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The Position of Women in the different Stages of Indian History and their Empowerment

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Abstract

Women have been playing an important role in shaping the society with men since the time immemorial. The contribution and achievement of women can never be denied. They engaged themselves in the household works as well as in the social or community works. The present article sheds light on the condition, achievements and empowerment of women in Indian context from the Indus Valley Civilization to the modern age. Their literary contribution in the Vedic age and their financial and political empowerment in the modern age have been focussed on.

Key Words

Women, Dignity, Satîdâha, Education, Franchise, Empowerment.

Introduction

The condition of women in India changed from time to time. Though the society in the Indus Valley Civilization was a matriarchal one, yet it changed gradually into a patriarchal one. In the Vedic age women were respected and regarded with high esteem. They flourished in all spheres of life from literary contribution to warfare in that period. But after the Vedic age the plight of women worsened. In the 18th and 19th centuries their condition became worst because of the excessive practice of *Satîdâha* (burning of widow). The English education strengthened women and the brutal tortures of men on them gradually ceased to exist. Some philanthropist and feminist thinkers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda etc. fought for the elevation of the social and educational conditions of women. After the Independence in 1947 women got political empowerment. Data have been collected mainly from literary sources for this research article to show the cultural and political achievements of women as well as to explain their social dignity and economic condition.

Women in the Indus Valley Civilization

According to the historians the society in the Indus Valley Civilization (3250 B.C. to 2750 B.C.) was matriarchal. Women got special respect in the society. As men women also would keep long hair on their head. They would use prickles to braid or plait their hairs. Moreover they would use lamp-black or collyrium as a cleanser for the eyes. The use of lipstick, nail-polish and vanity-bag was also very much known to them. This was proved by the excavation in Chanhudaro. Both men and women would wear ornaments made of gold, silver, copper, bronze and other precious stones. The main ornaments wore by them were finger-ring,

bracelet, necklace, armlet, nose-ring, ear-ring, waist-belt or girdle etc. The half-naked figures of women discovered by digging lead us to infer that women would enjoy unrestricted freedom in the society. These figures also shed lights on the cultural aspects of that age. In the later period the people of this civilization started to use the strong-scented perfumes and aromatic and cosmetic goods that led to the decreasing of their average longevity to 24 years of age.

The Status of Women in the Vedic Age

Then comes the Vedic period in the Indian history. In the Rigvedic period (2500 B.C. to 800 B.C. according to Winternitz) though the society was a patriarchal one, yet women had respect, freedom and social dignity. It must be remembered that in ancient India the women of the Aryan civilization were not self-willed or wayward in spite of their freedom. They were under the control of their husbands and they obeyed their 'sahadharmini' (one who has similar religious activities). The great grammarian Pânini has written in his 'Astâdhyâyî', "*patyurno jajnasamyoge*" (Astâdhyâyî, 4/1/33). It means that in the feminine gender of the word 'pati' the suffix 'na' is used with reference to sacrifice. So the word 'patnî' means the woman who enjoys the result of a sacrifice with her husband. The following mantra of the first *Mandala* (chapter) of the *Rigveda* (1/173/2) validates the view that women and men performed the sacrifices together in the Rigvedic period. It goes:

“arcadvrisâ vrisabhih sveduhavyairmrigo nâmno ati yajjriguryât/
pramandayurmanâm gûrta hotâ bharate marsonmithunâ yajatrah||”¹

It means that the *yajamâna* (the performer of a sacrifice), the giver of oblation, pays homage to the deity Indra with the *Adhvaryu* (the priest of the *Yajurveda*) and others with the oblations offered by himself. Indra will appear in the sacrificial ground as a thirsty deer. Oh wrathful Indra! The mortal priest (*hotri*) praises the deities fond of hymns with hymns and men and women perform the sacrifice. Another mantra of the *Rigveda* (5/3/2) supports this view. It says, “When you (*Agni*) make the husband and wife one-minded then as your friends they wet you with the materials like milk, ghee etc. produced from cows.”

