

Submissive Position of Women in Society

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Abstract

The women population has outnumbered the men population in number of states of India. But an unfortunate happening could be found in the Indian society that abortions are carried out to the women if the female babies are found in the womb of a woman. The major problem in India is the dowry problem. Women are to serve as maid servants to cook food or to provide sexual pleasure to their male counterparts. They are not allowed to talk to anybody or go to other places without the company of in-laws or husband or brother under the mask of security. Sexual pleasure and curiosity are same to both the sexes but women are denied to enjoy it without the permission of the society. This is the major problem confronted to the Indian society. Economically, the women are so weak and they could not fulfill their needs without the permission of their male in-laws. All the puranas, epics and ethics have suppressed the development of women by not allowing them to have knowledge and their share in the society. But the tribal women are enjoying high liberty in compared to their counterparts living in plain areas. All the dharmasastras have treated women as pleasure dolls and machines giving birth to children. But somewhat the trend has been changed in the modern society after the declaration of Human rights by UNO in 1948 and the fundamental rights and trained in the Constitution of India. Still the women are striving for political, economic and social justice and equal rights with their male counterparts. All these issues are highlighted in a typical manner in this article.

INTRODUCTION:

For the growth of population, both women and men are equal in the society. Without any sex, there would be no place for births in the society. For sexual pleasure, existence of both sexes is necessary. Unfortunately the societies particularly belonged to all the religions have degraded the position of women. They have no share in the country's economy. Political background of women is very poor but wonderful ladies like Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Sirimavo Bandaru Nayake, Golda Meera, and Margaret Thatcher are elevated to the high position and acted as Prime Ministers for their respected countries. It is unfortunate that so far no female candidate has been elected as President of highly developed country, USA. Still the female of America are fighting for the abortion rights. Several conferences have been convened for the upliftment of women. Most of the backward countries and developing countries are neglecting women and failed to spend money for their all round development. In the Gulf countries, particularly in Saudi Arabia, the literacy rate of women is about 13%. In the Bible, it has been written that females must be submissive to their male counterparts as they are regarded as one of the body parts of male. In India, the female are being regarded as the property of men folk. At this juncture, present article highlights some of the issues which are responsible for the declining status of women.

THEME OF THE ARTICLE:

In all human societies' social differentiation between the sexes the male and female existed and in an overwhelming majority of them women were assigned an inferior position. Only in a handful of small scale tribal societies or in particular castes within a peasant society women enjoyed a superior or equal status. In recent times, the emerging socialist societies did concede equality to women in principle. But in all these societies the equality of women is more often legal than existential. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that women consisting of one-half of the human population live in perpetual subordination to the other half, the men. Notwithstanding this age-old subordination, crystallization and expression of feminine consciousness is a recent phenomenon; if protest by women began by early twentieth century it became visible and militant only in the last couple of decades. At least part of the reason for this belated articulation of feminine consciousness can be traced to the very status and role traditionally assigned to women in society.

Women are perceived primarily as reproducers although they invented agriculture and produce at least fifty percent of world's food. Their role as producers is acknowledged but this is viewed as a transferable role unlike that of reproduction. It seems that the indispensability of women as reproducers of human societies has become an instrument of their enslavement. Pregnancy is often viewed as a period of physical disability¹. The dependency period of a human infant is one of the longest and women have to bear the brunt of it. These biologically anchored but culturally reinforced feminine roles gave birth to the argument by anthropologists such as Robin Fox that human biogrammer is geared to a sexual division of labor in society. According to this strand of thinking, the aggressive and domineering characteristics of the male are genetically endowed, based on the difference between male and female hormones. Given the fact that hunting, an important economic activity, and protection of the band from external physical aggression, the most important political activity in tribal societies, was male monopoly, man's aggressive and domineering traits got reinforced. Since genetic change is slow as compared with cultural change, the male and female biogrammings continue even in the modern industrial urban society, argues Robin Fox.

There are others who attest biological differences as the basis of sexual division of labour without endorsing the genetic argument. For example, George P. Murdock, an American anthropologist, after undertaking an elaborate cross-cultural study of societies ranging from hunting and gathering bands to contemporary industrial-urban societies concludes that given their biological specificities women are bound to pursue home-bound and less physically arduous tasks. In contrast, the physical superiority and the relative non-involvement of men in the long and tortuous reproductive cycle facilitate their participation in strenuous away-from-home activities.² That is, sexual division of labor simply signifies practical and efficient ways of organizing human societies. Similarly, the American sociologist Talcott Parsons argues that in nuclear families of modern industrial societies, the most well-knit and enduring relationship is that between the mother and the child. Because, ".....the bearing and early nursing of children establish strong presumptive primacy of the relation of mother to the small child". The mother-child relationship is reinforced by the absence of the father for long hours from home due to the bifurcation, between workplace and home. Even the adult husband who returns home after experiencing stress and strain at the work-place needs emotional support and personal warmth. Thus, the wife-mother

¹ T.K. Oommen, *Sociology*, Eastern book company, P.360

² Ibid

tends to specialize in “expressive” roles in contrast to the husband-father who concentrates on “instrumental” roles.

