

# Gender Question and Position of Women in India: A Historical Perspective

AJEET KUMAR

Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi (India)

## ABSTRACT

Gender Question and the position 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, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, their history has been eventful. As we know, The worth of any 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 honourable place granted to women. The Muslim influence on India caused considerable deterioration in the status of 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. This article trying to explore Gender question and position of women in India in the context of Indian History.

**Key Words :** Gender, Society, Position of Women, Indian History, Civilization

## INTRODUCTION

Indian women are inheritors of a very complex pattern of social models and cultural ideals. Some of the most acrimonious and emotionally charged debates of the 19<sup>th</sup> century centered precisely on issues which signified women's oppression and their poor position.

Inevitably, the perceived indicators of women's low status like sati, purdah, child marriage, female infanticide and enforced widowhood, formed essential items in the agenda of attack of almost all the major reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century India, whether they belong to the Brahma Samaj of Bengal and eastern India indifferent to the fact

that, the Arya Samaj of north India or the Prathana Samaj of Maharashtra and western India.<sup>1</sup> The problem of women received the attention of social reformers right from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In modern times, some individuals, organized associations and journals and significantly played remarkable role in bestirring the Indian society to focus its attention on this problem and make efforts in the direction of the general emancipation of Indian women's.<sup>2</sup>

With the growing impact of capitalist production and despite economic development schemes, women's relative access to economic resources, remunerative work and income has declined.<sup>3</sup> Women have on the whole

1. Y.Singh, *Modernization of Indian Tradition*, Rawat Publication, Jaipur, 1986.
2. M.N.Srinivas, *op.cit.*
3. Bitu Sen and Caren Grown, *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions: Third world Women's perspectives*, pp.15-16, Lourdes Beneria, ed. *Women and development: the sexual division of labour in rural societies*, (New York, 1982) in Samita Sen, *op.cit.*

**How to cite this Article:** Kumar, Ajeet (2019). Gender Question and Position of Women in India: A Historical Perspective. *Internat. J. Appl. Soc. Sci.*, 6 (8) : 2088-2091.

less access to public resources, such as education and health care, in part because of state policies and in part, because of social customs, which dictate that scarce resources go first to men and boys and only later to girls and women.<sup>4</sup> Women enjoy less than equal rights in law (both in civil or religious law),<sup>5</sup> whether because the law is written so as to limit their rights or because the law is adjudicate and implemented in such a way as to have this effect. They hold less political power than man, on national and local levels, both in terms of offices held and in terms of influence.<sup>6</sup> they are subject to violence by men of their own families, or often, by unrelated man who hold economic power over them, such as land lords or money lenders or those with state power, (like the police ) which goes largely unpunished by the state.<sup>7</sup>

### Women in Indian Society:

Women of different classes experience different problems and of course, have different opportunities and a political agenda<sup>8</sup> greater wealth helps alleviate some problems but creates others. For example, the phenomenon of dowry death is most common among upwardly mobile members of the lower and idle class.<sup>9</sup>

Women in communities, particularly of the lower

castes and classes, are economically productive and contribute to subsistence. Distributed as they are in all groups and classes, women are more closely bound to the men of their own social and economic group than to women of other groups even within their own class, let alone, women of other classes. Caste and class rather than gender, substantially influence their primary loyalties and concerns. Poor women share the world of men to a greater extent than women in the upper levels of the hierarchy, undertaking more than half the work. Wage work too, is performed when available, in addition to unpaid work and domestic tasks.<sup>10</sup>

The key to the social and economic position of members (particularly of lower classes in the countryside) is their relation to production and ownership of what is the main means of production (land, in case of rural communities), where ownership or farming rights vest in men, women status is affected to that extent, material divisions between men and women reinforcing women's subordination. Among landless communities men and women would appear to be equally affected by landlessness and their resource less status.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, division of labour on the lines of gender – which in itself need not necessarily entail subordination,

