



Topic: Contribution Of Women In The Empowerment Of India After Independence



Sub-Topic: Women in Society

Neelam*

*Research Scholar, Sunrise University, Alwar, Email Id: - mypassion3123@gmail.com, Contact: - 9560738851

Self Declaration

The content is exclusively meant for academic purpose and for enhancing teaching and learning. All the details provided above are genuine to the best of my belief and knowledge. I hereby declare that the above particulars of facts and information stated are correct to the best of my belief and knowledge.

Chapter Outline

- Status of women in independent India
- Problems of women in modern India
- Empowerment of women; strategies for women's development
- Factors facilitating empowerment of women-human rights and women
- Rights and protection given to women in the constitution of India
- Strategies for the protection of women's rights and rehabilitation of women
- The position and the problems of Indian women: future prospects

Status of women is a topic of sociological studies and discussions, for it mirrors the position of about 50% of the population of any society. Study of the history of human society reveals that in no society of the world have women enjoyed absolute equality on par with men. Everywhere they were subjected to inequality, discrimination and exploitation. In some Societies their position has been comparatively better than that of their counterparts in some other societies. Even in the same society the status accorded to women has never been the same all though. It has been changing in keeping with the changes in the general conditions of society.

WOMEN IN THE INDIAN SOCIETY

Nowhere in the history of humanity men and women were treated alike and assigned statuses alike. Women have not been able to lead a life exactly on par with men in spite of their urge for equality. But women in ancient India, particularly during the Vedic period, enjoyed a position which was on the whole much more satisfactory than in the later periods. Women underwent almost a kind of servitude during the Medieval period and their position Went on improving during the British period and after independence. Today, Indian women are almost assigned an equal status with men. All their political, economic, educational and other disabilities have been removed legally.

STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

The status of Indian woman has radically changed since independence. Both the structural and cultural changes provided equality of opportunities to women in education, employment and political participation. With the help of these changes exploitation of women, to a great extent, was reduced. More freedom and better orientation were provided to the women's organizations to pursue their interests. Importance of researches, national policies and programmes focused on women came to be increasingly realized. Several commissions were appointed by the Central and State governments to study the causes were appointed as the celebration of "International Women's Year" of 1975 and the activities of UNESCO also created awareness of the problems of women.

The Improvement in the status of Indian women especially after independence can be analysed in the light of the major changes that have taken place in areas such as legislations, education, economic and employment sector political participation and awareness of their rights on the part of women, etc.

1. Constitution and Legislation in Support of Women's Cause

• **Constitutional provision for equality to women:** The constitution of India does not discriminate between men and women. All the men and women of India are equally entitled to individual freedom, fundamental rights including the right to participate in social, cultural, religious, educational, economics and political activities. The constitution provides for equality of sex and offers protection to women against exploitation. It has given the voting right to women and in no way treats women as second grade citizens.

• **Social legislations safeguarding women's interests:** The Government of Independent India undertook a number of legislative measures to safeguard the interests of women. Some of them may be noted here.

- (i) The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955
- (ii) The Hindu Succession Act, 1956
- (iii) The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956
- (iv) The Special Marriage Act, 1954
- (v) The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961
- (vi) Other Legislations:
 - (a) The Suppression of Immoral Traffic of Women and Girls Act, 1956
 - (b) The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971
 - (c) The Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1983
 - (d) The Family Court Act, 1984,
 - (e) The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986
 - (f) The 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Acts, 1993

2. Women in the Field of Education

After Independence, women of India took to education in a relatively larger number. For example, in 1901, the literacy level of the females in India was just 0.6%; it increased to 54.16% in 2001. This brought down the gap between male and female literacy rates from 28.84% in 1991 to 21.70% in 2001. Various benefits such as free ship, scholarship, loan facility, hostel facility etc. are being given to women who go for higher education. By making use of the new opportunities, a large number of girl students go for higher education today. For example, in 1950-51 the percentage of girl students pursuing higher education was 10, 9% [that is, out of the total enrollment] and this increased to 32.0% in 1992. In fact, the Nation Educational Policy 1986 has been in favor of empowering woman through education. It gave a call to remove the gender prejudices by the inclusion of relevant lessons in the curriculum. It promoted the opening of women study centers in colleges and universities.

