

Women: The backbone of the society

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Abstract

The worth of a civilization can be judged by the place given to women in the society. One of several factors that justify the greatness of India's ancient culture is the honorable place granted to women. They were deprived of their rights of equality with men. Raja Ram Mohan Roy started a movement against this inequality and subjugation. The contact of Indian culture with that of the British also brought improvement in the status of women. The third factor in the revival of women's position was the influence of Mahatma Gandhi who induced women to participate in the Freedom Movement. As a result of this retrieval of freedom, women in Indian have distinguished themselves as teachers, nurses, air-hostesses, booking clerks, receptionists, and doctors. They are also participating in politics and administration. But in spite of this amelioration in the status of women, the evils of illiteracy, dowry, ignorance, and economic slavery would have to be fully removed in order to give them their rightful place in Indian society.

Keywords: women, backbone, inequality and subjugation

Introduction

Women are not born, but made. What better than India to exemplify this statement by Simone de Beauvoir. With the whole world celebrating International Women's Day with great pomp and show, it would be only apt to analyse the position and space Indian women occupy today, and comparing it to the time 60 years ago when the country had just gained independence. With women participating in nationalist movements, to being pushed into the domestic household space, to their resurgence as super-women today, women in our country have seen it all.

There have been many debates about gender in India over the years. Much of it includes women's position in society, their education, health, economic position, gender equality etc. What one can conclude from such discussions is that women have always held a certain paradoxical position in our developing country.

While on one hand, India has seen an increased percentage of literacy among women, and women are now entering professional fields, the practices of female infanticide, poor health conditions and lack of education still persisting still continue. Even the patriarchal ideology of the home being a woman's 'real domain' and marriage being her ultimate destiny hasn't changed much. The matrimonial advertisements, demanding girls of the same caste, with fair skin and slim figure, or the much criticised fair and lovely ads, are indicators of the slow changing social mores. If one looks at the status of women then and now, one has to look at two sides of the coin, one side which is promising, and one side which is bleak.

When our country got its independence, the participation of women nationalists was widely acknowledged. When the Indian Constitution was formulated, it granted equal rights to women, considering them legal citizens of the country and as an equal to men in terms of freedom and opportunity. The sex

ratio of women at this time was slightly better than what it is today, standing at 945 females per 1000 males. Yet the condition of women screamed a different reality.

And since men were better educated than girls, the demands were even more. The Dowry Prohibition Act was finally passed in 1961, to protect women and promising severe punishment, but the conviction rate of crime against women was, and still is very low in India. Because of such inhuman practices which were normalised by our society, the birth of the girl child was considered inauspicious. In villages as well as cities, the girl child was killed either before birth or after it. Even till date, the practice continues. The United Nations Children's Fund, estimated that up to 50 million girls and women are 'missing' from India's population because of termination of the female foetus or high mortality of the girl child due to lack of proper care.

Though a number of constitutional amendments were made for women's social, economic and political benefits, yet they were never effective to bring a radical change in the situation. Women had only the role of a 'good wife' to play, and if a woman ventured out to work, she was seen as a bad woman, going against societal norms. Women were expected to cook food and eat only after the men, with whatever meager amount of food is left. This led to rampant malnutrition among women, and an extremely poor health status. Around 500 women were reported to die every day due to pregnancy related problems due to malnutrition, and getting married before 18. It was only by the 1960s, that a few educated women began to see themselves increasingly change from a mere guardian of home to a legitimate participant in the discourse of life. The country saw the first undercurrent of female discontent with the system.

Present scenario

With time, a lot has changed since those dark ages of the

1950s for the women. Though at some levels like dowry, crimes like rape, sexual harassment at office or public places, and molestation, eve-teasing, even after over sixty years of independence women are still exploited, which is the shameful side of the country. Yet one can't deny that the situation has improved since the earlier times. Women, who now represent 48.2% of the population, are getting access to education, and then employment. From 5.4 million girls enrolled at the primary level in 1950-51 to 61.1 million girls in 2004-05. At the upper primary level, the enrolment increased from 0.5 million girls to 22.7 million girls.

Dropout rates for girls have fallen by 16.5% between the year 2000 and 2005. Programs like 'Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan' and 'Saakshar Bharat Mission for Female Literacy' has helped increase the literacy rates from less than 10 percent to more than 50% today. The result of this is that India has world's largest number of professionally qualified women. In fact India has the largest population of working women in the world, and has more number of doctors, surgeons, scientists, professors than the United States...

This point of view hasn't changed much. There is still a large section of women who are uneducated, and married off before the age of 18. Families are required to supply a chaste daughter to the family of her future husband. Also very few women are actually employed in good-paying jobs, and hence parents don't see the point of spending money on girls' education. Statistics say that close to 245 million Indian women lack the basic capability to read and write, which is a large number. Only 13.9% women are employed in the urban sector, and 29% in the domestic and agriculture sector, where too a majority of women are exploited by the men. The sex ratio of India shows that the Indian society is still prejudiced against female, and a lot is yet to be achieved in this context.

Conclusion

The woman in modern times is entering into certain new fields that were unknown to the woman's sphere of role-sets. They are activating participating in social, economic, and political activities. The women of the present generation have generally received higher education than the women of their preceding generation. There have been far reaching consequences in the economic status of their families. Increased awareness and education has inspired women to come out of the four walls of the home. Many woman actively supported and participated in the nationalist movement and secured eminent positions and offices in administration and public life in free India. Traditionally Indian women exist because of the family and for the family. The modern woman has started caring for her health, figure, cultural needs and interests, academic pursuits, social intercourse, religious activities recreational needs, etc.

The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. With a decline in their status from the ancient to medieval times ^[4, 5], to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. In modern India, women have held high offices including that of the President, Prime Minister, Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Leader of the Opposition, Union Ministers, Chief Ministers and Governors. Women's rights are secured under the Constitution of India — mainly, equality, dignity, and freedom from discrimination;

further, India has various statutes governing the rights of women.

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