

Plight of Women : A Retrospective View

Dr. Sunita Goyal, Associate Prof.
Department of English
Govt. College Barotiwala, Distt. Solan. H.P

In ancient times, women had an esteemed position in society . Scriptures and Sanskrit literature provide ample evidence of the fact that the women held a very respectful position and high status in Vedic times. In scriptures and vedas, two prominent aspects of respect to women; as mother and as wife are given vivid descriptions.

Women were attributed the highest position in Hindu scriptures and their role in nurturing the inherited values cannot be ignored. Shakuntala Rao Shastri tells about the position of women at that time : “ Woman was regarded with due respect in every sphere of life and she was not subject to any of the miraculous laws of an unsympathetic society ” (37).

A woman performs various roles as a mother, sister, wife, daughter, mother-in-law, daughter-in-law, grandmother etc. According to hindu religion, a man cannot perform a religious rite without a wife. So, the home without a wife is an utter bewilderment.

न गृहं गृहिमत्याहुः गृहणी गृहमुच्यते।

Manusmriti mandates that the proper respect and regard and full protection must be given to women throughout their life. Fifty third verse in the third chapter states,

पतृ भभ्रातृ भ श्रचैताः पति भदेर्वरैस्तथा ।
पूज्या भू षयतव्यश्रच बहुकल्याणमीप्सु भः

which means that women should be respected and adorned by all male members like fathers, husbands, sons, brothers and other members who seek their own welfare.

In Vedic literature, women like Romsha, Lopamudra, Gargi, Maitreyi, Aditi etc. have been designated as brahmavadinis or women Rishis. They revealed the highest truth to lord Indra. Sanskrit literature is also full of the life stories of chaste and virtuous women like Sita, Anusuya, Arundhati, Draupadi, Kunti, and Ahilya etc. At some places it is even mentioned that by contemplating the names of such great women one may free oneself from the bad effects of greatest sins.

अहल्या द्रौपदी सीता तारा मन्दोदरी तथा
पञ्चकन्या सस्मरित्रत्यं महापातकनाशनम्

The status of motherhood is glorified in Sanskrit literature, Sri Sankaracharya, the most revered person of Hindu tradition, eulogises mother Durga in Devi Aparadha Kshamapana Stotram, “कुपुत्रो जायेत विचदिप कुमाता न भ वत” which means “ No mother in India ever abandoned her offspring.” Manusmriti also assigned highest position to a mother in following verse :

उपाध्यायान्दशाचार्यः आचार्याणां शतं पता ।
शतं च पतृन्माता गौरवे णत रिच्यते !!

The guru or acharya is ten times more respectable than a teacher, the father deserves ten times more respect than an acharya and the mother is hundred times more respectable than father i.e mother occupies the highest position in social hierarchy.

We find a gradual decline in status of women after that period. Manusmriti, the earliest and the authoritative work lays down laws related with Hindu life and culture and propounds a theory of perpetual tutelage of women. This text which dealt with social philosophy assigned a dependent and submissive role to women. As a result, there was a steep decline in the position of women. Although Manu did not hate women yet instead of assigning equality between men and women he allotted superior position to men which is explicit in some of his laws. On the one hand, women are given an honourable place by Manu ;

यत्र नार्यस्तु पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवताः ।
यत्रैतास्तु न पूज्यन्ते सर्वास्तत्राफलाः क्रयाः ॥ मनुस्मृति ३/५६ ॥

“Where women are honoured, there the Gods are pleased but where they are not honoured no sacred rites yield results,” on the other hand , he finds women endowed with baser qualities,

“When creating them, God allotted to women a love of their bed, of their seat and of ornament, impure desires, wrath, dishonesty, malice and base conduct” (Quoted by Sree 6). Some of the laws given by Manu put women in a totally dependent, submissive and docile role. A few need mentioning :

- 1) "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead, to her sons, a woman must never be independent
- 2) Day and night women must be kept in dependency by the males (of) their (families), and if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyment, they must be kept under control ...
- 3) By a young girl, by a young women or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house .(Ghandially 30-31)
- 4) Even though destitute of virtue or seeking pleasure elsewhere or devoid of good qualities, yet a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife". (Das 74)

The double standards of morality set by manu assigned a subordinate position to women. This dual stand taken by Manu has had a lasting influence on man-woman relationship ever since and has resulted in exploitation of women.

