

The Role of Family and Society in Present Status of Women in India with a reference from *That Long Silence*.

AJAY KUMAR

B.A., M.A.(Eng.)

Mob. No. 8168451002

Email: ajay1996.as6@gmail.com

Abstract

In this paper, the status of women in India in present is discussed in a very precise manner. Few things are described from the point of view of historical status and identity of women in Indian subcontinent. Then the problems faced by the women and how they countered these problems or not. Is the status of women in India improved or not in the 21st century? The role of family and society is remarkable and it cannot be ignored. In *That Long Silence*, family and society defines the status and identity of women. Some suggestive steps will be discussed and these steps can be helpful in enhancing the status of women in India. In Hindu religion women are worshiped as goddess and girls are known as incarnation of *Lakshmi* – the goddess of wealth. The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. The women's movement and a wide-spread network of non-Government Organisations which have strong grass-roots presence and deep insight into women's concerns have contributed in inspiring initiatives for the empowerment of women. However, there still exists a wide gap between the goals enunciated in the Constitution legislation, policies, plans, programmes and related mechanisms on the one hand and the situational reality of the status of women in India, on the other. Gender disparity manifests itself in various forms; social stereotyping, violence at the domestic and societal levels and continuing commoditization of women in society are some of them manifestations. Migration, skewed sex ratio and environmental degradation have added to the women's vulnerability. Women, single-handedly, cannot improve their status rather a collective effort is needed.

Keywords: Women, identity, status, India, society, men.

Introduction

As per the latest census carried out by the government of India, there are 943 females for every 1000 males in our country. It shows negative sex ratio and male dominance. The male dominance can be traced everywhere. We can seek superiority of men in every phase of our lives. When we take birth, we have our parents to look after us but for a girl child her father, her

brother in her teenage and after getting married her husband decide everything for her, lastly her son enters the bandwagon in her old age days. To a very large extent, lives of women in our country are controlled and decided by the men.

The scenario is slowly changing in recent years. We can see a slow and steady growth of women in all fields of significance. Women of today are not just confined to kitchen and taking care of their households, they have stepped out of their comfort zones to make their own images in the outside world as well. This in short, can be termed as women empowerment. Society has now altered its stand and the way it looks at women, due to the progress achieved by women in all fields of life. Men of today more understand the dilemmas of women in their lives, yet we see many cases of harassment against women. Therefore, society demands more improvements and reforms. The status of women in India is not so much better in comparison to developed nations. The rural women are facing more discrimination than urban women. Education, as we know, plays a great role in one's life, that's why status of educated and uneducated women is also different. "The women in India are not safe". It seems very apt because many incidents and news show that women are tortured, burnt and murdered. They are not safe at home, at office, at educational institutes and so on. Rape incidents are happening in 21st century when it is considered that human beings have achieved many things such as Nuclear Energy, Artificial Intelligence incurable diseases' cure etc. but are unable to give and create a secure and fearless milieu for women. This is the true status of women in India.

Status of women in traditional times

In ancient times, the society was dominated by the men. It is obvious where there is domination, there is no equality. In *Ramayana*, *Sita* has no right to choose her husband rather she has to accept that person who will fulfill her father's challenge. She has to go into exile along with her husband, although she was not guilty and punished. She was kidnapped by man and rescued by man and banished by man. Similarly, in *Mahabharata*, many female characters such as *Kunti*, *Gandhari* and *Draupadi* have no equal rights and freedom and these characters has been exploited and suppressed under the veil of patriarchal norms. In brief, our history and religious books do not consider women are equal to men. In medieval times sacred books and tradition were followed and set a trend for modern generation to follow. Traditionally, women were considered to be care takes of the home. They had to look after the running of the family smoothly, they had to manage the expanses in the most economical way possible, they had to look after aged in-laws, nurture the children etc. They were judiciously kept out of decision making matters as the primary role of women was not that of ruling the family. They were expected to obey orders of the husband, the elders of the family but kept in isolation when it came to major decisions related to the family. Women were not educated in the past times. They would be married off one day to their in-laws place and hence would not need too much of knowledge was the previous thinking. Women, who were still part of families that thought otherwise, saw some respite in this narrow minded approach. The most shocking thing was that *Sita* accepted everything without objection because she was conditioned accordingly that its natural and it happens with every woman. There were women in olden days too, who were well educated and led paths of success in many spheres of life because of support from their families.

It is these women who led paths of change and brought about a transformation in the way people viewed women in the Indian society.

