Five

Indian Women Through The Ages:

A Historical Perspective
Nayantara Sahgal and Akilon are both preoccupied with the lot of women in the modern Indian society. Their instinctive perception of and insight into women's reactions and responses, problems and perplexities and their own emotional involvement with women, enable them to portray, by and large, a realistic picture of the contemporary Indian women with all their longings, hopes, fears and frustrations.

The roles the Indian women play, have undergone dramatic changes from one era to another, varying from caste to caste and milieu to milieu. There is historic evidence to prove that in India, women occupied a dignified place in society at the dawn of civilization, especially during the Vedic age (2500 BC - 1500 BC) and the later Vedic age (1500 BC - 500 BC) known as the age of the Brahmanas and the Upanishads. S.K. Ghosh makes the following comment on the history of Indian women:

Glimpses about the position of women in
ancient India can be found from the Vedas - the bedrock of Indo-Aryan civilization [2500-1500 BC]; the age of Samhitas, Brahmanas and Upanishads [1500 BC - 500 BC]; the Age of Sutras, Epics and Smritis [500 BC - 500 AD] and the Age of later Smritis, Commentators and Digest Writers [500 AD - 1800 AD] (1989, 1).

Tripta Desai, while dealing with the dates of the Vedic and the later Vedic periods in his work Women In India: A Brief Historic Survey, comments on the difficulty encountered by scholars with regard to periodization in the development of Indian women:

One major obstacle encountered in the study of Ancient India is the uncertainty of dating different historical periods..... We can accept 2500 BC to 1500 BC as the Vedic age when were composed the four Vedas of the Aryans, of which the Rig Veda is the oldest and most revered. The period from 1500 BC to 500 BC can be regarded as one of the Brahmanas and the Upanishads, commentaries on and addendum to the Vedas (1992, 3).

Women in the Vedic periods were treated not only with grace but also with courtesy and consideration. It is evident from the Rig Veda and the Atharva Veda that the Vedic women commanded a great deal of respect, enjoying almost an equal status with men in the family, society and the state. Tripta Desai's insightful comment on the Vedic women is significant as it
highlights their status in society:

In the Vedic age, particularly in the Rig Veda [the earliest of the four Vedas] wife and husband were referred to as 'dampati' or joint owners of the house. This attitude was responsible for the high status of women during that time (1992, 11).

Underlining the equal status, enjoyed by the Vedic women Indira Kulshreshita observes:

The Rig Veda had gently but firmly put men in their right position. Woman was protected by gods and her earthly companion, the man was considered her guardian, in no way her superior (1992, 3).

The girls were relatively less unpopular in the Vedic society as they were defined eligible to be initiated into the Vedic studies and could offer sacrifices to gods and hence, the sons were not absolutely necessary for this purpose. The girls were also educated like the boys and had to pass through a period of Brahmacharya or student life, some of whom achieving distinction in the venerable realms of Theology and Philosophy. Tripta Desai finds adequate evidence for the system of education prevalent during the Vedic period:

In the Rig Veda, numerous references to
educated girls, attest to daughters' access to learning. Women students comprised [sic] two groups the one studying life-long, the other until marriage. Evidence also shows that women also offered regular morning and evening Vedic prayers (1992, 5).

The *Atharva Veda* also laid great emphasis on the fact that a girl could succeed in her married life only if she had been properly trained during *Brahmacharya*. During this period, some women excelled in learning and their hymns were included in the Vedas. Neena Arora highlights their achievements in the following manner:

There were more than twenty women seers or *brahmavadinis* who composed the hymns of *Rig Veda* although there is no record of their works. Some writers believe that some of the hymns of *Atharva Veda* were also composed by some women seers. Gargi, Ghosha, Godha, Vishwarva, Apala, Maitreyi, Arundhati, and Lilavati were illustrious Vedic women (1991, 12).

Being equally learned as the men, these Vedic women participated in public debates alongside the men: "In *Upanishads* learned and wise women carried on analytical discussions with their male counterparts" (Desai 1992, 5). The *Rig Veda* accorded the highest status to the women of the time by granting them the privilege of accompanying their husbands during the conduct of sacrificial rites. Radha K. Mookerji, in her article
"Women In Ancient India" makes a pertinent remark on this subject:

In ancient India, the wife enjoyed with her husband full religious rights and regularly participated in religious ceremonies with him. In fact, the performance of such ceremonies would be invalid without the wife joining her husband as his full partner (Baig 1990, 2).

Further, it is interesting to note that the wife could perform sacrifices independent of the man, if the husband was unable to offer them. The basic unit of the Vedic society was monogamous families which were essentially patriarchial. S.K.Ghosh's remark on the patriarchial family in the Vedic society is:

The family is patriarchial, with all its members economically dependent upon the father, who by tradition received respect and obedience from his wife and children displaying care rather than warmth in return, preserving distance and controlling conduct (1989, 10).

There was no seclusion of women, and hence, women moved freely in the society. Child-marriage was unknown during this period, as girls were married only at the age of sixteen or seventeen. Educated brides of this age enjoyed quite naturally a definite right in the
selection of their partners in marriage. There were frequent occurrences of love marriages known as 'Gandharva Vivaha' that were consequently approved and blessed by their parents.

Women even remained unmarried if they wanted to, and had a right to the paternal property. The Atharva Veda refers to its well-known contemporary women figures Sulabha, Dhritavrata and Strutavati who remained unmarried and pursued the life of the spirit.

The gruesome custom of 'Sati' was not at all practised during this age. S.K. Ghosh makes a specific reference to the absence of 'Sati' in the Vedic period in his book *Indian Women Through the Ages*:

If a wife became a widow she was not required to ascend the funeral pyre of her husband. The custom of 'Sati' was unknown. The widow could, if she liked, remarry or follow the custom of Niyoga [liverate], which allowed the widow to have conjugal relations with her husband's younger brother or some other near relation till she got some children. A widow, who had children, was prohibited from having recourse to Niyoga (1989, 2).

Thus, on the whole, women enjoyed comparatively a greater freedom in society and commanded a much greater
authority during the Vedic age than during any other subsequent periods. Even Sarojini Naidu, the well-known poetess – turned – freedom fighter, makes a reference to the golden era of women's prosperity in ancient India, while calling for greater involvement of women in political movements:

In those beautiful days of the Vedic period of India, the glory of which still surrounds the country like a faint halo, women took part freely in the social and political life of the country.... It is with such a heritage as the foundation that the present women's movement in India has evolved (qtd. in Gedge 1927,4).