- 
4. *In search of our bodies: A Feminist look at Women health and reproduction in India*, Bombay, Shakti, 1967.  
*Towards Equality: Report of the committee on the status of Women in India*, Government of India, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, N.Delhi, 1974. L.S.S.O Malley, 'The impact of European Civilization' in *Modern India and the West: A Study of the Interaction of their civilizations*, ed., L.S.S.O.' Malley London, OUP, 1941.  
Milton Singer and Bernard S.Cohn (ed), *Structure and Change in Indian Society*, Chicago, Aldine Publishing Company, 1960.  
Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph. *The modernity of tradition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1967.
  5. T.N. Srivastava, *Women and the Law*, New Delhi, Intellectual Publishing House, 1985. and M.J. Anthony, *Women's Rights*, New Delhi, Dialogue Publications, 1985.
  6. See, Vina Mazumdar (ed), *Symbols of power*, ICSSR, SNTD Women's University and Allied Publications, 1979; Susheela Kaushik (ed), *Women's participation in politics*, New Delhi, Vikas, 1993.
  7. See, Govind kelkar, "Women and structural violence in India" in *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Volume 12, No.3-4. 1985, pp. 16-18.
  8. See, Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi, *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India*, London Zed Books, 1986.
  9. Indira Rajaram, "Economics of Bride – price and Dowry", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XVIII, 8 February 1983, pp. 275-279.  
Shalini Randeria and Leela Visariya, 'Sociology of Bride-price and Dowry', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XIX, 14 April, 1984, pp. 648-652.
  10. Ester Boserup, *Women's role in economic development*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1970, pp. 66-67 in Smita Sen, *op.cit.*
  11. Ester Boserup, *Ibid*, p. 60

hierarchy or social inequality generally works towards the detriment of women's position, and affects relations between men and women within the social process. For example, several tasks in agriculture which are monotonous and back-breaking, or which are ill-paid or unpaid, or are considered menial, are performed by female casual labour from landless communities and families, by definition tribal and scheduled caste women, this implies that tasks considered subsidiary or menial are generally 'female' tasks which earn lesser or no payment or status. Particularly where there is an abundant supply of such labour as in South India, wage differentials tend to be high.<sup>12</sup> Increasingly we see 'feminization of poverty' at work. The economic and social subordination of poor, rural, specifically landless tribal and low caste women is thus assured by their meagre or nil share of or access to benefits and resources, and the lower value given to their labour within the family and households, despite some status accruing to them as workers and mothers, partially recognized in some groups by the payment of bride price. Three identities – social class, caste and gender- place them at the bottom of the pile, lower in status than men and women of higher status groups as well as their own husbands. However, this did not affect such women's sense of commitment to their families, identification with their caste, group or class or their militancy over survival issues.

An attempt has to be made to visualize the context in which women's issues and their resolution at the plane

of movements, is placed. The ethnic and religious strife that beset the country and the divisions along lines of language<sup>13</sup>, (common too many other states brought together by the forces of invasion and imperialism hinders political organization of any kind—whether by movement or by political parties.<sup>14</sup> Such division separate women, whose first allegiance may be, for instance, to their own ethnic or religious group rather than to the women of another. While Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian and Parsi women have many problems in common – some of these appear susceptible to legal remedies- common solutions remain hostage to inter – ethnic strife.<sup>15</sup>

Indian women are also afflicted by poverty more crushing than that experienced by their men folk. They are more likely to be mal nourished starting as a result of the relative deprivation of food and health care for girls as compared to boys<sup>16</sup> (a deprivation which persists into adulthood) and continuing with related pregnancies, the process of lactation, and overwork at physically arduous tasks such as collection of fuel and water (tasks that have become more time consuming since rapid deforestation).<sup>17</sup> Women are also more likely to be illiterate, especially the rural women. To these debilitating factors can be added an ideological one the traditional concept of Indian womanhood.<sup>18</sup>

In societal expectations concerning the role and obligations of women, tradition continues to rule. In fact, traditional notions are so deeply ingrained and internalized that they cease to be more injections. They tend to define

12. Ester Boserup, *Ibid*, p. 71

13. For insights into state- society relations see Atul Kohli, (ed.), *India's Democracy: An analysis of changing state – Society relations*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988.

Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy, 1947- 77*. Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1978.

14. Miranda Davies (ed), *Third world second sex*, London, Zed Books, 1986, Jane Jacques, (ed), *The Women's Movements in Latin America*, Boston, Unwin Hyman, 1989.

15. Indira Jaising, "The Politics of Personal Law", *The Lawyers*, February 1986, pp.68.

16. See, Amartya sen and Sunil Sengupta, 'Malnutrition of rural children and the sex bias', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XVIII, May 1983, pp. 855-864.

17. Kamakshi Bhate, 'In search of Own Bodies', *Shakti*, 1987.

18. Research study made for the ESCAP Social development Division by Dr. Suma chitins, Tata Institute of Social Science, Mumbai in collaboration with the women studies unit of the SNDT University, Mumbai, A review of the progress made in India towards the Achievement of the objectives of the United Nations Decade for Women.

Also see, Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnaraj, *Women and society in India*, Delhi Ajanta Publications, 1987. Madhu Kishwar and Vanita Ruth, (ed.) *In search of Answers: Indian Women's voices from manushi*, London, Zed Books, 1984 (specially see, the introduction by Madhu Kishwar, pp. 1-47).

more often than not, the Indian women's conscience, sense of duty, and sense of personal worth; as much as they define societal expectations regarding the manner in which women must behave. Wifehood, motherhood, home making and devotion to god are the only roles visualizes for women. Any other work a woman may do, for example in agriculture, in the crafts etc., is seen as an extension of her role as a home maker, wife, daughter or mother. The back breaking house work that is done does not even count as 'labour' performed with proper submission of self, these restricted role may yet elevate a women to sainthood. This despite the fact that, in principle, women have no ritual status and are in many ways believed to be on level with the 'Shudras'. This ideal of womanhood continues to mould the minds not only of Hindu women but of women belonging to other religions as well.

## REFERENCES

- Asthana, Pramila (1974). *Women's Movement in India*. Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.
- Anthony, M.J. (1985). *Women's Rights*. Delhi: Dialogue Publications.
- Austin, Granville (1966). *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation*. Oxford: OUP.
- Beneria, Lourdes (1982). *Women and Development: The Sexual Division of Labour in Rural Societies*. New York: Praeger.
- Bhate, Kamakshi (1987). *In Search of our Bodies*, Bombay: Shakti.
- Calman, Leslie J. (1985). *Protest in Democratic India: Authority's Response to Challenge*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Calman, Leslie J. (1992). *Towards Empowerment: Women and Movement Politics in India*. Colorado: Westview Press
- Caplan, Patricia (1985). *Class and Gender in India: Women and their Organizations in a South Indian City*. London: Tavistock.
- Chandra, Bipan (1989). *India's Struggle for Independence*. Delhi: Penguin.
- Chanana, Karuna (ed). (1988). *Socialization, Education and Women: Explorations in Gender Identity*. NMML: Orient Longman.
- Chatterjee, Partha (1986). *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Chattopadhyay, Kamla Devi (1983). *Indian Women's Battle for Freedom*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publication.
- Chaudhuri, Maitrayee (1993). *Indian Women's Movement: Reform and Revival*. New Delhi: Radiant Publishers.
- Davies, Miranda (ed). (1986). *Third World Second Sex*. London: Zed Books.
- Desai, A.R. (1959). *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.
- Desai, Neera and Krishnaraj, Maithreyi (1987). *Women and Society in India*. Delhi: Ajanta Publications.
- Desai, Neera (1977). *Women in Modern India*. Bombay: Vora.
- Desai, Neera, (ed). (1988). *A Decade of Women's Movement in India*. Bombay: Himalaya Publishing House.

\*\*\*\*\*