

STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE 21ST CENTURY IN INDIA

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Abstract

Women constitute half of humanity and probably the better half. But to our utter dismay it is seen that humanity is depriving itself of a substantial strength from fifty percent of its constituents. It has been the case almost from the beginnings of civilized society that women were cast in specifically discriminatory roles and thus have never been empowered to contribute their best to the advancement of the society. This paper underscores as to what are the major bottlenecks which hinder women to a more emphatic participation in the affairs of mankind and how education, the government and other stakeholders including women herself can act as a catalyst to respond to opportunities, challenge their traditional roles and to change their lives for better living in this world and India in particular.

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Introduction:

Women and men have always had conflicting differences since the beginning of time. Natural giving characteristics to both sexes whether they be physical or mental have always been quite different among the two sexes. In modern times women and men are gaining the same amount of power while in the past, men were the only holders of power. Women still face different obstacles that men do not though things are looking up for the women's future. Women have proved to be vibrant, dynamic, sincere and perfect and there is not a single field where women have not made headway. But the million dollar question still remains as to whether women are really empowered in India in the 21st century?

Status of Women in India:

Despite women's proven ability, they have been relegated to secondary position even though they numerically constitute about half the world population today. Since time immemorial, women have been treated as second rate citizens of all across the globe and the situation is no different in India. This situation has caused immense loss to their self-dignity as human beings and also their independent entities, associated with men, apart from other matter, in context with intellectual and professional capability.

Unequal distribution of parental property including the basic assets like home and land make the women very insecure. The absence of claims to property can not only reduce the voice of women to enter and flourish in commercial, economic and even some social activities and also to cope up with the rapidly changing situations. Moreover, when it comes to the sharing of the burden of housework and child care, is always quite lopsided and uneven. Still, the never-ending working hands of women in a family are always invisible and indiscernible as they are not paid for that and their responsibilities are taken for granted. Let us take an instance of tea industry of Assam where 50% of the workforce is constituted of the women labour which contributes substantially to the national coffer. Still their contribution in the growth of the industry is never recognized or acknowledged. Discrepancy in payment structure is also quite visible in almost all the sectors and still exists in many unorganized sectors like small tea industry. It is seen that preference is

always given to the male counterpart in almost all sectors, a biased attitude is witnessed in all professional fronts. Though science and technology has made outstanding progress in the development of job opportunities, still the entry for women in government or corporate sector is not that simple.

Factors throughout history have forced women to become silent acceptors. The male dominated society makes them feel that they are incompetent, inadequate and worthless. Her training from childhood is groomed for a way of life that is accepted by others. And although today among the educated, liberated urban class there is no stigma attached to divorce or being a spinster and very little discrimination regarding job opportunities, yet the very hardships facing a single unmarried woman or a separated woman is often defeating.

It is not India alone where the plight of women is pitiable and status has been depleting and losing day by day, but it is an international phenomenon. Because discrimination and exploitation of women in the forms of domestic violence, rape and sexual abuse, in one form or the other is equally found throughout the world, including the advanced and developed countries of the west. But in a country like India, women have been devalued traditionally and men have been given the position just next to God.

“The origin of a child is a mother and is a woman. And it is a woman who shows a man what loving, caring and sharing is all about. That is the essence of a woman.” This is the legendary statement that raised Sushmita Sen, the former Miss Universe to great heights. The state of women in the country irrespective of whatever strata of society she belongs to is still pitiable even in this 21st century. There are some women who toil day and night so that her children could pursue education. Some woman’s brilliant academic career is thwarted midway to fulfill the wishes of her parents and society to get married. There are others who are mercilessly battered or burnt by their in-laws since they could not keep up to their never ending dowry demands.

Further there are some women who have been abandoned by their husbands since she gave birth to girl child. The fetish for male child has consequently resulted to female foeticide. The birth of a female child is often regarded as a curse, and is common in parts of India in spite the Pre-Natal

Diagnostic Techniques Act 1994. Birth of a male child is celebrated with in most parts of the country with hysteria.

In advanced countries like England, Europe or America, any women can walk out of an intolerable marriage with her minor children, appeal to the nearest court and become entitled to a reasonable maintenance allowance until legal separation or divorce is granted. If at all the husband tries to evade responsibility, he faces legal action or lands up in jail for disobeying the court. On the other hand, in a country like India, very few women would hardly dream of getting into a legal battle. The main reason is that her family wouldn't allow. Moreover, the legal procedures in this country are extremely complicated, long drawn and expensive. A separated woman seldom has enough to live on unless she holds a job or has wealthy parents. Paying lawyer's fees, court dues and travelling expenses are beyond her means. Everyone tries to dissuade her and tries to explain to her the pros and cons and impact of a broken marriage on children, friend and relations.