Nevertheless, it is needless to add that the status of women in India began to decline around 300 BC, as the education of women received a set back from then onwards with the introduction of child-marriage. The girls were married at the age of eight or nine, mostly long before they attained puberty. Female education was confined only to the cultured and well-to-do families, where the custom of child-marriage did not take roots. There was a slow but steady eclipse in the status accorded to women both at home and in society.

With Manu, the law-giver of the Hindus advocating a male-centred, and male-dominating society, a gradual,
and discernible, deterioration in the status of women occurred in the post-Vedic period namely 500 BC to AD 500, known as "the period of the Sutras, early Smritis, the Epics of Ramayana and Mahabharatha and the early Puranas" (Desai 1992, 3). The book Manu Smritis (The Laws of Manu) formulated around 200 BC saw to it that women became total dependants on men, for it declared,

Day and night women must be kept in dependence by the males of their families..... Her father protects [her] in childhood, her husband protects [her] in youth and her son protects [her] in old age; a woman is never fit for independence (Buhler trans. 1964, 327-328).

The wife was expected by Manu "to serve her husband faithfully even if he happens [sic] to be a drunkard, an addict, a bad character or contracts [sic] an abnoxious disease" (Oak 1988, 24). Thus over the centuries, women slowly lost the privilege of Upanayana, the right to Vedic initiation, and began to be considered as unfit to recite Vedic mantras or to perform Vedic sacrifices. K.M.Kapadia comments on this deterioration of the religious status of women:

In the Manusmriti we find restrictions that tended to deprive woman of her traditional status. The investiture of the sacred thread which initiated a person into 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, then, 'a wife is not independent with regard to the fulfilment of the sacred law' (1986, 251-252).

The epics and poems of this time, extol women for their subservience and faithfulness. In Tirukkural, the ethical literature of the second or third century, Tiruvalluvar portrays a male-dominated world where the woman is treated as an efficient mistress and faithful wife, who possesses the virtues of thrift, frugality, chastity, hospitality, love and other domestic virtues. To Tiruvalluvar, the virtuous woman who possesses strength of character and chastity is an asset to the family and society at large. There is none more excellent than a wife who possesses the stability of chastity:

If woman might of chastity retain
What choice treasure doth the world contain?

The women figuring in the ancient Puranas and Epics, are endowed with grace, courage, chastity, love and
dedication towards God and man, eventhough the deteriorating process regarding the status of women began to manifest itself in the subsequent ages. For instance, in Cilappatikāram, (The Lady of the Ankle Bracelet), dated severally as the fifth or eighth century of the Christian era, Kannagi figures as an embodiment of the ideal of chastity. To Ilankovatikal the author of Cilappatikāram, "Chastity is an absolute virtue for women, and Kannagi is the only 'goddess' on earth possessing this mighty virtue [Karpu Katam Punta Teivam]" Cilappatikāram Adaikala Kathai lines 142-144). In fact, Kannagi is worshipped even today, amongst the Tamils as the Goddess of wifely chastity (Pattiri Theivam). Sita, the silent sufferer of the epic Ramayana, became the archetype of Indian womanhood, with all her self-effacing wifely qualities of loyalty, submission and chastity. As Uma Chakravarthi in her article "The Development of the Sita Myth: A Case-Study of Women in Myth and Literature" states:

For both men and women in Hindu society, the ideal woman has been traditionally personified by Sita who is portrayed in the Ramayana as the quintessence of wifely devotion (1.1 July 1983:70).
There were also several other women characters in the epics and puranas considered as prototypes of loyalty and chastity of womanhood. According to A.W.Oak,

Seeta, Ahilya, Draupadi, Gandhari, Mandodari, Damayanthi and others from the epics and puranas were held as lofty examples of womanhood for their loyalty to their husbands, their steadfastness and their chastity (1988, 26).

Over the centuries, rigorous seclusion of women became the order of the day amongst the Indian women, as a result both of the purdah system foisted on by the Muslims on the one hand, and of a sense of fear arising from lack of general security due to recurrent Muslim invasions from the north-west. S.K.Ghosh observes:

After the Muslim conquest purdah became quite common among higher and richer classes in north India to provide protection to beautiful women against abduction and kidnapping by Muslim rulers, nobles and officials (1989, 6).

As a precaution, women were increasingly barred from participating in public religious rites and functions. Farquahar describes in his work The Crown of Hinduism the act of prohibition that eventually led to the
degradation of women in society:

The last downward step... was the acceptance of the custom of excluding the women of the upper-class in the women's apartment and cutting them off from all participation in public life (1915, 101).

The position of widows gradually deteriorated after 300 BC, as the prohibition on the custom of Niyoga and widow re-marriage forbade them from playing an active role in society. Finding it hard to lead a life of celibacy, and to avoid ill-treatment by family members who regarded them as inauspicious, the widows immolated themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands and, at times, some reluctant widows were forcibly thrown into the pyre as 'Satis'. Thus, several historical factors like the practice of 'Sati', female infanticide, the conventions of child-marriage, the purdah system and prejudice against women's education hampered the progress of women in the age of smritis.

It is interesting to note that women gained a temporary reprieve during the Buddha's time, i.e., around the sixth century. Buddha's teachings influenced the reigns of Chandra Gupta Maurya, Ashoka in particular and
When India witnessed the advent of Buddhism there was a welcome change in the position of women in society, for it allowed women to be educated, to travel as missionaries and even to remain unmarried (1992, 5).

In the sermons of Buddha, the ideal wife is enjoined to practise the universal virtues of loyalty, obedience to elders, efficiency in house-keeping and love of peace. Nowhere is 'pativrityam', the Brahminic ideal of abject surrender and all-absorbing devotion to the husband, stressed. Buddha advises young girls of marriageable age in the following manner in Anguttara Nikaya, one of the hallowed texts of the Buddhist Canon:

To whatever husbands your parents shall give you in marriage.... for them, you will rise up early, be the last to retire, be willing workers, order all things sweetly and speak affectionately.... You will honour, revere, esteem and respect all whom your husband reveres whether mother, father, recluse or Brahmin and on their arrival offer seat and water (qtd. in Thomas 1964, 90).