The decline in the position of women continued during the Mughal period because of the lack of education and introduction of social vices like child marriage, custom of sati, purdah etc. During the foreign invasions, women were used like “ commodities” by invaders. Many customs like Jauhar, sati and purdah came into force which further curtailed the liberty of women. During colonial rule also women underwent a lot of exploitation and suffering. They imbibed their exploitation and became silent and passive sufferers.

In modern times, women are not only performing their roles of wife, mother, daughter etc. but also working equally with male members of the society outside home. They are doctors, lawyers, politicians, engineers, writers, scientists, astronauts, entrepreneurs administrators, teachers who perfectly render their job like their male compatriots.

But it is a matter of sorrow and a great concern that in spite of performing dual roles at home as well as outside home, the women are not receiving safety, security and respect due to them. We hear innumerable case of domestic violence, dowry deaths, female foeticides, rapes etc. which show that safety and dignity of women is at stake in our society.

The deterioration in the status and position of women has been due to severe cultural exploitation and by foreign invaders in india. The decline in the position of women continued during the Mughal period because of the lack of education and social vices like child marriage, customs of Sati, pudah etc. During the foreign invasions ,

women were used like commodities by invaders. Many customs like Jauhar, Sati, and Purdah came into force which further curtailed the liberty of women. They imbibed this exploitation and became silent and passive sufferers. It is also reflected in a decay of spiritual standards in our ancient Indian culture.

Since the pre-independence period various efforts have been made to improve the condition of Indian women. Various reform movements aimed to abolish and generate awareness about several customs and practices like child marriage, sati, ban against widow remarriage etc. which kept women in subsidiary position. After the independence of India in 1947, equality, freedom, justice for women were the stated goals in the constitution of India. In the words of Mazumdar, this period may be described as "the heyday of the middle class" (Nagraj 77).

Women's rights under the constitution of India mainly include equality, dignity and freedom from discrimination, additionally, India has various statutes governing the rights of women. Due to constitutional rights and reformist movements, the condition of women has improved a lot. They are trying to assert themselves and get a position equal to men. Although there has been a lot of improvement in the condition of women, they still have to face a lot of challenges in striking a balance between performing traditional roles and making progress according to modern lifestyle.

Despite the fact that women have served as President and Prime Minister as well as the speaker of the Lok Sabha, women in India continue to confront issues such as sexual assault, gender inequality and dowry. The government should enact strict legislation to punish dowry seekers, women murderers and rapists severely. But no legislation can be effective unless citizens of a country take responsibility for the same.

The value of a civilization can be determined by the status it accords to women. On one hand, the Indian women must overcome all institutionalised prejudices against her and on the other hand the male members must co-operate and accept women as equal contributors to the family, society and country's advancement.

References

- Shastri, Shakuntala Rao. *Women in the Vedic Age* . New Delhi : Bhartiya Vidya Bhawan, 1960.
- Manusmriti, Motilal Banarsi Das, New Delhi 1998
- Sree, Prasanna S. *Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande : A Study*. New Delhi : Sarup and Sons, 2003
- Ghadially, Rachna. *Women in Indian Society : A Reader* . New Delhi : Sage, 1988
- Das, Ram Mohan. *Women in Manu's Philosophy*. New Delhi : ABS Publications, 1993
- Nagaraja, Yamini A. "Women and Social Change." *Beyond the Threshold: Indian Women on the move*. Ed. Yashodha Bhat. Delhi : B.R. Pub Corp., 1995