3. Women in 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 a tough competition to the men folk. In some fields, the number of women employees is steadily increasing. For example, women working as teachers, college professors, doctors, nurses, advocates, judges, managers, administrators, police officers, bank employees, clerks, typists, telephone operators, receptionists, personal assistants and so on, are to be found in almost all major cities. In big cities, women do not hesitate to work as bus conductors and drivers, police constables, auto rickshaw drivers and so on. Since 1991, they are being recruited into the three wings of the armed forces namely, military, air force and naval force

4. Awareness of Women regarding their rights

Women in independent India have more rights than their counterparts in many other countries of the world. But most of our women are not very conscious of these rights. Uneducated rural women do not have any awareness of their rights. Prof. Ram Ahuja conducted a study a few years ago in eight villages of a district in Rajasthan among 753 women belonging to different age-groups. His intention was to assess the degree of awareness and measure the level of satisfaction among women about the rights sanctioned by the Constitution of India. He concluded that the level of awareness of rights by women depends upon the following four aspects.

- (i) Individual background of women

- (ii) Social environment of women
- (iii) Economic base of women
- (iv) Subjective perception of women

PROBLEMS OF WOMEN IN MODERN INDIA

Women in independent India are comparatively in a more respectable position: Some of the problems which had been haunting the community of women for centuries are not found now. Problems such as child marriage, practice of 'sati' prohibition on widow remarriage, exploitation of widows, devadasi system, purdah system, etc. have almost disappeared. Development in the field of science and technology; universalisation of education, socio-political movements, modernization and similar developments have changed the approach of people towards women to a certain extent. These developments boosted the morale and self-confidence of women. As a result, Indian women now feel that they too have their own individuality, personality, self-respect, talent, capacity and efficiency. Many of those women who could grab the opportunities extended to them have proved that they are capable of discharging the responsibilities assigned to them on par with men. The nation which neglected almost 50% of its population for several centuries has now understood the necessity of giving equal rights and opportunities to its womenfolk. The Constitution of India provides equal rights and opportunities to women. It does not make any discrimination on the grounds of sex. Indian women are also responding positively to this changed socio-political situation. This does not mean that our women are completely free from problems. On the contrary, the changing situation is causing them new problems they are now beset with new stresses and strains. Some of the major problems haunting the modern women may briefly be analyzed here.

1. Increasing Violence against Women

- Violence is almost universal
- Women as victims of violence
- Increasing crimes against women

2. Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination refers to "the practice whereby one sex is given preferential treatment over the others." The practice of giving social importance to the biological differences between men and women is there everywhere. In some societies, these differences are very much pronounced while in others, they are given less importance. Even the Indian society is not an exception to this.

Different Faces of the Practice of "Gender Discrimination"

- **Discrimination in Socialization:** In our socialization process female children are becoming victims of discrimination. In the Indian social context even today male children are preferred to female children. Hence, female children are subject to discriminatory treatment. Male preference and female negligence has almost become a working policy especially in the rural areas. Discrimination between male and female children is made in matters relating to food, dress, health, education, domestic work etc.
- **Discrimination in the distribution of power and work:** Most of the Indian families are patriarchal. Hence, the philosophy of equality of sex is not acceptable to them. Domestic works such as cooking, looking after the children, washing clothes and vessels, keeping the house neat and clean, looking after the domesticated animals, serving family members like a nurse on all days and especially when they fall sick, etc., are branded as "women's work". Very rarely men do these works. But when the question of exercising power comes, it is always the man who dominates. His decisions are final and his orders are ultimate. The female voice is always suppressed.
- **Women's health is ignored:** Women suffer from some distinctive health problems from which men are free. Women have to undergo the distinctive biological process of pregnancy, or child bearing, delivering, nursing, feeding, child-caring or rearing etc. These are their maternal functions. But the insistence on the family planning has posed many health hazards. The use of contraceptives, Copper-T, sterilization, abortion and hormonal drugs has an adverse effect on health.
- **Women Neglecting their Own Health:** Studies have revealed that our women themselves are neglecting their own health. Normally Indian women consume less food [that is, on an average 100 calories a day] and spend more energy on work. Women toil for the good of the family and children even at the cost of neglecting their own health. Women very rarely complain about their ill-health because of their virtue of "self-denial".
- **Women have their own reasons to neglect their health:** Not finding free time to go to health centres because of heavy work at home; non-availability of proper medical facility to test the health or ill-health of the mother and the child especially in the primary health centres; inability to walk a long distance to reach a well equipped health centre in the absence of proper transportation facility; non-availability of female doctors in the nearby health centres, etc., are some such excuses.
- **Decline in the female population:** Normally, in the population of any country, male female ratio remains more or less the same, that is, 50:50. In India as the census reports reveal female population has been steadily declining ever since

1901. It is for this reason Neera Desai and Vibhuti Patel raised the point whether the womenfolk in India represent a "declining sex". According to 2001 Census, there is a deficit of 35 million women as compared to 3 million in 1901. For every 1000 men, we have only 933 women at present as against 972 women in 1901. The male preference has led to the abuse of technology. Thousands of "unwanted female" children are killed at the stage of foetus itself. It is said that in India, out of 12 million female children born every year, around 25% of them die before they attain the age of 15. Of the children which die every year, about 3 lakh female children, that is, more than the number of male children, die for one or the other reason. Of the children which die every year in India, the 6th child dies due to gender discrimination."

