

# Changing Status Of Women In India!

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## **Abstract:**

Women in India now enjoy a far higher standing than they did in antiquity and the Middle Ages. Women now have more freedom, rights, and opportunities to participate in public life. They still experience dominance, humiliation, harassment, discrimination, and even exclusion, though. Women were viewed as equals to men and as the center of the home in ancient India. Their rights were restricted in the areas of politics, religion, the economy, and society. They were free to choose their partners, receive an education, and run their homes as they pleased. They did not serve or receive pay, although they did have restricted rights to inherit property.

**Keywords:** India, Middle-Class Women, Remarriage Act, Special Marriage Act, Women's' Indian Association; Women Status, Marriage, Social, Education, Rigidity, Divorce, Rich, Roles

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## **I. Introduction**

The status of women—social, economic, political, and general—in India today is much higher than in ancient and medieval periods. Women today enjoy many more rights—social and legal—and have greater freedom and voice, and participate more freely in public affairs. But it is also true that they are still discriminated, harassed, humiliated, dominated and even exploited. In ancient India (Vedic and Epic periods), women by and large were treated ‘equal to men’. They were treated and honoured and considered to be ‘embodiment of all divine virtues on earth’. They were considered not only as pivots of domestic life but also of entire social organisation. Of course, there are scholars who refer to several passages from religious scriptures to point out that they enjoyed ‘low status’.

These passages refer to women as ‘unworthy of being trusted’, as ‘only means of satisfying the physical desires of men and secure them progeny’, as ‘root of all evils’, as ‘things of possession’, and so on. But all these references were ‘contextual’ i.e., given in some context. In the social field, they never observed purdah, had freedom of mate selection, were not denied education, and enjoyed freedom in the household as well as outside it. In the economic field, they had limited rights of property succession as wives and mothers.

However, they did not serve and earn wages because it was not necessary for them to do so. In the political field, their status depended upon the then-existing political system. Since there were no elected governments, they had no voting rights or the opportunity of holding political posts. They were not permitted entry in the sabhas (assemblies) because these were used for gambling, drinking and such other purposes too. Kautilya has referred (in Arthashastra) to women soldiers armed with bows and arrows. In the religious field, they enjoyed full rights and regularly participated in religious ceremonies.

In the Pauranic, Brahmanical and medieval periods, the status of women was lowered by imposition of several restrictions. Pre-puberty marriages came to be practised, widow remarriage was prohibited, husband was given the status of god for a woman, education was totally denied to her, custom of sati was introduced, purdah system came into vogue, polygyny came to be tolerated and women were forbidden to offer sacrifices and prayers and read religious books. In the Muslim period, more restrictions were imposed on them due to the rigidity of the caste system and imposition of Brahmanical austerities on the entire society.

However, situation did undergo some change owing to Bhakti movement which permitted some social and religious freedom to women. In the British period, the status of women improved a little because of spread of education, Christian missionaries’ interest in girls’ education, abolition of social customs like sati, enacting of some legal measures (like Widow Remarriage Act, 1856, Special Marriage Act, 1872, Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929) and a few social movements initiated by enlightened leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Justice Ranade, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Maharishi Karve, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Annie Beasant, Mahatma Gandhi, etc., and the growth of women’s organisations like Banga Mahila Samaj, Bharat Mahila Parishad (1904), Women’s’ Indian Association (1917), National Council of Women in India (1925), and All India Women’s Conference (1927).

The change in the status of women got further impetus after independence because of the enactment of new laws (Special Marriage Act, 1954, Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, Hindu Succession Act 1956 and Anti Dowry Act 1961).

**The Laws Pertaining To Women's Employment Are:**

Factory Act, 1948, Employees State Insurance Act, 1948 and **Maternity Benefit Acts.**

Other factors which affected women's status were: effect of education, leadership provided by educated elite women, increasing opportunities of employment, change in the rigidity of the caste system, and so on. The need for linkage between programmes oriented to women and national policy towards weaker sections has come to be increasingly realised.

Several commissions have been appointed by the central and the state governments to suggest measures for protecting women's rights in various fields. Two such commissions were appointed by the Central government in 1971 and 1992. The National Commission for Women (NCW), set up in January 1992, was directed to look into women-related issues, probe the status of women, examine various legislations and point out loopholes and gaps and assess the causes of discrimination and violence against women and suggest possible remedies.

**How do we assess the present status of women? What are the indicators of higher status of women?**

Some observers associate changing status of women with factors like increase in divorce and female share of divorce petitions outnumbering that of men, increase in inter-caste marriages, decrease in number of crimes against women, and so forth. But factors which really point out the high status of women are: involvement of women in paid-work and acquiring economic independence, increase in the number of higher and better-paid positions in different departments occupied by women, increase in the number of female entrepreneurs and managers, etc., increase in the number of women in legislative bodies, increase in the number of girls studying in universities, colleges and professional institutions, and so forth.

Women's status can be analysed at two levels: women in the rural areas and women in the urban areas. In the urban areas, their status may further be examined at three sub-levels: rich women, middle-class women, and poor women. In the rural areas, there is little difference in the status of women who are non-working and those who are working. But in the urban areas, middle-class women are at the crossroads. The rich and the poor have always had a lifestyle of their own but the middle-class women have different perceptions and values. This class distinction is like three parallel streams with well-defined boundaries which are sacrosanct.

Not many decades ago (say, up to the 1950s), the urban middle-class women had their role clearly defined. They knew what was expected of them and responded accordingly. It was a predictable lifestyle with known challenges and solutions and with a little effort, they could adopt to their roles with reasonable ease and grace. Today, a large number of women with more education and with work to do for earning livelihood find adjustment difficult. While earlier the priority for most girls was marriage at the right time and leading a life based on roles of wife, mother and daughter-in-law, parents remained more concerned about the family background of the prospective son-in-law before fixing the marriage of their daughters. The demands of dowry were high.

