STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA

The Indian society like a number of classical societies was patriarchal. Patriarchal values regulating sexuality, reproduction and social production prevailed and were expressed through specific cultural metaphors. Overt rules prohibiting women from specific activities and denying certain rights did exist. But more subtle expression of patriarchy was through symbolism giving messages of inferiority of women through legends highlighting the self-sacrificing, self sacrificing pure image of women and through the ritual practices which day in and day out emphasized the dominant role of a women as a faithful wife and devout mother.

The basic rules for women’s behavior as expressed in the Laws of Manu insist that a woman must constantly worship her husband as a god, even though his destitute of virtue or a womanizer. Women should be kept in dependence by her husband because by nature they are passionate and disloyal. The ideal women are those who do not strive to break these bonds of control. The salvation and happiness of women revolve around their virtue and chastity as daughters, wives and widows. This theme has been reiterated by the recurrent symbolism of seed and the earth. Man provides the seed, the essence for the creation of the offspring; the seed determines the kind: the child’s identity is derived from the father for the group placement. The role of the mother is just to receive the seed and through her own blood provide warmth and nourishment and help it to grow. Renowned anthropologist Leela Dube while referring to this symbolism comments: “One of the most significant aspects of the symbolism is how the two partners are situated in the process or reproduction. In his body man has the seed; the woman, on the other hand is herself the field..” The two partners are not on par with one another in so far as the process of
reproduction is concerned. The offspring belongs to the one to whom the seed belongs. In fact he also owns the field. Very sinister implication of this symbolism is that the man is the lord master owner, or provider. A daughter or a wife is a commodity or a possession.

Besides such symbolism relegating woman to a lower position there are rituals and practices for a woman which reinforce her role a devout wife is a doting mother. Women perform a large number of the yearly calendrical rites. These rites seek the protection and well-being of crucial kinsman (especially husband, brother and son) the general prosperity and health of family members. Men’s rites are not concerned with having good wives or one who will have a long life.

Further, the ideal women of Indian mythology who have been extolled as paragons of virtue like Sita, Savitri, Draupadi, Damyanti etc., are women who have been dutiful truthful chaste, self-sacrificing women of unswerving wifely devotion whatever the temptation. The legends associated with them consistently refer to their purity and selfless attachment to their consorts. At one place wives have been mentioned as restraining all their sense and keeping their hearts under complete control; they regard their husbands as veritable gods. For women neither sacrifices nor sraddh as (penances) are of any efficacy. By serving their husbands only, can they win heaven. This ideal gets re-enforced thoroughly numerous myths and legends. One important point in understanding the value structure in Indian society is the dual concept of the female in Hindu philosophy: On the on hand woman is fertile, benevolent bestowed of prosperity, on the other hand she is considered aggressive malevolent and destructive. This dual character manifests self in the goddesses also as there are dangerous aggressive malevolent goddesses like Kali and Durga; there are equally important goddesses like Laxmi, Saraswati and Mariamman who are benevolent. Veena Das while analyzing the
The anthropological meaning of prevalence of the worship of goddesses, draws attention to the fact that in Shakti form the goddess usually stands alone had is not encompassed with a higher male principle. She add: “The principle of power fins expression in the goddesses who represent shakti who come to the aid of man and gods in period of cosmic darkness, by killing the demon who threaten the entire cosmic order. The principle of renunciation on the other hand, finds expression in the ideals of sati.

This duality is confusing and attempts are made to explain it Susan Wadley for instance, considers that there is a cultural logic in this concepts. She says “The female is first of all shakti (energy/power) the energizing principle of the universe. The female is also prakriti (Nature) the undifferentiated Matter of the Universe.” She further adds, “Uniting these two facets of femaleness, women are both energy/power and nature and nature is uncultured… uncultured power is dangerous”. Romila Thapar in this quality sees both contempt and fear. The latter doubtless derived from fear of pollution since women were regarded as impure of many occasions. Sushi Kakkar, while studying the inner world of an Indian child, harps upon the intimate relationship between the mother and the son. Wherein for the son, wherein for the son the mother’s original perfection remains untarnished by reality a part of the iconography of Hindu inner world. He remarks, “in the case of a Hindu woman, at least in the imagery of the culture, maternal feelings of tenderness and nurturance occur in combination with a profound gratitude and the readiness for a poignantly high emotional investment in the child.

The value structure by presenting the dual character of woman seems to have been successful in creating a myth that Indian woman possesses power, which is far from the position in readily. This whole concept is still unclear and needs more exploration.
However, it is a very valuable concept in understanding the seemingly high and really inferior position of women in India.