- **Gender discrimination in occupations and public life:** Women workers are paid less than the male workers for the same type of work. Much labour is extracted from women by giving them very minimum wages. In matters of are en priority Excepting increment, facilities, etc., discrimination is normally made. In public life also men are given priority. Excepting the glamorous film actresses and politicians, in all other fields, women are not given importance on par with men. Government officials also practice this discriminatory treatment in dealing with the people.

Problems of Female Education

Social reformers and social thinkers believe that in a nation like India giving education to women in as large a number as possible can prove to be a panacea for many of the problems of women. Accordingly, much attention is paid to the education of women after independence. The female literacy level is also increasing steadily. It has increased from 18.7% in 1971 to 39.42% in 1991 and to 64% in 2001. In spite of this change in the trend towards literacy, some problem have cropped up. We find glaring differences between the level of education of men and women.

- It is found that girls are being discouraged.
- There are regional imbalances also.
- Increasing drop out of female children.
- Admission to school.

Problems Relating to Employment and Unemployment of Women

In the economic field the situation is such that majority of women who are ready to work are not finding suitable work to their satisfaction. Those who are in the employment sector are becoming the objects of exploitation and harassment. Though an increase in the female literacy level and extension of employment opportunities for women in the non-agricultural sector, have added to the trend in favour of female employment, these two problems continue to exist.

- Large number of employed women are illiterate
- Decreasing economic participation of women

Harassment of Women at Work Place

Women constitute an important labour force in all the countries. During the recent years there is an increasing number of women especially in the Indian context, who are working outside the family to get more income for the family. In fact, " the term working woman" refers to One who works outside the home for a wage or Salary. The main problem with this female workers, is that they are harassed in workplace in different ways. " Harassment" refers to the basic violation of an individual's rights. Not only the rights of working women are violated, they are often sexually harassed also.

- Economic exploitation
- Threat of removal from job
- Women are given more work
- Discrimination and giving opportunities
- Sexual harassment of women

Exploitation of women in the media

The mass media such as radio, television, newspapers and the cinema play a vital role in social change and social development especially in the modern societies. But unfortunately, the media has not been playing a positive role in the case of women. The media is even condemned of exploiting and misrepresenting women.

- Journalism as print media and women
- Visual media and women
- Advertisements and women
- Media and women movements

Divorce and Desertion

During the recent years, instances of desertion and divorce are increasing making the lives of many women very miserable.

(i) The hardship of desertion: Desertion is defined as " deliberate abandonment of conjugal relationships." As a matter of fact, desertion may take place at the behest of any one of the two, or both together. In actuality, in the Indian context, it is mostly the husband who goes away from the family leaving the wife and children at home to fend for themselves.

(ii) the Agony of divorce: Divorce causes lot of hardships especially for women. It damages the social image of the wife. It becomes a permanent stigma in her life. Many sensitive women find it difficult to come out of the shock of divorce. The impact of divorce on children is also very severe. The burden of protecting and rearing of children also like on the wife.

The Problem of Dowry

Dowry is both a practice and a problem associated with the Indian marriages. Though it was more in practice among the Hindus, it has now spread to all most all the religious communities of India.

Dowry refers to "..... The property, money, ornaments or any other form of wealth which a man or his family receives from his wife or her family at the time of marriage."

Dowry Harassments are many: Women are ill-treated, disrespected, man-handled, tortured and subject to all sorts of cruelties in the name of dowry. Very often, our daily papers flash news about the tragic results of dowry system, in which the newly married girls are always the victims of harassment, violence, murder and suicide.

Decline in the Political Participation of Women

Participation of women who constitute 50% of our total population in politics and public life is very much negligible in India. We find only a negligible number of women in prestigious positions like those of Central and State cabinet ministers, governors, secretaries and legal advisers to the governments, ambassadors to other countries, IPS, IAS, IFS officers, judges in courts, mayors of big cities, office bearers of all-India parties, etc. No political party of India has given position to women in accordance with their number in the total population. In some areas seats are reserved for women as we find in Gram Panchayat, Jilla Panchayat, University Senate, etc. Even in these areas women have not constituted themselves into a "pressure group". Hence in our political life, we have caste lobbies, linguistic lobbies, capitalist lobbies, minority lobby, etc. but we do not have "women lobby" to bring pressure on the government.

