in terms of paid employment or in terms of social and political activism during the colonial period) mostly belonged to rich and higher middle income group of the society. On the one hand, Western liberal thinking (which was even imminent in the preaching of Swami Vivekananda) started influencing for a new role for women in terms of giving her modern school based education and also, providing space for her in labourforce and political activism. But at the same time religious gurus (Hindu and Muslim alike) of the time continuously pinpointed what is implied by an ideal woman? An ideal woman is one who would serve her husband’s family with loyalty to her husband. The gender process remained hegemonized by the patriarchy within and outside family.
There are two issues which merit particular attention as far as women and gender process are concerned in the contemporary India as it has evolved through times given the colonial legacy of the country:

(a) First is concerned with the “actual life” of individuals within and outside family which mainly pertains to the fulfillment of economic needs as is portrayed in the western liberal philosophy\(^{11}\) of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which remained a subject of discussion in Bloomsbury group in UK during the early part of the twentieth century in which John Maynard Keynes was an active member.\(^{12}\) However, in this portrayal of satisfaction of needs of the actual life class questions remained untouched. And gender question came into the fore in terms of liberty and freedom that an individual should have as his/her birth right. But the conception of family as a social institution irrespective of biological sexuality of men and women was not much challenged. It was thought, even by Keynes, that sooner or later economic wants of human beings would be fulfilled and he too did not deviate from the principle of diminishing marginal utility as far as satiation of economic needs were concerned. Class questions never got any prominent place in the understanding of the actual life. This liberal thinking had much influence on Indian (particularly Bengali intelligentsia) intelligentsia.\(^{13}\) But note that hardly any Bengal Renaissance thinkers went against the prevalent Hinduism (except Michael Madhusudan Dutta – the noted Bengali poet and B.R. Ambedkar later). Rather, their major goal became to reform it under the influence of the then prominent Western liberal thinking where the question of class as economic categories did not find much place. Some of them attacked


\(^{12}\) “The Bloomsbury Group—or Bloomsbury Set—was an influential group of associated English writers, intellectuals, philosophers and artists, the best known members of which included Virginia Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, E. M. Forster and Lytton Strachey. This loose collective of friends and relatives lived, worked or studied together near Bloomsbury, London, during the first half of the 20th century. According to Ian Ousby, “although its members denied being a group in any formal sense, they were united by an abiding belief in the importance of the arts”. Their works and outlook deeply influenced literature, aesthetics, criticism, and economics as well as modern attitudes towards feminism,pacifism, and sexuality.” accessed from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bloomsbury_Group on 1st February 2014. See Ian Ousby ed., The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English (Cambridge 1995); p. 95.

\(^{13}\) Note in this regard a very short lived social movement which was tried by Derozio and his Young Bengal group in the early part of the nineteenth century which was an attempt at the leadership of Derozio as a teacher and friends of his students to instill the liberal way of thinking and attacks against the then dominant Hindu religious practices – many of which were actually aimed at subjugating women to men within the private space of family. However, this Young Bengal upsurge remained short-lived and many of the students attached with Derozio left it and went against him. Derozio died very young almost friendless at the time of his death. So, too Vidyasagar.
the caste based system but that too remained confined to a narrow space as the institution of marriage went on to be based on intra-caste marriage – not inter-caste one. No one challenged in this respect the marriage system of the time which necessarily implied socially accepted norm of exchange of woman between her parental (fatherly) home and (male) husband’s home. While the endogamy of women was the rule, polygamy for men was allowed even under some Hindu religious strictures, especially for those who were so called Kulin Bramhin (Brahmin of higher social status). So, in actual life the gender process of the time was dictated by the then prevailing Hindu religious norms and women’s role was perceived as mainly within the husband’s family to perform her “sacred” duties of care in terms of doing her domestic chores. As far as the actual life is concerned Keynes’s remark in his 1930 essay “Economic possibilities for our grandchildren” is pertinent to be mentioned here where he opined that ‘..‘the economic problem’…meaning satisfaction of the biological needs of human beings, was rather close to be solved. As a result of technological progress and capital accumulation, all reasonable human demands for consumption might soon be met, and what was thought of by economists as the eternal ‘economic problem’ of scarcity would no longer be ‘the permanent problem of the human race.’ (John Maynard Keynes Volume IX as cited in Goodwin (2006); p. 218) Note once again in this reference to actual life the class parameters were never given any due space taking it for granted that the actual life which is the life with respect to the fulfillment of economic wants would hold good for every individual in the society irrespective of their class, gender and creed and religion and race!

