

Status of Women: Quest for Equality

- ❖ Women have been treated as "objects" by the male-dominated society in India and elsewhere. However, there is no uniform pattern of social, cultural and economic distinctions between men and women. In India, gender-based consciousness has its origin in the emergence of the middle classes and their problems. Patriarchy is very strong in India despite several movements for the upliftment of women launched by women's organisations during the pre- and post-Independence period. Sex morals have a direct bearing on caste and class groups.
- ❖ Four aspects have been studied in detail in the context of feministic problems: (1) production, (2) reproduction, (3) Sexuality, and (4) socialisation of children. However, the Marxists and the socialists have over-emphasised the first aspect. In India's context, males generally dominate in all the four aspects; though women carry major responsibilities in

these spheres. Male-supremacy emanates from caste, class, Patriarchy and sexuality of the male.

- ❖ Women are treated as dalits in their own families by parents-in-law and even by their husbands. They are stationed at the receiving end. This is generally true of families belonging to all castes and classes, but it is more often found among those groups who are still under the influence of feudalism or have feudalistic life-styles and values. Even the neo-rich in the countryside have put restrictions on women getting higher education, migrating and taking up jobs. The fact of the matter is that women have been made dependents by men and by the social milieu they have created for them. This chapter discusses the status of women in ancient, medieval, British and post-Independence India, the role of women's organisations, legislations, social movements and man-women relations. These have been discussed with a view to understand women's quest for equality with men.

Women in History

❁ In the Rig-Vedic civilisation, women enjoyed equal status with men. Women, like men, received education and observed Brahmacharya and upanayana was also performed for them. Women studied the Vedas, and composed Vedic hymns. Women had access to all branches of Knowledge. Women like Ghosha, Apala, Vishvara were composers of Upanishads, there were women rishis like Gargi and Maitreyi. Women could own property and widows could remarry. They also became teachers. Women were not secluded from men, and they freely participated in public life. Marriage was sacred and indivisible and was not a secular contract. It was a religious bond. Child marriage was unknown. Girls enjoyed great freedom and settled their own marriages. Monogamy was a general rule, but there were cases of polygamy among the rich and the ruling classes. Polyandry and sati were unknown. The wife was given a place of honour and

participated with her husband in religious ceremonies.

❁ The position enjoyed by women in the Rig-Vedic period deteriorated in the later-Vedic civilisation. A daughter began to be regarded as a curse. However, women were granted the freedom to participate in public life. They were denied the right of inheritance and of ownership of property (like the shudras). Even the earnings of women became the property of their husbands and sons. However, women continued to have the upanayana, received education and worked as teachers. Intermarriage between Brahmanas and Kshatriyas was not unknown between A.D. 700 and 1206.

❁ During the Buddhist period women were not denied learning. They took active part in public life, but did not enjoy the right of Vedic studies. The position of women really deteriorated in the Gupta age. Dowry emerged as an institution in this period. Widows could not marry again. They had to spend a life in penance and austerity. Women had no right to real

property. But purdah system did not exist. Sati had become popular by the seventh century A.D. Some women did receive higher education even in this period. Lilavati and khana were experts in arithmetic and astronomy.

- ❁ The period between A.D. 1206 and 1761 witnessed further deterioration in the position of women. In this period female infanticide, child-marriage, purdah, jauhar, sati and slavery were the main social evils affecting the position of women. The birth of a daughter was considered bad luck. Giving freedom to women was thought of as the predecessor of doom. Women were largely uneducated and remained confined to their homes. Conservatism, superstition and belief in magic, sorcery and witchcraft were part of women's existence. Motherhood was respected. A women's devotion to her husband, children and home was universally accepted as a positive value.
- ❁ The reform movements and the national movement generated social consciousness among

women. The All India women's conference was established in January 1927. This concentrated on educational and social work among women. Mahatma Gandhi brought women out into public life. The women of the middle classes came forward to take employment in 1930s and 1940s. However, the British rulers did not want to do anything which could further women's position in Indian society. On matters of women's inheritance, marriage and the rights of married women, the law applied was a mix of ancient Hindu law and British law. For example, Hindu law nowhere did recognise the enforcement of a husband's conjugal right; but when the principle of "restitution" was brought up, it was accepted, even though it was taken from Anglo-Saxon law.