According to Hârta, an author of a smriti-text, called 'Hâritasamhitâ' women were classified into two classes in the Vedic period. These were 'sadyodvâhâ' and 'brahmavâdinî'. The women who continued their study of the Veda until they were married had been called 'sadyodvâhâ'. The women of the other class did not marry. They spent their life through philosophical discussions and religious practices observing celibacy. They were consecrated by the holy sacrificial thread. The author of 'Yamasamhitâ' Yama says that in the ancient age women had been consecrated by the sacrificial thread and they used to read the Veda and chanted the famous 'sâvitri' hymn. P. V. Kane commented in his monumental work, 'History of Dharmasastras' that though the custom of wearing the sacrificial thread by the women at the time of Manu ceased to exist and it had less influence in the society, yet Manu was fully familiar with the custom because there is a verse ascribed to Manu which says that in the ancient age it was expected that women would wear the rope made of the *munja* grass, they would teach the Vedas and they would chant the *Sâvitri* hymn. According to *Shabdakalpadruma* of Raja Radhakanta Deva the word 'maunjibandhanam' as used in the above indicated verse refers to the ceremony of wearing of the sacrificial thread. The verse ascribed to Manu goes:

“purâkalpe kumârînâm maunjibandhanamisyate/
adhyâpanam ca vedânâm sâvitriâvacanam tathâ||”²

The Marriage Systems in the Vedic Period

Women could marry when they attained full development. Early marriage was not encouraged. Marriage for love as well as for money was known. Remarriage of widows was permitted. Widows could remarry their brothers –in –laws. The *Rigveda* (10/18/8) says, “Oh woman! Please go back to your family. Arise. The man whom you are going to sleep with had shuffled off this mortal coil. Come back. All the duties have been performed by you being a wife of the man who had impregnated you after marrying you.” This is a consolation

to a widow at a crematorium. It also proves that *Satîdâha* (burning of the new widow) was not in practice in the Rigvedic age. Polygamy was practised. The result of polygamy is quarrel among the co-wives of a man. The Rigveda (10/159) portrays a funny and terrible picture of enmity among the co-wives. The first mantra of this hymn goes like, “The Sun has risen. My good luck has risen. I have verily understood that all my co-wives (wives-in-law) are defeated by me. I have brought also my husband under control.” The third mantra says, “My sons have killed my enemies. My daughter shines as the supreme one. I have got victory over others. My name is dear to my husband.”

The childless widows could marry their brothers-in-law in order to maintain the family community. This is called levirate marriage. Taking bride’s price and polyandry were restricted to king’s family only. Women had full the right to paternal property. The unmarried women lived in her father’s family. Rigveda (2/17/7) says, “Oh Indra! I pray for wealth to you as a woman living with her parents for life prays for her share from her paternal property.” This right to property proves that women were not regarded as an undesirable dependant who willy-nilly had to be supported and could not be got rid of.

Husbands were punished for neglecting their wives. But wives were not punished for the same misbehaviour to their husbands. From this reality the dignity of women can easily be inferred. Among many types of marriage in the Rigvedic Aryan civilization the *Gândharva* marriage (love marriage) gained currency. The *Râkshasa* marriage (marriage by capture), the *Paishâca* marriage (marriage involving seduction and rape after making drunk) etc. prevailed among the *Shûdra* castes and among the non-Aryan people. Women of the royal family could choose their husbands in the *Swayamvara-sabhâ* (a meeting for choosing the husband by a young princess from many princes gathered in the royal court to be selected and honoured with garland given by the princess). In this selection there was no discrimination between the higher caste and the lower caste. Both of the *Anuloma* marriage (marriage between higher and lower class man and woman respectively) and the *Pratiloma* marriage (marriage between lower class man and higher class woman) were equally popular in the society. More over exogamy (*vahirvivâha*) was in practice among the different lineages or different clans. Endogamy (*antarvivâha*) prevailed among the same lineage and the close relative. If a woman was not given in marriage to a man in the suitable time according to the scriptural instructions, then she could select a suitable person and marry him after waiting for three months to three years. From this it can be assumed that the society was liberal in respect of marriage.

In the marriage ceremony the bride would chant specific hymns designed for them only. The ‘*Grihyasûtrakâra*’ Gobhila had also instructed that some hymn like “*dhravam dyauh dhruvâ prithivî dhruveyam, dhruvâham patikule bhûyâsam*” (The sky is firm. The earth is firm. The Pole Star is firm. Similarly, I shall be stable in my husband’s home. I will stay there always.) is to be recited by the bride. Other similar hymns are also to be chanted by the bride in marriage ceremony.

Women’s Education in the Vedic Period

Both men and women had equal access to learning and teaching in the Vedic era. In the Vedic period women in India reached to the highest peak of wisdom. This pure land of the *Sanâtana Dharma* (the eternal religion) had produced many stalwart women in the field of knowledge. Thus we had Apâlâ, Visvavârâ, Ghosâ, Gârgî, Maitreyî etc. Maitreyî sought ‘*Brahmajnâna*’ or the supreme knowledge from her husband Yâjñavalkya who was about to take ‘*pravrajyâ*’ or the path of renunciation. Yâjñavalkya wanted to divide his property between his two wives namely, Kâtyâyanî and Maitreyî. But Maitreyî, a spiritual woman, asked her husband, “*What shall I do with the property by which I shall not be immortal?*”³ She wanted to know the path of immortality in the *Brihadâranayaka Upanisad*. This memorable question made by Maitreyî astonished the sages and the seekers of truth of all ages came later. Winternitz, Maxmuller and other western scholars of Indology highly praised this spiritual quest, light and thirst for immortality raised in the heart of an ancient Indian woman. We can hear the eternal message of human soul in this question of Maitreyî which is designated as the ‘divine discontent’ by Matthew Arnold of the nineteenth century English poet. The phrase ‘divine discontent’ means “an uncomfortable gap between ‘what we are, in comparison to what we have the

