UNIT 8: WOMEN IN INDIAN SOCIETY

UNIT STRUCTURE

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8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to -

- learn about the condition and status of Indian women during various periods.
- understand how women had to build their existence with limited focus.
- discuss about various activities in which they had engaged themselves in the process of reformation.
- learn and understand about Sati, Jauhar, Child marriage etc.
- know about famous and popular women leaders who were actively engaged in the process of struggle for independence.

8.2 INTRODUCTION

The position of woman in Indian society has always been always considered lower to that of the man. But man and woman both are equally important elements for a society to sustain itself. A man and a woman are like the two sides of the same coin. Jawaharlal Nehru once said that if a boy is provided education, than it is education for only one person, but if a girl is

provided education, it is education for the entire family. The condition of women in Indian society cannot be described in one single sentence. A lot of things should be taken into consideration while understanding the condition of women in the past as well as in the present. With the passage of time society is also changing in order to adjust itself with the ongoing situations during the time period. Changes in society and its environment with time is its basic requirement to grow.

Similarly the condition and the status of women has witnessed various changes from the ancient time till the modern period. During the times of kings and queens there are very less evidences which talks about the issues of women. Indian society is a patriarchal society which means the male is always the head of the family and in Indian society the unit family is considered very strong with regard to social order. So from ancient till modern times the male is the dominant one for which women are given very less importance. While there were lots of learned and famous women like Gargi, Matreyi, Sultan Raziya, Nur Jahan, Gulbadan Begum, Rani Lakhsmi Bai etc. whose contributions are still remembered in the history of India, all this personalities either belonged to elite families or were part of royal households. So it could not be concluded that Indian women enjoyed good social status from the past. Woman are not even considered equal to men till now for which women are still fighting for equality.

The books of history claim that during the Vedic period 1500-1500BCE the condition of Indian women was good but there is not a single reference where one can find that women were given inheritance rights or widow remarriage was allowed. For this the claim itself becomes very doubtful. The struggle for independence had witnessed the active participation of women in many social activities for which it can be accepted that by then women had grown more conscious. Their voice was still suppressed but a little was done by some liberal minded men in order to reform some aspects of Indian society. For instance Sati was abolished in 1829 with the help of Raja Ram Mohan Rai by Lord William Bentinck.

These were some major reformation that was carried out in order to improve the condition of women in India but the question of equal status to women is still a myth.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1: What is patriarchy?

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Q.2: What does books of Vedic period claims about women?

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Q.3: When was Sati abolished?

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8.3 WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA: VEDIC, POST-VEDIC AND BUDDHIST PERIODS

Male dominance and subordination of women is a feature of all known historical societies and India is not an exception. Indian society is highly patriarchal where the society is not of equal rank but divided upon rank, gender and caste. Before the begining of the Vedic period very less reference to women was made. As the society was primarily dependent upon survival so there was very less reference found about the status of common women. One important aspect which was found from the earliest period till now was the worship of Mother Goddess which was very popular among people but none of them was considered important than the male gods or believed to be superior. The worship of the female deity maybe popular but it doesn't necessarily mean that real women enjoyed power and privilege. There were terracotta figurines of female deities found in various sites of the Harappan which was widely prevalent among those

people as their main occupation was agriculture and the cult of Mother Goddess was related to fertility.

In the older writings a great part of the discussion was focused on the elite class of women and it ignored the ones those were privileged. The proportion of hymns attributed to women in the Rig Veda is miniscule (just 12-15 out of 1000) as in the number of women sages which suggests that women had limited access to sacred learning. There was no any women priest, while if any women perform or participates in any sacrifices it was on behalf of their husbands. The Vedic Household was clearly patriarchal where women enjoyed very less control over material resources.

There were various kinds of marriage performed during the Vedic period such as the monogamy, polygyny and polyandry. The Grihyasutras gives a list of six or eight type of marriage from marriage by capture to a woman choosing her spouse. Polygyny was more prevalent that polyandry where a man may have number of wives and concubines but the women can have only one man. The early Dharmasutras do not approve widow remarriage. However it was specified that after a definite period of time while waiting for her husband, in case she was abandoned, if he doesn't return, she could remarry. There were also customs where the widow cohabits with brother-in-law only to produce sons. Women were mainly seen as a docile character whose only duty was to bear a male child while they don't have a voice of their own. Women didn't have inheritance rights. The only rights they had over property was the stri-dhana which means the gifts she received during her marriage from her father and other family members, which may include jewellery, clothes, household articles etc.

