Chapter II

THE WOMAN QUESTION IN INDIA

A careful look at the status of woman in the Western society has shown us already that the position of woman at home and in the society has not been static. Same has been the case in India. The woman's status from one of freedom and importance, had gradually degraded into one of complete servility to the male, due to deprivation and negation of self.

From a look at the ancient civilization of India, it can be seen that women in India enjoyed a much better life in the earlier period of the Vedic age. Women were given equal education; and girls were not married before they reached a fairly mature age of sixteen or seventeen. They had also a say in the selection of their life partners. Various religions like Buddhism and Jainism encouraged liberalization of women's lives and provided alternative vocations to marriage.

But in the post-Vedic years, the birth of a daughter became a source of disaster for the family. Her birth brought sorrow to the family. Education of women, which was an accepted norm during the Vedic period, slowly began to be neglected. Later, girls were completely denied any access to education. Even the sacred thread ceremony performed to
initiate a person into the Vedic studies was prohibited for women. So the question of education for girls receded.

Their marriage age too was lowered to nine or ten years, thus starting the evil practice of pre-puberty marriages which was the cause of so many child-widows in those days. However, some girls in the ruling class did receive some sort of formal education in various fields like administration, military training, and fine arts. That is how we have a few outstanding women like Atreyi, Maitreyi, Gargi, and others. These were however, exceptions. For the most part, women in the upper caste too were confined within the four walls of their homes and forced to lead a restricted life.1

The advent of the Muslim rule brought with it the purdah system. Although, initially practised only among the Muslim, it was soon adopted by the Hindus as well. Among the Muslim women, although Islam does not give women absolutely equal rights with men, yet it tries to make them economically independent by giving them rights of inheritance and divorce. For, according to the Quran, men and women were created equal:

Oh mankind! Be careful of your duty to you Lord who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them twain hath spread abroad a
multitude of men and women.

(0 : 4,1)

But after the death of the Holy Prophet, the patriarchal society of the Arabs asserted itself, and various interpretations of the Quran were made by various religious leaders. As a result, women's status deteriorated considerably. Nevertheless, Muslim women had the right to divorce and *mehr* was religiously given. In a marriage, their consent was taken in public, and remarriage was never looked down upon.

As for the Hindus, by the early centuries of the Christian era, the code of Manu came into full force and affected the position of all Hindu women alike. Manu did not believe women deserved the right to Freedom. According to him,

The wife should ever treat
the husband as God, though
he be characterless, sexual
and devoid of good qualities.

(Manu : Smriti 5 : 154)

Women were treated as objects. They were considered men's responsibility and his honour was hers. Women became a very important weapon at the hands of men to be used as and when
the situation demanded. They had to be guarded and protected zealously. So, although women were raised to the position of goddesses mentally or verbally, in reality or in practice, they were no better than slaves.

Women, on the one hand, are considered in Hinduism to be the benevolent bestower of property and of knowledge like goddesses Laxmi and Saraswati. On the other hand, she is considered an aggressive malevolent destroyer, like goddess Kali. This dual concept of woman in Hindu philosophy is very important in understanding the position of women in India, where women are revered like goddesses and yet are considered the sources of disaster in the society and treated like slaves within the family.

Parents tried to get rid of their daughters as early as possible; they were considered a responsibility, a burden to be disposed of. The Hindu woman catered to her husband's every whim, dressed for his pleasure, bore his children and underwent rigorous fasting to reinforce her role of a devout wife and dutiful mother. Her penance and fasting was also needed for her husband's long and prosperous life.

Men's rites however, had nothing to do with getting good wives or praying for their long and prosperous lives. For women, neither sacrifice nor prayers were required;
because a woman remained a replaceable property. If one wife was lost in childbirth or sickness, others could always be found in a system where marriage was the only ultimate objective in a woman's life.

Against this, however, ideal women in Indian mythology have always been paragons of virtue, like Sita, Savitri and Draupadi, who were dutiful, chaste, self-sacrificing and completely devoted to their husbands. Their unswerving, selfless devotion to their men are always referred to and praised in legends which have been coming down through the ages. An ideal wife is expected to follow their example in their own lives. As a result until recently, when a woman lost her husband, very often she followed him into his funeral pyre. For, without a husband, a wife's life was supposed to be meaningless. It was considered preposterous that a wife would even want to continue living after her husband's death. So she was encouraged to immolate herself in her husband's funeral pyre by her relatives. For, as Manu says,

A woman has no separate sacrifice, ritual or fasting. She gains a high place in heaven by serving her husband.

(Manu Smriti, 5:145)
The widow was blamed for her husband's death; and if she happened to live after him, she had to spend the rest of her life in complete self-denial in everything. Her head was shaved, she had to wear coarse, white clothes, walk barefoot, eat only one vegetarian meal a day, and worse, she was considered an ill-omen and was shut-out from all ceremonies and auspicious occasions. She had to continually feel apologetic to be alive after her husband's death. There was no question of remarriage or starting a new life.