power to become”. Maitreyî also wanted to become immortal even being a mortal being. Her husband advised her, “Oh Maitreyi, the Self is to be realised, heard of, established by argument and meditated upon. The Self being realised, heard of, established by argument and meditated upon, all is known.” Actually Maitreyi taught us by her question that material prosperity and worldly riches cannot quench our spiritual quest and cannot lead us to immortality.

Gârgî was a wise, learned and sage. Her name has become immortal in the entire Vedic literature. She was the daughter of Vacaknu. She may be placed in the foremost place among the wise women of the Vedic age. Many learned persons and persons of parts would gather in the royal court of the king Janaka in Mithila. *Brahmavidyâ* or the knowledge of the supreme reality was discussed in the meeting of the learned men. Once the sage Yâjnavalkya had defeated other learned men by his shunned arguments. Then Gârgî approached to participate in the debate. In the 3rd chapter (3/6 and 3/8) of the Brihadâraṇyaka two important debates have been mentioned which took place between Gârgî and Yâjnavalkya. It was an interesting fact that no one was defeated in those debates. Both were announced equally expert in their philosophical discussions.

The words ‘*kathi*’ (the woman expert in the ‘*katha*’ branch of Veda), ‘*kalâpî*’ (the woman expert in the ‘*kalâpa*’ branch of the Veda), ‘*bahvrîchî*’ (the woman expert in the ‘*bahvrîcha*’ branch of the Veda) directly indicate that women had complete right to study of the Vedas. They also taught the Vedas. Pânini has given the meaning of the words like ‘*âcâryâ*’ (a female teacher), ‘*âcâryânî*’ (the wife of a teacher who would not necessarily be a teacher), ‘*upâdhyâyâ*’ (a female teacher), ‘*upâdhyâyânî*’ (the wife of a teacher) etc. To explain these words the great Patanjali has mentioned two names of female teachers namely, Aapishâlâ and Audamedhâ in his commentary called ‘*Mahâbhâshya*’. The word Aapishâlâ means a female teacher who has studied a special branch of the grammar started by the grammarian Aapishâli. Similarly the word Audamedhâ refers to a female teacher who has studied the branch of the grammar initiated by the female grammarian named Audamedhî. According to Kâshakritsna, an author of ‘*Kâshikâvrittî*’ of *Astâdhyâyî* mentioned a female teacher whose name was Brâhmanî.

Sometimes the wise men also took advices from the learned women. The *Aitareyâraṇyaka* (4/25/4) mentions one such incident. Once there was a dissension among the priests regarding the duration of the *Agnihotra* sacrifice. Some priests had opined that it should be performed for two days. Others said that it would be performed within one day. The offering of oblations is made twice in this sacrifice. These offerings are made in the morning and at the evening. Now one may count the two offerings performed in one day. Other may start the sacrifice from the evening session and he may finish the sacrifice in the morning of the next day. Being unable to reach to the conclusion the priests went to an unknown girl mentioned just as ‘*kumârî*’ to come to terms. She supported the second option and explained that the evening offering is performed after the setting of the Sun and the morning offering is done after the Sun rises. So the *Agnihotra* sacrifice is to be performed in two days. It was not the case that the parents only wanted son, but they wanted learned or erudite daughter also. The Brihadâraṇyaka Upanisad ((6/4/17) says, “If anyone wishes a learned daughter then he and his wife should eat rice cooked with sesame and mixed with clarified butter (ghee).”⁴

Women Seers of the Rigveda

Some Rigvedic hymns were revealed to women. The woman seer of the Rigveda Vâk, the daughter of the seer Ambhrina, had seen a *Sûkta* (a collection of some *mantras* or hymns) called the *Vâksûkta* (10/125). (Here it should be noted that in our traditional concept the Veda is eternal. It was not composed by the sages. It was revealed to them. The sages had attained the Vedic hymns by their contemplative thought. So they are called the seers of the Veda). A very high philosophical thought is expressed in this hymn. Vâk is the emblem of the all-pervading energy inherent in all objects of the universe. In the later Vedic period this Vâk had been changed into Durga Devi. Vâk is the controller of the whole universe. She regulates the deities and men. She is the Goddess of all wealth. By the grace of Vâk all deities and men and women attain unique power. She destroys the persons who hate Brahman.

