CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Manu said, "She should do nothing independently even in her own house. In childhood subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her husband is dead to her sons. She should never enjoy independence."

Women all over the country have more and more freedom, more girls have higher education. Administrative services at the highest level, and at lower levels women found jobs, after training, as village workers, nursery school teachers or as ordinary labourers. All along the line rising prices and economic pressures forced women to add gainful employment to domestic and family duties.

In 1975, International Women's Year, the status of women's committee makes a 1500-page factual report on where women now stand. Enormous contrast continues to be the pattern of life. Over a million women have education, rights and opportunities perhaps better than their counterparts in many affluent (rich) countries.

Paul Hoffman said, "There is a close relationship between the status of women and the state of economic development in any country. So long as countries regard women as chattels, their development will be slow and painful." But even if women are not regarded as chattels, if their housework is not credited as work, the same slow development in a country will result.
Though India's ancient lawgiver, Manu, laid down doctrines that have kept women in bondage of a special sort over the centuries, he did say "Women should be adored and always treated with love. Where women are treated with honour, the very gods are said to be propitiated. Where women are not adored, all acts become fruitless. If the women of a family, on account of the treatment they receive indulge in grief and tears, that family soon becomes extinct."

Generations of Muslim women have consoled themselves with the Prophet's saying that "heaven lies under a mother's feet," and generations of Hindu women have taken comfort in the edict of the sages, "revere thy father, mother and preceptor" in that order. While many believe that "there is no release from a mother's curse," and there was no greater sin than injury to a mother or her death at the hands of anyone.

"A wife is half the man, the best of friends,
The root of the family and its perpetuity,
The source of well being .........
Wives are friends, in the wilderness."

Vatsayayana

The United Nations in 1975 centered International Women's Year around three themes representing goals for women. These are promotion of equal rights for men and women, integration of women in development and women's role in strengthening peace. The first two relate to work, and all the three to status. This implies a re-examination in every country of women's present actual status, and the professional standing of women.
Listing the work of women in the voluntary field is virtually impossible. There are too many. In the so-called under-developed economics, women do a vast amount of unpaid service in many fields ranging from child welfare education, scouting and guiding, women's welfare and care of all categories of the destitute and the handicapped.

"Let a man be careful to honour his wife for he owes to her along all the blessings of his house." Talmud.¹

One of the best ways to understand the spirit of civilisation and to appreciate its excellences and realise its limitations is to study the history of the position and status of women in it. The marriage laws and customs enable us to realise whether men regarded women merely as market commodities or war prizes, or whether they had realised that the wife is after all her husband's valued partner whose cooperation was indispensable for happiness and success in family life.

The degree of freedom given to women to move about in society and to take part in its public life gives a good idea of the nature of its administration and enables us to know how far it had realised the difficult truth that women too have a contribution of their own to make to its development and progress.

The history of the position and status of women is, therefore, of vital importance. The subject is a very wide and a comprehensive one, for we shall have to ascertain not only the general estimate formed about women in the different periods of our long history, but its actual effects also upon the diverse spheres of their activities during the different stages of their life. The best way to begin our enquiry is to study the condition of
women during their childhood and to find out the general arrangement made about their training and education. This will at once disclose to us the concern of society for women and the steps it was taking for properly starting them in life.²

The Mahatma did not wish women to be ill-treated by men. He advised them not to think that they are physically weak. He argued that every woman who had inviolable purity of character enjoyed the same boon as Sita did. If man had ill-treated women, the reason was that she had yielded to lust.

Man has ill-treated woman and is still doing so. But the remedy for this ultimately lies in woman's own hand. If she stops thinking that she is weak, she can be free this very day. The really strong are not those who are strong in body. Ravana, who was a demon, that is, had physical strength, was helpless before the seemingly weak Sita. I am sure you remember the story. Sita was under the protection of a boon to the effect that anyone who cast an evil glance at her would be instantly burnt to ashes. Ravana knew this and that is why, though he carried her away, he could not touch her person with impure thoughts. He had to entreat Sita to let him embrace her. He threatened her time and again in the hope that she might yield; but unless she yields of her own free will, he was, in spite of his strength, as helpless as a goat. Though physically Sita was utterly helpless, in spirit she was a lioness.