References to women's work in later Vedic texts include tending cattle, milking cows, and fetching water. There were also vayitri and siri (female weaver), peshakari(female embroiderer), bidalakari (female splitter of bamboo), rajayitri(female dyer) and upalaprakshini(women corn grinder). Apala a women warrior mentioned in the Rig Veda lost her leg in battle and also there are references of women warrior such as Mudgalini and Vadhrimati. A few women, Gargi and Maitreyi participated in philosophical debate with Upanishadic sages.

BUDDHISM AND WOMEN

The highest goal of Buddhism was nibana which became possible for women with the opening of bhikkhuni sangha. On the other hand the Buddhist text reflects stereotyped ideals of the submissive and obedient woman, whose life was supposed to revolve around her husband and sons. Women were also compared to poisonous snakes and fire which means that monks should stay away from women to sustain their vow towards celibacy. While nuns were warned against men but men were never compared to any creatures. Buddhist texts claims that Buddha never wanted to establish bhikkhuni sangha but ultimately gave in to persistent pressure of his disciple Ananda and his aunt and foster-mother Mahapajapati Gotami. The Buddhist sangha was not open to pregnant women, mothers of unweaned children, rebellious women who associated with young men, and those who did not have their parents' and husbands permission to join. There were more rules laid for the nuns than the monks. While there were several nuns who were very learned such as Khema, whose discourse to king Pasendi (c. 6th century BCE king of Kosala) so impressed him that he stood up and bowed before her once she had finished. Other learned and wise nuns were Dhammadinna, Visakha etc. The Therigatha (Verses of Elder Nuns) is a collection of 72 poems consisting of 522 verses, supposed to have composed by 72 nuns who had attained a high level of spirituality. Women, either bhikkhunis or upasikas, were visible and important donors to the Buddhist monasteries. Even after this exceptionally high involvement of women in Buddhism the bhikkhuni sangha seems to be a shadowy entity in the available sources. Even though the engagement of women in the sphere of Buddhism was quite high, women were not able to break free of those stereotypes the society used to follow and they were never given the independence they deserved.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.4: What are the different elements that divide the Indian society?

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Q.5: What was the popular cult of worship in the early period which is related to fertility?

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Q.6: What is Therigatha?

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8.4 WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

Indian history is divided into three periods, ancient, medieval and modern to explain the progress of the society in political, social as well as economic spheres. Generally the period from the coming of the Turks till the establishment of the British rule in India is considered as the medieval period. While from 1206A.D to 1526 A.D is called Sultanate and from 1526 A.D till the foundation of British rule in India is considered as Mughal Era.

There were two principal religions found in that period which were Islam and Hinduism. But as during the medieval period the ruling people were dominantly the followers of Islam, so the Indian society had to undergo a tremendous change in its structure, shape and culture.

Like the Hindu families, the Muslim families were also highly patriarchal for which the condition of women never changed; it remained the same. In fact the condition rather deteriorated as the Purdah system was very common among the Muslims. They were not allowed to mingle with people outside their family and were confined to inside the household. In some places girls were allowed to have preliminary education but higher studies was not allowed.

Sultan Raziya, who was the daughter of Itutmish succeeded her father when he died. She was the only female to ascend the throne of Delhi and was very learned and equally capable of riding horse and handling swords.

Mughal Emperor Babar's daughter Gulbadan Begum was a very good poet and a very keen learner and she even wrote the book Humayunnamah. Humayunnamah is the biography of Sultan Humayun and a very important source to know about the period of his reign. Some other prominent women were Mira Bai, Dewal Rani, Nur Jahan, Rupmati. All of them were good poets.

Nur Jahan was very influencial and she was the only lady in the entire history of medieval India who had a tremendous influence on the affairs of the state and also over her husband Jahangir. She was a cultured, educated, intelligent as well as dominant lady with a strong view of the affairs of the state.

In South India Tara Bai played a very prominent role in the state affairs who after the death of her husband Rajaram (Shivaji's son and Chatrapati of Marathas) ruled the Maratha state with great valour in the name of her infant son and was even able to keep the Mughals at bay and also defeat them.