In the Indian context, the actual life got its manifestation in the works of Mahatma Gandhi. To him freedom was just not from colonial subjugation. But it also meant freedom from want, right to have one’s basic economic needs fulfilled at one’s own choice. This view of actual life as portrayed by Gandhi was not derived from the western liberal thinking of the day, rather much from the Hindu text Bhagwat Gita where karma (work/performance without desire/expectation) remained the sole aim of a life. But Gandhiji could not avoid at the same time (perhaps as one of the pioneer thinkers of his time in this regard) the pressing problem of actual life of his fellow countrymen and women and this found its manifestation in his concept of Charka and Swadeshi which as he thought would remain instrumental in fulfilling the basic minimum needs of the poor and downtrodden. While Keynes was not against capital accumulation and technological progress Gandhi unlike Keynes opposed it vehemently. His conceptualization of actual life was based upon the principles of (a) dispossession of wealth and (b) ahimsa (non-violence) while Keynes only
had in mind while thinking in terms of “future uncertainty” reforming the capitalist market system so that economic peace can remain guaranteed for the generations to come. Note that neither Gandhi nor Keynes touched upon the issue of class and gender either although in their personal lives they encountered these questions and except true confessions made by Gandhi in this regard his experiment with sexuality did not contest the patriarchy and the dominant family norms and ethos of the time. And as we know Keynes’s sexuality based position in his personal life he too could not dare to defy the heterosexual family norms where patriarchy prevails.

(b) Second is the question of “imaginative life” which was subject of intense discussion in the aforementioned Bloomsbury group where the influence of the Western liberal philosopher G.E. Moore was immense in the initial days of this group and Keynes as a student of Moore was greatly influenced by his ideas upto a certain point in life. Keynes wrote: “Thus for the first time since the creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem – how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for him, to live wisely and agreeably and well.” ((John Maynard Keynes Volume IX: 328 as cited in Goodwin (2006); p. 218). Note that this imaginative life as portrayed by the Western liberal worldview of the time accommodated women in her creation – first as wife and then as mother and care giver. But that class and gender overdetermined spaces would constitute the imaginative life space for women did not find any reference. In the Indian context, the greatest contribution in thinking for imaginative life of individuals in Indian society (or Indian samaj) may be trace to the writings of Tagore to whom creativity in its multi-various forms would constitute this imaginative life and where individual would remain always insatiate more she/he creates. So, the imaginative life of human beings goes against the economic principle of diminishing marginal utility. Even Keynes in this context rejects Benthamism and following Moore he accepted as a fact that the good like pleasure or utility was a naturalistic fallacy. So, human beings would never remain satiated with the fulfillment of his/her economic wants and would always clamour for more pleasure either meta-physically or even physically (sexual pleasure may be one form of it) to find a meaning for what constitutes a “good life” and “living space” for him/her. While Tagore was also concerned with the requirement for actual life (as his experimentation with Sri Niketan suggests) he was a thinker to whom this imaginative life (in terms of both meta-physical and physical creativity) remained most important unlike Gandhi. But none
touched upon the issue of class, caste and gender as separate category and holding implicitly that the imaginative life would automatically resolve the class-caste-gender oppression and would remain instrumental in “women’s emancipation” in the most liberal sense of term given the Indian tradition, culture and ethos intertwined by that time with Western liberal worldviews.\(^{14}\)

Now, the question is what happened for those who were uneducated and deprived from economic security? On the one hand, a smaller group of Indian women found space in the process of economic development. These were mainly urban families where the decision makers see the potential for a good life and prosperity if women undertake the double burden of domestic chores and paid employment outside. In fact, one of the four main objectives of Indian Five Year Plans viz. Modernization as the First Five Year Plan in 1951 portrays modernization as not only industrialization, modern technological upgradation but also modern social outlook which would ensure in terms of planning increasing female participation in economic activities of the Independent India. However, at the same time women’s role as mother and care giver were given the first priority as different social sector programmes of the Government of India since the initial days of planning and after that from the days of economic liberalisation indicate.\(^{15}\) Two observations regarding contemporary India is worth mentioning as follows:

i) Female participation in the labour force has increased in the post-Independent period. However, many activities performed by women within and outside family are not regarded as yet economic activities as they are supposed not to contribute to wealth accumulation or GDP of the country. For example, in this regard one can mention the labour performed by housewives and women as unpaid family labour in agricultural field.