Even today, the moment a marriage appears to be on the rocks, the wife immediately becomes the object of speculation and slander. Society expects her to compromise, adjust and live on her husband's terms and conditions. Very seldom is some understanding and empathy shown that she too has an identity, a potential and a destiny.

Of all the challenges that women and girls face, having no voice is among the most intolerable. Women, even if they try to step out of their zone and struggle to make their voices heard have to confront lethal consequences. Malala was shot because she voiced the right to education for women in Pakistan. Way back home in India, Jyoti Singh Pandey (named as Nirbhaya) was brutally raped and murdered because she expressed her right to travel freely. In December 2012, a woman in Tripura was brutally gang raped, stripped naked and battered in public. Khusboo, a young woman in Uttar Pradesh resisted her father's attempt to marry her off at the age of 16 and for which she was beaten up mercilessly and cast out of his house. Even then she mustered up courage and voiced her right to complete high school. There are endless stories of this nature of women struggling for her rights in India.

As far as women's position in politics and administration is concerned in India, in 2012, women occupied only eight out of 74 ministerial positions in the Union council of ministers. There were only two women judges out of 26 judges in the Supreme Court, and there were only 54 women judges out of 634 judges in various high courts.

Education can bring about a transformation in the lives of women and all the above mentioned issues can be resolved to a great extent by empowering women through education. Women empowerment is a global issue today and discussion on women political right are at the fore front of many formal and informal campaigns worldwide. So, we can't neglect the importance of education in reference to women empowerment in India. The empowerment of women in India has been slow for centuries owing to several reasons. The initial blow was in the form of depriving women from basic educational facilities. Historically, women have a much lower literacy rate than men in India. In independent India, illiteracy is the second most important problem following poverty. Female literacy rates are very low nationally. A look at the statistics relating to female literacy reveals a grim picture.

TABLE -1

LITERACY RATE IN INDIA

| YEAR | Persons | Males | Females |
|------|---------|-------|---------|
| 1901 | 5.3 | 9.8 | 0.7 |
| 1911 | 5.9 | 10.6 | 1.1 |
| 1921 | 7.2 | 12.2 | 1.8 |
| 1931 | 9.5 | 15.6 | 2.9 |
| 1941 | 16.1 | 24.9 | 7.3 |
| 1951 | 16.7 | 24.9 | 7.3 |
| 1961 | 24.0 | 34.4 | 13.0 |
| 1971 | 29.5 | 39.5 | 18.7 |
| 1981 | 36.2 | 46.9 | 24.8 |
| 1991 | 52.1 | 63.9 | 39.2 |
| 2001 | 65.38 | 76.0 | 54.0 |
| 2011 | 74.04 | 82.14 | 65.46 |

Source: Census of India (2011)

If we have a cursory look at the literacy rate in India from the beginning of the last century, we find that the pre-Independence time literacy rate for women had a very poor spurt in comparison to literacy rate of men. This is witnessed from the fact that literacy rate of women has risen from 0.7 % to 7.3 % where as the literacy rate of men has risen from 9.8 % to 24.9 % during these four decades(as revealed in Table-1 above). During the post-independence period literacy rates have shown a substantial increase in general. However the literacy rate of male has almost tripled over the period e.g. 25% in 1951 and 76 % in 2001. Surprisingly the female literacy rate has increased at a faster pace than the male literacy during the decade 1981 -2001. The growth is almost 6 times e.g. 7.9 % in 1951 and 54 % in 2001. From this analyze one can infer that still the female literacy rate (only half of the female population are literates) is lagging behind male literacy rate (three fourth of the male population are literates). The rate of school drop outs is also found to be comparatively higher in case of women. This higher rate of illiteracy of women is undoubtedly attributing for women dependence on men and to play a subordinate role. The lack of education is the root cause for women’s exploitation and negligence. Only literacy can help women to understand the Indian’s constitutional and legislative provisions that are made to strengthen them. Thus promoting education among women is of great important in empowering them to accomplish their goals in par with men in different spheres of life.

