CHAPTER IV

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIAN SOCIETY

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4.1 Introduction

In most of the human societies, social differentiation between the sexes, the male and female existed and in majority of them women were assigned an inferior position. In recent times in the socialist societies equality of status has been assigned to women, but it is often legal than existential. Thus women accounting for nearly one half of the human population live in perpetual subordination to the other half the men.

Women are considered primarily as reproducers although they invented agriculture and produce about fifty percent of world’s food. Their role as producers is acknowledged but it is viewed as a transferable role.” It seems that, the indispensability of women as reproducers of human societies has become an instrument of their enslavement”

Pregnancy is viewed as a period of physical disability. “The dependency period of a human infant is one of the longest and the women have to bear the brunt of it. These biologically anchored but culturally reinforced feminine roles gave birth to the argument that human biogrammer is geared to sexual division of labour in society.” During the early stages of human society, hunting was an important economic activity and protection of the
community from external aggression, was the most important political activity, was monopoly of men, a result man’s aggressive and dominating traits got reinforced. As genetic change is slower as compared to cultural change, the male and female biogrammer continued even in modern societies.

In the modern industrial societies the status of women deteriorated still further. According to Marx the distinction can be explained in terms of values. Values are of two types, use values and exchange values. In pre-modern societies men and women performed different tasks to produce for subsistence, hence both were producers of use values. As specialization in work took place and production became market oriented, men started producing most for selling and they became producers of exchange value, while women continued to be the producers of use value. The distinction between work and employment became clear. Although women worked at home but they were not paid for it, hence they were considered unemployed. The terms “working women” and “mere housewife” indicate the importance attached to work outside home and insignificance of work done at home. Thus man as the main producer of exchange values was called “bread-winner” and woman despite the lot of work being done at home was given the status of “dependent”.
Overtime man’s status came to be related to production and that of woman to reproduction. As the former gained power and privilege in the process, women experienced erosion of these. It is against this background that the importance given by women’s liberation movements to equality of opportunity in economic participation and political decision making process by women should be viewed.

4.2 The Social Framework

In order to understand the status of women in India we have to study the problem in socio-cultural context. Our ancient holy literature, such as Rigveda shows evidence that, women are fully the equals of men as regards to access to and capacity for the highest knowledge, even the knowledge of the absolute Brahma. The brahmavadinis were products of educational discipline of brahmacharya, for which women were also eligible. The Rigveda refers to young girls completing their education as brahmacharinis and then gaining husbands, in whom they were merged like rivers in the ocean. The Yajurveda also states that a daughter who has completed her bramhacharya should be married to one who is similarly learned. The Atharvaveda also refers to maidens qualifying by brahmacharya, the disciplined Life of studentship, fit for married life in the second ashram i.e. Grihastha ashram. The Upanishad also emphasizes that, the men and women were equal participants of knowledge.
Rigvedic society was based on monogamy and was patriarchal. The Institution of monogamy is the recognition of the high social status of women. The Brihadaranya Upanishad mentions a ritual by which a person prays for the birth of a daughter to him, who should be Pandita or learned lady. The Grihya – Sutras mention how wife uttered Vedic Mantras, along with her husband at religious ceremonies, Jaimini’s Purva – Mimansa also deals with the equal rights of men and women to the performance of the highest religious ceremonies.

As the society got much more settled and was not subjected to the pressure of continuous invasion, the position of women became subject to deterioration.

The majority religion in India, Hinduism assigned a lower status to women. The ancient law giver Manu prescribed, “A women must never be independent”. The life of an ideal Hindu wife is to be spent in the service of her husband, she ought to be a “pativrata”. A Hindu women was expected to be an obedient daughter, faithful wife and devoted mother. Marriage was the single important event in her life and it took place soon after puberty. Thus child marriage came to be a norm which implied that, young girls were not involved in decision making process of selecting their husbands. The custom
of Sati, the proscription of widow remarriage even when she is widowed as a child, the insistence on dowry etc. rendered a Hindu women a non-person. In addition prohibition of inter religious and inter-caste marriages compelled some women into prostitution or commit suicide.