There are other hymns also which had been seen by the women seers in the Rigveda. For examples, 1/179 (seen by Lopâmudrâ, the wife of sage Agastya), 5/28 (seen by Visvavârâ, the daughter of sage Atri), 8/96 (seen by Apâlâ, the daughter of sage Atri), 10/39-40 (both hymns seen by Ghosâ, the daughter of sage Kaksivat), 10/85 (seen by woman sage Sâvitri Sûryâ), 10/145 (seen by woman sage Indrânî). Woman sage Sûryâ gives advices to the bride, “Be queen to your father-in-law, be queen to your mother-in-law, be queen to your sister-in-law and be queen to your brothers-in-law.” (Rigveda, 10/85/46).

Fine Arts, Performing Arts and Occupation of Women in the Vedic Age

Women were taught dance, vocal music, instrumental music etc. in the Vedic age. The *Shatapathabrâhmana* mentions that the wives of the *Udgâtâ* (the priest of the Sâmaveda) would sing in the sacrifice. Women engaged themselves in sewing, weaving, combing of wool, embroidery etc. These have been stated as the works of women. The *Shatapathabrâhmana* (12/7/2/1) says, “*Tat vâ etat strînâm karma yat ûrnâsûtram karma*” (The work related to wool is natural to women.). The women involved in embroidery were called ‘*peshaskarî*’, because the word ‘*pasha*’ meant ornament. Women used to make the cushion of the king’s chair with golden thread, silver thread and coloured thread. The backrests were made by them. These cushions like pillow were called *hiranyakashipu* and *hiranyakurca*. The 30th chapter of the *Shukla Yajurveda* mentions 70 kinds of occupations among which 8 kinds of work were fixed for women only. These were washing of clothes, making of bamboo basket, preparing of aromatic compounds, preparing of lamp-black, making of jacket of sword, making of doll, dying, and embroidery.

Military Training of Women in the Vedic Age

There are many literary proofs for women’s participation in war. The queens of the famous kings took part in the war and they fought fearlessly in the battlefield against the enemy. Being ordered by her husband king Namuci the wife of him took part in a terrible and prolonged battle. The *Asvinsûkta* of the Rigveda (1/116) illustrates the prowess of Vishpalâ, the wife of king Khela. The 15th mantra of this hymn says, “One leg of Vishpalâ, the wife of king Khela had been separated in war like the leg of a bird. Oh Ashvins! You have transplanted an iron shank to her at night immediately for her movement and for acquiring the wealth abandoned by the enemy.” The mantra goes:

“*caritram hi verivâcchedi parnamâjâ khelasya paritakmyâyâm/
sadyo jamghâmâyasîm vishpalâyai dhane hite sartave pratyadhattam/*”⁵

The above mantra is a proof for the skill of the surgeons of the Rigvedic era. Mudgalânî, the wife of Mudgala was another female soldier whose name shines in the entire Vedic literature. She drove her husband’s chariot in the battlefield and defeated their enemy and captured many enemies by chasing them. The Rigvedic mantra (10/102/2) says, “When the wife of Mudgala boarded on the chariot and defeated thousands of enemies then the air blew her cloth. She became the driver of the chariot at the time of conquering the cows (taken by the enemy). Mudgalânî, alias Indrasenâ snatched away the cows from the clutches of enemy in war.” The military expertise of women of this period is shown also in many other hymns of the Rigveda like 5/61, 5/80, 7/78, 8/33, 8/91 etc. This was the most sublime state and status of women in India.

Decline of the Status of Women in the Later Vedic Period or Puranic Age

But in the Puranic period though women like Kuntî, Gândhârî, Draupadî etc. had shown their strong personality and wisdom in social and political affairs, still their freedom and power started to degrade. Draupadî became the property of her husband Yudhisthira in gambling. Consequently, she had to face a disgraceful situation in front of the civilized men in Dhritarâstra’s courtyard. Eight types of marriage prevailed in the society. These were brâhma (arranged marriage), daiva (marriage in which father gave his daughter to a sacrificial priest), ârsa (in which token bride-price of a cow and a bull was paid to daughter’s father), prâjâpatya (in which the father gave the girl without dowry), gândharva (marriage often clandestine, with the consent of the two parties), âsura (marriage by purchase), paishâca (marriage involving seduction and rape after making drunk), râksasa (marriage by capture). Manu laid down that a woman at her young age should be kept in the

protection of her father. After marriage she must be kept in her husband's guidance and in her old age her sons will keep her. Still their status was higher in this period than their status in the nineteenth century.

