

WOMEN AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Change is a word universal to cosmopolitan world. Human life, societies, cultures everything undergoes change. Even in our interaction we often discuss the changes which have taken place, which took place in the past or changes which are to be expected in future. Out of all these changes taking place in society one important fact is change in the status of women in modern contemporary society. At the same time it is observed that wherever we go and on whichever part of the globe, we find that the status of women is inferior to men be it any community or culture and this fact has itself become law of nature.

Keywords: Social Change, Status of Women, Women Education, Women & Politics, Women & Employment, Challenges.

Introduction

Change: Any kind of transformation is known as change. It implies any kind of alteration with time. Change is the law of nature. Sometimes changes are planned and sometimes unplanned. Everything changes with the passage of time. What is today shall not remain the same tomorrow. So as the case with society is already there. Society is not a static process rather a dynamic entity which is subjected to incessant change. The inherent nature of society is continuous variable in nature. It takes birth, grows, matures, decays, renews and further accommodates itself according to changing scenario and undergoes vast modifications in the course of time.

Social Change: Social change may be defined as the process in which there is a variable alteration in the structure and functioning of a particular social system. It thus indicates change in social behavior, social structure and social values but the direction of change is not indicated.

It is a process which implies continuity and persistence. The system is undergoing change with time. When it is possible to measure these changes objectively, it becomes possible to predict the future model of social system. According to MacIver, "Society is a web of social relationships" which further indicates social processes, social interactions and social organization and social change indicates variation in any principal forms of social processes, interaction or organizations. In other words it means alteration, modification or variation in the structure of society. At the same time changes in the art, language, technology, philosophy, etc. may not be studied under social change which should be narrowly interpreted to mean modifications in the field of social relationships. Social relationships are social processes, social patterns and social interactions wherein variations may be referred to social change. It is a change in the institutional and normative structure of society.

Women Education and Social Change: Education of women was almost neglected in the traditional society for more than 2000 years. History witnesses evidence of the fact that denial of educational opportunities for women virtually caused the downfall of Indian women. Lack of education led to their exploitation, suppression and enslavement. The idea of giving education to women emerged during British period. The Christian Missionaries took interest in the education of girls. A girl school was started for the first time in Bombay in 1824. Lord Dalhousie also stated that education of female children would help the family to reap the benefits of other changes taking place in society. The Hunter Education of 1882 also emphasized the need of female education. Thereafter, a constant progress in the field of women education can be noticed.

The literacy percentage among females in India has increased from 0.65% in 1901, 7.0% (1941), 24.88% (1981) and 39.42% in 1991. It increased from 64% in 2001 to 65.46% in 2011. It clearly indicates that the status of Indian women has changed radically as a result of education. They are comparatively in a more respectable position now. With the expansion of women education in India and the influence of western contemporary societies the low status of women in Indian society has changed to a considerable extent. In present scenario books have developed and changed women's intelligence and depth of knowledge too. The challenges given

by educated women in social, economic, political, religious and family organization is one of the greatest challenges that society is facing in modern time. The educated women today revolts when they are denied their rights.

The society is therefore compelled to give equal rights to women in every field of life. It has to be understood that society which is a web of social relationships of which those male and female are the most intimate and stable part and among them also the females, are the most crucial part in the absence of whom society cannot perpetuate and exist. Hence the index of standards of social organization is determined on the basis of status of women which has further increased to a considerable extent in last few years as a result of modern education. The most prominent factors which has enhanced the prestige ,role reformation in the status of women are multiplicity of occupations, growing interest of the females towards education, role of social legislations, awareness among women regarding their rights, women leaders and women organizations, women movements, freedom enjoyed by women, political awakening of women and women empowerment etc. The status of women has changed to a wide extent in advanced society.

Status of Women in India

The Sociologists had described the women by propounding different perceptions. In India, history speaks that women are considered as divine force but the multi-cultured Indian society placed women at different positions. Thus there is no uniform status of women in the Indian society. However the civilization showed the overall upliftment of women's position. According to historian.¹

“Within the Indian Sub-continent there have been indefinite variations on the status of women diverging according to cultural malice, family structure, class, caste, property rights and morals.”¹

The Indian philosophy poses the Indian women with dual character. On the other hand, she is considered fertile, patient and benevolent but on the other hand, she is considered aggressor and represents shakti”.

1. Romilla Thaper, *Looking Back in History & Devuika Jain, Indian Women, Publication division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhui, 1975, p.6.*

The discussion regarding the status of women has been there since decades. It is an acknowledged fact that Indian women though are given importance in society yet their status is inferior to men. But still it is astonishing to observe that Indian women who in traditional society suffered numerous problems and setbacks for more than 2000 years are now coming out of their shells and preparing themselves to make use of best possible opportunities offered to them.

