

## CHANGING STATUS OF WOMEN IN MODERN INDIA

**Meena Gaikwad**

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science of Gulbarga University, Gulbarga.

### **ABSTRACT:**

It is already described that the women in Vedic India had respect and honour in the society. They were equal with men in all respects. The women enjoyed freedom in education, marriage, family issues, economical, political and such other issues. The Muslim invasion into India during the medieval age changed their role and certain evils such as Sati, Devadasi, Dowry, Purdah (Veil), Child Marriage, etc., were practiced. Consequently the respect of the women in society was degraded in the medieval period. There are modern political thinkers, who strived and struggled to protect the rights of the women in the society, as well as to gain the respect and importance of women in the society. They have fought for equality for women in the Indian society.

**Keywords:** Vedic India, freedom in education, Muslim invasion, Sati, Devadasi, Dowry, Purdah (Veil), Child Marriage

### **INTRODUCTION:**

As discussed in the previous article, the views and opinions of the political thinkers were different on the emancipation of women. Together they have urged for the equality of the women in the society and upliftment of the status of women in India. Each of these political and social thinkers expressed their ideas on one or all the social evils which worsened the status of women in medieval India. Collectively the ideas of these thinkers were aimed to achieve the removal of the gender inequality in all respects. The present section proposes to analyze and discuss the contributions of the political thinkers on the emancipation and empowerment of the status of women in the society.

### **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:**

Women suffered in various kinds of aspects of life, that is socially, economically, politically and educationally during the medieval and early modern period. That is to say, the women are deprived from education and social status; as a result they did not get economic freedom and became backward in political aspects. The present section is an analysis and discussion of the different aspects in which they are suppressed.

#### **1. Education of Women:**

The women were deprived of education during the medieval period in India. Due to continuous struggle of freedom fighters and political thinkers, the then British Government emphasized the

education for girls. Of course, all the political thinkers stressed about the girls' education, but their views on the various aspects of education were different. It is noted that many of the colleges were established to provide education for girls in Sanskrit and social sciences.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy believed education to be an implement for social reform. He protested against the government's policy to strengthen the Sanskrit Colleges in the Presidency Towns of Calcutta, Benaras (Varanasi) and Madras and also urged for the establishment of more oriental colleges. He requested to promote the western education in India. According to Ram Mohan Roy, the then education was of no use, as they were on old Vedantic principles and doctrines. He supported the scientific learning. In that respect he emphasized education in scientific and technical subjects such as Mathematics, Chemistry, Anatomy, Technology, Natural Philosophy, etc.

## **2. Economic Freedom and Employment:**

During Vedic period, the women enjoyed economic freedom. But during the medieval period, the economic freedom and employment was rejected for women. Hence, during the modern period, many of the political and social thinkers blamed the orthodox and conventions which avoided the women in economic activity. It is worth to note that many of the freedom fighters and political thinkers avoided the specific ideologies on women's role in economic activities. In general the views of the political thinkers covered under the present study are stated in the following paragraphs.

It is noted that it was Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, who rightly diagnosed that illiteracy and economic dependence were the root cause of serfdom of women. He not only emphasized the education for women, but also employment and economic independence. As such, his Indian National Army and Rani of Jhansi Regiment consisted of women. Bose treated women as equal with men in all respects.

## **3. Right of Inheritance:**

In the Vedic period, women were having privilege and right to own property. Further, they had equal right to get property from their ancestors. In the medieval society, the right of inheritance of property and ownership to property was not allowed. For this purpose, many of the social and political thinkers urged for the right to inheritance for women.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was first to fight for the right of Hindu Women to inheritance. According to him, both men and women should be treated equal and he strongly criticized the grave injustice done to women by the modern law of inheritance. His sympathy was unbounded, his heart grieved at the sufferings and the pitiable condition of his countrymen and, therefore, he tried to devise ways for the welfare of the people, irrespective of nationalities and religions.

## **4. Child Marriage and Polygamy:**

The antecedents from Vedic period disclosed that there was no practice of child marriage. But the practice of child marriage evolved during medieval age. The practice of Child Marriage made the girls to suffer a lot. Young girls had to bear the brunt of the family life, get children at an inappropriate age when they themselves were mentally immature, problem of ill-health made them still weak. Those who were unfortunate enough to lose their husband at an early age had to spend the rest of their lives

in the most pitiable manner as unwanted widows. This was the result of Child Marriage. Most of the social and political thinkers raised voice against the practice of Child Marriage.

