CHAPTER II

SOCIAL HISTORY OF INDIA TILL INDEPENDENCE

Literature is the mirror of life; this truth is portrayed by Anand through his real picture of India of his times. Before analyzing the predicament of women in India, it is necessary to have the knowledge of the social milieu in which they lived. Then only one can understand and find out the solutions. So, in this chapter social history of women in Vedic period, Medieval period and before and after independence is focused to find out the evolution of women from subjugation to sublimation.

The position of women in Vedic period was high. In Vedic period men and women were equal in many respects. While analyzing the tradition of India Bhatt refers to the women philosophers in his book such as Vachanakavi. “The Upanishads refer to several women philosophers, who disputed with their male colleagues such as Vachanakavi, who challenged Yajnavalka” (Bhatt 52). Women were also engaged in warfare. “The Atharva Veda refers to daughters remaining with their parents until the end of their lives. A part of the ancestral property is given to them as dowry, which becomes their own property, and is called stridhana in later writings” (Bhatt 55).

Marriage was not compelled. Widow remarriage was accepted in the society. Sakuntala Rao, in the book, Women in the Sacred Laws quotes from Vasishta Dharma: “Vasishta allows a widow to remarry after an interval of six months, during which time she has to lead an ascetic life.
Young women, if they were not given in marriage by their guardians at the proper time, could choose for themselves and marry” (Shastri 44). In Vedic period widows were not exploited. Women’s physical and intellectual power was recognized. Marriage was celebrated through Swayamvara, the free choice by the woman of her man. There was no child marriage. From the following lines it is clear that caste system was based only on their intelligence not by their professions.

Anand mentions it in his novel Morning Face (MF), through the speech of Bhagwan Dutt who belonged to the Arya Samaj.

I speak of a certain high condition, when men and women were equal, and marriage was celebrated through Swayamvara, the free choice by the woman of her man; when there was no caste, not in the sense of superior or inferior from professions they practiced, according to brainpower; (52)

Longing for the sons was prayed as the son performed the last rites. It is found in the Rig Veda in hymn xv. “To us be born a son and spreading offspring” (Arasu 665). The son lived with his parents, earned money for the family, protected the family from enemies and perpetuated the name of the family. One of Upanishads recommends a ritual for ensuring the birth of a scholarly daughter. So, there was no feeling of dejection on the birth of a daughter and no female infanticide was in ancient India.

The ancient Hindu writers, denote the classification of the Hindu population under four varnas or orders with reference to their occupations, namely, (1) the learned and priestly class or the Brahmans, (2) the fighting and ruling class or the Kshathriyas who were grouped together irrespective of their ancestry, (3) the trading or agricultural people or the Vaisyas, and (4) the common humble folk whose business was to serve their superiors. “Caste
represents a harmonious division of society based mainly on division of labour and occupation. Caste promotes the spirit of co-operation and fellow feeling at least within its range. It helps the poor, the needy and strengthens group sentiment. Caste is a source of social stability” (Girish 23). A caste may be defined as a group of families internally united by peculiar rules for the observance of ceremonial purity, especially in matters of diet and marriage. The families composing a caste may or may not be restricted to any particular occupation and may or may not have traditions of common ancestry. “Democracy and caste cannot go together. The caste engenders inequality while democracy assures equality. It has retarded progress. It has hindered mobility; it has made our country more static than dynamic. It has lowered the status of women” (Grish 23). Later on, caste system affected the growth of the low class of society.

Jainism and Buddhism which began to appear in the 6th century B.C. deliberately ignored the caste institution and protested against the bloody sacrifices. The simple worship of the Vedic times had degenerated into a lifeless, mechanical system, quite insufficient to satisfy the spiritual cravings of the more ardent spirits. The ascendancy of the Brahmins and their arrogant class-pride were especially galling to the governing classes, the Kshatriyas. They found themselves ousted from their position of supremacy. So they assumed a hostile attitude to the prevailing religion which assigned to them a comparatively inferior position in the society.