- ❁ The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed several reforms regarding the position of women in Indian society. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar started agitation for widow remarriage, and were successful

in getting the Hindu Widows remarriage act passed in 1856. In Bombay, a widow remarriage Association was formed in 1861. The Arya Samaj gave priority to this programme. Several acts were passed in the first half of this century regarding inheritance of property and marriage regulations, the most important acts in the post-Independence period are: The Special Marriage Act of 1954, the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 and , the Hindu succession Act of 1956. The Government of India has taken up the problems of divorce, dowry, rape, etc. With a view to find solutions which will ensure equality of women with men.

Status of women in the British Period

- ❖ Sati, infanticide, slavery, child marriage, the prohibition of widow remarriage and the lack of women's rights were some of the social problems which attracted the attention of the British Raj and Social reformers. In the beginning of nineteenth century, the practice of sati was confined to

Hooghly, Nadia and Burdwan districts of Bengal, Ghazipur of Uttar Pradesh and Shahabad of Bihar. It was found in other parts of India., but only as a rare phenomenon. In southern India, it was practised in Ganjam, Masulipatnam and Tanjore districts. In Rajasthan, Punjab and Kashmir the practice was confined mainly to women of high caste. In Delhi, Charles Metcalfe stopped the practice. Aligarh and Agra seldom had occurrences of sati. In Bengal alone, three-fourths of the total occurrence of sati occurred in British India. It occurred among all castes, but it was more among the Brahmanas and Rajputs. Among the princely families, the sense of pride and heroism elevated the sati into a noble act. But, on the whole, the rite was practised by women whose husbands belonged to the middle and lower middle classes. The following factors could be attributed to the practice of sati : (1) the position of women in the Hindu system, (2) the institution of polygamy, specially among the kulin Brahmanas, (3) the enforced

widowhood and austerity,(4) social convention,(5) the sense of salvation attached to the rite, and (6) antiquity and adoration of the practice.

- ❖ The British had shown interest in the abolition of sati 1813. The persuasive propaganda techniques failed to prevent the occurrence of the practice. The police also did not prove effective. Ram Mohan Roy took it upon himself to eradicate this social evils. He announced that the rite of sati was not a part of the Shastras. Sati was not an integral part of the Hindu religion. A number of religion leader opposed Ram Mohan Roy's crusade against sati. Through the cooperation of the princes, it was virtually stopped in the princely states, but it was not made an illegal act for a long time. Even today, occurrence of sati are reported from various districts of Rajasthan. In the majority of cases, the police have either reached late or remained ineffective.
- ❖ Female infanticide was found mainly among the Rajputs of Benaras, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan and in

parts of Punjab and Sind and among some Sikhs. The institution of female infanticide arose due to (1) the deplorable position of women in a Hindu society, (2) the dowry system, (3) hypergamy, and (4) the sense of honour and pride. Marriage of a female is considered compulsory. In 1779, infanticide was declared to be murder by the Bengal Regulations XXI. In 1804, this was extended to other parts of India. However, the practice continued in secret till recently, particularly among the most Rajputs in Rajasthan. Dowry was its main cause.