In 1803 Ram Mohan Roy composed a tract denouncing religious segregation and superstitions, in which he mentioned the evils of the child marriage. Further, he organized the movements to increase awareness against child marriage and polygamy. The role of Dayanand Saraswati against child marriage is memorable. He wrote a famous book, 'Satyarth Prakash' in which he emphasized principles of Vedas. In this respect, he opposed the practice of child marriage. He organized many conferences and speeches to increase awareness against child marriage.

#### **5. Evil of Dowry:**

As a woman had no right to inherit a share of the ancestral property, streedhan was seen as a way by which the family ensures that she has access to some of its wealth. While opposing the Age of Consent Bill, Bal Gangadhar Tilak formulated constructive proposals for different reforms including the system of dowry. According to him, the system of dowry and liquor are social evils and should be banned.

Jawaharlal Nehru also condemned on evil of dowry. But his treatment of dowry revealed an utter failure to understand or loss of contact with the social process. Even caste councils had taken note of the negative aspects of this phenomenon and adopted resolutions to put a stop to it. While piloting the Hindu Code Bill, Ambedkar referred to dowry as 'a menace' and suggested that all dowry paid should become the property of the woman. In other words, Ambedkar wanted dowry to be converted to Streedhan, to which Hindu orthodoxy could have raised no objection. This was not accepted. Later, Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 put equal liability on the giver as well as the taker of the dowry. Other flaws in the Act made it a dead letter from the beginning.

#### **6. Practice of Sati:**

As revealed by the Vedic literature, the widows were allowed to get all privileges and rights in the society. Even the young widows were allowed to marry if they wish. But such freedom of widows was curtailed and widows were treated as ill-omens and due to their bad luck, the husbands are going to die. For this purpose, practice of sati was developed during the medieval age. The practice of 'Sati' indicates the decline in the status of Indian women. 'Sati' refers to a horrible practice in which the married women used to jump into the funeral pyre of their husbands with the hope of attaining 'Sadgati' or 'Moksha'. It was actually an act of self-immolation. The glorification of 'Pativradya' and the degraded and intolerable widow life made many women to become 'satis', there were horrible instances in which women were forcibly pushed into the funeral fire of their husbands. This custom was very much prevalent particularly in Rajaputana and central India. There was also the horrible practice of "Johar" in which the Rajput women immolated themselves collectively with a view to protect their chastity whenever it was endangered.

#### **7. Widows' Remarriage:**

In those days, Dharmashastras, religious customs, traditions and social rituals strictly prohibited the widow remarriage. Child marriage was also common. Due to these customs, there were young widows, who had miserable life. They were denied Nation, public life and most of the religious activities

were tabooed for them. Their very presence on important occasion was considered to be disgraceful for they were treated as symbol of ill-omen. They were made to work like servants throughout their lives. Life for them made a few to lead an immoral life and some even became prostitutes. To prevent such sex offences child widows were forced to shave their head, restricted to come outside of their home, restricted to wear colourful clothes, ornaments, flowers and forsake all types of beautification in order make them sexually unattractive. Under these circumstances, the social and political thinkers have blamed the practice of forced widowhood. They have not only fought against the child marriage, but also encouraged and appreciated the widows' marriage.

#### **8. Purdah (Veil) System:**

In Vedic period, the women were respected in the society. They have all kinds of freedom, including freedom to move in the society without any kind of restrictions such as Purdah or any kinds of cultural restrictions. The medieval age developed the system of Purdah, so as to curtail the freedom of women in the society. Purdah or Purdha system refers to the practice of women wearing a gown or veil to cover their face and upper part of the body. It was a common practice among the Muslim women. Purdah system was in practice only in the wealthy and royal classes among the Hindus. But, after the Muslim invasion, the Hindu women were also forced to wear the 'Purdah' mainly to escape from the sexy looks of the invaders and to protect them from being kidnapped or seduced. The purdah system led to the complete seclusion of women. Hence, the facilities of education and public life were totally denied to them. Women had to confine themselves to their own world and their progress was halted. Women became the objects of exploitation.

#### **9. Devadasi System and Prostitution:**

Devadasi system represents another social evil which caused the degradation of Indian women. It is a custom that denies, in the name of religion, marital opportunity to a few women, insisting on them to become devadasis or basavis to serve the god in the temple as dancers and singers. They were sometimes made to cater to the sexual needs of pilgrims. The devadasis and basavis thus were compelled by the circumstance to become prostitutes. This system grew into a social evil during the medieval age and spoiled the prospects of many young girls.