We know the meaning of a boon. It is only a symbol. Every woman who has inviolable purity of character enjoys the same boon as Sita did. Any man who casts an evil glance at such a woman would be instantly burnt to ashes. Being enslaved by passion, both forgot their higher nature, forgot that they were souls and remained mere bodies. So far as the body is
concerned man is undoubtedly the stronger of the two. Hence, woman was enslaved by man and the impression came to prevail that she was helpless before man, that she was weak and always needed man's protection.

As souls man and woman are equal. If a man does not recognize his spiritual nature but a woman does, the latter is the stronger of the two, as Sita was stronger than Ravana, and the other remains weaker, as was Ravana.

Do not believe, moreover, that this was possible only in the time of Rama. Even today there are countless Sitas in the world who requires no man's help and are yet safe against all dangers. Women alone can emancipate themselves, not men.

Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the very minutest detail in the activities of man and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his. This ought to be the natural condition of things and not as a result only of learning to read and write. By sheer force of a vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying a superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have. Many of our movements stop half-way because of the condition of our women.3

The United Nations charter on Human Rights affirms "faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, and in the equal rights of men and women" - 1945.

The United Nations Commission on the status of women is established as a subsidiary body to the U. N. Economic and Social Council - 1947.
The Convention on Political Rights of Women was adopted by the U. N. General Assembly - 1952.

The Convention on the Nationality of Married Women was adopted by the U. N. General Assembly - 1957.

The Convention on the Consent of Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages was adopted by the U. N. General Assembly - 1962.

The U. N. General Assembly proclaimed 1975, as International Women's Year - 1972.

First World Conference on Women was held in the Mexico City in 1972. Official delegates of over 100 countries adopted the World Plan of Action, including minimum goals. The Draft Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was approved by delegates.


The United Nations Voluntary Fund for the Decade of Women is established - 1976.


The Mid-Decade Conference of the U. N. Decade for Women opened in Copenhagen, Denmark, 145 States participated with 1,326 official delegates.
51 countries signed the convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women during the opening ceremonies - 1980.


The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women was instrumental in establishing 1975 as an International Women's Year. The commission also played a key role in developing the World Plan of Action and in securing the U. N. declaration of 1975-1985 as the Decade for Women.

The ten-year period of women's development has seen several seminars, workshops, conferences, demonstrations and protests at various levels - local, regional, national and international.

From time immemorial women have been the strongest moral support of men, in giving them inspiration, being their consolation in times of trouble, their guides in moments of despair, a source of unending strength and the largest reserve of compassion and human feeling. These have been the immortal qualities of womanhood.

The first signs of exploitation and discrimination against women begin to show within the family, in the infancy of the girl. Parents also tend to discriminate between sons and daughters in their day-to-day attitude. This is because of the social milieu and cultural environment, in which the birth
of a girl spells doom for most parents, mostly on account of the prevalence of the rigid dowry system. In Rajasthan, the birth of a girl is unwelcome. Female children are killed.

Equality for all is just a paper document, in reality it is nowhere visible. Society's behaviour towards women does not reflect this sense of equality. The country today has lost its value for human dignity; there is a definite lack of human values in us. We seem to be moving with fervour and speed towards a society dominated by commercial and economic values. It is little wonder, thus that even educated and intelligent women are unable to speak up and fight for their due rights. In the progressive world of science and development, the question springs up as to how progressive are women in this new world?

If women are also a part of the progressive society in all its developmental aspects, what is their percentage of participation? If the women are not active participants in the developmental process, will it ever be possible for them to be included in an integral manner which contributes towards the progress of our society? This seems possible only if more and more women become self-reliant. The need is that they become independent and self-supporting. Once self-reliance, self-confidence along with economic independence are acquired, the exploitation of women will slowly die — women's upliftment, thus, becomes an important and necessary part of all development plans.4

Humanity has advanced very far from where it had started. Many things had changed; the social position and rights of many groups have been subjected to the ebb and flow of history. Many sections of the population which had
ruled; have been brought down. While others which were deprived have risen to positions of equality and even to political power. Every now and then a new group that is being oppressed demands attention, demands its rights and upliftment. Attention shifts to this group; its problems get focused upon; the causes of its oppression get diagnosed; a strategy to solve its problems is worked out and an attempt to formulate policies gets rolling.