It is a significant fact that the reform movement was led by two Kshatriyas of the royal family—Mahavira and Bhuddha. The reform movement was mainly a reaction against ritualism and animal sacrifice. Both the founders of these two religions were originally Hindu reformers. They did not mean to destroy Hinduism but to reform it. Neither the followers of Mahavira nor those of Bhuddha were required to give up their belief in the
Hindu Gods. Hence these two systems are to be looked upon as sects of Hinduism and not as new religions. As caste system affected the low class society in Hindu religion, they were converted into other religions after foreign invasions. “Most of the present day Sikhs, Muslims and Christians were formerly Hindus, majority of them being from Sudras and untouchables” (Sahay 58). Conversion to Christianity was mentioned in the novel Untouchable.

Foreign conquest is nothing new in Indian history. The Pre-Mohammedan foreigners like the Greeks, Scythians and Huns never became a distinct factor in Indian politics; except Muslims, others merged in general body of Hindu population. Indian Muslims retain their culture and social systems and form a separate community side by side with their Hindu brethren. The serious efforts of the Muslims to conquer India began with the invasions of Muhammad Ghori towards the close of the twelfth century.

During this period, India was split into a number of Hindu kingdoms ruled by someone or other of the several Rajput families. The Hindu princes lacked cooperation even to meet a common adversary. Thus, there was no united resistance to the foreign invader. It was this internal division that made Northern India a comparatively easy prey to the Muslim conquest. Originally under the stern law of Islam there was no room for non-Muslims in a Muslim state. The alternative offered to them was death or conversion to Islam. Their religion was systematically insulted, their places of worship were destroyed and desecrated and they were subjected to differential treatment in the matter of taxation. In short, the Hindus were despised, distrusted and hence fleeced. India in the medieval age was famous for her untold wealth. Mohamed of Ghazini plundered northern India and carried off an enormous amount of booty.
The chief sources of India’s wealth were agriculture, trade and commerce. Although medieval India was a rich country there was no equitable adjustment of its economic wealth among the various social classes. Indo-Islamic architecture is a harmonious blend of Indian and Islamic traditions. The result of the Muslim conquest was the seclusion on women, especially of the upper classes. The purdah system, though not unknown in ancient India, became widely prevalent than before. The same causes were probably responsible for the growing prevalence of child-marriage. Men continued to be as protective about their womenfolk as in the previous period. They must be guarded against physical abuse and mental unchastity.

A good example of the unity of Hindus and Muslim cultures was the evolution of the Urdu language. The Bhakhi cult stressed the idea of a personal God, and pointed out the absurdity of the caste system in the presence of God and the futility of external rites and ceremonies. The reformers like Kabir and Nanak preached the unity of religions and rejected caste system and ritualism.

Due to the impact of foreign invasions, self-immolation of widows on the funeral pyre was getting more common in North India. Married women in higher families did not usually appear in public without veils. The custom of dedicating maidens for service in temples continued during this period. Girls were married off at an early age less than 10. Due to early marriage girls were not educated as earlier. Dowry was demanded and paid.

Political changes affected the social and economical life of Indian. At the same time efforts were taken by certain kings like Akbar for the harmonious life. Akbar evolved the synthesis between the Mughals and Hindus. He married a Rajput princess, and his son and successor, Jahangir, was thus a half Mughal and half Rajput. Aurangzeb incurred the displeasure of the Hindus by destroying the temples. He also infuriated the Rajputs. The
Maratās under the stewardship of Shivāji consolidated their power. The hundred years following the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 were turbulent. There were many sided struggle for power and mastery over India. Many states came into existence. Due to internecine disintegration, India became weak and backward.

The East India Company, which had originally established itself for trading purposes, became the ruling power. Its military was superior and possessed sophisticated weapons. The British power took advantage of India’s internal differences and promoted treachery and treason among Indian officials of the Marathas and Rajputs. Raw materials for boosting up industry in England were exported. India’s industrial set up collapsed and a vast number of weavers and artisans were badly affected. Unemployment was rampant. Agriculture was immensely suffered.

Despite British policy of suppression and exploitation, new force of social and national awareness was at work. Various reform movements took place due to the influence of English education. The British government had to arrange for the training and production of clerks for running its growing administration. English education brought India out of the mire of stagnation and orthodoxy.

Madhava depicts the impact of Western education on social reformers in the following lines:

Inspired by western education, the leaders of the religious movement sought to reform and remodel the religions and society according to the requirements of the changed conditions. They drew inspiration from India’s past heritage and reinterpreted it in the light of modern rationalism. Above all the educated Indians were compelled by the growing activities of the Christian
missionaries to set their house in order to check conversion of Indians to Christianity. (Madhava 65).