Though Buddha considered celibate religious life as superior to that of the married householder, he did not
exhort all his followers to practise celibacy and renounce the world. Child-marriage was not encouraged at all and widows were allowed to remarry. While discussing the status of women in the Buddhist India, P. Thomas remarks:

No widow was expected to remain single in memory of her dead husband. She could either marry or join the nunnery. 'Sati' was practically unknown at the time of Buddha.... Similarly only grown up girls were considered competent to marry (1964, 79).

Like the women in the early Vedic period who were skilled in composing hymns in praise of deities, there arose Theris or Lady Elders in Buddhism who compiled religious songs. Thomas also refers to the fact that "A Collection known as Theri Gatha (Songs of the Theris) forms part of the Buddhist Canon and it consists of composition by seventy-three nuns" (1964, 84). The position of the Buddhist women during the dominant period of Buddhism in India was higher than that of their contemporary Hindu sisters. Buddhism was the dominant religion till the close of eighth century of the Christian era, when it witnessed a serious setback, with the rising tide of Hindu revival. P. Thomas
observes:

Buddhism was the dominant religion of India from the time of Ashoka onwards but under the Imperial Gupta there was a Hindu Revival and a gradual decline of Buddhism. Buddhism was steadily losing ground to Brahminism. The eighth century sounded the death knell of Buddhism in India (1964, 217).

Following the decline of Buddhism in India, there dawned the darkest period in Indian history, the later Puranic and Hindu Dharma Shastra Period, which "falls roughly between the seventh and twelfth centuries, the period between the decline of Buddhism and the spread of Islam in India" (Thomas 1964, 219). During this period, the practice of child-marriage, dowry, polygamy, infanticide and Purdah system, began to gain momentum. Pre-puberty marriages and neglect of education resulted in disastrous consequences with regard to the status of women in society. Parents were not expected to keep their daughters unmarried after they attained the age of ten years. The Hindu law-givers enforced pre-puberty marriage. The following text from Marichi, one of the law-givers, amply illustrates the superstitious notions prevalent in the
society of the age, concerning child-marriage:

A father who gives in marriage a girl of eight goes to heaven, the giver of a girl of nine to Vaikunta; one who gives his daughter in marriage before she attains the age of ten attains the heaven of Brahma. But the father of a girl married after puberty goes to hell (qtd. in Thomas 1964, 225).

While the ceiling on marriage was thus fixed as ten, there was no minimum mentioned and so, even infants were married among the orthodox. Around this time, marriage was also made compulsory, without which, woman could not hope to go to heaven. Child-marriage in turn, led to child-widows, and the fate of the widow was worse than the fate of the child-wife. Further, the Muslim invasion led to the spread of the practice of 'sati' or widow-burning among the Hindus. The Hindu society kept women largely illiterate and subservient to a male-dominated tradition and social structure.

A further degradation in the status of women is clearly discernible in the Medieval India i.e., 1100 AD - 1500 AD. During the Mughal period in India, the invasion of foreigners into the country jeopardized the security of women as they were often carried away by the invaders. Therefore, a woman was reduced to the status of a 'commodity', and came to be considered a
liability, rather than as an asset, to the family. This led to the severe curtailment of social liberties of the women. The following comment of Manmohan Kaur acknowledges the fact that it was women who were the chief victims of an invasion:

The political instability, consequent migration of population and economic depression extending over a period of about three centuries affected the women adversely (1992, 1).

Child-marriage became the general rule for the Hindus and spread over even amidst the Muslim population. 'Sati' became widely prevalent. Purdaha was strictly enforced, and feminine literacy was regarded as a source of moral danger. P. Thomas remarks on an interesting fact, that motivated the Hindu law-givers, who denied women their basic rights:

In medieval India feminine literacy was considered the accomplishment of prostitutes and a girl who knew how to read or write was reckoned a menace to society as the art was feared to facilitate intrigue by correspondence with forbidden friends and paramours (1964, 228).

In fact, when the Indians came into vital contact with the British in the latter half of the eighteenth
century, the position of women in India was at its worst, in the history of the country. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women occupied a very low status indeed in Indian society. They were regarded as having no individuality of their own, and were discriminated as the weaker section of the society. Talking about the status of Indian women in her work Changing Status and Adjustment of Women, Rita Sood observes:

When the British came to India, the condition of Indian women was deplorable...... There were several serious backward social institutions and practices prevalent in Indian society like Sati, perpetual widowhood, purdah, dowry system, early marriage, incompatible marriage, polygamy, polyandry, devadasi system, illiteracy and female infanticide (1991, 41).

In the twentieth century, Mahatma Gandhi who emerged as the leader, mentor and guide for millions of Indians, vehemently opposed any kind of secondary place accorded to women, and even went to the extent of questioning the Hindu tradition:

Hindu culture has erred on the side of excessive subordination of the wife to the husband and has insisted on the complete merging of the wife in husband. If I was born a woman, I would rise in rebellion against any
pretension on the part of man that woman is born to be his plaything (1942, 92).

Gandhi disapproved of practices like purdah, child-marriage and ban on widow re-marriage. He realised the plight of the Indian women and worked for their emancipation too along with political freedom.

Eventhough Nayantara Sahgal, the Indian woman novelist of this century, depicts in her early novels modern Indian women, as aspirants for true emancipation, she actually moves back in time in her later novels, to the early twentieth century, when child-marriage, polygamy and female infanticide were all widely prevalent in the Indian society. Her latest novel, Mistaken Identity, is set in the 1920s in which the protagonist Bhushan Singh's mother is portrayed as the victim of child-marriage and polygamy. Bhushan's mother is pledged at the age of five and is given in marriage at the tender age of thirteen. Bhushan says, "Mother had been betrothed at five, but she hadn't come here as a bride until her thirteenth birthday" (MI 62). Thus, it is obvious that she is always confined to the high-walled 'zenana' and can see the world outside only through a barred window. While describing the prevalent
Indian convention of 'zenana' in his book *Life and Times of C.R.Das*, P.C.Roy makes the following observation:

There the women [sic] lay condemned to lifelong prison, a helpless, prostrate and pathetic figure with feeble [sic] health, her naturally keen senses dulled through inaction, without the light of knowledge illuminating her vision, steeped in ignorance and prejudice, groping in the dark, a martyr in the conventions of the society in which she had been born (1927, 4).