- Increasing violence and terrorism in politics
- Minimum representation of women in Lok Sabha
- In the 1996 elections for the 11th Lok Sabha
- In the 1999 general elections for the 13th Lok Sabha
- Poor participation of women in the party politics

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN



Meaning of the concept of empowerment of women

The term 'empowerment of women' has become popular especially after 1980s. It refers to the process of strengthening the hands of women who have been suffering from various disabilities, inequalities and gender discrimination.

The background of the emergence of the concept

Historically, women have been regarded as constituting a weaker section. They have often been treated as "second grade citizens". They have been pictured and presented as "home-makers" who are good in household chores. This image of women has been changing everywhere. Extension of the voting right to women in Britain and America in the beginning of the 20th century brought about a series of changes in the status of women especially in the western world. Many of their disabilities and inequalities came to an end in due course. The quest for equality was pursued consistently by the western Women.

Strategies for Women's Development

The national document which the Government of India had prepared with the intention of promoting women's development, highlights the importance of three strategies which are mentioned below.

(i) **Obtaining greater political participation of women:** The document recommends that 33% of the seats should be reserved for women in order to get the effective participation of women in politics/ It was also recommended that some power positions [posts] should be reserved for women at the block and village level bureaucracy.

• **Income generating schemes for women:** On the economic front, a number of income- generating schemes were to be introduced to women as per the provisions of this document. It was insisted that sufficient provisions were to be made in all the rural developmental programmes such as, IRDP, JRY, TRYSEM.

Empowerment of Women and “The 73 Constitution Amendment Act, 1993”

The framers of the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act believed that "social and economic status of women could not be improved much without political power The females in the village need to be given some political power They should have their share in the decisions made about the development of their villages. The new Panchayat Raj is a part of the effort to empower the women at least at the village level.

One-third reservation of seats for women

The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act has made an effort to give some special powers to women in all the three tiers of Panchayat Raj. As per this Act, 1/3 of the seats are reserved for women in addition to the reservation for SCs and STs. It was, indeed, a very bold step towards the empowerment of women. Rural women who have been working as farm labourers, cleaning the utensils, washing clothes, sweeping the court-yard, fetching drinking water from a distance, cooking food and serving the same to all, labouring in the fields, etc., are now able to exercise some amount of political power on par with men. They now have the role to play in matters of decision making that affect village affairs.

A brief assessment of 73rd Constitution Amendment Act

The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act came into force in April 1993. The Act has not brought about miraculous changes as expected. Though it has created some awareness among women it suffers from many drawbacks. Some of them may be noted as below.

- Illiteracy
- Non availability of women
- Corrupt leadership and bureaucracy
- Biased towards elites and middle class

Factors Facilitating Empowerment of Women

A big nation like India which consist of more than 50 crores women cannot afford to ignore the role of women in the national development. It is in this context the process of empowerment of women has assumed importance.

Women cannot be empowered in a magical manner. It is not an automatic or spontaneous process but request deliberate and consistent efforts. It is through the combined and coordinated efforts of the government, people and the woman the task can be fulfilled.

Various socio-economic and political factor facilitate the empowerment of women. Among them the following may be noted.

- Acknowledging women's rights
- Freedom to take decision and make choices
- Access to education and empowerment
- Opportunities for political participation

Reasons behind the Need for Empowerment

In a nation like India the need for the empowerment of women is justified on account of the factors like the following.

1. Education or literacy: Among other countries of the world, India has the highest number of illiterate people. As per the 2001 Census report, 75% men are literate while only 54. 16% women are found to be so. In the rural areas, the level of illiteracy is still higher. [For example, the female literacy rate in rural Rajasthan was only 12%, while it stood at still a lower level that is 10%, in rural Bihar in 1991.] Illiteracy is the biggest weakness of women.

2. Health problem of women: Poor health on the part of women has also added to their weakness. Women consume less food and work more. They are shy of complaining about their ill health. They prefer to suffer silently than to approach a medical practitioner for obtaining medical assistance. This is mostly true in the case of a large majority of rural women. Surveys and studies have revealed that traditional importance shown towards the male children is also one of the reasons for neglecting the health of female children. Women are found to be maintaining relatively good health in the regions wherever the rate of female literacy is higher. Kerala provides here the best example.

3. Economic exigencies of women: Indian women are economically weak in two respects: (i) The per capita income of the Indians is quite low and a large number of families are under the tight grip of poverty. This economic distress naturally affects women who are a part and parcel of the family; (ii) Since property laws in this country were not in favour of women for hundreds of years, women do not seem to be possessing property of their own. Even the working

women who get some income give it to the custody of their menfolk who take decisions to spend it. Economic dependence of women on men still continues. This dependence weakens them economically.