Indian protestant religions like Jainism, Buddhism, Veershaivism, and Sikhism under took reform movements to improve the conditions of women. However, the status of women continued to be similar to that in Hinduism. The Hindu code Bill and the Constitution consider these religious groups as Hindus, hence, the same civil code is applicable to them.

Islam religion in theory accepted social equality to men and women but does not allow women to have equal participation in religious field. Islamic marriage is a contract, still it does not give equal rights to men and women, polygamy is allowed and easy divorce is granted to the husband only. The middle class Muslim Women are not allowed to participate in social activities and they are expected to observe pardah especially while moving in the streets. Most of Muslims in India are patrilineal except the Mopla Muslims in Kerala and Lakshadweep.

Classical Christianity does not accept equality to women but it emphasizes monogamy and nuclear family, which ultimately results in freedom of
women, and individuality. Indian Christian women are still not given
equality in the religious matters and property rights. Thus the position of
women in India has remained subordinate to men. In general female child is
less wanted and less cared as compared to the male child. The girl is given
secondary position in the household, in respect of food, dress, schooling,
healthcare etc. They are rarely assigned outdoor responsibility. The type of
education, subjects selected, occupations projected as desirable to them lead
to reinforcement of an inferiority complex among them.

“Indian daughter is not served from the company of her mother and the
other women in the household, although like her brothers, she continues to
be cared for by her mother, albeit more casually than before, as she gradually
learns to be like her mother by taking care of herself as well as the other
younger children in the family. Late childhood also marks the beginning of
an Indian girl’s deliberate training for how to be a good women, and hence
the conscious inculcation of culturally designated feminine roles. She learns
that the virtues of womanhood, which will take her through life, are
submission and docility as well as skill and grace in various household
tasks”.  

However, female culture as reflected in ballads, wedding songs and
jokes, women tend to react against the discrimination of their culture by
describing men as vain, faithless and childlike. All these factors help to
reduce the damage to a girl’s self esteem when she realizes that she is
considered inferior to a boy which she discovers when she becomes aware of
gender identity in the late childhood.  

It is often said that the inherent strength of a society, a culture and a system
is judged by the way its women are treated and the role assigned to them by the society. The great socio-religious revolutionary saint, Swami Vivekananda stated that, the country which had no respect for woman-hood could never become great. He said, “If you do not raise the woman who is but the living embodiment of the Divine Mother, do not think that there is any other way for nation to rise”.

To speak of gender equality is to speak about the world where ideal situation
would be that both men and women are treated equal in all respects. Although the Indian religion and philosophy consider womanhood nearer to divinity and our religious scriptures assign respectable position of pride and honour to a woman and womanhood has been worshiped with high respect in our history, still in reality this contemplated equality has remained a myth. Gender equality is an important issue of human rights and social justice not only in India but also in the world as a whole. It has been recognized that efforts to promote gender equality between men and women can along contribute to the overall development of human society, despite this consciousness and greater awareness of the role of women; they are treated
equal to men in any society. Consequently women continue to suffer from various deprivations.

4.3 **The Political Context**

The status of women towards the last part of the British rule in India i.e. in the first quarter of 19th Century, some remarkable social changes took place. Law relating to Abolition of Sati in 1829, suppression of Female Infanticide etc., were the steps taken towards liberation of women. Introduction of English as a medium of education provided a gateway to the changing ideas of Western liberalization and democracy, based on the ideals of individual freedom, liberty and secularism. The social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, M.G. Ranade Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekanand, Dr. Anne Besant, Sister Nivedita contributed significantly to the social reform movement in India, and aimed at liberating women by fighting against social evils like sati, purdah, child marriage, female infanticide, prevention of widow remarriage, devadasi system etc.