Sahgal's description of the condition of Bhushan's mother in *Mistaken Identity* amply illustrates the heinous aspects of the 'zenana' which was still lingering in the third decade of the twentieth century. Bhushan also recalls how his mother, as a victim of polygamy, remained a meek spectator when his father went on to take a second wife and later a third.

Besides 'zenana', several other formidable challenges are faced by the women in the tradition-bound society of India. For instance, the birth of a female child is more a matter for sorrow than joy in the Indian society. The following words of Mahatma Gandhi make an oblique reference to the prevalence of
such a practice in the Indian society:

I fail to see any reason for jubilation over the birth of a son and for mourning over that of a daughter. Both are God's gifts. They have an equal right to live and are equally necessary to keep the world going (qtd. in Bakshi 1986, 168).

The preference for a son at birth, is as old as Indian society itself. It is evident from the prayer in one of the hymns in the *Atharva Veda*: "The birth of a girl, grant it elsewhere, here grant a son" (qtd. in Das 1962, 10). There are valid ritual and economic reasons for the preference for sons over daughters in Indian society. The son is absolutely necessary in a family for the proper performance of many sacraments, especially, those carried out upon the death of parents. A daughter is normally considered an unmitigated expense, as she will never contribute to the family income but will take away considerable part of her family's fortune as her dowry, at the time of her marriage. So female babies are considered as economic burdens and, very often, poor parents resort to female infanticide. S.Krishnaswamy, while making a case-study of female infanticide among the Kallars of
Tamil Nadu, observes:

The financial burden of marrying off a daughter and the social stigma of having an unmarried daughter in the house forced people to kill infant girls at birth (1988, 187).

That occurrences of female infanticide are frequent, in both the rural and urban societies of India, has been exhaustively dealt with by several historians and sociologists. S.K. Ghosh in his book Indian Women Through The Ages makes a study of this social evil at length, in a chapter entitled "Female Foeticide and Infanticide", where he analyses the various social causes leading to this nefarious practice, despite various measures taken by the Government, amongst the Kallars of Tamil Nadu found in Usilampatti taluk of Madurai district and the adjoining taluks even as recently as the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Ghosh observes bitterly, "Mothers who had killed their babies, some barely a day old, spoke openly and stoutly defended their actions" (1989, 125) as their cultural habit. This can be better illustrated by the words of S. Krishnaswami, another observer of this evil practice in the same area, who records in an article, his first
Since I do not want the first child to be a female baby I wanted [sic] it to be killed. But my husband feels that we should wait for the second child. If that also happens to be a female baby we will definitely kill the second one (1988, 188).

In fact, the killing of female children has been practised so much over the years that, according to demographers, it has even affected the population ratio of the sexes in the country:

The sex ratio declined from 972 females per 1,000 males in 1901 to 935 in 1981; and India is one of a handful of countries where female infant mortality exceeds that of the male (Ghosh 1989, 119).

Sahgal does not flinch from exposing this brutal practice prevalent even in the rich families in her latest novel **Mistaken Identity**. In this novel Bhushan's two elder sisters are victims of female infanticide. Bhushan recalls the words of his tutor describing various methods of infanticide: "There are records of strangling with the umbilical cord. Another popular method was a pill of bhang...." (MI 63). In the company of his prison-mates Bhushan expatiates on the shocking social habit of killing female babies, though his words
are pungent with irony:

Very safe and simple this was. The mid-wife put the pill on the infant's tongue and it slid down the throat like a sweetie or she smeared the mother's nipple with it and the infant swallowed it with the first suck. However, if they buried the infant alive as some did, first they filled the hole up tenderly with milk (MI 63).

Beyond any shade of doubt, Sahgal is very keen on highlighting the cruelty inherent in the obnoxious social habit of female infanticide prevalent even till date in some parts of India through some of her works.

Sahgal's description of female infanticide is true to history as reported by John Cave Browne in his book Indian Infanticide Its Origin, Progress and Suppression:

As soon as the child was born opium was administered. Sometimes a pill made out of 'bhang' and tobacco was placed on the palate of the infant where it softened with the saliva and went into the system of the child causing her death (1857, 8).

Sahgal's description is not far different from the description of the sordid event narrated in Manmohan
Kaur's account:

Among the Rajputs it was a common practice that a mother's breast was smeared with a preparation from dhatura or Mudar plant or poppy. The infant drank the milk along with the poison..... Another method of killing the child was that a big hole was dug in the ground which was filled with milk, the child was placed in it, thus causing death by drowning (1992, 8).

Sahgal is also extremely sensitive to the horrible social evil of 'Sati' in the Indian society, which means self-immolation by widows on the funeral pyre of their deceased husbands. In her novel Rich Like Us she gives a poignant account of some of the gruesome murders committed in the name of 'Sati'. In this novel, Sonali's grandfather is supposed to have made those diary entries in 1915. While perusing those gory accounts, Sonali suddenly realises how those widows were forced to be 'Satis' even as late as 1890s. Sonali sounds highly cynical in the manner of her narration: "They give intoxicating drinks and sedatives to the poor wretched women and drag them to the funeral" (RLU 135).

Further, Sonali is also told how when a widow, being unable to bear the heat of the flames tried to
jump out of the pyre, her inhuman relatives, "took her by the head and heels and threw her into the fire... they also took up large blocks of wood with which they struck her in order to deprive her of her senses" (RLU 137).

In the same diary entries Sonali's grandfather gives an account of how his father, i.e., Sonali's great grandfather, viewed 'Sati':

Of course, the abolition of 'Sati' was a landmark and my father made a study of the historical practice and the effects of the law. He had in his files the editorial of the Calcutta Gazette on 7 December 1829, expressing 'supreme pleasure' on the passage of the Regulation abolishing the 'horrid rite of suttee' and saying it was 'the glory of Lord William Bentinck's administration to have carried into effect' this reform by ending 'a system demoralizing in its effects on the living, a revolting system of suicide and murder' (RLU 134).