4. Atrocities against women: Women constitute the weaker sex. This fact is also borne by the number of crimes and atrocities committed against them. There are cases of rape, kidnapping of girls, dowry harassments, molestation, sexual harassments, abuse of women, incestuous sex relations and so on. Women in all walks of life are discriminated against by men. They become the victims of atrocities in a number of ways.

Human Rights and Women



"Human rights" - as the very term indicates represent the rights of all human beings of both the sex, men and women. Individuals of both the sex are born with these rights. Human rights are God given or Nature given rights. Both men and women have equal access to these rights. No discrimination is allowed or imposed in the exercise of these rights. It is a fact of history that women have been denied equal rights for centuries. The "philosophy of human rights" became popular only during the second half of the 20th century and the issue of "gender equality" and "equal rights" for women assumed importance only after 1970's."

Women's Rights and the Declaration of Human Rights

The "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" by the UNO on 10th December 1948 both directly and indirectly influenced its member nations to extend these rights to women also. India which joined the UNO after its independence paid sufficient importance to the human rights by incorporating many of these in its constitution. India which adopted a Constitution of its own in 1949 contains several Articles mandating equality and non-discrimination on the ground of sex.

RIGHTS AND PROTECTION GIVEN TO WOMEN BY THE CONSTITUTION OF INDIA

The Constitution of India in its attempts to provide equal rights and opportunities to women, and to ensure protection and justice has made the following provisions.

1. Constitution assures equality to all its citizens including women. [Article-14].
2. Ensures that no discrimination be made against its citizens on the basis of caste, class, creed, race, sex, place of birth or region [Article-15(1)].
3. Does not deny or impose sanctions or conditions on its citizens to make use of any public place or institutions on the basis of sex, race, caste, religion, etc., [Article - 15 (2)]
4. Recommends the State to make certain special arrangements in order to provide protection to women and children and to promote their welfare [Article - 15(3)]
5. No discrimination be made by the State against its citizens including women while providing jobs. [Article-16].
6. To pursue a policy of providing the minimum necessities of life to the citizen without discriminating between men and women [Article-39(a)]
7. Fixing "equal remuneration for equal work" without discriminating between men and women.
8. To provide human conditions for the citizens to fulfil their occupational obligations. The responsibility to provide maternity benefits for its women employees [Article - 42].
9. Promoting harmony and fraternity among people and doing away with all the humiliating customs in respect of women [Article-51 (A) and (e)]
10. 1/3 Reservation For Women in the Panchayats: Reserving not less than 1/3 of the total number of seats for women in the Panchayats (including the women belonging to the SCs and STs) for which direct elections are held. These reserved seats in the range of the Panchayats are to be kept on rotation basis. [Article - 243 D (3)].

11. 1/3 of Reservation for women in the Presidential Posts of the Panchayats: Reserving not less than 1/3 of the total number of the presidential posts at all the levels of the Panchayat (Gram Panchayat, Taluk Panchayat and Zilla Panchayat) systems [Article -243 D (4)]
12. 1/3 of the Reservation for Women in the Municipalities: Reserving not less than 1/3 of the total number of seats for women in the town municipalities (including the women belonging to the SCs and STs) for which direct elections are held. These reserved seats in the range of the town municipalities are to be kept on rotation basis[Article - 243 (T)3].

THE POSITION AND THE PROBLEMS OF INDIAN WOMEN: FUTURE PROSPECTS

The discussion regarding the status of Indian women has been there since decades. It is an acknowledged fact that though the Indian women are given importance in society, their status is not equal to that of men. Indian women are not able to lead a free and independent life as their counterpart do in the West. Still it is astonishing to observe that Indian women who suffered from various problems and setbacks for more than 2000 years, have been trying to come out of their traditional shells and getting themselves ready to make the best use of the opportunities offered to them.

- New problems in place of old ones.
- Continued dominance of male Supremacy.
- Regional, caste and class differences.
- Relaxed control over women.
- Women exploiting women.
- Lack of powerful women organizations and movements.
- Is there not a need for women's Liberation Movement in India?
- No protection to the interest of lower class and lower caste women.
- Indifferent attitude of the government and political leaders.

Bibliography

1. Principals of sociology with an Introduction to sociological Thought, C.N Shankar Rao.
2. Women in Indian Society, National Book Trust of India, New Delhi (Desai, Neera and Usha Thakkar)
3. Human Rights, Leah Levin
4. Women in changing Society, 1993 (Sinha Anjana Moitra)