The rise of feminist movement led to the questioning of several male-biased conclusions and generalizations regarding the sexual division of labor. Thus it was shown by Ann Oakley, a British sociologist, that Murdock’s data do not support his conclusion that sex roles are found to be universal across societies and cultures. Oakley argues that there are no exclusively female roles, and no physical disabilities stemming from biological features which bar women from arduous tasks. Parson’s argument that wife-mother specializes in expressive roles is countered by citing the examples of collective settlements such as Kibbutz and communes wherein the sex roles are scarcely sex-specific. On the whole, the evidence is that there are no tasks, except that of child-bearing and rearing, which are specifically female. Oakley concludes: “Not only is the division of labor by sex not universal, but there is no reason why it should be. Human cultures are diverse and endlessly variable. . . . They owe their creation to human inventiveness rather than invincible biological forces.”

Apart from Oakley several others also attempt to show the central importance of culture in sexual division of labour and the differential importance assigned to tasks performed by the male and the female as a product of male dominance and power³. Today, nobody claims that there are no biological differences between the male and the female, but only that these differences should not be invoked to treat women as inferior. Further, it is widely acknowledged that a many of the disparities that obtain between men and women emanate from culture rather than biology.

It is widely known that in the modern industrial societies the status of women further deteriorated. For an understanding and analysis of this, the seminal distinction that Karl Marx made between use values and exchange values is of great importance. In pre-modern societies, men and women, notwithstanding the varieties of tasks performed by them, produced for subsistence, both were producers of use values. But with the emergence of substantial specialization in work and production for market, men started producing predominantly for selling; they became producers of exchange values while women continued to be producers of use values. The distinction work and employment became sharp; women worked at home but they were not paid for it and hence not employed. The phrases “working women” and “mere housewife” signify the importance attached to “work” outside home and the insignificance of “work” done at home. Man as the predominant producer of exchange values came to be reckoned as the “breadwinner”, and woman despite the enormous amount of work she did at home got relegated to the position of “dependant”.⁴

Man’s status came to be anchored to production and that of woman to reproduction; if the former gained power and privilege in the process, the latter experienced an erosion of these. It is against this background that the importance given by women’s liberation movements to equality of opportunity in economic participation and political decision-making process by women should be viewed. While inequality between the sexes is a near universal phenomenon, specific circumstances lead to different types of oppression in particular societies. Presently, the society is concerned with analyzing the Indian situation.

In order to understand and evaluate the status of women in India, identification must be made to understand the problem in its socio-cultural context. The socio-cultural variations in India are staggering. The different religious traditions prescribed different sets of values and norms for women.

³ C.N. Venugopal, *Sociology*, Eastern Book Company, Lucknow, P.362

⁴ P.363, Ibid.

Similarly, different linguistic groups, castes and tribal communities also varied substantially in regard to customs and practices regarding women.

The pre-Aryan indigenous animistic religion seems to have conceded considerable freedom and equality to women. The surviving practitioners of this primal religion, namely, the tribal communities of contemporary India, treat their women folk with dignity and equality at least in comparison to their peasant neighbours. However, as these tribal groups get inducted into one of the world religions – Hinduism, Christianity, Islam – and get modernized, one witnesses a gradual erosion of the status of their women. But it may be noted here that even when the women of those tribal groups such as Khasis and Garos of Meghalaya and Assam enjoyed high social status thanks to their matrilineal descent system, their women wielded hardly any political power. This restricts the effective exercise of economic rights and responsibilities accorded to women.

The majority religion of India, Hinduism, assigned a lower status to women. The ancient law giver Manu prescribed: “A woman must never be independent”.⁵ The life of an ideal Hindu wife is to be spent in the service of her husband; she ought to be a pativrata. The fulfillment of a Hindu woman should be found in being an obedient daughter, faithful wife and devoted mother. Understandably, marriage was of signal importance to a woman and invariably it took place soon after puberty, if not earlier. Thus, child marriage came to be a norm which in turn meant that the young spouses were not involved in the decision-making process of selecting their mates. The custom of sati, the self-immolation of a wife, by jumping into the funeral pyre of her husband; the proscription of widow remarriage even when she is widowed as a child; the insistence on dowry, etc. rendered the Hindu woman a non-person. Some of these practices such as prohibition of widow remarriages, excessive dowry, prohibition of inter-religious and inter-caste marriages compel at least some women into prostitution and suicide.