ii) Some women could get the benefit of economic development and growth in terms of better access to education, change in the outlook in their family towards women, independent earning capacities and decision making processes within and outside family. However, a great majority of women are not like that still today. And the patriarchy still is the dominant form of Indian family system including the social institution of marriage. In

\(^{14}\) Note that here we have not referred as far as actual and imaginative life are concerned, the Western feminist worldviews which were emerging since the nineteenth century in Europe because to our understanding of the historical facts at the time of Independence they had very little influence of Indian social reformers and political thinkers and religious gurus. Rather, the very idea of “feminist” remained devalued in the Indian psycho-political landscape of the time.

\(^{15}\) See Draft First Five Year Plan (1951), Planning Commission, Government of India.
their struggle for existence, family is exerting full control over their income, body, sex and mind.

2.5 The Status of Women – An Overall Assessment:

The analysis of women’s activities within family is still somewhat on the periphery of the discipline of economics. In the existing mainstream economic literature women as a separate category of labour found place as a typical rational economic agent and no differentiation in this regard has been made between man and woman as if rationality itself would signify the end of inequality between men and women as social constructions in which a female is portrayed as the other – “not man”. Marxist-feminists have moved towards accepting the importance of looking inside the family. A vast majority of women in contemporary India are both (unpaid) surplus labour performers within her family and bread earner to supplement her family income. Neither the family nor its reproductive behaviour is static in any society. This is also applicable for market. Their nature changes radically during the process of social evolution. Each society constructs a set of social, cultural, economical, political and legal processes which are crucial for supporting its social institutions like family and market. In the previous chapter we have tried to categorized women within society on the basis of ‘empowerment’. We have already discussed that ‘empowerment’ has different meanings in different socio-cultural, economic and political context. By social empowerment, we understand ‘being able to make a contribution at all levels of society and not just in the home’ (Kapur 2001). Legal expert envisages the term as ‘key to women’s empowerment is recognition and enforcement of women’s human rights’ (Kapur 2001). Here education and learning play a vital role to make a woman empowered. P. Sethumadhava Rao considers ‘the most important thing is that they (the women) need to be given free and compulsory education, so as to make them aware of the rights and duties and their cases without spending money’ (as cited in Kapur, 2001). Further economic empowerment will be gained through equal work opportunities, equal organizational benefits and equal working environment (Mandal 2012). Combining all such factors one can say that for achieving ‘empowerment’ all the social processes like economical, political, legal, cultural, educational process should be such that they help women to gain control over all the decision that directly related to their lives.
From our historical analysis of the Indian Hindu society, we have found that at the pre-
Vedic society women were empowered in some aspects. They had the right to get
education, participated in the process of decision making and also their participation in
production activities were highly recognized and valued. But over time proceeds women
lost their control over the decision that related to their own lives and they got dominated
by the men both within and outside family. Economically women were exploited by men
as they lost their rights over property. Women’s right to participate in various local
functions and institutions disappeared and their status vis-à-vis men got devalued. With
the spread of masculine Brahminical culture gender process remained oppressive one. The
main reason behind their subordination to men can be traced as the complete dependence
on husbands for their livelihood and maintenance.

The position of women further deteriorated in medieval period and they became more and
more legally and socio-culturally oppressed due to foreign invasions and existence of
uncertain socio-political factors. At the later phase Bhakti Movement fetched some
opportunities for women of different social and economic section to be culturally
empowered. Women learned of their equal right to be leaders of society. The equality and
freedom for women implied in this movement was a progressive landmark in the history
of Hindu womankind (Atlekar 1938). However, the basic attitude of these saints was
conservative because they conformed to traditional beliefs and values. As they dealt with
ascetic and devotional turns of mind, they ignored the concrete realities of life. A woman
to them was a great obstruction in the way of spiritual realization. However, these saints
meekly tolerated and implicitly accepting injustice in the social system in spite of being
persecuted by the member of higher castes who ruled the society. Thereby, the primary
convulsion in Hindu society failed to bring about any significant alteration in the status of
women (Kapadia 1966).