This attitude was soon adopted by the Muslims too. Muslim women, although initially on a fairly equal footing with men, now came to lead a life of complete submission and slavery. Marriages were arranged for convenience, not love. Love could be indulged in only with courtesans. It became very common for men to have several wives. They misused the permission given to them by the Holy Prophet by not following the restrictions that went with it. Although mehr was obligatory in a Muslim marriage, gradually it became a disgrace to demand or claim it in case of separation. A divorced woman was compelled to go back to her own family with or without the children to live out the rest of her life at the mercy of the male members of the family. Even widow remarriage was discouraged, including child-widows. Women even stopped asking for their natural right to the family property. Thus the plight of Muslim women deteriorated
considerably.

So, Hindu and Muslim women both led a life of oppression. Because of the rigid purdah system, there was no education for them. With the advent of the British, attempts were made by many enlightened Indians in educating girls. But because of the practice of child marriage and the purdah system, it did not prove easy. Scholarships, prizes and concessions were given to encourage the girls to attend school. Even then, the percentage of school going girls at school was as low as 2.7% in the year 1911-1912. The Calcutta University Commission appointed in 1917, recommended Purdah schools where girls of conservative families would be taught in their homes, but this too, proved to be of little help. Only boys were allowed to study. Girls were married off by the time they were nine or ten years of age, if not earlier. It was not uncommon to find widows of ten or twelve years of age even in British India.

Infanticide was another custom prevalent at the time. Female infants were killed at birth by their parents - they were unwanted in a male-dominated society. And cruel methods were used to carry out this terrible act. Although the custom was first detected as early as the seventeenth century by Emperor Jehangir, he could do little to prevent it. Another custom which oppressed the women was the
offering of young girls to deities in temples. As soon as a girl reached marriageable age, she was 'married' off to the invisible deity, an offering for blessings for her mother. Thereafter, she led a life of complete misery. Having been 'married' off once to the deity, she could not marry any human being again. She lived in the temple, and was often made use of sexually and otherwise by priests and other men around the temple. Infanticide, child-marriages, sati, purdah system and prejudices against women’s education were some of the causes which hampered the progress of women in India.

Despite all these, however, there appeared throughout the ages some Indian women who excelled as intellectuals, administrators, soldiers, reformers and religious teachers, thanks to their own individual efforts or to the care and good wishes of their family.

During the British period, there were some major movements which affected the position of women. These were the social, religious and political movements of the nineteenth century as well as of the early twentieth century. The Social Reform Movements aimed very often at uplifting the position of women. These movements were against sati, ill-treatment of widows, polygamy, child-marriages, and deprivation of women from property rights. These movements were also for widow-remarriage and education for women.
They tried to awaken the public to the evil practices that women were subjected to. They hoped that educating the women, a social change could be initiated.

Leaders of the Brahmo-Samaj were amongst the first reformers to get a law passed against widow-Burning (1829). Raja Rammohan Roy did much for the emancipation of women. He was not only a socio-religious reformer and thinker, but was also an educationist. He was the first man to espouse the cause of women. Arya-Samaj opposed the existing caste systems, and also took up the cause of child-marriage. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was strictly against child-marriage; and it was at his insistence that the Indian Penal Code passed a law in 1860 which prohibited the consummation of marriage if the girl was below ten years of age. Also, it was for his efforts that widow-remarriage of Hindus became possible. Keshab Chandra Sen of the Brahmo-Samaj insisted that the consent of the bride and bridegroom be taken before the ceremony. This was a big step forward in the recognition of women's individuality.

An off-shoot of the Social Reform Movement was the National Social Conference established in 1887. In its annual meeting, among the many topics that was discussed, women's problems were always given especial attention.
Although initially some of these movements met with little response, certain leaders like Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu and others did much to bring these problems of the women into prominence. In the years 1914-1918, Annie Besant led an organised movement for the emancipation of women and raised demands for their political rights. She condemned child-marriages and encouraged widow-remarriage. She also insisted on the importance of education for women. She joined the Congress and was elected its President soon after in 1925. Annie Besant did much for the upliftment of the Indian women.4

The major political movement which was instrumental in the improvement of the position of women was the Indian freedom movement. When the Indian people started rising against the colonial foreign rule, and the leaders of the Nationalist movement insisted on the women also joining the movement, women too came out for social and even political activities. Although there was no mass awakening in the beginning, there was an awareness spreading slowly among them. In 1917, the Women's India Association came into existence and women gathered here to discuss and demand their rights. They began to understand their responsibilities and rights. And when Gandhi introduced the satyagraha (or passive resistance movement) and gave a call to women also to join
the nationalist movement, many women came out to take equal part in it along with the men.

During the freedom movement, the women had to suffer much. They were harassed, ill-treated physically, molested, jailed, tortured, but they endured it all with grim determination quite like their male counterparts. All women from cities, towns and villages joined the movement to fight for the national as well as woman's cause. They took to spinning and weaving khadi for the people in their zeal to follow Gandhi and live up to his ideal. They participated in the nationalist programme of banning all foreign goods and encouraging everyone to use khadi. And when in 1926, women were given the right to vote in India, it was a significant and proud moment for all women, although the right granted then was very restricted.