Sonali's great grandfather is shocked to learn that 'Sati' is still in vogue even after the legal abolition. On hearing of a 'Sati' in the neighbouring village he says, "It is grotesque to think this happening in 1905" (RLU 142).
The irony is unfortunately, when Sonali's great grandfather "suddenly died at the age of fifty" (RLU 145) his wife, a non-believer in 'Sati' is forcibly taken, a couple of days later, to a pyre next to her husband's and most cruelly burnt to death by her close relatives in the absence of her nineteen-year-old son. Returning home from the college, he finds his mother nowhere in the house, and so he rushes to the river bank:

When I got to the river bank where we had cremated my father a new pyre was blazing where the old one had been. I saw her fling her arms wildly in the air, then wrap them about her breast before she subsided like a wax doll into the flames. Madness propelled me forward and made a demon of me..... I was half in the fire myself,.... In a working corner of my brain I had but one object, to take at least one victim of my own, a life for a life (RLU 149).

However, Sonali's grandfather's attempts to save his mother from the pyre are all in vain and he is told to believe that his mother voluntarily chose to be a 'Sati': "My uncle told him [Mr.Timmon's -- his father's friend ] she had insisted on it as part of a bargain that would ensure my inheritance" (RLU 150-151). Sonali's remarks as an adult show that she has no illusion in respect of the gory incident of her great
grandmother's 'Sati'. She is far too shrewd to believe all the suggestions made to her by her superstitious elders.

Sonali has nothing but bitter contempt for the perpetrators of her great grandmother's murder:

My murdered great-grandmother's relatives had said she had sacrificed herself -- which even a goat has too much sense to do -- on the altar of 'Sati'. They had built a shrine on the guilt-soaked spot to commemorate the martyrdom of the last woman to perform the noble act in the entire region (RLU 252).

It is even more interesting to note that Sonali's reading of the diary report of her great grandmother's 'Sati', is autobiographical in its rendering as Sahgal herself acknowledges in her interview to Jasbir Jain:

I have always had my great grandmother on my mind who was 'Sati'. Somewhere at the back of my mind there was always this my father used to tell me. There is this shrine still in Bombili village in Ratnagiri (1994b, 176-177).

Sahgal metaphorically suggests in Rich Like Us, the psychological agonies and anxieties 'Sati' gave rise to, in her women characters, Rose and Mona. Both the autobiographical and metaphorical interpretations of
the account of 'Sati' in the novel have been discussed in the third chapter.

'Sati', the gruesome social evil much in practice among the Rajputs and the high caste Hindus in North India, existed till the middle of the nineteenth century when it was terminated by an act of law. The first man to speak out publicly against the injustice perpetrated on women in the name of 'Sati', was Raja Ram Mohan Roy who had personally witnessed 'Sati' in life. P. Thomas reports the event thus:

When Roy's brother Jaganmohan died in 1811, he tried to dissuade the widow from mounting the funeral pyre but his relatives hurried her off to the cremation ground; she tried to escape from the flame but sturdy men with long poles of green bamboo pressed her down to the burning pyre (1964, 295).

Much against the opposition from the large number of orthodox Hindus who made several representations to the government, the Governor General Bentinck issued a regulation on the 4th of December 1829, declaring 'Sati' illegal and punishable:

Lord Bentinck took a decisive step after consulting his principal officers and got the Regulation XVII of December 1829 passed. The
practice of 'Sati' or of burning or burying alive widows became illegal and punishable by criminal courts (Kaur 1992, 267).

Though the system of 'Sati' was legally abolished in British India, it continued to linger long in Rajasthan as late as 1987. In October 1987, 'Sati' was performed in public, in Deorala village in Rajasthan. This incident and the events that followed prompted a nation-wide debate. Women's organizations in Rajasthan and the All India Women's Conference in Delhi held special sessions declaring the act reprehensible and demanded the Central Government to enact appropriate legislation. Soon the Government intervened and issued a strict law making it a high crime to abet or encourage 'Sati' or to participate in the ritual of 'Sati'.

Sahgal, by bringing in artistically the report of the 'Sati' of Sonali's great grandmother in Rich Like Us juxtaposes the past with the present Emergency regime in the novel, where a woman undergoes 'Sati'.

Over several centuries of recorded history, polygamy has also been in practice in India, a
convention that has been detrimental to the progress of women, that tends to reduce women to a state of perpetual subjection. Abbe J.A. Dubois, a French social historian, calls polygamy an "unnatural custom" and condemns the vile social practice on the grounds of sexual oppression, morality and religious ethics:

This unnatural custom of polygamy, which finds a place among some nations, may be attributed to sinful lust, the abuse of the power of the strong over the weak, and to the dominion of one sex over the other. It is evidently altogether contrary to the intention of the creator, who, when He created the father of mankind, gave him only one woman to wife, and indeed, ordained that man and his one companion should form but one flesh (1985, 210-211).

In contrast, to the above view, the Indian Hindu society viewed polygamy as almost natural, and hence, permissible. Manmohan Kaur is quite right in his assessment of the Indian society of yore: "Polygamy was permissible among the Hindu and there was no limit to the number of wives one could have" (1992, 18).

The narrator in Sahgal's *A Time To Be Happy* and Ram in Rich Like Us justify polygamy in a bland manner. The narrator in *A Time To Be Happy*, justifies the businessman Sir Harilal Mathur's second marriage when he informs
McIvor, a puzzled foreigner, of the prevalent condition in the Hindu society: "A Hindu can have as many wives as he can" (TH 162). In Rich Like Us, Ram cites instances from the great epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha that justify his polygamy when he picks up Rose as his second wife. He tries to enlighten Rose, herself a Christian, who finds it hard to digest the idea of a man living with two wives:

Lord Krishna had three hundred.... King Dasrath, Rama's father, had four wives.... We are more adventurous, even polyandrous. In the Mahabharata a woman marries five brothers (RLU 60-61).

The humour in the episode, however, springs mainly from the irony provided by Sahgal.

With regard to Sahgal's works, there seems to be a perceptible progress in the depiction of the sufferings of women in their marital lives. In A Time To Be Happy Prabha the first wife of Sir Harilal Mathur passively accepts her husband's second marriage "as she knew she couldn't give him a son" (TH 162) and "he had wanted a son badly" (TH 200). She does not even appear miserable over her plight, as she always wears "broad smiles of amusement" (TH 261). Being a fatalist,
Prabha believes in the simple dictum, "Everything depends on Providence" (TH 261). She lives quite happily with Lady Mathur under the same roof, as she is aware that Harilal continues to be emotionally dependent on her also, and cannot do without her in a crisis. The narrator observes:

Whatever storm might rage in Harilal's life, this refuge -- his only one, I suspected -- remained. I had seen it in his relaxed contentment on the 'nivar' bed, in the careless sensual gesture of his hand against her throat (TH 201).

