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# Women in Indian History: Changing Status and Social Transformation

(Tradition, Reform, and Empowerment)

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**Abstract--** The status of women in Indian history has not been uniform. Changes in society, culture, religion, and politics over time have affected women's lives and their rights. In ancient India, women enjoyed a degree of freedom to receive education, participate in religious activities, and play a role in family decisions. Examples of learned women like Gargi and Maitreyi from the Vedic period demonstrate the respect women commanded at that time. During the medieval period, the status of women declined. Practices such as child marriage, the purdah system (veiling), Sati (widow burning), and denial of education became prevalent. The patriarchal system strengthened, granting more rights to men and limiting the roles of women. Women were largely confined to domestic life.

During the colonial period, social reform movements attempted to improve the status of women. Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotiba Phule, and Savitribai Phule championed the abolition of Sati, widow remarriage, and women's education. During this period, women also actively participated in the national movement and raised their voices for their rights. After independence, the Indian Constitution granted women equal rights with men. Many opportunities were created for women in the fields of education, employment, politics, and law. Numerous government schemes and laws were enacted for women's empowerment, such as the right to equal pay, the right to education, and reservations for women.

However, despite legal and educational progress, gender discrimination has not been completely eradicated from society. Traditional thinking, social pressure, and patriarchal mindsets continue to hinder gender equality. This study concludes that true gender equality requires not only legal reforms but also a transformation in societal attitudes.

**Keywords--** Gender and Society, Indian Tradition, Patriarchy, Social Reform Movements, Women in Indian History, and Women's Empowerment.

## I. THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA

The status of women in ancient India was generally considered respectable, particularly during the Vedic period. At that time, women had the right to education and participated in religious and intellectual activities.

Vedic literature uses terms like Brahmavadini and Sadyodvaha for women, indicating that they studied the Vedas and could continue their education even after marriage.<sup>1</sup>

Women also played a significant religious role during this period. They participated equally with their husbands in yajnas (sacrifices) and other religious rituals. Some women were also active in philosophical discussions. Learned women like Gargi and Maitreyi are mentioned in the Upanishads. Gargi questioned scholars like Yajnavalkya in the court of King Janaka, while Maitreyi presented profound thoughts on the nature of the soul and Brahman. This clearly shows that women in ancient times were not confined solely to domestic duties.<sup>2</sup>

However, this situation was not uniform across all periods and social classes. As society expanded and the social structure became more complex, the caste system and patriarchal thinking gained strength. In the later Vedic period and the subsequent Smriti period, various restrictions were placed on women's freedom. Educational and religious rights were gradually curtailed, and women's roles became primarily limited to family and domestic life.

Thus, it can be said that the status of women in ancient India was not uniform. In the early period, they enjoyed respect and opportunities, but over time, the hardening of social and religious norms led to a decline in their freedom.

## II. MEDIEVAL INDIA: PATRIARCHY AND SOCIAL CONSTRAINTS

The status of women in medieval India (approximately 1200 to 1700 CE) witnessed a significant decline. During this period, the patriarchal social system became more entrenched, leading to limitations on women's freedom, education, and social participation. Political instability, constant warfare, foreign invasions, and an atmosphere of insecurity profoundly impacted the lives of women. In this era, women were primarily confined to domestic life.

<sup>1</sup> Altekar, A. S. (1956). *The position of women in Hindu civilization*. Motilal Banarsidass

<sup>2</sup> Thapar, R. (2002). *Early India: From the origins to AD 1300*. University of California Press.



The practice of purdah (veiling) became widespread, ostensibly for the protection of women, but in practice, it curtailed their social activity. Similarly, child marriage became prevalent, hindering the education and mental development of young girls.<sup>3</sup>

The practices of Sati and the harsh realities of widowhood were among the inhumane customs of medieval society. The burning of a wife on her husband's funeral pyre, either voluntarily or forcibly, was the cruel manifestation of Sati. Widows, on the other hand, were ostracized from social, cultural, and economic life. According to historians; the decline in the status of women was not solely due to religious reasons, but also to the prevailing political and economic circumstances. The constant wars and invasions created a sense of insecurity in society, resulting in the imposition of stricter social controls on women, which over time transformed into rigid customs.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the presence of women in medieval India was not entirely extinguished. The Bhakti movement provided women with a new platform for self-expression. Female saints like Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi, and Lalleshwari challenged social norms and presented a new interpretation of female liberation through devotion and spirituality.<sup>5</sup> These saints demonstrated that a woman is not merely a unit bound by social rules, but also a carrier of spiritual and intellectual consciousness. Thus, medieval India was, on the one hand, an era of social constraints for women, and on the other hand, a period where voices of resistance and awareness also emerged.