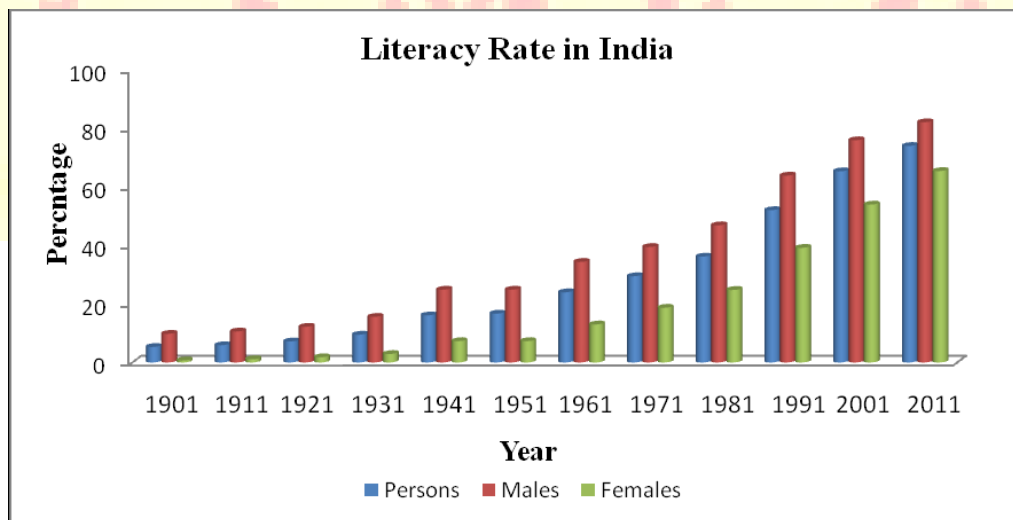


TABLE -2

STATE-WISE PERCENTAGE OF FEMALE LITERACY IN THE COUNTRY AS PER 2011 CENSUS

| Sl. No. | Name of the State | Female Literacy |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Andhra Pradesh | 59.7% |
| 2 | Arunachal Pradesh | 59.6% |
| 3 | Assam | 67.3% |
| 4 | Bihar | 53.3% |
| 5 | Chattisgarh | 60.6% |
| 6 | Delhi | 80.9% |
| 7 | Goa | 81.8% |
| 8 | Gujarat | 70.7% |
| 9 | Haryana | 66.8% |
| 10 | Himachal Pradesh | 76.6% |
| 11 | Jammu and Kashmir | 58.0% |
| 12 | Jharkhand | 56.2% |
| 13 | Karnataka | 68.1% |
| 14 | Kerala | 92.0% |
| 15 | Madhya Pradesh | 60.0% |
| 16 | Maharashtra | 75.5% |
| 17 | Manipur | 73.2% |
| 18 | Meghalaya | 73.8% |
| 19 | Mizoram | 89.4% |
| 20 | Nagaland | 76.7% |
| 21 | Orissa | 64.4% |
| 22 | Punjab | 71.3% |
| 23 | Rajasthan | 52.7% |
| 24 | Sikkim | 76.4% |
| 25 | Tamil Nadu | 73.9% |
| 26 | Tripura | 83.1% |
| 27 | Uttar Pradesh | 59.3% |
| 28 | Uttarakhand | 70.7% |
| 29 | West Bengal | 71.2% |
| Union Territories | | |
| 1 | Andaman & Nicobar Islands | 81.8% |
| 2 | Chandigarh | 81.4% |
| 3 | Dadra & Nagar Haveli | 65.9% |
| 4 | Daman & Diu | 79.6% |
| 5 | Lakshadweep | 88.2% |
| 6 | Pondicherry | 81.2% |
| All India | | 65.46% |

Source: Census of India - 2011

According to the Table -2 the state wise female literacy rate had an average of 65.46% in all India bases in 2011 census. The high literacy rate is 92.0% in Kerala and least literacy rate is 52.7% in Rajasthan in 2011 census. While comparing literacy rate of female, there has been an 11% increased in 2011 census which increased from 54.16% in 2001 to 65.46% in 2011. Women's are growing well in the last 10 years. Government of India has been taken various steps and plans especially for women in every movement. But this increase is not sufficient to empower women in India. The constitutional directive to provide free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of 14 years has remained unfulfilled till now. Educational experts admit that this failure is mainly due to the slow progress of education among girls. After 56 years of Independence, there still exists a great disparity between male and female educational status.

From the British Raj to India's independence, literate women accounted for only 2-6% of the total female population (Raman, 2006). With India gaining independence, the Government has attached great importance to women's education. An RGCC (Register General and Census Commissioner) report cited by Velkoff (1998) found that India's female literacy rate reached 22% in 1971, nearly half of the male's 46%. These figures jumped to 39% and 64% respectively two decades later. The trend unfortunately continues. A 2011 Census (as revealed in Table 1) showed that the average female and male literacy rose to 65.5% and 82.1% respectively (RGCC, 2011, p. 126). Despite the fact that many more women are becoming literate, as indicated by the figures, the gap between male and female literacy rates persists. If we look closer at how much education the literate women had, the situation becomes even more discouraging. In 2001, among all the literate women, nearly 60% of them received only primary education, a mere 5.9% attended high secondary education, as shown in the Table 3 below.