The Indian nationalist movement under Gandhiji’s leadership contributed towards a significant change in the prevailing attitude towards women. Thousands of men and women both from rural and urban areas joined the Non-co-operation Movement in 1921 and Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 in response to the call of Gandhiji and faced police and prisons. The
All India Women Conference was formed in 1927 which was an important milestone in the march of women towards equality. A series of laws like Child marriage Restraint Act, Hindu Women’s Right to Property, Widow Remarriage Act and several other laws regulating the fixation of working hours and working conditions were passed. This provided an opportunity for the women to participate in politics and several other fields. 8

The charter of the United Nations signed in San Francisco in 1945, was the first international agreement to proclaim gender equality as a fundamental human right. “Since then the organization has helped to create a historic legacy of internationally agreed strategies, standards and programmes and goals to advance the status of women world wide” 9

For the advancement of women, the plan of action has been on forefronts. These are, promotion of legal measures; mobilization of public opinion, and international action; training and research including the compilation of gender wise statistics and direct assistance to disadvantaged groups etc. “To day the central organizing principle of the work of the United Nations is that,” No enduring solution to society’s most threatening social and economic problems can be found without full participation and empowerment of the world’s women on an equal footing with that of men in all spheres, including governance, administration and political process.
Indian Independence in 1947 has marked a major step in the march towards improvement of social status of women and also in the process of development of women. As India emerged as a Sovereign Democratic Republic in 1950, it provided a strong judicial base to the status of women at par with men in the male dominated society. The constitution of India which came into effect on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1950, guaranteed to every citizen men or women, some basic Fundamental Rights which emphasized “equality of status and of opportunities and also enumerated the principles of welfare state in its Directive principles, of state policy. The Part III of the constitution includes Articles 14, 15 and 16(2) 21, 23 39(a), 39(d), 39(e) etc. prescribe equal treatment for both men and women in all economic and social activities including educational and cultural activities. The Directive principles as enumerated in part IV of the Indian Constitution provide the base for equality of women in India.

United Nations’ adoption of Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1948 provided for legal equality of sexes in Article 2, had also its impact on woman development. 10

In the year 1967 the United Nations delegation of Human Rights postulated the principle of equality of men and women and advocated its universal
recognition in law by all countries as an absolute and necessity. It was expected that countries should assume equal rights to men and women, because denial of such rights to half of the humanity across the world would amount to injustice and also it would be incompatible with human dignity, political stability and social homogeneity. As Indian Government is a party to the Declaration of 1967, it has also committed to the ideal of eradication of gender discrimination in all its forms including political discrimination.

Indian Government enacted several progressive laws such as Hindu Marriage, and Succession Act 1956, Right to inheritance Act, Hindu Women’s Right to property Act 1973, Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act 1971, Dowry prohibition Act, Family Court Act 1984 etc. aimed at bringing about significant changes in the status and privileges leading to legal empowerment of women. The passing of Muslim women’s protection of Rights and Divorced Act 1986 was a step in the direction of improving the status of Muslim Women also.

The year 1975 was adopted as the international women’s year. At the same time the First World conference on women was held in Mexico City, which emphasized equality; development and peace. The decade 1976 – 1985 was observed as the United Nations decade for women development and the entire member nations were expected to take necessary steps for promoting
the status of women. In the year 1979, the United Nations adopted the convention for elimination of all forms of Discrimination against women (CEDAW). An International Bill of Rights for women came into operation in 1981. The second world conference on women was held in Copenhagen in 1980, which adopted & programme of Action for women in the world. The third World Conference on Women was held in 1985 at Nairobi. The main outcome of the conference was, the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for Advancement of the women to the year 2000. This provided a framework for action to be taken at the national, regional and international levels for promoting development of women. The Fourth World conference on women was held in 1995 at Beijing in China. It provided a platform for Action focusing on human rights for women and to adopt gender perspective in all levels of planning for achieving gender equality. Thus all these developments at the international level and plans of action taken by the United Nations contributed significantly towards development of women all over the world.

The Government of India established the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) in 1953, during the First Five year plan, as its part of constitutional obligation and policy priorities to promote welfare of women and to protect the social and economic interests of the women living in adverse conditions. Establishment of this board is an indication of intention of the government
for a community development and social welfare approach to women’s problems. The need of organizing and uniting women workers led to the formation of women groups or Mahila Mandals throughout India for promoting the welfare and achieving development of rural and under privileged women. In order to achieve the same objective at the state level, The State Social Welfare Advisory Boards (SSWAB) was setup in 1954-55 in various states. It helped in promoting functional coordination and to strengthen linkages with the Central Social Board at the apex level and women organizations and voluntary agencies at the grass root level. The other steps taken by the government include strengthening of women workers organizations, and emphasizing equal pay for equal work, maternity benefit and providing crèches for children; the state government focused on promoting women’s education as a major welfare strategy, and health programmes related to nutrition, family planning and child welfare and promoting literacy among women.