Of the 32 items raised by Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade during the first of the Indian National Social Conference in 1887 in Madras, the evils of the Prostitutes and dancing girls was a major one. His questions depicted the status of prostitutes and dancing girls and whether these women are acceptable in the society. According to him this practice of prostitution and dancing in the ceremonies should be checked and banned.

#### **10. Political Empowerment of Women:**

Noble status was given to women in the Vedic period, as many of the women like Sitadevi, Lopamudra, Draupadi and such others were also involved in the political activities with their husbands. Even during the medieval age, many of the queens such as Rani Channamma of Kittur, Laxmibai of Jhansi, Razia Begum, Noorzahan, were prominently and equally participated in the politics and administration. But, still the historical records, present political trends and issues reveals that the participation of women in politics is not equal or on par with men. Among other issues raised by the

political thinkers about women in the modern era, the political rights, played an important role. It is noted that the women have no voice or authority in the political aspects. That is the women's rights including suffrage was not provided during the early modern times. A few political thinkers urged the government to grant political rights equally to women. But still as noted in the first chapter, even though women constitutes half of the total population, on an average there are only 8.00% are the women members in Indian parliament. It shows that even though the social and political thinkers stressed on the equality of women in political matters, still there is lot to improve on the political front for women to achieve equality'. But regarding the fundamental rights such as voting and equality, the social and political thinkers contributed much, to uplift the political status of women so far as liberty and fundamental rights are concerned.

### **11. Equality of Women:**

Swami Vivekananda stated 'I have more opportunity than many other men to know women in general, from my position and my occupation as a preacher, continuously traveling from one place to another and coming in contact with all grades of society (and women, even in northern Indian where they do not appear before men, in many places would break this law for religion and would come to hear us preach and talk to us) still it would be hazardous on my part to assert that I know everything about the women of India...In each nation, man or woman represents an ideal consciously or unconsciously being worked out. The individual is the external expression of an ideal to be embodied. The collection of such individuals is the nation, which also represents a great deal; towards that it is moving' (Swami Mumukshananda, 2002). In this way Swami Vivekananda believed in individual, it may be man or woman, all are equal in his view. Through his philosophical ideas, Swami Vivekananda made a series of speeches to highlight the equality of women and caste.

### **METHODOLOGY:**

The most important part of the present study is the Changing Status of Women in Modern India on the ideology and contributions of thinkers on the status of women. Here the different aspects related to the women are classified into eleven heads, namely, education of women, employment and economic freedom for women, right of inheritance, child marriage and polygamy, evil of dowry, practice of sati, widows' remarriage, purdah system, devadasi and prostitution, political freedom and equality of women in all respects. The major contributions made by each socio-political thinker are discussed and analyzed under these respective aspects related to women.

### **CONCLUSION:**

A few of the thinkers also highlighted on the political participation of women by inviting them to participate in the freedom movement and fight for their rights. Even their way of movement were also different, a few of the thinkers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy organized movements to increase awareness and to pressurize the government. A few thinkers like Bal Gangadhar Tilak created awareness by publishing newspapers, pamphlets and letters and also by organizing people against these social evils through public gatherings like Ganapati Festivals. Thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi agitated the social evils on women by making speeches and satyagraha and creating public opinion. A few thinkers like Sri Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda strengthened the philosophical thoughts of the people by writing

and delivering lectures. There are also poets like Sarojini Naidu, who created awareness through their poems. But the main aim behind all these efforts of these socio-political thinkers is Indian freedom and emancipation of women and improving the status of women in the society.

**REFERENCES:**

- Baig, Tara Ali (1974): Builder of Modern India: Sarojini Naidu. New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1974.
- Bali, Devaraj (1973): Great Political Thinkers.
- Joshi, Pushpa (1988): Gandhi on Women: Collection of Mahatma Gandhi's Writings and Speeches on Women. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1988.
- Mohanty, Dushmantakumar (2001): Indian Political Tradition: From Manu to Ambedkar. New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 2001.
- Sarma, GN (1976): Politics and Society: R.M. Roy to Nehru. Mumbai: Panmal Prakashan, 1976.
- Sengupta, Padmini (1966): Sarojini Naidu: A Biography. Bornbay: Asia Publishing House, 1966.
- Swami Mumukshananda (2002): The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda. Vol. 8. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2002. P. 55.
- Verma, Vishwanath Prasad (1978): The Life and Philosophy of Lokamanya Tilak: (With Excerpts from Original Sources). Agra: Lakshmi Narain Agarwal Educational Publishers, 1978.