Status of Women in Ancient Period

In ancient India women were given an equal status along with men in every field of life. They received higher education and participated in the discussions of political and philosophical nature with male scholars. The Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads mentioned the names of such lady scholars, poets and politicians in ancient India. In *Mahabharata* the wife has been called the better half of husband. In *Altereya Upanishad*, the wife has been called as the companion of husband. In *Rig-Veda* the wife has been blessed to live as a queen in the house of her husband. The word *dampati* often used in the Vedas characterizes both wife and husband. It is said that *dampati* press the *Soma*, rinse and mix it with milk, and offer adoration to the God.² According to Macdonell and Keith this word signifies the high status of women in ancient India. The wife and husband together performed religious duties, enjoyed and carried out other functions. In *Mahabharata* she is called the root of *dharma*, prosperity and enjoyment. “The execution of *dharma* of the man depends upon women; all pleasures and enjoyment also entirely depends upon her. Men should therefore serve women and band their wills before them.”³ No man was allowed to perform religious duties without a wife. Thus, like the status of women in contemporary western world, the status of Indian women in ancient India was based upon liberty, equality and cooperation.

Status of Women in Medieval Period

The medieval period proved to be highly disappointing for Indian women. The Muslim invasion to India changed the direction of Indian history. The influx of foreign invaders and the Brahmanical Iron Laws were the main causes of such degradation.

2. *Rigveda*, VIII31, 5, X, 186; VIII27, 7.

3. *Mahabharata*, *Anushasana Parva*, 10.

After the death of Harshvardhana (646 A.D.) the Brahmanism without the benevolence of the Vedic period took hold of Indian society with all its severe restrictions and rigidities. As far as woman was concerned, “her freedom was curtailed, knowledge of not only the scriptures but even letters was denied to her and her status was reduced to that of an appendage on man”.

Caste laws dominated the entire social life. Mitakshara law for the entire country and Dayabhaga in Bengal reduced women to the status of slaves. Widow Remarriage and Levirate were now disallowed. Women could not inherit property. Girls were treated more as burden or liabilities than as assets. The ancient Indian ideal of equality of male and female was finished and women were considered as slaves of men.

The major problems faced by Indian women during this period were practice of child marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage, practice of Sati Purdah and Devdasi system and equally poor was the position of Muslim women.

Status of Women in Modern Period

About a century back, the status of women in India was almost the same as was in the medieval age. Though it cannot be said that the exploitation of women in India has no parallel in any other country, it can be safely asserted that the women had to face much cruelty and exploitation in India.

But women’s position in society has been changed abundantly. The most important event after Independence has been the drafting of Constitution of this country enshrining the principles of equality, liberty and social justice for the framers of the Constitution was aware of the *Sociology* of the problem of emancipation of female sex. They realised that equality was important for the development of the *Nation*. Thus, it became the object of the state to protect women from exploitation and provide social justice. All these ideals were enshrined in the Preamble of the Constitution. Indian women are now the beneficiaries of these rights in the same manner as men. Today she is granted the share in the property to their parents and husbands. Now they are also free to adopt a child. The spread of education has made them enlightened and they are now participating in every walk of life. In urban areas they have become much more mobile. With the advancement of technology they are utilizing their spare time in pursuing various activities which has altered her role and role relations. Various birth control techniques have not only helped in controlling birth rates but also led to changes in sex mores, perhaps to

greater incidence of pre-marital sex, lessened the control of religion on individuals and has contributed to emancipation of women. As women are now stirring out of their homes in order to earn their livelihood, a considerable change in the structure of Indian society is taking place.

Changes took place in following spheres as a result of women education -

1. Women in the Economic and Employment Fields

In both villages and cities there has been a remarkable increase in the number of women going out of the four walls of the household and becoming workers. In the employment market they are giving tough competition to men folk. In some fields the numbers of women employees are steadily increasing. For instance, women working as teachers, doctors, nurses, advocates, bank employees, clerks, typists, telephone operators, receptionists and so on are to be found in almost all cities. In big cities women do not hesitate to work as bus conductors, police constables, auto rickshaw drivers and so on. Since 1991 though in a smaller number, women are getting recruited into armed force, air force and naval force also. Employments have given women economic independence and the feeling of importance. They now feel that they can stand on their own legs and look after the entire family by themselves. This has boosted their self-pride and self-confidence. Educated employed women feels that they need not live as parasites on their men folk. Apart from it in order to give protection to the economic interests and rights of women folk the government has undertaken various socio-economic legislations which cover areas such as right to property or inheritance, equal wages, working conditions, maternity benefits and job security.