### III. THE COLONIAL PERIOD AND SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENTS

The colonial period (approximately 1757 to 1947 AD) was a time of profound introspection and transformation for Indian society. During this period, along with British rule, Western education, modern ideologies, and a scientific outlook began to penetrate India. As a result, the educated class of Indian society began to question traditional social practices and evils. The deplorable condition of women emerged as a major theme of social reform movements. At this time, problems such as Sati (widow burning), child marriage, polygamy, the plight of widows, and the lack of

female education were widespread in Indian society. Social reformers realized that the overall development of society was impossible without improving the status of women. This realization led to the initiation of numerous reform movements.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy is considered the first social reformer of modern India. He launched a vigorous campaign against Sati and declared it inhumane and unconstitutional. As a result of his efforts, the British government legally banned Sati in 1829. Raja Ram Mohan Roy also advocated for widow remarriage and women's education, fostering a new perspective on women's rights.<sup>6</sup> Following him, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar made significant contributions to improving the condition of widows. He justified widow remarriage based on religious texts and strived to create a positive environment for it in society. Through his tireless efforts, the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act was passed in 1856, granting legal recognition to widow remarriage. This was a revolutionary change in the social lives of women.<sup>7</sup>

These social reform movements created a new awareness in society regarding women's rights and dignity. Schools were established for female education, and women gradually began to gain a place in public life. However, it is also an important truth that the impact of these reforms remained largely limited to urban, educated, and upper-class society. The impact of these reforms reached women in rural areas and lower classes very slowly. Traditions, superstitions, and economic dependence remained major obstacles in their path. Nevertheless, these movements laid a strong foundation for improving the status of women in Indian society, a foundation upon which the national movement and the policies of independent India would later build.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the social reform movements of the colonial period proved to be a crucial historical stage in the direction of women's liberation and rights.

### IV. ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT

The Indian national movement brought about a significant transformation in the lives of women. Before this movement, most women were confined to the domestic sphere, but the freedom struggle gave them the opportunity to step out of their homes and work for the nation.

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<sup>3</sup> Satish Chandra, *Medieval India: From Sultanat to the Mughals (1206–1526)*, Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Irfan Habib, *Indian Society under Early Mughals*, Tulika Books, New Delhi, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2004.

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<sup>6</sup> R. C. Majumdar, *Social and Religious Reform Movements in India*, Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1962.

<sup>7</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India: 1885–1947*, Macmillan, New Delhi, 1983.

<sup>8</sup> Bipan Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1989.



Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, women were instilled with the belief that they too were equal partners in the struggle for national independence.<sup>9</sup> Women participated in large numbers in the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22), the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34), and the Quit India Movement (1942). They boycotted foreign goods, spun the charkha (spinning wheel), picketed liquor shops, and were frequently imprisoned. The participation of women in these movements was not merely symbolic; they actively became a part of the struggle. Women like Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Aruna Asaf Ali, and Sucheta Kripalani not only participated in the movements but also played leadership roles. Sarojini Naidu became the president of the Indian National Congress and was known for her eloquent speeches in the freedom movement.<sup>10</sup> Kasturba Gandhi participated in the Satyagraha movements alongside Gandhiji and played a crucial role in mobilizing women for the movement. Aruna Asaf Ali is particularly remembered for hoisting the Congress flag in Bombay during the Quit India Movement, while Sucheta Kripalani contributed to organizational work as well as nation-building after independence. All these women proved that women could be not only supporters but also leaders of the movement. During the national movement, women broke through domestic boundaries and established a strong presence on the public platform. This increased their self-confidence and fostered their social and political consciousness.<sup>11</sup> The freedom struggle changed the social image of women and made them an integral part of the nation-building process.