- ❖ Child marriage is prevalent even today among the rural people are among the urban illiterate and poor. The institution of child marriage is also the result of hypergamy dowry, the notion of virginity and chastity. It has resulted in the problems of over population, poverty, unemployment, ill-health dependence upon patents, etc. The first legislations was passed in 1860 under which the minimum age for consummation of marriage in

the case of girl was raised to ten. In 1891, the age of consent for girls was raised to twelve, and in 1925 to thirteen for married girls and fourteen for unmarried ones. In 1929, the child marriage Restraint act was passed. Under this act, the minimum age of marriage for girl was fixed at fourteen and for a boy at eighteen. This act came into being in 1930. According to the Hindu marriage act of 1955, the minimum age for a bride is fifteen, and for a bridegroom eighteen. The legislation have not proved effective in this case. Education economic pressures, and migration to towns and cities from rural areas have certainly contributed to the raising of the age at marriage of both the sexes.

- ❁ Slavery was of two types: (1) domestic and (2) predial (agricultural). There were also the institution of the nautch(dance) girls and prostitutes. The latter was found particularly in the princely states. Predial slavery was found in Bengal, Madras, Assam, Coorg and southern Bombay Presidency (presently

in Karnataka and Maharashtra respectively). The slaves of this category were insolvent debtors . Some of them were migrants from Rajputana. Even slaves were sold out. There was also the practice of entering a contract by a person to work for a specific period of time either to pay the debt or to have a fresh one. Domestic slavery was confined to females. The foreigners also indulged in the purchase of children in a clandestine manner and exported them overseas. Proclamations were made in Bengal, Madras, Bombay, etc. to prevent the institution of slavery. Today, the institution exists in the form of bonded labour. It is known by different names in different states. The British policy of apparent and selective non - interference in social matters encouraged the institution of slavery and other institutions which supported this evil.

- ❁ With the efforts of Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar , the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act was passed in 1856. In 1861, a Widow Marriage Association

was formed. The Arya Samaj gave top priority to this programme. The following legislations have enhanced the status of Hindu women in matters of marriage, adoption and inheritance: (1) the Hindu Law of inheritance (Amendment Act) of 1929, (2) the Hindu women's Right to property Act of 1937, (3) the Hindu Marriage Disability Removal Act of 1946, (4) the special Marriage Act of 1954, (5) the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, (6) the Hindu Succession Act and the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act of 1956, (7) the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, (8) the Maternity Benefits Act, 1976, and (10) the Criminal Law amendment, 1983

- ✿ Today both sexes have the right to a civil marriage. The age without parents' consent has been increased to 18 for girls and 21 for boys. Thus, monogamy, judicial separation, nullity and divorce are some of the salient features of the post-Independence era which put man and woman on an equal platform. Inheritance, adoption and divorce (even consent) have

enhanced women's status in India. These reforms have a long history, and are outcome of the efforts of several reformists through various movements which they launched in the pre-Independence period. However, there is no uniform civil code in India. Muslims continue to have their personal law.

✿ **Quest for Equality**

- ✿ Women's quest for equality with man has become universal. It has given birth to women's movements and feministic activities and association. All over the world, feminism has its origin in social structure. Several constraints, such as inequalities between men and women and discrimination against women, have been age-old issues. For a long time women remained within the four walls of their households. Their dependence on menfolk was total. Educated women in particular and the poor once in general realised the need for taking up employment outside the household. In recent years, the middle class women have taken up the issues of price rise and

have launched anti-price-rise movement in various cities of India. Within the household, women have demanded equality with men. What exists for men is demanded for women. This demand for equality with men, speaks of a notion of men's tyrannical hegemony.

- ❁ Women have hardly any choice but to adopt an Independence path for their upliftment. They want to have equality within the framework of the existing highly rigid patriarchal society. Further, women want to have for themselves the same strategies of the change which menfolk have had over the centuries. But why do women want to follow in the footsteps of men? Our experience shows that even earning women given their earnings to their Mothers-in-law and Husbands, rather than spending the same independently. This again speaks of the deep-rooted patriarchal normative orientation. However, this does not mean that women have always followed men in all respects in their households. Women participated in India's

national movement for freedom from British rule. Many of them worked with Gandhiji in the pre-independence period. Today women's organisations, woman social workers and politicians have taken up the issues of price-rise, dowry, rape, exploitation, etc. to seek equal status with men and a dignified life. Women have demanded their share of jobs in the police and other such services. Women's organisations have created a sense of consciousness for gender equality, particularly in the urban areas.