Walking out of marriage i.e., separation or divorce did not have social or legal sanction. Women after marriage had, therefore, no option but to try and make their marriage work. The relations between husband and wife were based on mutual trust where he appreciated and helped her in her efforts of adjustment based on patience, humility and understanding and she trusted him. Family hierarchy was well defined. The father-in-law was the boss and his word was law. It had to be obeyed.

A woman had respect for social norms. But today, housekeeping and bringing up children are no longer a full-time job for a middle-class woman. She is desperately trying to ape the rich class. Today, the main criteria for selecting a girl as life-partner are her education and her employability. This is an age of earning couples. The girls have taken up the challenge. Professionally, they have practically left no field where boys could claim exclusivity. Working couples leave their kids behind in crèches and pick them up in the evening. Marriages have become late by choice because couples tend to give due weight to their career graphs. 'Live-in' relationships are being tolerated and divorce is no longer a social stigma. The traditional institution of marriage seems to be slowly losing its sanctity.

The old joint family system is also breaking. This has also affected the bringing up of children. A child in a nuclear family is a loner and tends to be self-centered. Old values are being replaced with modern values of equality, individualism and rationality. Though males have yet to be domesticated to share the daily chores but they have been made to realise that they do not hold dominating position in the family. Thus, modern middle-class women have greater privacy, more opportunities, freedom of action and equal rights. They have broken away from many shackles and unfairly restrictive practices. Women have indeed arrived and got their place in society.

**Thus, if we were to describe the woman of contemporary times, we could give her following characteristics:**

- (1) She has struck a perfect balance between tradition and modernity.
- (2) She seems to be determined to try and prove to man that she is equal to him.
- (3) While earlier, a woman has had an identity always through a male (either she was known as somebody's daughter or wife or mother) and her plight was like a satellite that kept orbiting around one planet—the man, today she has an opportunity to shine independently and reflect an identity of her own.
- (4) She is no longer confined to orthodox beliefs, capitalises on her own potentials and merits, and has carved a notch for herself that was once forbidden by society.
- (5) She has begun to take responsibility and decisions for her life rather than just playing wife's and mother's roles. Her aptitudes and skills are slowly breaking down all chauvinistic barriers.
- (6) There has been metamorphosis in a woman. From the conservative woman of the 1940s and 1950s, she became the feminist reactionary of the 1960s and the 1970s, the super woman mother-wife-career woman of the 1980s, and the empowered woman of the 1990s, who demands and enjoys her rights and is not afraid to stand alone. She accepts that this is what I am, this is what I am not, and this is what I have to be.
- (7) She makes her own decisions, and is not a doormat. She doesn't take any kind of injustice meted out to her. She can think for herself, she makes a life for herself, and she instills important values in her children too.
- (8) The new woman is part of the old woman.
- (9) She is not afraid to be tough, aggressive and assertive. At the same time, she is not afraid to be feminine, sensual, gentle, caring, and considerate. She can be a career woman as well as a house-mother. She loves the people around her—family, friends, work-folk, etc., but she also loves herself as a person.
- (10) She is full of aspirations, expectations and desires. But if she fails, she does not act like a weak woman.

We can give the example of Fatima Bi as a new woman of today. An ordinary illiterate wife and a mother of three children coming from Kalva village in the Karnaol district of Andhra Pradesh, she contested and won the post of sarpanch.

A chance attendance of a UNDP project meeting inspired her to work for women and the development of her village. She built a school, constructed roads, grappled with illiteracy, sold various products which fetched nearly a lakh of rupees to her panchayat. She got international recognition and travelled to New York to receive award from the United Nations' General Secretary.

**Taking the general status of women in contemporary society, it may be averred that:**

(1) There is more representation of women in parliament, vidhan sabhas, panchayats and Nagar Nigams (municipal corporations). There are more women entrepreneurs, more bureaucrats, more professionals, more managers and more administrative officers.

(2) Rural women are still traditional, deeply ritualistic, and fiercely conservative in their behaviour, but urban women are fighting the real battles of life.

Of course, in the urban areas, there are women who belong to lower middle class and work as housewives, teachers, nurses, clerks, stenographers, telephone operators and also women of lower classes who work as labourers, domestic maids, sweepers and rag-pickers, etc. for whom life hasn't changed much. They are still subdued in our society. They are still not economically emancipated from men.

In social, psychological and moral dimensions also, their situation is not identical to that of men. When they start their career as adults, they are evaluated by the society with a different perspective. Since only a few women escape from the traditional feminine world and since they do not get from society nor from family the assistance they need to become in concrete fact the equals of men, they fail to get recognition as successful role-performers.

## **II. Conclusión:**

The changing status of women in India reflects significant progress in social, economic, and political rights compared to historical periods, yet challenges such as discrimination and societal expectations persist. The ongoing evolution of women's roles, particularly in urban middle-class settings, highlights the complexities of balancing traditional values with modern aspirations.

Women's status can be analyzed at two levels: rural and urban. In urban areas, middle-class women face challenges due to class distinctions and differing perceptions and values. Previously, urban middle-class women had clear roles and expectations, but today, they struggle with adjustment due to the demands of dowry, separation, and divorce.

In the past, women had a predictable lifestyle with known challenges and solutions, but today, housekeeping and raising children are no longer full-time jobs for middle-class women. The need for linkage between programs oriented to women and national policy towards weaker sections has become increasingly important.

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