#### V. CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS RELATED TO WOMEN IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

After gaining independence in 1947, India adopted a democratic constitution that granted equal civil rights to both men and women. The Indian Constitution aimed to create a society free from any form of discrimination based on gender. In this regard, the Constitution placed special emphasis on the equality and dignity of women. Article 14 of the Constitution guarantees equality before the law, meaning that all citizens' men and women are equal in the eyes of the state.

Article 15 prohibits the state from discriminating on the basis of gender, religion, caste, or place of birth and also permits the state to make special provisions for women. Similarly, Article 16 guarantees equal opportunities in public employment. These provisions legally empowered women and provided them with opportunities to advance in public life.

In addition to these constitutional provisions, several important laws have been enacted over time to strengthen the social and legal status of women. The Dowry Prohibition Act (1961) attempted to curb the social evil of dowry. The Hindu Succession Act (1956) and its subsequent amendments granted women equal rights to property. Similarly, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) provided women with legal protection against domestic violence. However, despite these constitutional and legal provisions, women still face numerous social challenges in practice. A clear gap remains between the law and social reality. Traditional thinking, patriarchal mindsets, and social stereotypes continue to hinder the achievement of true equality for women. This highlights that legal reforms alone are not sufficient; a change in social consciousness and mindset is also essential.

*Education and Economic Empowerment* Education plays a crucial role in the process of women's empowerment. Education not only makes women literate but also makes them aware of their rights, duties, and social responsibilities. Since independence, India has witnessed a continuous increase in the literacy rate among women, resulting in a significant improvement in their social and economic status.<sup>12</sup> The spread of education has provided women with opportunities to pursue higher education, technical knowledge, and vocational training. This has enabled them to secure employment and even start their own businesses. According to Naila Kabeer, education and skill development increase women's income and empower them to make economic decisions, which is the cornerstone of their overall empowerment.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, self-help groups, women's entrepreneurship schemes, and various government programs have promoted women's economic participation. Through these schemes, women have gained access to credit, training, and employment opportunities, thereby increasing their economic self-reliance.

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<sup>9</sup> Bipan Chandra, *India's Struggle for Independence (1857–1947)*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1988

<sup>10</sup> Ramachandra Guha, *Gandhi: The Years That Changed the World (1914–1948)*, Penguin Random House, New Delhi, 2018

<sup>11</sup> Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2003

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<sup>12</sup> Government of India, *Census of India 2011: Literacy and Education*, Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, New Delhi.

<sup>13</sup> Naila Kabeer, *Women's Economic Empowerment and Inclusive Growth*, International Development Research Centre (IDRC), New Delhi, 2012.



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Economic independence has strengthened women's self-esteem, confidence, and decision-making abilities. Today, women are not only participating in family economic decisions but are also playing an active role in the development of society and the nation.

#### VI. CHALLENGES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Despite progress in education, law, and technology in modern India, women still face numerous serious social and economic challenges. Problems such as domestic violence, dowry harassment, gender discrimination, child marriage, sexual harassment, and unequal pay in the workplace remain widespread in society. Social traditions and stereotypes in both urban and rural areas limit women's freedom and opportunities. In the workplace, women face lower wages, limited promotions, and an unsafe environment compared to men. Furthermore, family and societal expectations place additional mental pressure on women, affecting their personal and professional development.

Feminist ideology and women's movements have played a crucial role in addressing these problems. These movements have brought issues related to women's rights into public discourse and have raised serious questions about the patriarchal structures of society. According to Naila Kabeer, women's movements are not limited to demanding rights but are also a means of empowering women's social, economic, and political participation. As a result of these movements, awareness has increased in society, and a gradual change in attitudes towards women is being observed.

#### VII. CONCLUSION

The status of women in Indian history has undergone a continuous process of change.

From the relatively independent status of ancient times to the social restrictions of the medieval period and the reform movements of the modern era, the social role of women has changed over time. Tradition, reform, and empowerment—these three elements have together shaped the social identity of Indian women.

Today, there is a need to strengthen social consciousness alongside legal equality. Until there is a real change in societal attitudes and behavior, women's empowerment will remain limited to policies and laws. Therefore, it is essential to make women's empowerment a practical reality through education, awareness, and equal opportunities.

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