The Mauryan Period (324 B. C. to 185 B. C.)

In the Mauryan period women lost their high esteem. Married women could hardly take part in important religious ceremonies with their husbands. They live within the boundary of walls. But some positive sides were also prevailing in the society for women. The second queen of the Emperor took part in religious ceremonies with the Emperor. Women were entrusted for the care and security of the Emperor. They were also appointed as ambassadors. The Emperor Ashoka sent His son Mahendra and daughter Sanghamitra to Sri Lanka to preach Buddhism. Their names are stated in the Buddhist text 'Mahāvamsha' composed in Sri Lanka. Women were expert in dance, music, painting and other arts. Remarriage and divorce got currency. Polygamy and *Satīdāha* were in practice.

The Gupta Period (320 A.D. to 500 A.D.)

Inter-caste marriage prevailed in the Gupta period. Women were educated. There was no purdah system. The increased prosperity created the institutions of prostitution. The system of Devadāsī (courtesans of god in temples) started in different temples like the temple of Mahakal in Ujjayini. They could participate in all social, religious and political activities. They inherited property. They even could be the *âcārya* or instructor of Vedic mantra. The chaste and dutiful wife of husband was respected in the society with high esteem. This kind of condition of women continued up to the 12th century. In the 8th century A.D. the wife of Mandan Mishra namely, Ubhayabharati confronted the great Shankaracharya in a debate and she was appointed judge between Mandan Mishra and Shankaracharya in a philosophical discussion.

The Medieval Age (12th Century to 18th Century)

In the medieval age the plight of women became the worst because of the inhuman and brutal system of burning of Sati (a newly widow). Moreover, there were the curses of the dowry system, child marriage, polygamy etc. In the pecuniary and social affairs women were completely dependent on men. A Brahmin could marry more than one lady according to the system of '*Kaulīnya*' or the high status of lineage.

With the advent of the Islamic Rule in India the condition of women deteriorated. They were socially secluded. The Muslim women of all strata of society had to follow the system of purdah according to their religious instruction. So the women of the ruling class had to confine themselves in the harem of the Emperor. The male doctors could not enter the harem for treatment. The eunuchs played the media between the women of the harem and the doctors. Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, a French traveller, commented that the wives, daughters and sisters of the Mughal Emperor seldom went outside their harem to visit new places or to improve their health-condition. If they went to visit an Elite woman they had to take the Emperor's permission and they had to go in a palanquin covered in four sides and they were guarded by the security guards. Sujan Roy wrote: "If a young woman was found running the streets and Bazars of the town and while so doing did not veil herself or allowed herself to be unveiled . . . she was to go to the quarters of the prostitutes and take up the profession."⁶ Professor P. N. Chopra mentioned that once the Begum of the Subahdar of Kabul Amir Khan was compelled to wear of her purdah while she was travelling. The Subahdar rejected her for this sin. The Elite Hindu women followed this to protect themselves from the foreign rulers. The lower class Hindu women worked in the fields and markets. So it was impossible for them to follow the purdah and consequently they enjoyed much freedom. The Mughal Emperors like Akbar, Jahangir, Aurangzeb tried to ban the *Satīdahā*. When Akbar heard that the widow of Jayamal who was unwilling to be burnt as *Satī*, he went to the crematorium and saved her life. Aurangzeb made a rule to ban *Satīdahā*. In spite of that *Satīdahā* took place in the Hindu society.

The women of the Rajput community were brave and self-respectful. The women of the Royal Rajput practised *Jauhar* or mass self-immolation with their children and valuables in a massive fire to avoid capture enslavement and rape by Turkish-Persian Islamic invaders when facing certain defeat during a war. According to P.N.Chopra, being insulted for dress code by her husband Jayasingha, the King of Amber, his queen

protested that mutual respected was the guardian not only of happiness but of virtue, and if again she was insulted he would find that 'the daughter of Kotha' could use a sword more effectively than the Prince of Amber the scissors. This shows the self-respect of the Rajput women. Mothers got honour in the Mughal period. P.N. Chopra has written, "Whatever might have been the position of woman as a girl, bride and widow, she certainly occupied a most respectable position in society as a mother."