- ❁ Consequent upon these urgent social problems connected with women, International Women's day, International Women's Year, Conferences and Seminars on women, and women's studies have been instituted in a big way since the late 1960s and 1970s. The provisions made in the Constitution of India regarding equality of women with men have also been widely popularised by these organisations and associations. A notable development was the appointment in 1971 by the

Government of India of the committee on the status of women. The committee submitted its report in 1974. The report of the committee was very widely welcomed. There is also an All-India Association of Women's Studies. Demonstrations, processions and strikes against rape, dowry deaths and the murder of women have become a regular feature in Delhi, Bombay and other cities. Rape is generally committed by upper caste and class landowners, moneylenders, police officials and government functionaries, besides anti-social elements. Dowry has become a sort of market mechanism among the urban middle class, the lower middle class and the upper caste - economically well-off rural people. In case of dowry deaths, suicides and extortion, the parents of the girls as well as the girls themselves suffer indignities and inhuman treatment.

- ✿ Andre Beteille makes some valuable observations about the position of woman in peasant families. He asks: "How are we

to view families in which men work in the fields but women are by custom debarred from such work?" This is found among the families of the upper castes. Even some families of the intermediate and of the lower castes who have become economically well off have adopted this norm with a view to elevate their social status in the village community. This does not mean that these women, who do not work or have been stopped from working on farms, are given treatment equal to the men in their families. The status of the family within the community is one thing; and the status of the individual members within the family is quite another. There is an elaborate sex-based division of labour in rural families. However this too varies from caste to caste, and also depends upon the economic and social standing of particular families.

- ✿ Beteille comments upon the process of change in the status of women in the context of manual labour. He very rightly states: "Women are first withdrawn from wage employment on the farms of

others. They are then withdrawn from the family farm. Finally the men either withdraw from work, or change their role from cultivator to supervisor." Thus, withdrawing womenfolk from manual work on farms is a symbol of high status in the countryside. But this is not true of working women belonging to upper and upper-middle or even to the lower-middle classes in towns and cities. Working unmarried women are considered an asset; as they can be married without much difficulty and with less dowry

Man-woman Relationship

- ❁ Can there be an expression of women's identity independent of men? Ideologically yes, and practically no. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly observes that social conformity has always been more obligatory for a woman than for a man. Generally a woman's identity tends to be defined, by herself as well as by others, in terms of her relationship with men; as a daughter, a wife, a mother. This was also true of women in Europe, in the nineteenth

century. Today women in China enjoy status almost equal to men. Chairman Mao said: "The day all women in China stand on their feet is the time for victory for the Chinese revolution. Times have changed, and today men and women are equal. Whatever men comrades can accomplish, women comrades can too." Feudal ways of thinking and acting were strongly attacked to elevate women's position in Chinese society. Old beliefs about women's inferiority were discarded. Equal pay for equal work is the practice today in China.

- ❁ Women's bondage to men and to the social structure is a characteristic feature of capitalism, and emancipation of women from such ties is referred to as a feature of socialism. Employment for women is not a panacea for solving their problems. Women among the lower sections of society are found engaged in several economic activities, and yet they are more enslaved to their menfolk. Similarly to look at women in terms of literate versus illiterate, rich versus

poor, and rural versus urban would not give a proper understanding of women's plight in today's India. Women, in fact, cannot be understood independent of men. The family alone has not been enslaving women. The ethos of society has been such that women have been treated rather shabbily. Leon Trotsky once remarked: "there are no limits of masculine egotism. In order to understand the world we must look at it through the eyes of women."