TABLE 3
NUMBER AND PERCENT LITERATES BY LEVEL OF EDUCATION: INDIA 2001#

| Level of education | Absolute Numbers (000') | | | Percent to Literate | | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------|---------|---------------------|-------|---------|
| | Persons | Males | Females | Persons | Males | Females |
| Literate | 560,688 | 336,534 | 224,154 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| Literate without educational level | 20,023 | 11,361 | 8,662 | 3.6 | 3.4 | 3.9 |
| Below Primary | 144,831 | 81,148 | 63,683 | 25.8 | 24.1 | 28.4 |
| Primary | 146,740 | 83,525 | 63,215 | 26.2 | 24.8 | 28.2 |

| | | | | | | |
|--|--------|--------|--------|------|------|------|
| Middle | 90,227 | 55,940 | 34,286 | 16.1 | 16.6 | 15.3 |
| Matriculation/Secondary | 79,230 | 51,202 | 28,028 | 14.1 | 15.2 | 12.5 |
| High secondary/ Intermediate/ PreUnivercity/ Senior Secondary | 37,816 | 24,596 | 13,220 | 6.7 | 7.3 | 5.9 |
| Non technical diploma or certificate not equal to degree | 386 | 259 | 128 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.1 |
| Technical diploma or certificate not equal to degree | 3,667 | 2,901 | 766 | 0.7 | 0.9 | 0.3 |
| Graduate and above | 37,670 | 25,533 | 12,137 | 6.7 | 7.6 | 5.4 |
| #India figures excludes Mao Maram, Paomata and Purul sub-divisions of Senapati district in Manipur state as census State as census results were cancelled due to administrative and technical reasons. | | | | | | |
| Source from: RGCC, 2001 | | | | | | |

No doubt, over the past decades, great progress has been made in promoting women's education; the gap between male and female literacy rates declined from 26.62% to 21.69% between 1981 and 2001 which was further reduced to 16.6% in 2011. However, the 34.5% illiteracy rate in 2011 means there were 252, 249, 642 women unable to read or write in India today, as shown in Table 4 below.

**Table 4
India's Literacy Distribution in 2011**

| Gender | Male | | Female | | Total | |
|------------|-------------|------------|--------------------|------------|---------------|------------|
| | Number | Percentage | Number | Percentage | Number | Percentage |
| Total | 623,700,000 | 51.5% | 586,500,000 | 48.5% | 1,210,193,422 | 100% |
| Literate | 444,203,762 | 82.1% | 334,250,000 | 65.5% | 778,453,762 | 74.0% |
| Illiterate | 179,496,238 | 17.9% | 252,249,642 | 34.5% | 431,745,880 | 36.0% |

Source from: (RGCC, 2011, p. 128)

With more than 252 million illiterate women, clearly India has failed to tap into half of its human resources which is definitely a glaring issue today. Education should be made a catalytic force in changing the societal attitudes towards women. Thus, the entire education system should be revitalized and restructured so that it can awaken the divine in women by making an all round development of body, mind and soul of the women as human beings and thus bring development and happiness to our society.

The Way Ahead:

In this contemporary world, women need to gain the same amount of power that men have. Now, it is time to forget that men are the only holders of power and this need to be realized by men first. While women in the West had to fight for over a century to get some of their basic rights like the right to vote, the Constitution of India already gave women equal rights with men from the beginning. Unfortunately, women in India are mostly unaware of their rights because of illiteracy and the oppressive tradition. In a male dominated society like India, nothing would be that easy for a woman to change. But if a woman wants to live with dignity and sanctity, it is she herself who must make a conscious effort to exercise her legal rights. Since women in this country already have constitutional equality, all they need to do is bind together to ensure fairplay. For too long women have been victims of the patriarchal system which places all economic and social power in the hands of man. Women were glorified in epics and Puranas, for their service to their men. Serving a father first, secondly a husband, and later serving her children and grandchildren, had been her lot. She has been ruled by man at different stages of her life by her father, husband and son in the form of daughter, wife and mother respectively. Women can know the true essence of liberalization only when they too acquire earning power, shoulder responsibility, speak out against injustice towards them and confidently go ahead building a future for themselves and alone if necessary..