Speeches of National leaders and social reformers aroused the conscience of men and women. The Arya Samaj supported the education for women. It also believed in remarriage of widows and widowers. The great social reform leaders and movement - Ram Mohun Roy and Debendranath Tagore of the Brahmo Samaj, Keshub Chandra Sen of the Brahmo Samaj of India, Dayanandan of Arya Samaj, and Annie Besant of the theosophical society, and Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda all combined to bring about an intellectual, social, cultural and spiritual ferment which shook Hindu society to its depths and inevitably gave birth to a national movement of political regeneration.

Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar’s contribution to the cause of women’s education in Bengal was tremendous. He opened girl’s schools. Some prominent members of the Brahmo Samaj started journals for the promotion of education among women. The Arya Samaj initiated education in Punjab by establishing the Mahakanya Vidyalaya at Jullandar in Punjab. Vidyasagar mercilessly attacked the social custom that prevents widow remarriage.

When Vidyasagar sent a petition to the government of India praying for an enactment in favour of widow remarriage, the reaction was tremendous in the orthodox Hindu family. Many pamphlets and booklets were issued from different groups of pandits and orthodox Hindu leaders protesting against his proposal for legalizing widow marriage. Strong protests were also issued from ‘Dharma Sabha’ of Calcutta. Vidyasagar arranged to send a petition to the Indian Legislative Council signed by 987 persons representing the progressive sections of the society, praying for the legislative enactment to remove all legal obstacles to the marriage of Hindu widows and to declare the
issue of all such marriages to be legitimate. He had also arranged for his own son to marry a widow. The widow remarriage gained momentum in the country. Sati was abolished in 1829. The Hindu Widow’s Remarriage Act was passed in 1856. It legalized the marriage of widows and held children born of such marriages to be legitimate. In spite of the act, remarriage did not make much progress.

It is tragic to see that a widow whether young or old, has to undergo many rituals. Even today after the death of a man, widow is decked up as a bridegroom for ten days as she would not be permitted to decorate herself after the summation of ceremony. All her relatives would remove her ornaments and flowers one by one and she should have to surrender like a goat to these people. In villages, the uneducated women have accepted the conditions imposed on them by the society and these women were glorified at that time. The situation is improved in the Twenty First Century but yet not everywhere in the villages. Even, after undergoing this ritual their life was dependant on the family members. Hence, they had to be subservient to them.

Women’s education made steady progress. The number of female students at each stage increased rapidly. Obstacles like early marriage and orthodoxy were gradually being removed. A new feature introduced during this period was co-education. Divergent views were expressed on the benefits of this policy. On the other hand, gradually a tendency was growing among girls not only to be equal to men, but to be like them in all activities.

The spread of education among women made them eager for improving their rights. Ladies section was added to the Indian National Social Conference in 1903. While this facilitated change, the actual changes introduced by legislation were a few. The Child Marriages Prevention Act became effective in 1930, became applicable to all communities, and penalized marriage if the girl was below 14 years and boy 18 years of age. The institution of Devadasi, a class of women who dedicated themselves to
the life-long service in temples was in practice for many centuries. An Act was passed in 1925 to prevent this criminal offence.

The Home Rule and Non-Cooperation Movements drew out women of their homes and made some of them participate in the struggle for freedom. An important consequence of this was the near disappearance of the Purdah system amongst the Hindus. On April 10, 1930, Gandhi made a special appeal to the women of India to take up the work of spinning. Women came out of their homes and offered themselves for arrest and imprisonment.

Number of schools in rural areas was less and they have to pay fees to get education. For poor people education was not accessible. In middle class society both educated and uneducated women were found in India. Bakha’s father had told him that “schools were meant for the babus, not for the lowly sweepers” (Untouchable 30). Education was not affordable to the poor. The children of the British government officials had the chance to get education.

People started to migrate to the urban areas for their livelihood. After industrial revolution rich became richer and poor became poorer. The labourers’ claim was not considered by the government; their only motive was to keep the Indians slaves and coolies and exploit them. British economic system affected the life of cultivating classes. Food crops were replaced by cash crops.