Some women achieved their notability in the political and cultural spheres in spite of the patriarchal rule in the Islamic age. In the Sultani period the daughter of Iltutmis Sultana Raziya reigned in India from 1236 A.D. to 1240 A.D. with glory. In the Mughal period Tara Bai flourished in Maharashtra, Chand Bibi in Ahmednagar, Queen Durgavati in Gandoyana, Sahibji in Afganistan and Nur Jahan in Delhi. Nur Jahan was the real power behind Jahangir's throne. Jahan Ara and Roshan Ara, the two daughters of Shah Jahan also participated in the political activities. In the cultural spheres Gulbadan Begum, sister of Humayun wrote the valuable book '*Humayun Nama*' on her brother. Poetesses like Zeb Unnisa (daughter of Aurangazeb), Mira Bai (the wife of Bhoj Raj), Salma Sultana, Aka Bai, Kena Bai achieved fame. It may be mentioned here that the great mathematician Bhâskara II wrote *Lîlâvatî*, a mathematical work, to teach Mathematics to his daughter Lîlâvatî in 1150 A.D. The book comprises of 279 verses in Sanskrit in poetic form with a prose commentary. It mainly deals with Arithmetic.

The British Period

In the British period Lord William Bentinck abolished 'Satidâha' in 1829 A.D. by the Regulation Act – XVII. Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) played the pivotal role in convincing the then Governor General of the Fort William Lord William Bentinck. After that women got the English education through the tireless efforts of Rammohan, Pandit Iswarchandra Vidyasagar etc. Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) established 'Hindu Female School' in 1849 with the help of Drink Water Bethune. He was also involved in the 'Female Juvenile Society'. For the expansion of female education he established 'Strishiksa Sammilani' in different districts of Bengal. He established 35 schools for girls in the villages of Bengal. The numbers of female students in these schools were 1300 within 1850 AD. His greatest contribution in our society was that he struggled for remarriage of widows. He quoted the verses from Parâsharasmriti, Baudhâanasmriti, Naradasmriti etc. supporting the remarriage of widows. He collected 1000 signatures of the then renowned personalities and applied to the British Government for passing the regulation on widow remarriage. Raja Radhakanta Deb collected 36,763 signatures of the orthodox Hindus against Vidyasagar's move. At last Lord Canning passed the Widow Remarriage Act by Regulation – XV on the 26th July, 1856 and consequently widow remarriage became legal or legitimate.

The English education strengthened the mental power of women. As a result, they flourished in different fields of our society. Thus we got some eminent personalities from women in arts, music, science, sports, politics, law etc.

We cannot forget the poetical beauty as presented by Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), the Nightingale of India, in her English poetry. She served as the first Governor of United Provinces after India's independence. She played the pivotal role in the Indian independence movement against the British rule. She became the 44th President of the Indian National Congress in 1925. Her notable works include "The Golden Threshold" (1905), "The Bird of Time" (1912), "The Broken Wing". The second book includes "In the Bazaars of Hyderabad" and the third book includes the famous poem "The Gift of India" in which she vehemently criticised the British Empire's exploitation of Indian mothers and soldiers. The pathos of the Indian mothers for their martyred sons had been expressed by her in a melancholy tone in the following verses of "The Gift of India":

"Can ye measure the grief of the tears I weep
Or compass the woe of the watch I keep?
Or the pride that thrills thro' my heart's despair
And the hope that comforts the anguish of prayer?
And the far sad glorious vision I see

Of the torn red banners of Victory?
When the terror and tumult of hate shall cease
And life be refashioned on anvils of peace,
And you honour the deeds of the deathless ones
Remember the blood of thy martyred sons!" (Source: <https://poets.org> . Accessed on 29 May, 2022)

Liberation Movement and Women

The contribution of Sarojini Naidu, Matangini Hazra, Pritilata Weddedar, Basanti Devi, Urmila Devi, Hemprabha Majumder, Jyotirmayi Devi, Lila Roy, Ashalata Sen, Santosh Kumari, Prabhavati Devi, Suniti Devi, Binapani Devi, Pratima Devi, Sunitibala Mitra, Mohini Dasgupta, Bagala Som, Sati Devi, Uma Devi, Smt. Durga Bai, Purnima Banerjee, Vijaylaxmi Pandit, Sucheta Kripalini, Ammu Swaminathan, Hamsa Mehta etc. in our freedom movement is remembered even now with great respect. Women established many organizations for their own interest as well as national interest. Few names of these organizations are Bharat Mahila Parishad (1904), Bharat Stri Mahamandal (1910), Women's Indian Association (established by Annie Besant in 1917), National Council of Women In India (established by Lady Tata and Lady Aberden in 1925), Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust, All India Women's Conference, Banga Mahila Samaj, Theosophical Society of Women etc. These organizations mainly focussed on the preservation and development of the women's rights. They tried to eradicate some social diseases like child marriage, the system of Purdah etc. They acted for women franchise and social, economic and political equality.