In order to properly estimate the position of women in ancient society, a brief reference to the stratificatory system as expressed through varna and caste system is necessary. The Varna principle of categorization of society into four groups, viz, Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras existed in Vedic society. The four varnas are mentioned in order of hierarchy wherein the first three are called dwija, i.e. twice-born while the Shudras occupy the lowest position in the society and they are expected to serve the other three varnas.

Brahmans occupy ritually and ideologically the top position of power and authority. The principle of stratification acquired normative significance, thus legitimizing the over-lordship of the Brahmans. The varna scheme were empirically expressed through various caste groups, indicating the adjustment of the system to the development needs of the society. A good deal of controversy about the caste system centers around its origin. Scholars are divided in their opinions with regard to the emergence of a stratificatory system which has such a powerful hold on both religious and secular activities of the Indian even today. The most popular and widely prevalent theory traces the origin to the Aryan invasion of India and links it to be process by which the invaders could sub-ordinate the indigenous inhabitants and integrate them as peasants and slaves in a stratified society. Thus the ‘twice-born’ castes are descendants from the non-Aryans.
Position of Women in India: An Overview

The status of women in India has been a chequered one as it has seen many ups and downs. In the Vedic age, they were worshipped as goddesses. In the Muslim age, their status suffered a sharp decline and in the British regime they were looked down upon as “Slaves of Slaves”. Since independence the tide seems to have gone in their favour. There is no denying the fact that women in India have made some progress, may be because of the social legislation, the progress made in the fields of education, health or economic or as a result of Technological very small numbers, we find engineers, pilots, journalists, teachers, administrators, judges including a woman judge in he Supreme Court, State Governors, ambassadors, members of parliament and ministers. We have a women prime minister and a president of the U.N. Assembly. In spite of these achievements, the fact remains that the women’s condition is a grim reality. Though concern is being expressed for her emancipation in every field, economic independence is of paramount importance. Efforts are on to ensure that she is economically not dependent of anyone. But these efforts have hardly been of any help. The woman is now burdened with two kinds of Jobs-her work within the house and the job outside. She does not find any free time to enjoy the fruits of her economic independence. Not only have that in many cases she is the custodian of her salary till she arrives homed. Her salary later becomes a part of the total development of the woman the awareness about her rights and responsibilities, the recognition of her role and the work that she does at home. If necessary the social system must change so that the woman does not have to ask for concessions.

The year 1990 was observed as the year of the girl child. Her well-being and her status in the family, the community and the nation may be the focal points of concern.
Perhaps there may be an increasing awareness that the girl child is also human being with her thoughts, emotions, aspirations, will and individuality of her own. In fact, the post . Independence period, particularly in the case of women, has been a continuation of pre-independence era of social reforms, economic uplift and political recognition. The struggle for equality, Justice, Parity between women and men and for their identity continues.

The social reforms, which began in the 19th century, set in motion a number of legal measures with a view to improving the conditions of women. The laws thus enacted, among others, related to infanticide, child marriage, widow remarriage, sati etc. This even though was a step forward and an enabling factor in the development of women, the law could not achieve the desired results. For in the case of social legislation it is also imperative to have a change in the outlook, in the perception of women’s role and support service. All these have been very slow to come by; consequently, even after more than a century of social reforms, the change, though discernible, is far from being indicative of parity between men and women.

The overview of the situation generally is distressing. Rape, dowry deaths, misuses of the tests to determine the sex of the child in the womb and the termination of pregnancy in the event of a female fetus is given an indication of the horrible behaviour patterns. In recent years the Government has taken a number of steps to correct the wrong that is done to the girl child. We have the report of the committee on the status of women, the women’s year followed by the women’s decade, women’s departments, national perspective plan for women, and the inclusion of aspirate chapter on women’s development in the 7th plan and now the national commission. All These measures show the concern for women.
The women have yet to travel a long way before they can be equated with men. Employment and income generating production programme was stated in 1982-83 to train women belonging to weaker sections of society and provide them employment on sustained basis. It is implemented through public sector undertaking/corporations/autonomous bodies/voluntary organizations. Assistance for the programme comes from Norwegian Agency for International Development (NORAD).

The concept and organization of self-help group (SHG) has been described as an illustration for understanding. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) by organizing SHGs, facilitate a ‘silent sustainable grass-root revolution’ for ameliorating the lives of the rural poor, particularly women.

**Women in Indian Society**

There are a number of images of Indian women, sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory. She is revered as a Goddess; but at the same time, her birth is not much preferred. She is considered as an embodiment of Sakti, but at the same time she is considered as one to be protected all through in her life-by father, husband and son respectively. She is worshipped as a Goddess but instances of treating her as slave are not unknown. She is honoured as a mother and loved as a child. But as a wife and of one’s own age group, for example, a friend or a colleague, the attitude is not always positive or friendly. At times, general comments on entire women-folk irrespective of age and accomplishments are not unknown. While the reverential feelings exist at ideological level, she is socially treated as inferior and is assigned discriminatory values.