Child marriage was prevalent in the medieval society, where it was believed that a girl should be married before attaining puberty. It was generally believed that if the menstruation cycle of a girl starts before her marriage, she is not considered pure. Akbar, during his reign gave an order where he stated the age of a boy and a girl of getting married which was determined to be 16 and 14 respectively. On the other hand polygamy was widely prevalent in the society where a man can marry several wives. In Muslim societies it was even considered legal. Dowry system was also widely practised where the brides' parents had to give lots of gifts and money to the grooms' family for which the poor families had to face lots of difficulties in marrying off their daughters. While Sati was also in practise, it was not obligatory. It was practised in the kingdoms of Rajputana and Vijaynagara. Akbar tried to stop the system of Sati where he ordered that no women

should be forced to burn herself in the funeral pyre of her husband unless and until she is willing. According to the European traveller Peisaert, "the permission of the governor was essential before a widow could be allowed to be burnt. This governor tried to dissuade her from the act and even offered her monthly subsistence. Sometimes permission was refused to willing widows if they had children to rear. The permission was usually obtained after giving a suitable present to the kotwals." Emperor Aurangzed tried to ban the practise of Sati in 1664 A.D but he was not successful.

Prostitution was widely prevalent where it was essential for the women to get permission from the government before adopting the profession. The Mughal kings even maintained very large harems. The practise of Devadasi system was also found where young girls were donated to the temples as singers and dancers in the name of God. The king himself maintained the institutions of Devadasis as it generated large amount of revenues.

Women had no right of inheritance while divorce was also not easy. Purdah was very widely practised for which even Akbar stated that, if a young woman was found running in the streets and bazaars without a veil, she should go to the quarters of the prostitutes and take up the profession. While in the Rajput states although the girls were allowed to have education as well as to handle swords and fight but the practise of Jauhar (i.e. mass suicide where all the rajputs women either jump into a fire or well in order to preserve their chastity when a war is lost) and female infanticide were deep rooted for which the condition of those women cannot be considered good. During the Bhakti movement a little amount of change was witnessed where the females were active participators where many of them criticised those brutal crimes done against the females. They even opposed the practise of Sati, Purdah, female infanticide, child marriage, dowry etc.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.7: What is the time period of Sultanate Period?

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Q.8: Who was Sultan Raziya?

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Q.9: What is Polygamy?

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Q.10: What is Jauhar?

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8.5 WOMEN DURING STRGUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE AND REFORM MOVEMENTS

India's struggle for independence was an important event in the history of India which influenced each and every section of the society equally. Women also actively participated in the freedom movement. The struggle of 1857, which is also known as the first war of impendence or Sepoy mutiny, witnessed the active participation of women. Rani Lakhsmi Bai of Jhanshi gave a perfect example of courage and bravery while fighting the British. Indian National Congress was formed in the year 1885 which was also an inclusive organisation which had many female members. The Partition of Bengal in 1905 witnessed the biggest participation of women in the freedom struggle where they donated their ornaments for national trust, actively engaged in weaving clothes, giving education to other women folks and wrote many poems, songs essays etc. Annie Beasant and Sarojini Naidu were politically active ladies who were continuously working for the rights of women and they were considered as the role models by many women. With the initiative of Annie Beasant two newspapers such as the Commonwealth

and New India were founded and the active participation of women in the freedom movement, movement of trade Union etc. was felt tremendously.

Mahatma Gandhi also worked for the well being of women, lower caste people, poor and the needy. He criticised the system of Purdah and inspired women for becoming independent. During the second non-cooperation movement the response of women was unprecedented. Over three thousand women were actively participating in long and tedious processions, picketing, destroying liquor and foreign clothes shops, suffering lathi charge, serving long term imprisonment etc. Women participated in every single movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. Sarojini Naidu even became the president of Indian National Congress in 1925 at Kanpur.