The Modern Period

Now-a-days, women crack the UPSC civil service examination with glorious achievements. We had one internationally esteemed woman Prime Minister namely, Mrs Indira Gandhi. Now women go to the bottom of sea, fly in the sky for astronomical research, and put their footprints on the peaks of high mountains. They govern a state, act as the head of the educational institutions with their skill and expertise. The literacy rate of India as per the Census of 2011 is 74.04%. The literacy rate among the males is 82.14% and among females it is 65.46%. Kerala stands in the highest position in the literacy rate of women with 92.07% and Rajasthan stands in the lowest position in this rank with 57.6% of women literacy rate according to the census of 2011.

Women Employment in the Central Government Service

As per the Census of Central Government Employees, as on 31st March, 2011 (which was published by the Government of India, Ministry of Labour & Employment, Directorate General of Employment & Training, Survey & Study Division, 3/10, Jam Nagar House, New Delhi, in April, 2014) out of 30.87 lakh regular employees, 3.37 lakh were women. The proportion of women in the total employment is almost static, around 11% in the year 2011, 2009 and 2008. The estimated women employment in major employing Ministries is shown in the following table:

Estimated Women Employment in Major Employing Ministries

| Sl. No. | Ministry | Women Employment as on 31 st March, 2011 | |
|--------------|--------------------|---|--------------|
| | | Number | % age share |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 1. | Communication & IT | 37,460 | 17.30 |
| 2. | Railways | 96,704 | 7.28 |
| 3. | Defence (Civilian) | 42,698 | 11.38 |
| 4. | Others | 1,60,577 | 13.76 |
| TOTAL | | 3,37,439 | 10.93 |

(Source: Census of Central Government Employees as on 31st March, 2011, Published in April, 2014)

The above table shows that participation of women was highest in Ministry of Communication & IT (17.30%) whereas participation of women in Ministry of Railways is quite low (7.28%) as compared to

overall women participation in Central Government Employment. Ministry of Defence (civilian) has fair share of women employment i.e. 11.38%. The participation of women shared by the rest of the Ministries/Departments was of the order of 13.76%.

Women's Participation in the General Election to the Parliamentary Constituency

Women in India have been participating in the Panchayet Election, Municipal Election, Assembly Constituency Election and in the Parliamentary Constituency Election since the 1st General Election in 1952. The following table shows the numbers of the women contestants and women elected Members of Parliament in the General Election of Parliamentary Constituency.

Women's Participation in the General Election to the Parliamentary Constituency

| General Election | Year | Total no. of Seats | Women Contestants | Women Elected |
|-------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| 1st | 1952 | 489 | -- | 22 |
| 2nd | 1957 | 494 | 045 | 27 |
| 3rd | 1962 | 494 | 070 | 34 |
| 4th | 1967 | 520 | 067 | 31 |
| 5th | 1971 | 518 | 086 | 22 |
| 6th | 1977 | 542 | 070 | 19 |
| 7th | 1980 | 542 | 142 | 28 |
| 8th | 1984 | 542 | 164 | 44 |
| 9th | 1989 | 543 | 198 | 27 |
| 10th | 1991 | 543 | 325 | 39 |
| 11th | 1996 | 543 | 599 | 40 |
| 12th | 1998 | 543 | 274 | 43 |
| 13th | 1999 | 543 | 277 | 47 |
| 14th | 2004 | 543 | 355 | 45 |
| 15th | 2009 | 543 | 556 | 59 |
| 16th | 2014 | 543 | 668 | 61 |
| 17th | 2019 | 543 | 719 | 78 |
| 18th | 2024 | 543 | 797 | 74 |

[Sources: 1. Mahapatra, Anadi Kumar (2010): *Bharater Shasanbyabastha o Rajniti Parichay*; Kolkata, page-1016. 2. <http://pibarchive.nic.in/archieve/ot> (Accessed on 16 June, 2024). 3. <https://www.myneta.info/LokSabha2024/index.php?action> (Accessed on 16 June, 2024)]

The above table shows that the highest number of women elected in the General Election of India is 78 in the year of 2019.

Constitutional Rights and other Legal Rights for Women

The Indian Constitution has provided 6 kinds of Fundamental Rights to its citizen. Women can also enjoy these rights equally with men. These are stated from Article 12 to 35 and are included in the 3rd chapter of our glorious Constitution. These are Right to Equality (from Article 14 to 18), Right to Freedom (from Article 19 to 22), Right against Exploitation (articles 23 and 24), Right to Freedom of Religion (from Article 25 to 28), Cultural and Educational Rights (Articles 29 and 30) and Right to Constitutional Remedies (from Article 32 to 35). Women cannot be eliminated from any kind of Government job because of gender. Besides these Fundamental Rights there are some other social, financial and political Acts enacted in different times for the preservation of women's rights and interests. These are : The Widow Remarriage Act, 1856; The Special Marriage Act, 1954; The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955; The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956; The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1972; The Hindu Succession Act, 1956; The Factory Act, 1948; The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 etc. In this regard The Women's Reservation Act, 2023 enacted by the 106th Constitutional Amendment which recommended the reservation of one-third of all seats for women in the

Parliament, State Legislative Assemblies, and the Legislative Assembly of the National Capital Territory of Delhi, including those reserved for SCs and STs is to be mentioned. This Act will be effective after the publication of the census conducted following the Act's commencement.