It is interesting to note that Sahgal's protagonists in Rich Like Us and Mistaken Identity who are both married, are bitterly hostile to the 'other women' in their lives and live a life of despair. Mona and Rose in Rich Like Us are depicted as co-wives hating each other. Mona rants and raves into the night, lamenting her condition:

Mona's protest was far from silent. Calling upon the Almighty to spell out what she had done in this or past lives to deserve such outrageous treatment, she had wept with vigour (RLU 60).
On the other hand, Rose who detests Mona, wishes for her death:

One of Rose's more foolish fancies had been that everything would work out all right if Mona were dead. If only she'd be dead, dead, dead, she had hammered out the thought night after night after night (RLU 97).

In Sahgal's latest novel till date *Mistaken Identity*, the protagonist Bhushan's mother, is portrayed as an indomitable rebel who walks boldly out of the palace of her polygamous husband, the Raja of Vijaygarh in the arms of her communist lover Yusuf.

Sahgal's works present mostly characters belonging to the affluent upper-class in India and hence, polygamy too finds an inevitable place in them. Sir Harilal Mathur in *A Time To Be Happy* and Ram in *Rich Like Us* are business men, each of whom feels that he can afford to acquire more than one wife for himself. Bhushan's father in *Mistaken Identity* is the Raja of Vijaygarh whose three marriages are celebrated with all pomp and publicity. As Dubois has rightly observed, "Polygamy is tolerated amongst persons of high-rank such as rajahs, princes, statesmen and others" (1985, 207).
Akilon's fictional world, on the other hand, is peopled with members of a highly conservative Tamil middle class society. It is true that in his highly popular novel *Pāvai Viḷakku* (The Maiden Lamp) the protagonist Tanikacalam consents to marry, after much initial hesitation, Uma, an ardent admirer of his art, as his second wife while his first wife Gauri is very much alive. However, Uma dies on the very night of their marriage due to an accidental fall. Akilon thus finds an artistic way-out from confronting the problem squarely on the face. Akilon's 'modus operandi' in this context, seems to be highly escapist as he does not leave any final clue about his own concept of polygamy to his readers.

In fact, Akilon never depicts his women as victims of bigamy, as it is anti-traditional and a great offence in the Tamil society which he depicts in his novels. However, when women suffer physically or emotionally from incompatible marriages, Akilon does make such women find a way outside their traditional bonds, without breaking up with the society in any final sense. In Akilon's *Cinēkiti* (The Girl Friend) Lalitha's second marriage to Durai, the young writer, is presented in such a manner, that it is totally
justifiable in the eyes of the readers through the appprobation given to it by her first husband Narayanasami himself, despite the fact that all of them belong to the highly conservative orthodox Tamil society which does not usually accept a married woman, deserting her husband in favour of a new, nuptial relationship with another man. It is Narayanasami's whole-hearted exhortation that makes the Lalitha-Durai's marriage acceptable in the eyes of Akilon's readers:

My loving command is that you should live together. You should accept this without any hesitation. It is cowardice to think, hesitate and refuse this. You needn't worry about the people around (Cinēkiti 134-140).

It must be conceded that Akilon is not an author who dares to deviate from the traditional code laid down by the Tamil society. In a crucial moment, Anandhi in Cittirap Pāvai runs away from her brutal husband Manickam and seeks asylum in the arms of her lover Annamalai. But even this episode occurs only after the death of Annamalai's first wife Sundari.

Sahgal shows in her novels women like Mona and Bhushan's mother as victims of polygamy whereas for Akilon's women like Lalitha and Anandhi, seeking a
nuptial relationship outside marriage means an escape from an incompatible marriage. Tanikacalam's bigamy is short-lived and in no way affects the life of his first wife Gauri.

Women in ancient India also had been subject to the ignominy of the 'Devadasi' system, in which young girls were offered to the deities in the temples as dancing girls. When temples of Hindu gods and goddesses came to be built, singing and dancing acquired a significant status as institutions for the expression of joy during religious celebrations. Magnus Hirschfeld, an eminent anthropologist, describes the 'Devadasi' system at length in his work *Women-East and West*, in the following terms:

Mothers bring their little girls to the temples when they are quite young. The priestesses train them, as they themselves were once trained, to become 'Devis' [bride of gods] or 'Nautch-girls' [dancing girls]. 'Nautch' means dance. The priestesses teach them to dance and to sing, to assist in divine services, and to march in processions richly attired and always much admired. In early youth, they are used sexually by the priests — or to be correct, misused. They are also placed at the disposal of pilgrims as remuneration for contribution to the temple treasury (1992, 151).
S.K. Ghosh, an Indian sociologist, is also of the opinion that these dancing young girls are forced to lead a life of indignity: "Devadasis are women dedicated to serving the deities as dancing girls at a very young age and are compelled to lead a life of indignity" (1989, 265). Manmohan Kaur, another observer of the above phenomenon, also confirms the view that the women dedicated in this manner to temples, led miserable, undignified lives:

In South India, devadasis and dancing girls are identical.... They visited the temple at the invitation of the temple authorities. They were professional singers and dancers (1992, 24).

Mostly devadasis were the children of mothers of the same 'profession', or they might be daughters of ordinary citizens dedicated to the deity from childhood as pious offerings. They could not become wedded wives and so led a life of shame.

Akilon lived in South India before the enactment of the Prohibition Act directed against the 'Devadasi' system. He describes the devadasis who performed in the festivals of rural temples in his autobiography Eluttum Valkkaiyum. He observes in this work how "among those
who remained as dancing girls, some would live as unwedded wives" (136). It is with such a personal knowledge that Akilon presents the character of Cenkamalam in Pāvai Vilakkku as a devadasi, implicitly ostracized by society. Akilon considers Cenkamalam, the fruit of moronic social norms and he makes the following comment in his Kataik Kalai(The Art of Story-Telling):

The society had segregated one group of women as public women and made them prostitutes in the name of god.... Cenkamalam, the dancing girl is the resultant product of such rigid social conventions (1972, 104).