Sorajini Naidu, known as the poet, politician and peace-maker, moved a resolution in the Social Service Conference of 1909, for the protection of Hindu widows, and stressed the importance of education for women. She said,

Until and unless they raise the fallen women in the country and make their voices heard, India's salvation was only a distant dream.
She fought for self-government of the nation and women's rights simultaneously.

On 18 July, 1947, the Indian Independence Act was passed by the British Parliament which envisaged the end of the British rule in India. It was a long and hard struggle but worth it. More for the women because their participation in the freedom movement brought them to the forefront of Indian society. And after Independence, they gained many rights easily here that were won only after a long and bitter struggle in the West. Women in India now had equal opportunities in education, public employment as well as in the political field. The new Constitution ensured equality of men and women before the law, showed no discrimination between the sexes; and every effort was assured to promote women's welfare.

The Nationalist movement helped not only in drawing a large number of women to political activity, but also gave them confidence and courage to organise themselves to fight for their own cause. The formation of the All-India Women's Conference in 1927 was a crucial event in women's struggle for improving their status in society by promoting education for women and fighting social injustice.

Several laws were formulated to eradicate social evils. The Sarda Act passed in 1929 prohibited marriage
below the age of fourteen for a girl. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 provides equal share in property for women and the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 established the principle of monogamy among Hindus which proved to be a tremendous improvement in the status of women in India. Bigamy now became an offence in the eyes of law. The Dowry Prohibition Act was passed in 1961 which made the giving and taking of dowry punishable by law. Then in 1971, the Government passed the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act which gave women the right and the choice to have children. They were no longer the helpless victim of men's desire. In 1980, a nationwide anti-rape movement made the Government sit up and review the existing rape laws. Soon after, in 1984, a family court was established to look into the matrimonial disputes to help in reconciliation between estranged couples.6

In the last three or four decades, there has been a slow but noticeable increase in women's education which has opened new opportunities in various fields. Women with higher education have now secured well-paid jobs. They are qualified to enter areas which hitherto have been reserved for men only, like Medicine, Engineering, Agriculture, and so on. A look at the 1981 Census shows that women's literary rate has gone up to 47.8%,7 whereas in 1951, the female literary rate was only 8.86%. As a result more and more
women are now qualified for employment.

However, in rural areas and in slums, women still suffer from social and economic oppression. This is more so in case of the women of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes because of their illiteracy. Inspite of attempts made by the Government to remove illiteracy by providing free education to children, there has not been much progress. For example, the literacy rate in the rural areas in 1981 was only 18%. The Government has now launched yet another programme, the National Adult Education Programme which aims at bringing those in the age group of fifteen to thirtyfive years within the ambit of literacy.

Several autonomous women's group emerged in recent years which worked independently in spreading literacy, fighting exploitation of women, and in bettering their position in society. They circulate reading materials and magazines to reach the wider section of the educated women to create an awareness and contribute to the upliftment of women, thus we have the Mazi Santa Manch, Stree Shakti, Saheli, and so on, which have risen against various issues like wife-beating, dowry harassment and so on. Because of the movements launched by such organisations and also because of government measures in the years following Independence, the position of women seems fairly promising.
But this is only so far as the laws have been concerned. In the social level, even today, forty-five years after India's Independence, the situation offers a good scope for study. One cannot deny that there have been a lot of changes in favour of women; many new avenues are now opened for them. But how deep have been these changes, and how effective have been the laws and rights introduced in favour of women? Has the position of women really improved? For, even as we are on the threshold of the twenty-first century, the shocking, barbaric, primitive tradition dies hard, nay, is even revived in all its 'glory'. One example is that of sati, one of the most gruesome of all crimes against women in India. Such fanaticism makes a mockery of all the women's development schemes taken up by the Government. If a woman has no right to her life, what emancipation can she hope for? With progress in the Medical field, we have another form of infanticide in India today. Amniocentesis, a new technique which determines the sex of the unborn child. It has been generally used to abort the female foetus. A female child is denied the right to be born!

Bride-burning still continues today in all major cities among the educated rich, not to speak of the illiterate poor in the villages. Majority of the people in India are still ignorant and steeped in superstitious beliefs. As is
evident from the recent shocking incident in Srirampur in Midnapur district of West Bengal, just hundred kilometers away from Calcutta. A seven year old boy and a seven months old girl child were married off to break a curse on the bride's mother! And this inspite of the Child Marriage Restraint Act or the Sarda Act enforced as early as 1929.9

All this makes one wonder: have women really improved her status in the Indian society? Has she progressed or regressed in life?

It is to find an answer to these questions that I propose here to study the position of women as it gets reflected in the Indian English novels written in the last fifty years.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2. According to Islam, it is obligatory for the husband to pay the wife on their marriage a certain sum of money to safeguard the economic position of woman after marriage, so that she has the means of defending her rights. The amount of money for this *mehr* is generally fixed between the two concerned parties before the marriage.


5. Ibid., p. 160

6. Neera Desai & Maithreyi Krishnaraj, op.cit., p. 43

7. Ibid., p. 158

8. *Femina*, September 8, 1987, p. 27