The last decade focused much attention on one such target group — women. In this case, however, the group is a majority one, forming more than half of the world population. Its problems are centuries old, its oppression persistent and universal, and its solutions complicated. It is indeed curious that the status of such a major segment of population took so long to discover, its potentialities recognised, and the strategies for its development worked out.

Women's studies have become increasingly popular. With various foundations both Indian and International, devoting their attention for the cause of women's uplift in this United Nations Decade for Women, there has been a spurt of activities, particularly in the academic field. Much research on the status and role of women in society, their development and non-development, the contribution to development and participation in social movements have been undertaken. The number of higher research institutions for women's studies as well as of specialised women's universities is increasing. The U.G.C. has established a number of centres for women studies in some universities.

The concept of equality has exercised a powerful emotional appeal in the struggle of women to free themselves from the yoke of exploitation and
oppression. Women have not only claimed that they are equal to men in capacity and moral worth, they have also demanded equal rights and equality of opportunities and life chances. It is a measure of the success of the women's movement in many countries that a number of governments have now accepted the responsibility for trying to promote the equality of women and have adopted legislative and administrative measures for the purpose. However, in spite of these efforts, there has really been no dramatic change in the condition of women although some inroads might have been made into the entrenched inequalities. This raises the question, whether the approach to the problem has been tactically correct or not. If correct, then all that is required is further efforts of the same kind. If not, however, a new approach might be demanded.

Your daughter will never be as good as your son unless you give her the same opportunities to develop. It has often been stated that women cannot achieve equality in social interactions until they achieve equality in the family since it is in the family that the roots of the sexual division of labour are established.

The emergence of the women's movement is a significant political development in recent years. This movement is now gaining an international existence. There are few countries, including in the Third World today, which have not produced a few active women's organisations. In the advanced industrialized countries of the west, these organizations have transcended the immediate issues relating to the oppression of women. As a matter of fact, women in these countries are active in the broader political struggles. The militant role of women in the peace movement is a case in point.
The men went to war, hunted, fished, provided the raw material for food and the tools necessary for these pursuits. The women cared for the house, and prepared food and clothing; they cooked, weaved, and sewed. Each was a master in his or her own field of activity; the men in the forest, the women in the house. Each owned the tools he or she made and used; the men the weapons and the hunting and fishing tackle, the women, the household goods and utensils, and often many families. Whatever was produced and used in common was common property: the house, the garden, the long boat.

The original relations between sexes was thus one of mutual dependence, and the principle of 'Mother right' existed only so far as there was a tie between the mother and children. The status of this equality between sexes and their work, according to Engels, first underwent transformation to that of inequality and subjugation of women, when development of productive forces began to change the material lease of the society.

Since the objective of development is to improve living conditions of the society as a whole it is logical to expect that this also implies an improved status for women. For a long time it was generally assumed that development automatically improved women's status. So, if development is to have any meaning, women must also be given their due place, perhaps even more consciously in the development plans particularly because of their already relatively more disadvantaged status.

The women of any country have an important role to play in the progress of the country. It is women who alone are capable of bringing up children who may lead the country in the paths of progress and prosperity. Educated women make the family and the society cultured.
Emancipation of womenfolk in any society has engaged attention of social leaders and reformers all through the ages. It is, however, a fact that only in particular periods and in particular phases of a society's history appreciable momentum has gathered round the problem and found expression in concrete manifestations. Thus, we may speak of such legislations and people's concerted efforts as the stoppage of sati pratha, child marriage, etc. or legislation on widow remarriage, and women's share in the property of ancestors by inheritance, etc. But the fact remains that society's stability can hardly be sustained without man and woman playing complementary roles. Whenever there has been any disharmony in this important aspect of a society's development, in-built forces have somehow geared up enthusiastic attention and efforts of the enlightened section of the society so as to restore the much needed balance for its vitality. While this may be manifestly observed in the more advanced societies, the inner mechanism for the establishment of harmony even in a primitive society like that of a tribal group is discernable on close analysis of the customs and practices amongst the members of such a society. It is true that efforts to bring about a solutary change may not have assumed such boisterous and assertive expressions as may be currently seen in 'Women's Lib' movement or hippyism. But it stands out, as a fact that even in a primitive tribal society woman has seldom allowed herself to be unfairly and harshly dominated by her male counterpart.