The Government of India had appointed the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) which concluded in its report that, women as a group have been adversely affected by the process of economic transformation. There was also a debate in Parliament. According to the recommendations of the committee, the National Plan of Action was worked out in 1976, which provided guidelines for development strategies based on
United Nations world plan of action for women. The plan identified important areas like health, family planning, nutrition, education, employment, legislation, social welfare etc. for the formulating action programmes for women. At the same time the Women Welfare and Development Bureau was set up under the Ministry of Social Welfare to coordinate policies and programmes for the development of women community. The Government of India appointed a Working Group on Employment of Women. The group studied in details the impact of development of women and emphasized development of women rather than welfare of women. The Seventh Five Year Plan (1985 – 90) stressed the need for equality and empowerment of women and for integrating them into the main stream of national development. There was also an emphasis on awareness about their rights and privileges, training for undertaking economic activities and providing employment opportunities for women.

In order to accelerate the pace of development of women, the Government of India, created a separate department in 1985 named “Department of Women and Child Welfare”. The department functions as a national nodal agency and is in charge of planning and executing various programmes for women and also monitors other programmes related to women in other departments and Ministries, both at the national and state levels. In addition Women Development Corporations were established in various states during 1986-
87, as plan priorities. These corporations are in charge of coordinating and monitoring women specific schemes and programmes especially those for the development of economically backward women”. They were setup in different states to take up various issues related to women, such as dowry, divorce, atrocities on women etc.

The Government of India thus created Institutional framework under plan priorities for the development of women and also introduced special schemes for women to be implemented throughout the country. In 1987 “Support to Training and Employment Programme (STEP) was launched for upgradation of skill, training and providing subsequent opportunities for the economically backward women, Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) was created in 1993 to meet out the needy of small loans and credit of poor, Rural Water Supply Programme (RWSP) and Minimum Needs Programme (MNP) which had special importance for women in rural areas having problems of drinking water. Other agencies such as ‘Council for Advancement of people’s Action and Rural Teaching (CAPART) are working for providing aid through institutional arrangements. The National Prospective plan for women (1988-2000) led to the setting up of State Women Development Corporations in various states of India.
The Eighth Plan promised to ensure that benefit of development from different sectors do not bypass women. “The Rashtriya Mahila Kosh” (RMK) was set up in 1993 to meet the credit needs of poor and assetless women. The initial amount allotted for the Fund was Rs. 310 million which later on was increased to Rs. 1000 million, so as to reach the demand of poor women in the country. Since its inception the RMK has sanctioned and disbursed Rs. 1544 million and 1182 million respectively, to about 5 Lakhs poor women beneficiaries through 1130 NGOS. The Nineth Plan made two significant changes in strategy of planning for women. Firstly, empowerment of women became the primary objective and secondly the attempt was to be made for the convergence of existing services, available in both, women specific and women related sectors.

The World Bank describes the picture of Women’s Status in India as under:

“Women are a vital part of the Indian economy, constituting, one-third of the national labour force and a major contributor to the survival of the family.” The poorer the family, the greater its dependence on women’s income. Despite progress in several key indicators, a gender analysis of most social and economic data demonstrates that women in India continue to be relatively disadvantages in matters of survival, health, nutrition, literacy and productivity.
More than 90 percent of rural women in India are unskilled, restricting them to low paid occupations. Women generally have no control over land and other productive assets, which largely excludes them from access to institutional credit and renders them dependent on high cost informal sources of credit to secure capital for consumption and productive purposes.

Women form the backbone of agriculture, comprising the majority of agricultural labourers in India. Gender divisions in agriculture are stark, with all activities involving manual labour assigned to women, while all operations involving machinery and drought animals are generally performed by men. Female agricultural labourers are among the poorest sections of Indian society. Agricultural wages for women are on average 30-50 percent less than those for men.  

4.4 Conclusion

Women have been successful in improving their status in India. Social workers and political and legal environment enabled them to prove themselves as an equal partner in promoting social economic and political development of the society.
CHAPTER IV
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