Commercialisation of agriculture led to the growth and increasing dominance of the moneylenders over the village economy. Majority of the peasants lived in debt to the moneylenders who charged exorbitant interest and exploited the poor peasants. Commercialisation of agriculture “gave a shock to the self-sufficient village community because the villages now came to be
linked with outside markets and ceased to be local markets for agricultural commodities. (Madhava 77)

Farmers did not have the facility to store the grains. They did not get the expected price. Though, the consumers had to buy the costly products, yet, this profit did not reach the farmers. Middle men took the profit from the peasants and sold it at high prices to the peasants. Further, they exported the raw materials and crushed the Indian handicrafts. Under the British rule they had to pay tax to the government. Traditional coppersmiths were rendered jobless after the advent of machines.

Poor people, due to scarcity of water, were forced to live in unhygienic place. As a result, they became victims of epidemics and diseases. “The ramparts of animal and human refuse that lay on that colony made it an ‘un congenial’ place to live in” (Untouchable 1). Like untouchables, the labourers had to live in one room houses. Farmers who had land for agriculture, could not get expected profit from agriculture. So they started to mortgage their land, jewels, cattle, house and the articles they had. They migrated to the towns or plantations to seek jobs. The condition of coolies under the British capitalists is portrayed in the novel Two Leaves and a Bud as: “The black coolies clear the forests, plant the fields, toil and garner the harvest, while all the money-grubbing, slave-driving soulless managers and directors draw their salaries and dividends and build up monopolies” (123). They became slaves. The debt ridden farmers never redeemed their mortgaged articles from the moneylenders.

Even, after independence also, farmers could not get profit from their agriculture. Prasad highlights this idea while tracing the development of farmers in his book Agriculture and Rural Development in India Since 1947. “Poverty of Indian farmer forces him to borrow money for his existence. The institution of money lending is the greatest curse for the poor and illiterate
rural folk of India. Although the importance of moneylenders had declined over the last 55 years, they are still very dominant in providing credit to the farmers” (Prasad 15). To pay the debt farmers worked along with their children as bonded labourers.

Child labour existed in the society. In some places it was considered that running a brothel was also a source of income. War and its impact and British rule in India affected the life of Indians. To get and to keep the government job they suppressed their feelings. Their family was under the threat to lose the job if they or their family members involved in any agitation against the British rule. To get their support at the time of war, the unemployed youths were lured by British army by a piece of land and pension; but they were cheated by the British government. They did not get any reward after their service as a war prisoner. They left their family as orphans. On their return to India, they found that their family was disintegrated in vain.

Further, Indian passengers were not allowed in the ship to go abroad and develop their business. So they did not give passports to the Indians. “Good things that happened during the British rule were: canals, roads, railways, hospital and school” (MF 210). Transport and communication was developed. Social interaction was improved. Yet, the impact of poverty on women was acute, it is revealed at the time of marriage.

Marriage is a liability. For marriage, money is necessary. In the novel, The Road Rukmani’s brother suggested the idea of the exchange of brides. “The exchange of brides between two families occurs mainly in communities in which two families with girls or boys of marriageable age cannot get them married due to a high bride - price or dowry. Such an exchange of brides does away with bride-price or dowry payment” (Singh 53). Anyhow, the marriage of a girl was determined by possession of money.
Without consulting the partners, parents arranged marriages at the early stage. Child marriage was common in the society. Anand condemns this practice in the novel Seven Summers (SS): “It was the custom to betroth children at seven or eight” (58). Love marriage, intercaste marriage or inter religion marriage was not accepted by the family. For a better future girl’s parents must be ready to give dowry. Similarly girl’s parents expected jewels from the boy’s side. Bride price was common in the society. It was a prestigious issue. “The relationship between husband and wife was considered as complementary and supplementary. Father was then lord and master only in name” (SS 72). But in reality mother took decision. She managed the family in all circumstances.

The Indian women, maybe the deciding authority behind the screen but they are economically deprived and racially discriminated. Hence they became the victims of social exploitation. Caste system, gender bias, religious hypocrisy, traditions and superstitions restricted the freedom of Indian women. The qualities traditionally admired in a Hindu woman are modesty, shyness and self-effacement. Bhatt, in the book, History of the Ancient Indian Ritual lists a number of customs:

1. Womanly Reserve – In mixed company especially in the presence of strangers, a Hindu woman will keep herself modestly in the background and not participate freely in conversation. This, of course, does not apply to situations among family and close associates.