2. Women in Political Field

Women today are competing with men not only in economic field but in political sphere too. Today she is actively participating in Indian Politics. She is allotted equal rights with those of men in political field. Two most prominent rights sanctioned to Indian women by Constitution are female enfranchisement and eligibility for the legislature. Before Independence there were only a few women who participated in politics but after independence a huge number of women are becoming Women Parliamentarians, Chief Ministers, Cabinet Ministers and Ministers in various states. To mention the name of few Mayawati, Sonia Gandhi, Sushma Swaraj, Smriti Irani etc. The number of women voters and women contestants is successively increasing with

each election. At the same time women from different political parties are enthusiastically participating in various campaigns held during elections and even the members of the family are stimulating them to become an active part of the politics. It can thus be stated that even politics also is not beyond the reach of women. It has generally been observed that women from middle and lower middle class who constitute one of the most literary class are moving towards political field. It is these women who have made great socio-cultural contribution in the development of the Nation and simultaneously to art, music and literature of India. This participation by women in political field has resulted in emancipation of women.

Awareness among the Women regarding their Rights

With the enactment of various social Legislations women today are becoming aware of their rights. As a result of these Legislations they are treated with consideration and honor. In this concern Law has played a crucial role. With the increase in their educational level and aspiration level they are becoming conscious of their rights. Today they fight against social injustices done to them through various social movements and social legislations and raising their voice against various types of exploitations. To mention a few legislations enacted for the purpose are -

- National Commission for Women Act, 1990
- Indecent Representation of Women Act, 1986
- Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961
- Maternity Benefits Act , 1961
- Equal Remuneration Act, 1976
- Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act ,1971
- Immoral Traffic Prevention Act,1956
- Hindu Minority & Guardian Act,1956
- Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act,1956
- Employees State Insurance Act,1948

Challenges

Though education has elevated the status of women to a great extent yet the women needs to struggle hard to secure and protect their rights in society. What would be the future of women in India? Will they be free from existing problems or not? Will they be able to lead an in-

dependent life. Such types of questions often dominate the minds when we think of it. On the basis of some observations we may say that until unless following issues are not resolved we cannot expect of a healthy society.

1. Emergence of New Problems in place of Old ones

Though age old problems such as child marriage, devdasi system, prohibition of widow remarriage etc. have almost disappeared; yet some new problems in the form of atrocities against women, rape, dowry harassments, sex crime, sexual harassments of women at working place, immoral traffic of women, torture and harassment of women under trials etc. These new problems have made it difficult for women to lead an equal life with men.

2. Women Harassing Women

In Indian context, we often come across social situations in which women are exploiting women in some or the other ways. For instance lady bosses in brothels, mother-in-laws torturing daughter-in-laws. In these situations, unless they develop a feeling of understanding towards each other, but they are unable to collectively fight against gender discrimination.

3. Lack of Powerful Women Organizations and Movements

Indian women are forging ahead in the field of education and employment but they have yet not developed powerful women organizations and movements to safeguard their rights. Neither at state level nor at National level any such organizations are found.

4. Indifferent Attitude of Governments and Political Leaders

The measures taken and the programs implemented by the Central and state governments in elevating the status of Indian women and in protecting their rights are neither promising nor adequate. Consistent and honest efforts on the part on the part of people's representatives and social leaders are required to persuade people to accept new situations and challenges. Such efforts are conspicuously absent in India.

5. Patriarchal System of Society

The Indian society still continues to be a male dominated society. Though sex equality has been achieved by Law yet it is not practiced socially. The belief that biological and cultural roles of women and men are different is very strong in India. So long as such types of beliefs persists and

male dominance prevails, male-female equality cannot be perceived in Indian context.

Conclusion

In spite of various changes, developments and educational reforms the status of women in India is still lagging behind. Though Laws are formulated to provide multiple rights to women but they are not properly enforced. The state has enacted various laws for the same. For instance, family courts have been established for speedy matrimonial disputes, fast track courts are established for resolving issues against sexual exploitation of women, a special commission for women has also been established to monitor the status of women laws pertaining to them.

Despite the progress, the war on equality, discrimination and un-empowerment continues. The road to achievement is far away and women have to continue their fight. At the same time until a change is sought in the beliefs, perspectives and attitude of people in general with respect to women we cannot expect that women will be accorded a proper position in society. Even today she is seen as an object of fulfilling the lust of man, a mere sex symbol. Though modern contemporary society is changing at a fast speed but the changes are not uniform in every field.

Hence, efforts must be made by the people, governments, educators, academicians, social activists, legal system and religious reformers to bring about a change in the psychological tendencies of people, change in beliefs with respect to women, to make the women realize of their powers, to teach men how to respect women, to bring about strict implementation of Laws related to women in order to protect and safeguard their rights and at the same time to make strict laws against those who are engaged in criminal activities against women so that it may be quoted as an example before others and they think ten times before committing any heinous crimes against women. For, if a woman is protected and secured in society then only it can be prevented from societal disorganization.

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