During the 19th century there emerged a group of learned Indian men who were against the atrocities of Indian women and desperately wanted to stop those heinous crimes with their liberal thoughts and behaviour. The reform movement was initially started with the view to reform the religious discrimination faced by the lower-caste people while later it on got extended to various other issues. Raja Ram Mohan Rai was the most important figure in the process of reformation. Some other prominent figures were Govinda Ranadae, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar etc. The British Missionaries were also indirectly responsible for the increasing momentum of the reform movements. As the missionaries started to criticise Hinduism for its very old customs and traditions, so the learned people became conscious for which they themselves tried to reform the religious customs and traditions. Ram Mohan Rai took great initiative in abolishing Sati, while with the initiative of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar the widow-remarriage act was passed by Lord Dalhousie on 20th July, 1856. Ranadae and D.K Karve were also actively associated for the well being of widows. Karve even got married to a widow after the death of his first wife. In 1795, British Governor-General, John Shore declared female infanticide as illegal. Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj played a major role in banning those previously glorified customs for which these organisation were considered great epitome of reformation process in India.

Jyotiba Phule and Shabitri Bai Phule are also two very important names in the history of India who worked a lot for upgrading the status of women, lower-caste people and the marginalised. They even opened one school for girls in 1848 and Shabitri Bai was given the responsibility of teaching those girls. In 1854 an orphanage was also opened by Jyotiba Phule for the widows and children. The contribution of Jyotiba and Shabitri Bai is tremendous for the changes in Indian society and also in the status of woman.

Another important leader was Pandita Ramabai, an eminent scholar in Sanskrit, who got titles like Pandita, Saraswati etc.She was actively associated with the process of giving education to women and children, helped widows abandoned by their families to rehabilitate and dedicated her entire life to the improvement of women's life and condition.

The first women college was established in Kolkata with the great initiative taken by the workers of Brahmo Samaj in 1862 which was a milestone in the women's movement in India. In 1878, Bethune College was established, which contributed a lot towards the empowerment of women by providing education. In 1883, Kadambini Basu and Chandramukhi Basu were the first women to graduate from this college. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar established more than 50 schools for girls with the help of Christian missionaries. The wives of the missionaries were also actively engaged in rendering education to women in India. The Hunter Commission which came in the year 1882, played an important role in propagating education to women where it stated that,

- Equal amount of money should be granted to boys as well as girls school.
- Owing to the necessity of rendering education to girls, education was made free.
- Establishment of hostels were proposed for girls who stayed in distant areas and also scholarship for the poor.
- Moreover the syllabus should be same for the boys school as well as in the girls school.

On 28th September, 1929 the Sarada Act was passed with the initiative of Raibahadur Haribilash Sarada which increased the marriageable age for girls and boys to 14 and 18 respectively. This act is considered a milestone in strengthening the position of women in India. Also the Hindu Women's Right to Property Act XI was passed in the year 1938.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.11: Who was the brave Indian lady who fought against the British in the battle of 1857?

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Q.12: What were the two newspapers founded by Annie Beasant?

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Q.13: When and by whom was the widow remarriage act passed?

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8.6 GENDER RELATION IN DIFFERENT PERIOD

In order to know about the gender relation it is very essential to know the meaning of the term gender. The term gender originates from French word 'Genese' and Greek word 'Gene' which means a range of characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between, masculinity and femininity.

Sex and Gender have a little difference where Sex is biological but Gender is Psychological or Cultural. It was found that the root cause of discrimination towards women is because of gender as it relates to the count of masculinity and femininity. In Indian societies a woman is considered weak compared to men. While the birth of a boy is celebrated; in many places mourning takes place when a girl is born. There is separate kind of clothes for both boys and girls. Less emphasis is given for providing

education to girls compared to boys, while parents often keep surveillance over the girl child and put restrictions in her day to day life. A girl is never given equal importance or freedom compared to the boy. These are some social discrimination towards women which differs from society to society for which gender is a socio-cultural term but not biological. It is a man-made concept to signify the weak according to their term over the strong.

Gender relation has been very weak in India in every period. If you observe the situation during the time of kings and queens it could be argued that the prevalence of Purdah is itself the proof. Women had to follow various rules which were set by males, they were not allowed to roam around freely like man, were considered weak for which male asserted that it was the responsibility of the males to protect them. These were followed through the ages in order to trap the women and suppress them and their voices. History also talks very less about women. Whatever references were there were either of some very outstanding ladies or of those who belonged to the royal household or elite class. The condition of the poor or the general women was still the same and they had to face all kinds of social discrimination and atrocities.