2. Walking behind One’s Husband

3. Serving at meals – Serving the men first

4. Chaperoning – Always be accompanied when she leaves the home. Living alone, too, is unusual.
5. Women in Public- improper for women to speak with strangers,
6. Drinking alcohol or smoking in public are interpreted as a sign of moral laxity

Behaviour of a traditional Hindu women at the time of guests visiting the house is also mentioned in the above book. Close friends can visit at any time without being announced. Always a refreshing drink is served. If the lady of the house was alone and a male visitor would come to see her husband, it is not proper for her to invite him in to expect to enter. Rather, he will leave a message and depart.

Indians spend money on ceremonies related to marriage, purificatory ceremonies and death. Daughters do not have the responsibility of taking care of her mother’s family after marriage as they did not have economic independence. Getting money from a married daughter was not to be welcome. Further “a Hindu mother-in-law would not eat from the house of her son-in-law” (OWC 249). All these were not rules but the customs, they followed and as a result they suffered.

Gender Bias was existing in the society. So women were not allowed to move freely and fearlessly. Traditional rules were imposed on women. After marriage daughter should not come alone to her (parent’s) house. The advice of the parents to the daughter who arrived in her misfortunes is: “You might have sent us a message!...Or your husband could have brought you!” (OWC 108) Even, in this adversity, wife and mother-in-law give him respect. They do not utter the name. Wife addressed her husband as ‘they’ (OWC 118) “Women do not utter the name of elders” (MF 43). Girls were taught to give respect to the elders, especially husband’s
family. Even before marriage parents prepared the daughter by giving advice from traditional mythologies.

Society fixed the role models to the girls to keep the unity of the family. Gradually, the joint family system was declined in the modern society. Men demanded their individual shares in the joint property of the family, only after marriage. “Legal heirs prefer to have their individual shares in family property instead of holding it as joint property of the family. The rise of individualism in modern societies has hastened the decline of joint family system” (Prasad 11). Unfortunately, for the disintegration of family, daughters-in-law were criticized.

Even for the natural biological features women were condemned. At the time of menstruation women were treated like untouchables. If they were polluted they have to spend money for the ceremonies to purify. “Women are tabooed during menstruation and are debarred from attending festivals” (Thakur 7). The enmity between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law did not end. Widow’s presence was considered as inauspicious. Women wearing ‘head cloth’ (MF 5) were considered as modest and it is traditional to follow the advice of elders. If they ignore they will have to face the consequences.

Through the skillful use of mythology Anand insists that all mythologies and religions and traditions are only for the welfare of human beings. “Intellectually, he wants the Indian women to shake off their slavery and achieve liberation, but he also expresses his instinctive affinity with the traditional values of Indian womanhood, which he depicts in golden light” (Rajan 178). Anand asserts, through his novels, in the name of tradition, women should not be exploited.
Anand’s characters became the victims of economic, social and racial exploitation. As colonization led to the racial exploitation of Indians, it affected the economic and social life of Indians. All these are intermingled. It cannot be viewed separately. To find out the solutions for these exploitations they are analysed separately in the following chapters.

Due to monsoon failure they could not get profit from agriculture. In those days women had to spend time in cooking, fetching water, and collecting fuel. Now, modern technologies lessen the physical burden of women. On the whole, despite the various attempts by the government, the main problems of Indian women like malnutrition, lack of health awareness, lack of education, inequality, difference in wages, lack of power, liabilities in marriage, rape and the way of dressing are existing.

Government spend a lot of money for the establishment of schools in rural areas. Educated women became economically independent and had self respect. After the advent of Multinational companies, educated women were working in the night shifts with confidence and courage. They did not accept the prolonged social and religious taboos. For the empowerment of women mass media plays vital role in arousing the conscience of men and women. Due to globalization and the development of telecommunication women get more job opportunities in India and abroad.

Developments of modern technology give scope for the empowerment of women. Legal amendments for women have changed the condition of women. National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme helps the poor in villages. Through Self Help Groups women get loans from the banks to improve their business. Yet the status of women in villages needs care as the source of income was less. To improve the income of women, it is necessary to analyse the economic exploitation of women from Pre-independence to modern period.