Major Women Empowerment Schemes in India

The Central Government in India has introduced many schemes for the welfare of women. These schemes strengthen the power of women and give them social, political and financial security. Some of these schemes are:

1. **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao:** It was launched in 2015 to prevent gender-biased sex selective elimination and to ensure education and participation of the girl child.
2. **One-Stop Centre:** Being launched in 2015 it provides support and assistance to women affected by violence, both in private and public places. It also ensures the facility of assistance in filling First Information Report.
3. **Women Helpline:** It was launched in 2016 to provide toll-free 24-hours telecom service to women affected by violence.
4. **Ujjwala:** It was started in 2016 to prevent the trafficking of women and children for commercial sexual exploitation. It ensures the facility of rescuing the victims from the place of their exploitation and placing them in safe custody.
5. **Working Women Hostel:** It focuses on providing the accommodation to children of working women, up to the age 18 years for girls. It started in 1972-73.
6. **Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP):** Its aim is to provide skills that give employability to women. It was launched in 1986-87.
7. **Nari Shakti Puraskar (2016):** It facilitates the institutions that work towards the progress and development of women in society.
8. **NIRBHAYA (2021):** It ensures safety and security for women at various levels.

[Source: <https://byjus.com> (Accessed on 18 June, 2024)]

Various states in India have also launched many schemes for women empowerment. For example, the Government of West Bengal has introduced the Kanyashree Prakalpa, Rupashree Prakalpa, Laksmir Bhandar Prakalpa etc. The first two schemes are meant for financial assistance for female students of West Bengal and the third one is for an applicant of the age limit of 25 to 60 years whose household is enrolled under the 'Swasthya Sathi' scheme of West Bengal.

Conclusion

In this modern context this is the one side of a coin. It projects only the apparent well-being of women. But the reality is something different. Disparity prevails between men and women with regard to power—legislative, or executive, or judiciary, or social or economic. Despite universal suffrage and education and a little bit of pecuniary freedom, the whole plight of women is below the expectation level. It is a grim fact that the attitude of the whole society endorses the inferiority of women. Even the women believe on their inferiority.

But the attitude must immediately be changed. If India has to develop in her economy, technology and science, women must be given same respect as what is given to men. Manu says in his *Manusamhitâ* that the deities please where women are worshipped. But all activities become fruitless where they are not worshipped.

The old proverb says that modesty is the ornament of a woman. But the modern proverb says that political power is the valuable ornament of woman. So reservation for women is a step to establish an egalitarian society. Though the 33% reservation does not guarantee the safety and security of women, yet it can be

considered as a milestone in the history of empowerment of women. If we want cultural integration, if we want to achieve national progress and unity, then more women justices and administrators must be appointed. Much ministerial responsibilities are to be conferred on them so that they can enact laws fulfilling their own aspirations.

Some groups of people have discriminative customs which lower the dignity of women. These are to be eradicated. Some Hindu temples are meant only for men. If more women are appointed as judges in the High Courts and in the Supreme Court then these humiliating customs may be wiped out from our society. A female District Magistrate can uplift the comprehensive condition of women in a district.

Though the women of the General Caste are educated and advanced, yet the women of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes are not enlightened by education. Most of them are illiterate. They work in the paddy fields. Some collect the leaves fallen from the trees in the forest for fuel. Some work in the tea garden and coal factory.

Education along with political and pecuniary power is the only panacea for eradicating all kinds of discrimination and poisonous aspects of society. Swami Vivekananda said that women must be educated and then they must be made free in taking their own decision regarding their marriage or celibacy. The spiritual master of Swami Vivekananda Sri Ramakrishna worshipped his wife Sri Sarada Devi as *Tripurasundarî*. This is the highest ideal and attitude to women in our *Sanâtana Dharma*. It upholds women as the emblem of the cosmic power inherent in every sentient and insentient being in the universe.

In conclusion it can be said that a bird cannot fly with its one wing. It needs two wings. Similarly, the future progress of our motherland depends on the active participation of both men and women. Men and women have had equal share in our struggles for life and whatever values we have achieved. As the Bengali poet Nazrul Islam said so nicely:

*“Men and women partook equally of whatever great and good,
Mankind has achieved in this world.”*

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