Cenkamalam is the only daughter of Chellakannu, a dancing woman (devadasi) who used to dance in the temple every year, during the Chittirai festival. Tanikacalam, the protagonist, is fascinated by her beauty and vivacity and calls her as "the illusion of next door" (PV 91). From Cenkamalam's words to Tanikacalam one understands the plight of women in the 'Devadasi' system which keeps women in personal subjection:

We are slaves to this temple, generation after generation.... My mother is a devadasi and I am brought up in her way. She has no other child except me. She has taught me music,
veena and dancing. From this year onwards, I am going to be enslaved by this temple as a dancing girl (PV 108).

Cenkamalam is not only made to perform as a dancer in the temple but is also forced to live as an 'unwedded wife'. Even though she falls in love with Tanikacalam, she is goaded by her mother Chellakannu to become the concubine of one Kumarasami, a wealthy business man of the place. Eventually, as her love for Tanikacalam proves to be of no avail, Cenkamalam writes a letter of apology to her lover, expressing her inability to go away with him as that would mean flouting the wishes of her mother. She closes the letter with a cryptic note: "Forget me.... I am now the unwedded wife of a young mirasudar" (PV 181).

In the latter part of the novel, Akilon dwells also on the sad plight of Cenkamalam, who is subsequently rejected by the man to whom she remains utterly loyal all along, as he develops an affair with a Sindhi woman in Bombay. Finally, circumstances egg her on to earn her livelihood as a public dancer having to undergo untold humiliation, as she tries hard to keep her womanly dignity.
In modern times, more and more voices have been raised against this so-called 'sacred' prostitution. Mahatma Gandhi felt very much grieved at this deep-rooted system in many towns of South India and condemned it in vehement terms:

> My whole soul rose in rebellion against the custom of dedicating minor girls for immoral purpose. By calling them 'Devadasis', we insult God himself in the name of religion and commit a double crime, in that we use these sisters of ours to serve our lust and take in the same breath the name of God (qtd. in Bakshi 1985, 2).

In most recent times, various women's social organisations have been earnestly engaged in a concerted effort to put an end to this shameful evil system of religious prostitution. Dr. (Mrs.) Muthulakshmi Reddy of Madras, a member of the Legislative Council, played a key-role in passing the Madras Devadasis Act (The Prevention of Dedication) which marked the beginning of the end of the 'devadasi' tradition in this part of the world.

Rape is yet another scourge that continues to wreak havoc on the lives of thousands of innocent women in India. In fact, the condition is so bad that a woman
who reports of rape has to face shame and humiliation from all quarters including the society around, the police and the court, as a raped woman instantly becomes an outcaste, often looked down upon by her own family. It is significant that Sahgal has made an attempt to depict the hooliganism and disorder in the university of Delhi in her novel *A Situation in New Delhi*, which depicts the plight of the young innocent girl Madhu, a victim of rape. Sahgal euphemistically deals with Madhu's getting trapped in the Registrar's office by three ruffians: "... she heard a key turn in the lock and three of them stood in the room, one with a beard and two without" (SND 30).

Madhu who is hospitalized after rape, is crying in agony and is silenced by the nurse who keeps "clamping her hand hard over her mouth and holding it there till she stopped" (SND 30). Madhu's parents keep a tight lid on the tragic episode and nobody pays heed to Madhu's emotional needs. She resumes her studies in the university, escorted by her brother "until they could hand her to another household" (SND 61). Her timid parents who fail to understand her, simply want to get rid of her by marrying her off at the earliest,
after consulting some astrologers. Madhu, however, is not for marriage, as it is going to be another kind of assault on her dignity as suggested by the following metaphor:

She couldn't [hide] from the unknown face and hands of the marriage to which they would deliver her. She wept and pleaded to be left alone but her family paid no attention (SND 61).

Subsequently, as her family fails to listen to her desperate plea, Madhu commits suicide in protest, setting fire to herself. Neena Arora has rightly pointed out how the fearful prospect of life-long misery leads Madhu to her suicide:

Even if she had been married, once the incident was known, she would have been condemned to perpetual misery. How can the society pardon her for her loss of virginity, when it did not forgive Saroj for the same reason! Perceiving the consequences, Madhu took the fatal decision of burning herself to death, instead of leading a miserable life even after marriage (1991, 50).

Through the plight of Madhu, Sahgal shows how a woman who gets stigmatized once in an andro-centric society, has no other means of escape but to put an end to her very life.
In contrast to the plight of the rape victim in society, Sahgal deals with its seduced women with greater compassion and understanding. In *This Time of Morning* Leela who belongs to a "modest unpretentious" (TTM 77) Hindu family of Banaras, brought up under strict over-protected parental control, goes to America for her higher studies and for the first time in her life savours all the freedom the new land has to offer her. She cherishes the "lipstick, dancing and going out with young men" (TTM 58). She has "taken to life in America at first with the tremulous flutter of a bird just uncaged and later with a soaring delight in every aspect of her new freedom" (TTM 58). Even when she becomes pregnant, she does not think of any way of escape through medical help, as her Indian culture has not alerted her to face this kind of situation. So she ends up drowning herself in the Charles river out of shame and desperation: "The police concluded after questioning those who had known Leela best that her pregnancy had been too great an emotional shock for her" (TTM 76).

While Leela decides to kill herself on being seduced and rejected by her lover, Akilon's Dr.Sankari in *Pon Malar* (The Golden Flower) faces such a situation
with the courage of a new emancipated woman of the modern age. Being a motherless child, Sankari is brought up by her father with all the liberty and luxury she needs. In her youth, she is attracted towards the handsome, and rich Gurumurthi her fellow student, who traps her with false promises, never informing her the fact that he is already married. She stops going to college for four months and then pleads with him to marry her in her pregnant condition. To her shock, he gives her one thousand rupees and sends her away. On learning of Sankari's shame, her father commits suicide, throwing himself before a running train. The dejected Sankari is prevented by Rukmani, the Principal of her college, from following her father's footsteps. Gradually the latter instills in her adequate courage and confidence to face her life boldly. Sankari gives birth to Saradha and leaves the baby to the benevolent care of Rukmani in an orphanage. She continues her medical studies and becomes a doctor.