Women, form about half of the population of the country, but their situation has been grim. For centuries, they have been deliberately denied opportunities of growth in the name of religion and socio-cultural practices. Before independence, women were prey
to many abhorrent customs, traditional rigidities and vices due to which their status in the society touched its nadir and their situation was all-round bleak. At the personal social plan, women were victims of widespread illiteracy, segregation in the dark and dingy rooms in the name of purdah, forced child marriage, indeterminable widowhood, rigidity of fidelity and opposition to remarriage of widows turning many of them into prostitutes, polygamy, female infanticide, violence and force to follow SATI and the complete denial of individuality. Besides, the economic dependence, early tutelage of husbands and in-laws, heavy domestic work-load which remained unpaid and unrecognized, absence of career and mobility, no-recognition of their economic contribution, poor work-conditions and wages and monotonous jobs which men generally refused to do was also responsible for their pitiable conditions. At the socio-politically plan women suffered from the denial of freedom even in their homes, repression and unnatural indoctrination, unequal and inferior status, rigid caste hierarchy and untouchability. Consequently, most women were reduced to dumb cattle and had lead to inhuman beastly life. During pre-independent India nationalist movement led by Mahatma Gandhi strived to achieve equality for women. Women were Gandhi’s ‘last persons’ whose tears he wanted to wipe and without their liberation, he thought the country’s independence was superficial. The Fundamental Rights and Directive principles enshrined in the Constitution are the instruments to attain the national objectives of equality, liberty and justice. By these objectives, the Constitution abolished all discriminations flowing from sex, caste, creed, colour and place of birth. Women were placed at par with men in all respects. Women’s sacrifices of pre-independence days were rewarded by the Fundamental Rights of equality between both the sexes. The Constitution of India had not only provided equal rights and privileges to both men and women, but has also gone a step further to make provisions
for special measures to be undertaken by the Government to improve the conditions of women by enacting laws and establishing separate institutions. Thus, the Constitution has once for all settled the position of women in society. This recognition of political equality of women was a radical departure from socio-cultural norms prevailing in the country.

The status of women is intimately connected with their economic status which in turn, depends upon rights, roles and opportunities for the participation in economic activities. The economic status of women is now accepted as an indicator of a society’s stage of development. However, all developments do not result in improving women’s economic activities. Pattern of women’s activities are affected by prevailing social ideology and are also linked with the stage of economic development. Undoubtedly, the scope of women’s career has expanded during last forty years.

Women, throughout the country and more so in Uttar Pradesh are very inadequately participating in the development process. They are the recipients of an iniquitously small share of development opportunities. Their access to education, nutrition, health care, skill formation, jobs and decision making is very limited. Many customs cause them harassment. Wage discrimination and gender bias are both visible and widespread. Generally they are employed in low paid, low producing sectors, despite a lot of laws enacted for conceptualizing the equal status of women.

After Independence many steps have been taken to improve the lot of women. Many laws have also been passed. A National Commission on Women was setup to act as a watchdog on the matters concerning women in 1992. Many Programmes in the areas of education, health and employment have been initiated for development of women, rural as well as urban.
Women in India are subject to discrimination not just on the basis of gender but on the basis of numerous other factors such as caste, community, religious affiliation and class. India's caste system involves a social hierarchy and is a feature of Hinduism. People are born into a caste where they remain throughout their lives. Keer (1936), compared the Hindu society with a tower "which have several stories without a ladder or an entrance" in which one "was to die in the storey in which one was born". On the basis of broad caste categories (Varnas), the caste groups can be separated according to occupation. Outside these categories are the "untouchables" or dalits whose occupations like - sweepers, tanners - were viewed as "polluting" and who are subject to segregation. Ambedkar interpreted caste as a dysfunctional, disintegrative and undesirable institution. Ambedkar was of the view that in order to maintain the so-called purity and sacredness, the caste Hindus not only maintained physical and social distance with the untouchables and other backward classes, but they also developed different prescriptions and proscriptions which these caste were forced to follow. They were forced to lead a pitiable life and debarred from following the culture and tradition of higher castes. Those who dared to go through the process of what Srinivas called 'Sanskritisation' had to face rough weather Ambedkar (1936) criticized the socialists and their view points toward the caste system. According to him, we cannot understand social relations in India on the basis of economic relations. There are about hundreds and thousands of Sadhus and Fakirs. We have so many religious places. We believe in the cycle of birth and death. Hence, if we have to understand India, we must take into account these undercurrents. He opined that without having social reformation, which includes withering away of the caste system and untouchability, we cannot think of economic reformation Keer (1981) said "caste is the cause of the downfall of the Hindus. Owning to the caste system the Hindu's life has
been a life of continuous defeats. Caste has made the Hindus the sick men of India. Caste has ruined the Hindu race and has destroyed, demoralised and devitalized the Hindu society". The only way to improve and reform them is to reject the existence of the caste system. This is not possible because for the Caste Hindu, Caste and religion are more important than the people and the society.