Apart from women herself and the law, the society, the government and law enforcing agencies has its own important role to play to wipe out gender discrimination, stop devaluing women and work out for giving women an equal and respectable place in the society. Equality before law is not enough. True equality is only possible by means of a complete revolution in our thinking and

attitude towards women. While in one part of the country a law is formulated to safeguard the rights of women even in live-in relationships, in another part of the country women are facing physical assaults for being dressed in "western attire." Time has arrived to realize that their liberties and rights are not to be challenged on the basis of attire or profession; that they are treated equally under the Indian constitution. This can be achieved but it requires time, and perhaps a cultural revolution. It seems to be a very hard task but unavoidable. There is no doubt that women have made progress in the matter of education and career. In our country, women have reached a long way eventually and have discovered a new path for them to come. Today, women are busy running in the presidential campaign. The work force is covered with intellectual women who currently hold the CEO positions at large companies which were never held by Indian women long ago. We can now see women employed in all fields not only in clerical jobs but also in I.A.S., I.P.S. and Indian Air Force. Women have been given representation in the Panchayat Raj system as a sign of political empowerment. The Women's reservation policy bill will further strengthen political participation. Many savings and insurance schemes, announced from time to time by the central government and various state governments have helped women to become economically stronger, resulting in their better social status. The government has made significant efforts to improve conditions for women and girls, creating a large-scale girls' education program that provides schools and support for girls in rural areas and has already helped to narrow the gender gap. The Indian government has also set up a £125m fund in budget 2013-2014 to pay for measures to improve women's safety in the country, hit by an unprecedented wave of sexual violence in recent years.

The national uproar in the aftermath of the Delhi gang rape prompted the Indian government to address calls for reform of the country's judicial system. As provisional measures, Delhi ordered the use of so-called fast-track courts in several sexual assault cases in the capital, and established the first special court to handle crimes against women. The court, which opened in West Bengal in late January, is staffed and run entirely by women--a forum which officials hope will encourage more female victims to come forward.

A breakthrough came in March 2013 when India's parliament passed a new law further protecting women against sexual violence. The legislation criminalizes stalking, voyeurism, and sexual harassment, and imposes the death penalty on repeat offenders and for rape attacks that

lead to the victim's death. The law also makes it a crime for police officers to refuse reporting cases when victims file complaints of sexual attacks. The legislation came after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh set up a special committee in January 2013 that produced a 650-page report of suggestions on how to strengthen criminal laws dealing with sexual assault against women.

Much of the work to improve conditions for women, however, is being done at the grassroots level, where some Indian and foreign NGOs are engaging with the male community in an effort to elevate women in society. For instance, in Bihar state, a village planted mango and lychee trees to celebrate the birth of a girl, with the idea that profit from the fruit would help support the family and discourage the community from marrying its daughters at young ages.

But apart from all this, much more needs to be done to alleviate the position of women in the society especially for the disadvantaged women by the government and all other stakeholders. We need approaches, such as self-organizing and campaigning for women's rights, gender-sensitive education, and including men in the fight for equality. Gender norms should receive special official focus in education systems, curricula and teacher training. Students today who are future citizens must know the laws and recognize that women are entitled to an equal voice in the home and in society. Education helps girls and women develop their voice and the capacity to aspire to equality, based on the recognition of themselves as equal persons. We must include gender education in our core curriculum along with or as part of human rights education. This inclusion will help reduce gender gap. Severe punishments for rape and for all sexual offences including stalking and sexual harassment in the work place are necessary. All marriages should be registered, which will make it possible to identify and prevent child marriages, which are widely prevalent in India. Further, the concerned authority should be subject to punitive action for not registering cases of rape and other sexual crimes even after reporting or filing the case. Impunity is the single biggest reason that violence against women continues to exist in such large numbers. These are just a few initiatives or measures mentioned and many more initiatives can be taken and are yet to be taken. Women empowerment cannot be possible unless women come with and help to self-empower themselves. There is a need to formulate reducing feminized poverty, promoting education of women, and prevention and elimination of violence against women.

Conclusion:

Men and Women are just like the two wheels of a chariot. They are equal in importance and they should work together in life. The one is not superior or inferior to other. But it is really unfortunate that, we Indians cannot give our women a safe, civilized home, workplace and society where she can live without any fear and anxiety and dream of realizing her true potential without being unduly discriminated and threatened. Since time immemorial, women in India have been carrying out their responsibilities with utmost devotion and dedication and now time has arrived to be aware of their rights so that they attain a venerable and distinguished position in the society.

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