

POSITION OF WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SOCIETY: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract - Discussions on position of women in the society have been made since long. The real freedom of this sex has not been attained even after 75 years of Independence of the country. Though on paper, various steps have been taken to empower them, reality hits hard as women are subjugated and exploited to the extreme even in contemporary society. This paper attempts to dive deeper and reinterpret different aspects of a woman's life in Indian society with reference to a few eminent women writers and excerpts from their texts.

Keywords – Women Empowerment, Gender and Literature.

INTRODUCTION

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman...it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine,” said Simone de Beauvoir in her remarkable work *The Second Sex* (1949). After seventy-three years, this holds substantial relevance. Discussions and conferences on ‘status of women’ itself state the dearth of changes in the place of women, even in contemporary society. We have gone hard of hearing by listening time and again about their dilapidated condition, and their fights for rights, justice, and equality which is seldom heard in the case of men. The notion of the superiority of one gender to the other has been a constant cliché since distant history. The interrogative that still lingers after centuries of debates and discussions is — “Are women sharing the same status in society as men?”

CHALLENGES IN THE INDIAN SOCIETY

Peeping into Indian society, women had a revering place before the advent of the Mughals. They were bestowed with specific status in religious activities. The ensuing period had witnessed a drastic downfall in the condition of women in India. Though during the British Raj, social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Jyotiba Phule put sincere efforts into making Indian women’s life less miserable, India’s liberation from colonial rulers could never confer liberation to this gender, in its truest sense. Starting from those hideous rapes to the so-called ‘honour killings’, women had undergone the worst in everything. They faced violence at various levels: communal, familial, and even at the macro level. Their lives then resembled a house of cards. After seventy-five years of independence, the condition of women has strengthened, but at a snail’s pace. Millions of cries remained unheard, and many female children have been denied permission even to take a glimpse of this world. Contemporary society thus has not come far from that derogatory picture, even now.

The notoriety of subjugation of women continues in modern society. In the extreme, they are not even treated as humans in many parts of the country. The ‘individual self’ is robbed of them. Pathetically, women have to face ‘female feticide during the embryonic stage’, molestation during childhood and adulthood, and ‘subjugation after marriage’. Rosario Castellanos aptly mentioned a ‘packet of meat’, the tag of which was invisible due to its icy covering. The state of women is not much distinct from this. They are suppressed, exploited, and thrashed under societal conventions, norms, traditions and most importantly, by the internalized mindset from the past. In the process, they lose their identity and their individualism, thereby being invisible even to themselves. Traditionally, a marriage even snatches away her surname. Men, on the other hand, have always occupied the role of the self or subject. While it is natural for humans to comprehend themselves in opposition to others, this process is tainted when applied to gender. Women have been harassed not only physically but also socially, physiologically, culturally, historically, psychologically, and emotionally by society. They are conditioned to internalize the ‘fate’ that society has created for them and thus participate in their own subversion.

The situation is worse for women belonging to poor families and minority communities. They undergo ‘double-oppression’. One, because they belong to the ‘other sex’ and second, because of their community misery as a whole. The female workers’ plight knows no bounds. States like Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Bihar, and Punjab have an alarming rate of women workers getting raped every year. According to the estimates of the International Labour Organization (ILO) based on NSSO data, female workers in India are paid a lower wage than their male counterparts in each employment category and location — although the differences are relatively smaller in urban areas. Of all worker groups, the average daily wage of rural female casual workers is the lowest.

Molestation of women continues to the present day more than before. Even two-three-month-old infants are assaulted and killed in the present society. Such inhumane behaviour itself suggests the urgent requirement for rigorous laws and punishments for the accused. A country where Goddesses are revered, and women are molested, seriously needs to introspect, and open a whole new perspective to life.

LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS

In light of all the scenarios, several acts have been passed since independence. The Special Marriage Act (1954), the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act (1971) (amended recently in 2021), the Family Court Act (1984) are some of the milestones to enhance the status of women. Constitutionally, Articles 14, 15(1), 15(3), 39(d), 42, 51(A)(e) protect their liberty and dignity. However, these measures alone cannot serve the purpose of the long-fought battle. Unless society, as a whole, steps forward to beget an environment devoid of gender discrimination and where women will have full opportunities of self-decision-making, these are nothing more than tools to woo the woeful woman.

COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL DUTIES

No matter how far it goes, the battle for the equality of women with its counterpart will still continue to linger. Although they are at the forefront of every field, there are still many issues to ponder upon. In a society where women are still considered a liability, it is awfully difficult for her to explore her full potential. The mere roles of homemaker, housekeeper, and child bearer are not actually what she is. She stands much above all these pursuits. A day when a girl would fearlessly walk out of her home at night, when she would not get goosebumps at the thought of coming back home in a cab, when she would not be questioned about her ‘boyish’ behaviour, when she would not be a burden to her family anymore — the society would be a tranquil place to live in. Even women have to play a pivotal role in this. They have to rise against each and every discrimination. As Maya Angelou stated, “I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept.”

CONCLUSION

If this disparity diminishes gradually and a tapestry of equality and justice is woven where both the ‘sex’ are segregated as ‘individuals’, having their own potential, instead of classifying them based on ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’, the world would ‘win’ a long-fought battle.

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