During the uprising of 1857, women belonging to the native ruling class came together
along with the men to fructify their ambition for an independent India. The seed of
National movement for India’s independence started in the early 19th century with social
reform and education programmes. The Swadesi movement aroused a strong sense of
patriotism among the Bengali women. Female leaders adopted various skillful tactics to
increase mass-participation of women in public life. Indian women achieved the voting
right by the Government of India Act, 1919 which came into effect from 1921. Under the
Government of India Act, 1935 all women above 21 years of age got the right to cast vote.

Women played a vital role in the armed revolution also. Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose recruited about 1000 women for the Rani of Jhansi Regiment from different South East Asian countries and they were given the same training as that was given to men (Mandal 2012). During the pre-independence period, Gandhiji also believed that “woman is the companion of man gifted with equal capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest details of the activities of man, and she has the same right to freedom and liberty as he…” (Bandopadhyaya, 2002). When Gandhiji declared Non-cooperation Movement, the peasant, artisan and rural women also took active part in making it a national movement. Nehru praised their participation and remarked as “it was not only the displays of courage and daring, but what even more was surprising was the organizational power they showed” (Nehru 1947).

Women of India occupied a dominant position not only in the freedom movement, but also against the tyrannical behavior of the zaminders, their sexual atrocities and other oppressive rules and oppression. Now while on one-side women fought for independence, on the other they (Annie Besant, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Begum Hamid Ali, Muthulakshmi Reddy, Renuka Roy, etc) set up women’s organization to impress upon the foreign Government to improve the social, legal and economic position of women in India. These women not only fought for the freedom of the country, but were instrumental in fighting for the cause of women.

Therefore during this period women not only started gaining opportunities to improve their status but also proved their existence. However, it was hard to get an idea about the ‘economic empowerment’ of the women across different income and social strata. Moreover, both male and female population from the farmer families and other backward communities fought against the oppression of the ‘zaminders’, ‘jotedars’ and ‘mahajans’.

India won freedom from foreign rule in 1947. But does this help to change the vision regarding women at large in Indian society? The answer is both ‘yes’ and ‘no’. As per Mahatma Gandhi, “She is passive, he is active, she is essentially the mistress of the house. He is the bread winner.” (Sinha 2000). Women thus remained mostly confined within family unless it became necessary otherwise to participate in market.
Women continued to be underrepresented at the legislative, ministerial and sub-ministerial levels (Kapur 2001). Again, social processes both within family and outside family continued to be exploitative and oppressive for her.

Women again went out from the shell to protect their families from financial crisis that occurred during the Second World War. The work participation rate was rising without giving them the opportunities to participate spontaneously in all types of decision making processes. Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) found that women still continue to remain invisible and marginalized in decision making bodies. The government of India then set up a Status Committee (Towards Equality) in 1971 to find out the problems and to suggest remedial measures. This Committee recommended establishment of statutory women’s Panchayats at the village level, construction of permanent committees in municipalities and supervise programmes for women’s welfare and development and adoption of a definite policy regarding the percentage of women candidates. Former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi introduced the 64th Amendment Bill In LokSabha, which got defeated in Rajya Sabha. Ultimately the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Bills were passed by Parliament on 22nd December, 1992 and provided 33% reservation of seats for women in three tier Panchayat bodies and municipalities. So there were certain de jure positive changes in the political and legal spheres. But the following table will show though the Amendment provided the scope for women’s political participation in local-Self Government Institutions, but it failed to ensure women’s participation in Parliament and state legislatures.