- ✿ Today the emphasis in women's studies is not on the status of women, their degradation, social customs, the role of women in the family, community and tradition, but it has shifted to education, economic and legal status of women, political participation, etc. Nowadays, instead of studying their attitudes, roles and status, the causes of women's subordination, work participation, women in movements, patriarchy structure and women in relation to socio-economic and political structure are being taken up as crucial issues concerning

women. Age and sex are not simply biological phenomena; they are social and cultural variables too, and in some societies these are considered the basis of distribution of rewards and privileges.

- ✿ It is necessary to have "empathy" to study the position of women for a scientific understanding of their problems, the device of "role-taking" is adopted. This means placing oneself in the position of women rather than simply expressing sympathy with them. Women working within their own households as dependent members, children and old men by large constitute a common category against the active and earning male members. Such a situation is found in India where a great deal of concern has been expressed for familial bonds, collective responsibilities and emotional ties for Kinship relations.

✿ **Women's Struggle against Exploitation and Oppression**

- ✿ In recent years, a number of women's movements have emerged: Characterised by acting, theorising and

mobilising. Are these movements class struggle or are they emancipation movements? Another related question is: How should one link the struggle for the liberation of the working class with that for the emancipation of women? The women's movement, like the students' movement so far, is more or less middle class oriented. The systems of sexism and male chauvinism are more or less universal in all organisations. Thus, there is a close connection between male dominance and patriarchalism in the family and capitalist exploitation in the larger society.

- ✿ The women's movement is organised by white-collar middle class women and social workers from among upper and upper middle class non-working women. Feminist publications such as Manushi, Bayja, MahilaAndolanPatrika, feminist Network and several other publications are run by women's organisations managed by urban middle and upper middle class women. Women's conference and

seminars in Delhi, Bombay and Pune have now become a regular means of mobilising working women in particular to achieve equality with men, intra-households discrimination, women's economic status, their work situations, occupational patterns, etc. have become focal themes of these seminars. It has been mentioned in the discussions held in these seminars that women in India receive less consideration and money than is required to meet their needs and responsibilities within the household and less than is their right. One view is that there is economic basis for sexual discrimination within the family. Women can be compared to some extent with the urban proletariat and the poor peasant in terms of their exploitation. Women do a lot of work at home which they are not not paid for. Even working women do not enjoy independent status as they are made to carry the burden of household work actually to be done by their in-laws and husbands.

❁ Some women protagonists have mentioned four major forms of the struggle of women for greater control over their lives. These are: (1) women have organised (through mass movements) consciousness raising groups, women's centres etc. These are meant for greater control over bodies (for example, against rape, for free and safe contraceptives and abortions), for political rights like suffrage, against oppression in the family, against pornography, etc.; (2) women have fought through unions for improvement in their standards of living and in conditions of work; (3) women have organised themselves for social recognition and remuneration for their work as housewives; and (4) they have also worked for housing, and against political repression, price-rise, etc. But all these issues mainly concern the urban women.

❁ Exploitation of women in the countryside has not received proper attention. The question is: Do women have a self and identity in a male-dominated society? Two images of

women, are found (1) of the strong and resilient woman, and (2) of the suffering and tolerant woman. Both the images are unrealistic; as they do not refer to women as oppressed, suppressed members of the family, and see them chiefly as weaker human beings. Women are protesting against forcible sexual contact with them. A woman's willingness is her prerogative.

Women's Identity as a Person

❁ The identity of women is generally defined by her role within the family. She is identified as a daughter, daughter in law, mother, mother in law, wife, etc. and not as a person. She has no independent connections, friends and relatives outside her family. Her only friends, relatives and connections are those of the menfolk of the family, becoming hers by implication and not by voluntary choice. She therefore has a subordinate status in the family. However, there are various degrees of women's identities, depending upon caste

and class background of her family.

