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Invitation for Articles / Research Papers

Authors are invited to contribute articles on contemporary issues in higher education in general and Indian higher education in particular for publication in the 'New Frontiers in Education'.

The articles may be sent as an e-mail attachment in MS Word to: niache2011@gmail.com. Also send printed/typed copy in duplicate along with CD/DVD by post at the following address:

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Chief Editor,
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Indian Women through the Ages

Mrs. Sahayamary*

Introduction

Women is the mother of the race and serves as the link between one generation to the other. Indian culture attaches much importance to this section of society, which constitutes nearly half of our country's total population. India has rightly been symbolized as the Mother India. Keeping in view the exemplary qualities of women i.e., patience, endurance love and affection, sacrifice, sympathy and generosity Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, the maker of Modern India, once said, "To awaken the people, it is the woman who must awaken. Once she is on the moves, the village moves, the nation moves".

Ancient Indian Women

In ancient times Aryans were the main inhabitant of India. These people were mainly Brahmins and they used to give the status of goddess to the women. At that time women enjoyed no less than status of 'Lakshmi (goddess of wealth) in the households. The women of ancient times had immense power this is evident from a South Indian legend that once a king accidentally killed the husband of a woman and she had such powers that she burnt the whole kingdom of ashes. Women in that time had place even superior to men. They had representation in each arena from assemblies to religious rituals. In fact no religious ritual of Hindu Brahmins was supposed to be complete without the presence of the women.

Ancient Indian women had the right to choose their own life partners. The process of choosing the life partner of own choice was known as "Swayamvar" in which grooms assembled at the house of bride and she used to choose the one whom she liked.

Women were not just confined to domestic arena but they were also part of religious teachings. In ancient India women like Gayatri, Maitreyi, Anusuya were renowned seers of their time, this shows that women had the right to religious teachings. They were not prohibited even from learning. They could learn whatever they wanted.

The status of women of Vedic era began to decline with time. Gender inequality started creeping into the society. Slowly women's status degraded to such an extent that they were not given the freedom, which was available to even sudras (lowest cast of ancient Hindu Society) As vedic age progressed, the status of women became worst. And till the time of "Smirits" the condition became so bad that women were not allowed free access to education they were given education related to just domestic purposes.

Medieval of Indian Women

Medieval India was not women's age it is supposed to be the "dark age" for them. Medieval India saw many foreign conquest, which resulted in the decline in women's status. When foreign conquerors like Muslims invaded Indian they

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brought with them their own culture. For them women was the sole property of her father, brother or husband and she does not have any will of her own. This type of thinking also crept into the minds of Indian people and they also began to treat their own women like this. One more reason for the decline in women's status and freedom was that original Indians wanted to shield their women folk from the barbarous Muslim invaders.

As polygamy was a norm for these invaders they picked up any women they wanted and kept her in their "herems". In order to protect them Indian women started using "Purdah" (a veil), which covers body. Due to this reason their freedom also became affected. They were not allowed to move freely and this led to the further deterioration of their status. These problems related to women resulted in changed mindset of people. Now they began to consider a girl as misery and a burden, which has to be shielded from the eyes of intruders and needs extra care. Wherever a boy child will not need such extra care and instead will be helpful as an earning hand. Thus a vicious circle started in which women was at the receiving end. All this gave rise to some new evils such as Child Marriage, Sati, Jauhar and restriction on girl education.

There was one major evil present in South India of medieval time. It was the custom of Devadasis. In this system girls were dedicated to temples in the name of gods and goddess. The girls were then onwards known as "Devadasis" meaning servant of god. These

Devadasis are supposed to live the life of celibacy.

All the requirements of Devadasis were fulfilled by the grants given to the temples. In temples they used to spend their time in worship of god and by singing and dancing for the god. Some kings used to invite temple dancers to perform at their court for the pleasure of courtiers. This practice had destroyed the lives of many girls as they were physically molested and sexually exploited by many pundits.

The British Period

The status of women in India touched its nadir on the eve of British rule in India. At that time they occupied a very low place in society. Child marriage was in vogue and the practice of sati was prevalent. Purdah was strictly enforced on Muslim women. The British rulers, no doubt, tried to check all these evil practices and went all out to end them. Female education was introduced and encouraged to such an extent that literacy came to be recognized as a desirable accomplishment. Prostitution was looked down upon as a social evil.

One of the major legislations framed by the Britishers in favour of women was in 1879, when the female infanticide was declared to be murder. Then Raja Ram Mohan Roy succeeded in persuading the Britishers to declare abolition of Sati. Iswara Chandra Vidyasagar did a lot of work for the widow remarriage. Keshab Chandra Sen, Maharshi Karve were some of the well-known social reformers, who strived for the upliftment of women. Among the major reforms were abolition of sati and widow remarriage.

A number of education institutes were established by the British Government. In 1917, the first women's university was founded in Pune. In 1932, the Lady Irwin College was founded in Delhi in order to make women utilize the advantage of science in their homes and to introduce them to the beauty of art. The contribution of Catholic missions in the field of education is notable.

The status of women was improved during the time of freedom struggle in India. The period of Colonial rule and the freedom struggle marked the beginning of a political awakening among women.

Women Empowerment in India after Independence

Modern India witnessed improvements in the Status of Women. There were many women reformers who worked for the betterment and upliftment of their other female counterparts. After independence, awareness was created among the women about their pitiful conditions. The Indian constitution provides equal rights and equal opportunity for all men and women. The Indian Government has passed various legislations to safe guard constitutional rights to women. Apart from these, various welfare measures have been taken up by the Government from time to time to empower women. In 1953, the government of India established a Central Social Welfare Board with a national wide programme of grants-in-aid for women, children and under-privileged groups. It was a land mark not only in the history of social welfare but in primarily through women's

organizations. All round development of women has been one of the focal points of planning process in India. The Five Year Plans envisaged a number of welfare measures for women.

The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14) no discrimination by the State Article 15(1), equality of opportunity (Article 16), equal pay for equal work (Article 39 (d)). In addition, it allows special, it allows special provisions to be made by the State in favour of women and children (Article 15(3)), renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51(A) (e), and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief. Article 42)

Education has been regarded as the most significant instrument for changing women's subjugated position in the society. It not only develops the personality and rationality of individuals, but qualifies them to fulfill certain economic, political and cultural functions and thereby improve their socio-economic status.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) - 1986 is a landmark in the approach to women's education. It has attempted for the first time to address itself to the basic issues of women's equality. Education will be used an agent of basic change in the status of women. In order to neutralize the accumulated distortions of the past, there will be a well conceived edge in favour of women. The National Education System will play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women.

In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue

in determining the status of women. The National Commission for women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels.

The Government has adopted the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women on 20th March 2001. The main objective of this policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women and to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and to ensure their active participation in all spheres of public life and activities.

Now many women took up leadership in the fields of education, health, social work, media, art, culture, service sectors, science and technology, politics administration, legislatures, municipal, councils, panchayats, Indian Administrative Service, Indian Police Service and Allied services. In the modern age women have played an important role in each and every aspect.

Conclusion

Women's status in Indian society had a chequered history; from purdah, slavery, sati and Devadasi, it has achieved equal status with men. Thus, India has gone a long way in pioneering efforts for improving the status of women and bringing them in to mainstream of development. The position of women has changed a lot in

modern times. The last five decades have witnessed some basic changes in the status of women in our country. Clearly women have made tremendous strides towards equality in recent decades however; we still live in a society in which the worth of women is measured in their physical appearance and not their intellectual contribution or talents.

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