Some major changes occurred throughout the world during 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. The American Revolution of 1776 and French Revolution of 1789 influenced society of that time. In 1832, England passed a reform act and under this reforming spirit the women's suffrage finally succeeded through two laws in 1918 and 1928. These changes helped to make better life of women throughout the world. In Indian Constitution, some special sections and articles for women were added by the Constituent Assembly. The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. In this way, the Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the

State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women. The women's movement and wide-spread network of non-Government Organisations which have strong grass-roots presence and deep insight into women's concerns have contributed in inspiring initiatives for the empowerment of women.

Gender Disparity

After myriads of changes occurred at the global level but nothing is changed in social, political and economical status of women in India. Few women transformed their professions from being a mere homemaker to the modern day multitasking woman, handling responsibilities without fear. These, few women, are educated and urban women who are only one side of the story. Women, in downtrodden regions and rural backgrounds, are uneducated and not able to compete of their urban counterparts. The gender gap still exists in minds of Indians. The discrimination starts before the birth of child. Parents are hoped that they will bless with a boy child. They do not want girl child because they think many things which are traditionally attached with girl child. Moreover, rural and illiterate people think that the boy child is the forwarder of the family and clan. In contrary, they do not know that boy and girl are equivalent except anatomical difference. After taking birth, the boy child and the girl child are brought up unequally and they are not given equal diets and food. Virginia Woolf says, "One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well". This inequality happens throughout their life.

The role of the Indian family

The question that comes to mind automatically that despite all the progressive ideals defining the concept of the nation, why do women still suffer from social attitudes? The answer lies within the unit of an Indian family. In an Indian family (in general), where there is a girl child and a boy child, it is interesting to note the different set of values that they are taught from their childhood.

The main character of *That Long Silence* is Jaya, a girl born into a middle-class family. When she is young, Jaya is clever, curious and bright; all qualities are considered unladylike by mainstream society. So she does not behave womanly, but Jaya's grandmother encourages her to act more conventionally so she can get a husband when she grows up, explaining that civilized and cultured girls are skilled at cooking, cleaning and household labor. In addition, she tells Jaya to learn to be more accommodating and to keep quiet when she disagrees. All young women will have to build good relationships with their in-laws at some point and learning to make a good impression will go along way towards helping her in the future. Jaya's grandmother regrets on her questioning nature of her granddaughter because she believes that only husband can ask question.

"I feel sorry for your husband, Jaya whoever he is ', she had said to me once.

'What for, *ajji*?'

'Look at you – for everything a question, for everything a retort. What husband, can be comfortable with that?' (Deshpande 27).

Even in cases where she is given the chance to study further than school and complete college or university, she is taught to prefer gendered stereotypes for careers like “teacher”, “nurse” etc. In our country, unequal opportunity is provided to the female gender at the level of family.

In spite of such unreasonable teachings, we have women who are bus drivers, metro rail drivers, pilots, flight squadrons, engineers, scientists etc. Women have proved to the world that there is literally nothing that is unconquerable by them. They have taken over male bastions and proved successful in their own ways. Women today are participating in every field of life.

Atrocities against women

In modern India, women changed their status from object to subject, but men are not ready to accept the empowered position of women. Violence at domestic and societal levels and continuing commoditization of woman is not ended. Migration, skewed sex ratio and environmental degradation have added to the women's vulnerability. The newspapers are full of news of exploitation, violence, acid attack, dowry, rape, alive burning, honor killing and murder. The numbers of atrocities against women are increasing day after day. These news of atrocities are very important of the ugly truths of mankind. Women, be it from urban or rural backgrounds, still face harassment and humiliation in domestic as well as professional circles. However high they reach in their lives, women are still made to feel helpless when mete out unhealthy treatments and behave badly in front of them. On the other side of the society, women in prostitution are facing and bearing socially challenging situations. In terms of safety, there are still lots to be achieved.

Conclusion

Women play many roles in their lives, that of a daughter, sister, wife, daughter-in-law, mother, friend, colleague, professional and so on. With addition of roles, comes addition of responsibilities and women have to handle everything in a very meticulous manner. The modern day woman is more aware of the society around her and believes in her strengths, handles her weaknesses with grace, identifies the goodness in things and is socially responsible towards her duties. There is no profession that does not have women enrollment. The Government of India launched many schemes especially for women empowerment and girl child security i.e. *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*. Education of girls is made free and necessary in government schools to encourage women to join different institutions and render their valuable services. Our armed forces have seen a rise in women enrollment. But in spite of these accomplishments the status of women in India is not so prestigious and appreciable. Incidents of atrocities against women are increasing day by day. Indeed, the male dominated society of India is not ready to accept the empowered status of women. Women, single-handedly, cannot improve their status rather a collective effort is needed.

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