❁ Is a woman a person? A woman bows down to her husband's desires even if she is unwilling to do so. She does not have "gender justice" or equality with man. Whenever a woman has expressed her identity as a person, she has been put to a lot of hardship. "Forced sex" or "restoration of conjugal rights" contribute to a large extent to the violence against women. Dowry harassment and bride-burning have sprung up as violence against women. The institution of joint family and hypergamy need a reorientation. The joint family home, for example, is a place where the daughter in law is treated as an "outsider" and a "servant" of the family. She becomes an object of scolding and ridicule for everyone in the family. Hypergamy demands the marriage of a girl within the framework of caste endogamy and clan exogamy with a boy belonging to a family of higher status. Due to hypergamy and the higher value attached to the boy among the Hindus, dowry has become a price for a boy.

❁ Several legislations have been passed by the Government of India since Independence regarding marriage, inheritance of property, divorce, dowry, rape, etc. In addition to what was incorporated in the constitution regarding equality and against discrimination based on religion, race, caste, sex, etc. Social legislations have not been very effective in India. The Dowry Act and act against rape have been vociferously discussed over the last few years in courts and on public platforms : But rape continues unabated. The victims are particularly the poor and the Dalit women. Dowry harassment and torture, wife burning and suicides due to torture are continuing unchecked. The victims of dowry harassment and torture are women from among the upper caste, middle and lower middle class families in cities and towns. The institution of anulom vivah has become deep-seated among the upper and some upper middle caste and class groups. This has created a sort of indirect competition among parents of

girls to find a match who belongs to a superior family, and whose educational and job is high.

- ✿ It is accepted that women are in no way inferior to men. Women have contributed a lot to India's development. They participated in the freedom struggle against the British Raj. They did a lot of social work in those very difficult days of Indian history. Women are exploited despite their immense contribution to the national cause. They are generally found in the unorganised sector; hence their oppression and exploitation. Technological advancement has affected women adversely as they have now less control over resources within the family and other sectors of their employment. Advancement in the fields of agriculture, dairy development, fisheries and domestic technology has reduced the economic authority and the general status of women. Men have become less dependent upon women even in domestic affairs. The gap between men and women has further widened. The major areas of hiatus between men

and women are, for example, In literacy, education and training, women's employment, female mortality, health care and medical services. Female mortality is higher than male mortality. Women are lagging behind men in these areas because of India's social and cultural heritage and strong tradition of patriarchy and male-domination.

Conclusion

- ✿ The problem is due to unequal access of men and women to society's resources and its distributive processes. Technological devices, which could have helped women in many ways, have also been adopted by men to their advantage. Can men alone be blamed for these gender-based inequalities? It has been observed that it is women who obstruct the path of other women even more than men do ; as is the case with mother in law and colleagues at work. All women are not equally exploited or oppressed. Therefore, there is a need to study women as unmarried girls, young wives, mother, old

woman, and working and non-working women. Such a scheme of study will provide a comparative picture of the dimensions of women's problems as it covers ramifications and variations in the status of women. Interaction between women in different settings may also provide useful clues for our understanding of the problem.

- ✿ Women's struggle for emancipation from social and cultural bondage has been a historical fact in the Indian context. Women have also fought for their right to vote and also against their oppressions and exploitation in all aspects of their existence. Women's struggle have challenged the existing system which has made them socially, culturally, economically, and even politically, crippled. To seek "gender justice" for them (and also for men) it would be proper to understand India's social formation, its layers and levels (including caste and class), male-female images and reality, various views of a women's place in the family and at the place of work, and

the congruence between technological advancement and patriarchy. Scientific and technological devices have not challenged the traditional mechanisms of women's oppression and exploitation. The man-women relationship continues to be the dominating-dominated relationship. One finds even today, a close tie-up between caste, class and man-women relationship. However, the quest for equality with men has been strongly expressed in recent years. It has made some tangible impact in metropolitan cities and big towns. There is a need for a lot more to be done in this social field.