The current wave of globalization has changed the lives of women significantly. Women are increasingly becoming an integral part of the global economy, which has been glorified as “feminization of labour force” in existing literature. But in many cases this increased participation created hazards for women. Today they are pressed with double burden of work both within family and outside family. Conflicts within family and their personal lives are an ever present challenge for them. They are no longer expected to stay at home with children, but instead, feel economic and social pressure to work, regard less of their family status. On the other hand, as wives they are still home-makers. She faces a variety of social processes - some of which are economic in nature and others non-economic. Some are oppressive, and some non-oppressive.
# Table 2.1

## Qualitative Performance of Women in India

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial Number</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Value/Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>HDI (2012)</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Gender Inequality Index(2012)</td>
<td>0.610/132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Maternal Mortality Ratio (death/ 100,000 live birth(2010)</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Adolescent Fertility rate (birth per 1000 women ages 15-19) (2012)</td>
<td>74.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Seats in National Parliament(Percentage female in both houses) (2012)</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Population with at least secondary education(% ages 25 and older) (2006)</td>
<td>26.6(Female) 50.4(Male)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Labour force Participation Rate(percentage ages 15 and 64)(2011)</td>
<td>29.0(Female) 80.7(Male)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>HIV prevalence(% ages 15-24)</td>
<td>0.1(Female) 0.1(Male)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Mortality rate(Adult)</td>
<td>169(Female) 250 (Male)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Total Fertility Rate (Birth per women) (2012)</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Sex Ratio (2011)</td>
<td>943</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Within the family space, the gender and cultural processes that are predominant still expect that working women must produce the use-value for members of the family, perform social and religious duties and other typical works that a house wife should do. Moreover, both family and society has identified some works as ‘female work’. Even if the spouse wants to share, society and other family members very rarely accept this with an open mind. Gender and cultural processes are not willing to allow women to work long hours. Ideologies are such that women are allowed to join market for such tenure of time that needed to produce the exchange value. In maximum cases feeling of insecurity and suspicion are operating behind these ideologies. Several studies have shown that the women’s role is negatively related with organizational commitment, job involvement, job
satisfaction and participation in decision making. In addition, distance and alienation from other members of the family make the situation more stressful for her.

Can the economic independence only fetch self-respect for women? There are lots of evidences where women in spite of being economically independent, lack self-respect. Interestingly, women are trained by the senior members of family to be submissive and taught the twin virtues of patient and sacrifice, as marriage and motherhood are viewed as the main goal of a woman’s life.

It is clear that the plight of the majority of Indian women workers is very much a continuation of established trends. It was expected that the process of globalization might create better scope for women in job market. In reality incentives offered during this modernized situation have led to fast changes in the attitudes of a section of urban, rich and middle class society where women can get access to education and careers in modern sector. But, dominance of patriarchy never allowed modernization to challenge family’s control over women labour.

Findings of numerous field studies along with results of some recent official reports have shown that for majority of women in India many aspects of the patriarchal regulation are still inviolable. Patriarchal authority control and direct the fundamental decision of working activities that how, where and how much a woman should work.

So participation in market alone may or may not solve the problem of gender disadvantages. Studies have shown that combinations of several factors led to gender disadvantages. The intersection between implementation and execution of active public policies, changes in social informal institutions, changes in consciousness and awareness and changes in household behavior have reduced to a certain extent some of the gender disadvantages for some women but not for all.

Conclusion:

Summing our viewpoints regarding the status women in Indian society in the historical backdrop the following comments merit our attention:

(1) The social division based on sex of an individual in the prehistoric ages in India was not very much gender-biased. Rather, the women to a certain extent were treated at par
with their men counterpart in the society as far as hunting life which was intertwined with the so-called family life of that time.

(2) The devaluation of women’s labour gradually started occurring when in India human settlements at fixed places started taking shapes as by then agriculture, not hunting, became the predominant economic activity for the physical survival of human beings.

(3) The concept of “female” is a social construction which can be traced back to the later and post-Vedic ages and this conceptualization of women envisaged women as the weaker sex, not-male. That mean the imagination of women was with reference to men who were adjudged since ages in India as the better sex or stronger sex in normative sense of the term. This is what is warranted under any patriarchal relationship and social norms and customs in which religious codes of conduct as can be found in scripts like Manusmriti played perhaps the most pivotal role.