As a doctor, Sankari serves the society at large, never revealing her inner despair. Instead, she pours all her love on the baby as an unwedded mother and visits her very often. In the light of her own experience, she empathizes with Kumutha who has been
seduced and rejected by Thirumurthi, a twin-brother of Gurumurthi. In a dramatic scene where Thirumurthi comes to Dr. Sankari with a plea to do away with Kumutha, she learns to her shock the pathetic fact that the victim is none other than a young girl who has been seduced like herself. Sankari takes Kumutha quietly away from her seducer and helps her to deliver her illegitimate child. Both Kumutha and her baby are left to the motherly care of Rukmani at Trichy. In this novel, Sankari not only rises up from her fallen condition but also proves to be a tower of strength to another fellow victim like herself. M. Ramalingam considers Pon Malar a great novel on account of its didacticism:

Akilon points to the female world a new course to follow with his view that women who fall due to circumstances should not throw away their lives just because they had fallen (1974, 100-101).

Another common subject of interest to both the novelists in question is the issue related to inter-caste marriages. Such marriages were permitted in the Indian society down to the tenth century as the cultural differences between the members of the different castes were not so pronounced then. People of all castes performed 'upanayas' and observed the
various sacraments laid down for them. In course of time, the cultural gulf between different castes became too wide to permit happy and harmonious inter-caste marriages. Marriages between Brahmins and non-Brahmins went out of vogue first, and subsequently, other castes followed suit.

Mindful of the emotional upheavals in her own marital life when she married outside her caste, Sahgal makes her character Gauri in *Storm in Chandigarh* rush for the security of an arranged marriage within her own caste:

There is only one safety in India for some time to come, that is to marry in your own state into a background you thoroughly understand.... That kind of a thing endures (SC 160-161).

However, in her later novel *Rich Like Us* Sahgal seems to commend the case of inter-caste marriages. When Mona and Rose are in search of a bride for Mona's son Devikin, Mona declares firmly:

We should say caste no bar, like horoscope no bar..... And caste is not so strict now-a-days, we should be more broad-minded except for untouchables (RLU 182).
In the modern society, cultural disparities are diminishing fast due to the sudden spread of a homogeneous culture and education.

On the other hand, in Akilon, whose fictional world presents the conservative society of the Tamils, inter-caste marriages are supposed to bring humiliation and hence are to be resisted at all cost. His novels Vālvu Enē? (Whither is Life?) and Cantippu (The Meeting) point out the evils of the caste system in the Tamil society. In Vālvu Enē? Krishnamurthi, a high-caste Hindu, is attracted towards Parvathi, a low-caste woman, in Gandhiji’s ashram and boldly marries her in the face of stiff opposition and cynical criticism of the society at large. The marriage casts a shadow even on the future generations. When Radhai falls in love with Krishnamurthi’s son Chandran, her relatives stand in her way as Chandran is an offspring of an inter-caste marriage. Radhai is kept under house arrest as otherwise, she might elope with Chandran with whom she is passionately in love. Later, after much struggle they are united in wedlock.

In Akilon’s Cantippu, the rich Bhuvaneswari’s love for the poor artist Muthiah is resented by her parents,
just because Muthiah hails from an inferior caste. Much against her parent's opposition, Bhuvana tries to meet him often but in vain. Muthiah's disappointment in love turns him eventually into a drug-addict and he dies in the end, pining over his love for Bhuvana, who manages to see him only at the moment of his death. She throws herself upon him and dies instantly. The lovers, separated by the caste system, are thus united only in death. In the preface to the novella, Akilon says, "here a corner of the Tamil world which is reeling under caste fanaticism is seen" (Cantippu Preface). Similarly, in Pāvai Vilakku, Cenkamalam the dancing girl, is not allowed to marry Tanikacalam whom she loves passionately, just because she is a 'devadasi'.

Women, married or unmarried rather than men, become the easy target of oppressions in several cultures as most of the taboos and beliefs of a society pertain only to them, though they constitute just half of the humanity. In most cultures, women are treated as second-class citizens and denied their basic human rights. Sahgal, being a woman writer of the twentieth century, depicts the predicaments faced by women in the context of female infanticide, child-marriage, 'Sati', rape and divorce, and presents a pronounced gyno-centric vision
in her fiction. She depicts social problems mainly from the point of view of women, who are caught in different kinds of crises in their married lives. Yet, the predicament of women is just one among the several social problems delineated in Akilon, though he too is not oblivious to the sufferings of women in the male-dominated society he depicts. While Sahgal's women rebel openly against social taboos, Akilon's female protagonists submit themselves passively in the face of oppression as Cenkamalam does in Pāvai Vilakku.

While Sahgal's married women are bold enough to fight against the crises they face in their marital lives, her young women who end up as victims of rape and seduction conspicuously lack the courage to face the challenges of their lives and resort to committing suicide as Madhu does in A Situation in New Delhi, and Leela in This Time of Morning. In contrast, even the young women characters of Akilon brave the challenges of life with an indomitable will and courage. Dr. Sankari in Pon Malar does not lose heart when her seducer Gurumurthi leaves her big with a child. She boldly goes ahead and gives birth to a girlchild, and carries on her life as an 'unwedded mother'. Sankari
sees life as a challenge and emerges at last as a 'new woman' of whom Susie Tharu says:

This new woman was also self-confident, autonomous and this was a figure that dominated the literary imagination for several decades to come (1991, 173).

It is important to stress here that both Sahgal and Akilon stand up for the principle of equality between the sexes in their fictional works. Sahgal, being a liberal artist, stands for new morality, according to which,

a woman is not to be taken as a mere toy, an object of lust and momentary pleasure, but man's equal and honoured partner in word and deed as against the inhuman traditional postures (12 Dec. 1971: 7).

Akilon too is of the opinion that women are not to be treated as 'the toys of the bed-room' as he observes through the character Chidambaram in Enkë Pökirm?:

This is not a time to keep in secret our women as toys of the bed-room. All their intellect, skill and industry are needed in so many ways to the nation as well as their homes (148).

Tripta Desai, a feminist, too expresses a similar opinion: "Women have to be accepted as equal to men,
endowed with the same propensities and capabilities, and worthy of the same esteem and care" (1992, 33).

Thus, Sahgal and Akilon are deeply preoccupied not simply with the need for the emergence of the new, emancipated women, but also the evolution of a new social order which ensures amongst its men and women mutual respect, trust, frankness and freedom.