

Place of Women in Indian Society

The place of woman in Indian society has been changing from time to time. In Rig Vedic period, women were at par with men and, thus, used to participate actively in different walks of life. But, by the medieval period, the place and status of women in society reached its nadir and a woman was considered merely an object of consumption and re-production.

Till recently, Indian women were, indeed, stationed at the receiving end. They were neglected in their families and there were many social and religious restrictions upon them. Child marriage was rampant, widows were debarred from remarriage and were subjected to humiliation and even the cruel custom of “Sati” was in vogue. Purdah system and the rigid socio-religious customs had interned them within the four walls of their homes and, thus, they had no access to education. Economically, they were completely dependent on their husbands, sons or other male relatives.

Thanks to the Indian renaissance of 19th century that the place and status of a woman in the Indian society started looking up. The efforts of various social reform movements under the stewardship of Ram Mohan Roy, Dayanand, Vivekananda, Shankaracharya, Govind Ranade, Annie Besant, Gandhiji and many others are really laudable in this context. Many inhuman customs and practices have come to an end only due to their tireless essays for the upliftment of women’s status in Indian society. Influenced by their motivation and exhortation, women with all their nerve and verve participated in the Indian freedom struggle and women like Kasturba Gandhi, Nelichandra Sen, Sarojini Naidu, V.L. Pandit and Indira Gandhi have all left an indelible mark in the annals of women’s lib movement.

With the passing of many legislations like the Sharda Act, 1929, the Sati Abolition Act, 1829, the Hindu Widows Remarriage Act, 1961, the equal Remuneration Act, 1976, and many other acts and constitutional provisions, the place and position of women in the Indian society has legally and socially improved markedly. Many evils of the past no longer haunt Indian women. Far away from the traditional antediluvianism and fundamentalism, today’s average Indian woman is devoted to the modern ideals and rational human values.

With the prevalence of nuclear family, woman’s rights and status within the family have looked up and today, she is playing a more independent and active role in society and nation-

building. Inter-caste marriages are becoming popular day by day and polygamy has been declared illegal. There is a National Woman Commission to look after them and their affairs and redress their grievances. Indian women, today, are playing really a very important role in the economy, academics and politics of the country.

But there is another side of the coin also. Even surfeit of manifold women-upliftment schemes by the government, enactment of multifarious laws and proclamation of constitutional provisions and various movements for women's welfare still have not been able to change our jaundiced perception of a woman. News of dowry deaths, suicides and various other torturous treatment meted out to women are quite common today. Even today, women are considered '*paraya dhan*' and an object of charity. Their consent in marriage is generally not taken care of.

Epithets like '*Ardhangani*', '*Grihalakshmi*' and '*Lajwanti*' further denigrate her societal position. The women who go out of home and work in offices are generally looked with suspicion. Sexual exploitation of women in work places also often comes to know. According to the new census, we have only 929 women per thousand men. Female infanticide is frequently being resorted to due to superstition and ignorance largely rife among Indian womenfolk and child marriage also continues to take place.

"*Akha Teej*" festival of Rajasthan presents a glaring example of this social evil. The number of rape and dowry death cases has been rising over the years despite increased awareness and societal advancement. Families are still "patrifocal" and parents do not wish to educate daughters beyond a point owing to the problem of finding equally or more educated grooms matching them. The earning ability of girls has proved no substitute for dowry that must still be given at the time of marriage.

Quite a number of would-be in-laws insist that a working girl should give up her job and look after the household chores. Also, in terms of place of work, promotion, etc., the woman is expected to subordinate her prospect to the man. In the megalomaniac male-dominated Indian society, a married woman is still known by her husband's name and her identity is generally defined in terms of her relationship with a man; as a daughter, as a wife, as a mother, etc.

In fact, all the upliftment and development in the position and status of the Indian woman have been cosmetic in nature as only urban women have benefited by all these developments. The place and position of rural women are still more or less the same as had been in the feudal medieval society. So, there is a need to implement all the existing laws effectively, while enacting some new ones at the same time. And of course, to have an egalitarian and progressive society, the Indian menfolk too need to metamorphose their perception of a woman. Aristotle rightly says, "Rise and fall of a nation depends upon the rise and fall of its women". So, we must not leave any stone unturned to bring women to parity with men to have a developed and ever progressing society.

Today, our women have come into their own, what with increased education and heightened awareness. Societal consciousness has also grown to acknowledge that with half the population remaining backward and underdeveloped, no society can grow to its potential. Hence, it is quite heartening to note that today we not only have a welfare state trying to do its best to uplift the conditions of our women, but general social consensus has also evolved

around the equal status for our women. However, still a lot needs to be done before we have a more healthy attitude towards our women. The paranormal and pathological societal behaviour towards women, as experienced from time to time, is only a reflection of a lingering reluctance of a section of the society in this regard.

Salient Points

- After Indian renaissance of 19th century, many inhuman customs against women have come to an end due to their tireless efforts of social reformers.
- Women participation in the Indian freedom struggle have left an indelible mark in women's lib movement.
- Today's average Indian woman is devoted to the modern ideals and rational human values.
- With the prevalence of nuclear family, woman's rights and status within the family have looked up. She is playing a more independent role in the economy, academics and politics.
- Still, Even today, women are considered 'paraya dhan' and an object of charity.
- Sexual exploitation of women in work places and female infanticide often comes to know.
- Families are still "patrifocal" and parents do not wish to educate daughters beyond a point.
- The earning ability of girls has proved no substitute for dowry that must still be given at the time of marriage.
- Only urban women have benefited by all these developments.
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Glossary

Nadir: point of greatest adversity

Vogue: something in fashion

Verve: enthusiasm in literary or artistic work

Antediluvian: of or belonging to the period before the flood

Surfeit: an excessive amount

Epithets: any word or phrase applied to a person or thing to describe an actual or attributed quality

Patrifocal: focused or centred on the father

Megalomania: an obsession with doing extravagant or grand things