Most of those belonging to dalit communities are expected to stay in the profession they are born into and overall, members of dalit and adivasi communities are less well educated than their non-dalit counterparts. About 75 per cent of dalits live below poverty line. Economic backwardness of dalits is mostly due to injustice done to them by the high castes and also due to exploitation. From the time immemorial dalit women worked like slaves, sold as commodities resulting in their social discrimination, economic deprivation and educational backwardness. Literacy levels among dalit women are among the lowest levels of literacy of all groups in India (in rural areas, only ten per cent are literate). Till recently, many dalit women were ill-treated and educationally backward inspite of the facilities of free education. Their low level of literacy is due to three interrelated factors:

1. Continued monopolization of state, economic, cultural and other resources by middle and upper class groups;

2. The stronger influence of casteism in rural areas on dalit women; and

3. The control of dalit men over dalit women and girls. As a result of which, dalit women’s access to even basic literacy or education is limited.

Nearly ninety per cent of Dalit women are in rural; most of them are landless or marginal farmers who live in abject poverty with grinding labour. Many work as coolies, or day-to-day manual workers without much returns. Their economic situation has
worsened due to the overall deteriorating rural economic conditions as a result of the New Economic Policy. So too, the deterioration and privatization of common forest resources on which many Dalit women depend for survival. Water and fuel scarcity have a direct influence on Dalit girls' access to education.

Dalit women are the target of government population programmes and female literacy is viewed as part of this strategy, in other government programmes and schemes for rural and urban women, it is other backward castes (OBCs), middle and upper Hindu caste women who derive most of the benefits dalit women are left out with few exception. In all cases of caste conflict Dalit women are the first victims. Dalit women are invisible in school curricula and text books. Poverty, the root cause of many social problems compels most rural Dalit parents to send their children to work rather than to school. Many Dalit parents consider education for girls as a luxury, pointing out that it is expensive and later on there is lack of gainful employment opportunities. For example, Dalit women's participation in the organized sector is negligible. However, many parents also feel that education beyond the primary level of girls will affect their household management. Infant mortality due to neglect and malnutrition is very high. Among the several factors the gender division of labour, child marriage and restricted mobility also limit Dalit women's access to education. These factors directly contribute to a high dropout rate among dalit girls especially at the secondary school level and higher. Dropout and non-enrollment is also due to other factors including the lack of childcare facilities in rural areas, cooking, cleaning and other domestic chores; employment as child labourers to supplement the family income; education and marriage of siblings; and above all the attitudes of parents and the Dalit community. Fear of alienation of girls from their environment as a result of education is yet another factor for low literacy level
among Dalit girls. Even if the education improves the marriage prospects of the girls, the minus point is the increase in dowry. Therefore, many parents wish to withdraw their girls from schools.

The present scenario seems to be better with reference to the rate of literacy among dalits. The literacy rate is 31.48 per cent for boys and 10.93 per cent for girls. In rural areas, Dalit girls need the assistance of government and other welfare organizations. In many Dalit associations executive positions are occupied by male members whereas very poor representation is made by women. There is an urgent need to get a feedback about the welfare schemes where lot of money is allocated for the development of Dalits. The funds are not properly utilized for their development. Many of the schemes go unnoticed because they are not popularized properly.

The coaching programme conducted by the government for Dalit women are beneficial in training many women to compete in the competitive exams. These programmes do not reach the needy Dalit women, because they are cornered by the very few creamy Dalit women. This needs to be monitored and schemes should be designed in such a way so that it is evenly distributed. The benefits should be directed towards the most deprived and constantly struggling Dalit women.

Because these Dalit women are neglected by socially advanced communities and also by the better off among the Dalits, which leads to an unhealthy socio-economic condition. There should be some scientific basis to pick up the poorest and they should be equipped with facilities. There are some pre-examination coaching centers offering training for Dalits which are doing good service. They are training them in vocational line for competitive exams, in medical and engineering field, railway recruitment boards,
bank recruitment etc. These services also need to be checked so that they reach the poorest deserving dalit women so as to make optimum use of the services.