Indeed customs and practices in such a society have so shaped themselves us to ensure for her a position of dignity in the overall configuration in spite of some apparent contradictions. It may, therefore, be an interesting study to examine the position of woman in the Mizo society for a worthwhile appraisal of her status therein.
Mizo society, as it existed in the past, was deeply community-based. It is true that the individual and the family enjoyed certain prerogatives but the net balancing force was such that both of these had to submit unquestioningly to the demands of the group life anchored in their social structure. As a result, it was seldom that man found it possible to exercise unfettered and autocratic dominance over women. In fact, in spite of the differences in their pursuits and responsibilities, their interdependence and mutual appreciation of each other's position and responsibilities in the society's overall growth and development could hardly ever be made light of by either the man or the woman. This, therefore, appears to point out that the status of woman in their society was in no way inferior to that of man and she suffered none of these derogatory and discriminatory treatment as may be found in some of the more advanced societies.

What strikes an outsider when he moves in Mizoram is the significant role Mizo women are found to play in all walks of their daily life. A visit to the main market places all over Mizoram reveals that almost all shops are by ladies. As for example, Bara Bazaar in Aizawl presents the look of a 'ladies world'. Books, stationeries, textiles, drugs and a variety of other shops are all found to be run by women. Their neat and tip-top dresses, stylish hairdo, their engagement in knitting or reading of daily newspaper, magazine in their spare time at the shop appear to point out that they belong to the richer section of the society and this in its turn establishes that the role of women in middle and high middle class families is indeed a very significant one. The picture does not change basically when one goes to the vegetable market or a tea stall. These are also run almost in their entirety by Mizo ladies. Even in activities such as road making, brick laying, shifting cultivation, etc. their engagement is in no way less than that of men.
In all the schools, right from the elementary stage, it is found that boys and girls are studying together in almost equal numbers and their teaching staff representative of both sexes in adequate proportion. The government offices too usually have no less women folk than their male counterparts even though their absence in the officer cadre is conspicuously noteworthy. It is that the wind of rapid change in this rather secluded area has brought about a praiseworthy emancipation of the women fold.\footnote{7}

The Mizos highly respect womanhood in spite of the fact that in their society the males enjoy a comparatively higher status. Though comparatively the status and position of the women fold is lower than those of men folk, still they are not so neglected and humiliated. The contributions of women folk in maintaining and managing the household and particularly, their calm and cool behaviour always attract the Mizo men even when they are in rage.

The freedom and liberty to announce divorce by her, called 'Sumchhush' is an important example to describe her status in the Mizo society. A Mizo woman's loyalty to her husband is always sought, but she can also raise protests if her husband acts outside the norms of their nuptial bond and obligations. If the husband is having illegal relations outside wedlock, the wife has every right and liberty to divorce him.

The Mizo woman is respected by everybody in their society and the status and privilege they enjoy in the society are no less important than those of men folk as a whole. Of the marriage price, a portion goes to the elder sister and another to the paternal aunt.\footnote{8}
To improve the status of woman's life she has to be given more freedom in all sides of life, like social, economic, political, cultural and moral. Nowadays women march the path of progress. In every corner of the world, women's organisation have been raised to get the equal status as the men.

In the field of education, culture, social and political, they should be allowed to take part freely for the betterment of women, and thereby improve the status and standard of living. Women also should stand for themselves and fight for their dignity and just rights.
Notes and References

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2 Dr. A. S. Altekar, *The Position of women in Hindu Civilisation*, pp.1, 2

3 S. R. Bakshi, *Gandhi and Status of Women*, pp.45-47, 60


5 S. Kanshill, *Women in Society/women's Oppression. Patterns and Perspectives*, pp.1, 2, 5, 8, 11, 13


7 Dr. (Mrs.) N. Chatterji, *Status of Women in the Earlier Mizo Society*, pp.1, 2 (preface)

8 M. C. Goswami, *Mizo Customary Laws and Practices*, p.20