Hindus are predominantly patrilineal – save the cases such Nairs and Thiyyas of Kerala, who are matrilineal. However, even among these groups the male dominance is evident in the control and management of property as well as in the political context. But matriarchy is scarcely practiced today in its original form by these communities.

Indian protestant religious such as Jainism, Buddhism, Veerasaivism and Sikhism did initiate reform movements to better the conditions of women. But by and large the position of women among these religious groups continue to be the same as that in Hinduism. In fact, the Hindu Code Bill and the Indian Constitution consider these religious groups as Hindus and the same Civil Code is applicable to all of them.

Islam concedes social equality to men and women but prescribes women from equal participation in the religious realm. The Islamic marriage is a contract but gives unequal rights to men and women; polygamy is permitted and easy divorce is granted to the husband. The middle class Muslim women are usually secluded from social spheres of activities and are expected to observe purdah particularly while moving about in the streets. Most Muslims in India are patrilineal except the Moplah Muslims of Kerala and Lakshadweep.

Classical Christianity did not concede equality to women. However, great emphasis was placed on monogamy and nuclear family, both of which gradually contributed to the crystallization of women's freedom and individuality. There are two specific contexts in which Indian Christian women are

⁵ Mahendra Pratap Singh, Reader in History, Kashi Vidyapith. *Life in Ancient India*, Varanasi, Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan., First Edition:1981. P.116.

particularly handicapped: They are not yet given equality in the religious context and in regard to property rights.⁶

Notwithstanding the minor variations between the different religious communities in regard to the position of women, the overall ethos in India is one of subordination to men. To begin with the female child is less wanted and less cared for as compared with the male child. The girl is given only a secondary place in the household in regard to food, dress, schooling or health-care. The child-rearing practices are geared to making girls submissive and obedient. Rarely are they assigned out-of-home responsibility. The type of education, subjects chosen, occupations projected as desirable for them, etc. lead to reinforcement of an inferiority complex among them. To crown it all, even the modern and supposedly modernizing mass media also project and reinforce the stereotype images regarding sex.

By the 19th century several socio-religious movements were initiated in India. But these efforts were confined to improvement of women's position within the limits of the traditional framework. It was the participation of a large number of women in the national liberation struggle and social reconstruction programmes under the leadership of Gandhiji and the involvement of a limited number of them in revolutionary activities drawing inspiration from Subhash Chandra Bose which heralded the beginning of women's participation in the wider social and political processes in India. The participation of women in political activities was facilitated in independent India by two factors: the acceptance of universal adult franchise and the emergence of a cadre of women leaders during the freedom struggle.

Available evidence shows that participation of women as voters has been gradually increasing over the years and the gap between men and women in this context is increasingly reduced. However, the number of women candidates contesting elections is very low. For example, in the Lok Sabha Polls of 1971 only 17% of the total seats were contested by women, an all-time high. Even the declared policy of some of the political parties to allot a specified proportion of seats to women contestants is not translated into practice for a variety of reasons, perhaps the most important being the deep entrenchment of male vested interests in politics. In regard to Cabinets, women's representation is a mere token. And this is equally true of the top decision-making bodies of almost all political parties. In contrast, the policy of reserving a specified number of seats at the panchayat level invariably results in women occupying them even though it cannot be said that they are effective participants in the decision-making process in these grass-root bodies.⁷

It may be noted here that the Indian Constitution unambiguously recognizes political equality of women. This has been a revolutionary step viewed against the background of social conservatism which prevailed in Indian society. But the political culture moulded by black money, surcharged by violence and subdued by character assassination, scarcely provides a congenial atmosphere to translate the constitutional promise of large scale political participation of women into practice.

CONCLUSION:

In India, the women are being regarded as second-rate citizens. They have no property rights. Both Mitakshara law and Dayabhaga law did not allow the women to inherit property rights from their parents or from their in-laws. The survivorship would pass to the male members only. But the British government has implemented some laws for the betterment of the position of women. The position of married women is not appreciable. They have to bend their knees and head before their in-laws.

⁶ Dr. Preeti Misra. *Domestic Violence Against Women Legal control and Judicial Response*. P.33.

⁷ Women and Law

Marriage laws, Succession laws and Law of Maintenance and other laws which are passed for giving equal rights to women have been totally failed and courts have put their deaf ear towards the problems of women. Several ministers and Prime Minister are hailed from women community but failed to solve the social, economic and political problems being faced by women. Inequalities and injustice could be done to the cause of women right from the ancient days till today. All these issues have been discussed in brief in the article presented above.