(4) So, in the pre-colonial days it can be safely argued that women’s role was confined within the family which was her living space and she was supposed to be loyal and caring to her husband’s family. Even in terms of performing religious rites her role was secondary which was defined once again with respect to the role of men in this regard. The idea of marriage (which is basically social exchange of a woman from her paternal family to her husband’s family) became the rigid social institution in terms of Hindu order (particularly Bramhinical Hindu order). Although there were certain exceptions, the women remained subjugated to her father in her childhood and then to her husband in her married life and the child marriage (even below the age of six years) was rampant and normal. Even a girl of, say, 14 years used to be married to a man of say 70 years. And after the death of her husband as per Satidaha Pratha (Burning alive young and married women when their old husbands died), her physical life was forcibly terminated. In the medieval ages, although many Bhakti and Sufi saints tried some religious reforms within existing Brahminical Hindu religion based on caste-hierarchy and gender-bias and also within the gender-biased Islam religion, they did not explicitly on the issue of equality of men and women or against gender-based oppression which according to Karl Marx is the first instance of oppression in the history of human civilization.
(5) During the colonial the situations started changing with the advent of Western liberal ideas and philosophies and education through the colonial rulers which actually led to the emergence of what is today known as Bengal Renaissance. Because of the initiative taken by the pioneer of this Renaissance Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the colonial rulers enacted the Prevention of *Satidaha Pratha* Act. However, it should be kept in mind that polygamy was permitted for men in both Hindu (particularly among certain Bramhin castes) and Islam religion whereas the monogamy was prescribed for every woman to keep the sanctity of family – the onus of which always fell on women within the family. Only in the poor low-income earning families women members of the families had to work outside – mostly as vendors and women perhaps were the first performers of surplus labour in public domain as it is well known that the oldest (public) profession in the world is prostitution which is narrated in the play *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* by the famous English writer Bernard Shaw. This period gradually paved the way for some women (those belong to the rich and upper-income earning families in the urban areas like Calcutta) to get education in which Vidyasagar – another Bengal Renaissance leader – took active steps. He also tried his level best to stop child marriage and introduce widow remarriage – the latter is still not very acceptable in contemporary India even in the urban society.

(6) The colonial age also spread the idea of women’s participation in public life – especially in political life. However, the great freedom movement leaders like Gandhi although hinted at some social reform but did not explicitly challenged or contested patriarchy as the rule of the society. One may find some contradiction or inconsistencies even in Tagore – particularly as far as dowry system was concerned. However, the new wave of Western liberalism to a certain extent helped to change the Hindu society and some women at least got the benefits out of it. Thus slowly emerged the idea of gender-based equality and the concept of feminism in India, which is still a far cry.

(7) Lastly, in the Independent India although various acts have been passed by the Indian Parliament and also, by the different State Legislative Assemblies favouring women and garnering right to them at par with men but still Indian society and family structure remained pre-dominantly patriarchal where the men’s domination over women has been hegemonized. In fact, a delusory image of society is still prevalent in the (male)
minds of the society that if women raised their voices, if women come out of the family then there would be anarchy in the society and society would become unethical. So, despite increasing participation of women in the market or public domain in the post-Independent period the women labour remained undervalued and women remained confined within the binary imaginary based of sexes, which is actually a social construction, although it is envisaged that feminity and masculinity are something which are pre-given or determined at the time of birth of a child. The stereotype still is prevalent. And a married women, who is also working outside, is stressed or burdened with her double duties (and that too with loyalty and care to her husband’s family) of performing domestic chores and performing surplus labour in the market. Although in the contemporary India there are various stereotypes for women in general (not just one), the fact remains that all these stereotypes were constructed socially to satisfy the need of men and to keep intact the patriarchy as a hegemonic social system – the breaking away from which would signify a delusory unethical society.

In the following chapter we will make an attempt in terms of our class-focused Marxist approach to foreground the diverse concrete reality for women in contemporary India. This study may be called a case study as ours is an attempt with respect to some selected rural and urban areas of the district of Murshidabad in West Bengal. Hence, we limit ourselves in that respect in making an attempt to generalize the Indian women in terms of some fixed ideas and theories. Although we have taken clues from different brands of feminist ideas and concepts and ideals, however, we find in terms of our empirical findings women-market interface may take different forms and some radical feminist ideas in terms of building counter-hegemony may not fructify in reality the practical empowerment and emancipation of women. What is needed first a recognition of different combinations of class and non-class processes both within family and market and on the basis of which for each one of these combinations may shape/construct women’s empowerment differently.