Till now women are fighting for their rights and for their freedom. Since the past the voice of the women has been suppressed for which now the conscious and learned women have raised voice against the oppressors. A lot of changes had happened compared to the previous period but a lot is yet to be achieved. It was a long and continuous struggle for women for which many social crimes such as Sati, Child-marriage etc were overcome but gender inequality is still in practise. Societies in India still prefer a boy child over a girl child. The system of dowry is still prevalent in many different parts of India for which parents don't allow their girl child to go for higher studies and try to marry them off soon. Moreover human trafficking, rape, molestation etc. are rising which is a great concern. The Indian societies are never equal. For thousands of years women were dominated, humiliated, suppressed and violated. Although a lot is achieved but there are a lot to achieve in future for which a continuous struggle is very necessary.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.14: What is Gender?

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Q.15: What is the reason for which gender could be considered as the root cause of discrimination of women?

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8.7 WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Women empowerment is nowadays considered very important,to redefine the society, according to an understanding of the state with drawing from its welfare role and acting asa facilitation. Thereby, the neoliberal citizen and within it women are articulated as efficient and will change their situation of poverty without the state taking the ones. Women empowerment basically means to empower the women by providing education and financial security. When a women is learned enough she could earn her own bread which will make her financially strong. Many projects are coming up with the notion of women empowerment. Many small projects such as the SHG or the Self-Help Group are doing tremendous work in empowering women financially. In this kind of projects a group of women, preferably composed of local women make small regular savings for a few months until there is enough capital in the group to begin lending. After that the saved funds could be lent to the members of the group or someone in need in the villages on a small interest. In India many SHGs are linked with the banks for micro-credit.

SHGs are started by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) which was generally started to remove poverty but now it is seen as an instrument for empowering women and leadership abilities among the poor, increasing consciousness among people to enrol their children's in schools, nutrition, birth control etc. SHG groups are generally linked with NABARD

which offers loans to different SHGs for undertaking micro projects and to earn profit. NABARD has estimated that there are 2.2 million SHGs in India representing 33 million members. SHG is a small example of empowering the poor and women. There are various other projects run by both government and NGOs for the development of women in the present situation.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q. 16:What is women empowerment?

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Q.17: What is SHG?

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8.8 LET US SUM UP

- Indian Society is a patriarchal society.
- Females are never considered equal to males.
- Women had no right to inherit property.
- Sati and Child marriage were prevalent from ages.
- During Vedic period women were not allowed to study Vedas.
- Gargi and Matreyi were learned scholars during ancient period.
- Buddhism allowed women monks into its fold very late.
- Bhikkuni Sanghas were opened for women.
- Islam was the dominant religion during the medieval period. Like the Hindu society the Muslim society was also patriarchal. They practised Purdah very strictly.
- Sultan Raziya was the first lady to ascend the throne of Delhi
- Gulbadan Banu Begum and Nur Jahan were very learned and intelligent ladies from the medieval period

- Tara Bai who was a Maratha lady was an able ruler who was successful in defeating the Mughals
- Prostitution was very widely prevalent in medieval India and the Mughal rulers maintained very large harems.
- The revolt of 1857 is also known as the first war of independence and also as Sepoy Mutiny.
- Rani Lakshmi Bai, the queen of Jhanshi took part in the war of independence in 1857.
- Indian National congress was founded in 1885.
- Partition of Bengal took place in 1905.
- Women took active participation in the freedom struggle. Sarojini Naidu and Annie Beasnat were prominent women leaders during the freedom movement.
- William Bentinck declared Sati illegal with the help of Raja Ram Mohan Rai in 1829.
- In 1795, British Governor-General, John Shore declared female infanticide as illegal. Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj played a major role in banning those previously glorified customs for which these organisation were considered great epitome of reformation process in India.
- Jyotiba Phule, Sabitri Bai Phule, Pandita Ramabai were great personalities engaged in the well-being of the poor, lower-caste, women and the needy.
- Mahatma Gandhi also worked for empowering the women.
- Sex is biological but gender is psychological or cultural. Gender could be called the root cause of discrimination against women because it is related to the count of masculinity and femininity.
- Women empowerment is nowadays considered very important to redefine the society. Women empowerment basically means to empower the women by providing education and financial security.
- SHGs or the self-help-groups are doing great work in empowering women and providing them leadership quality.



8.9 FURTHER READING

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3) Chopra,P.N, B.N Puri and M.N Das: *(1995) A Social, Cultural and Economic History of India,* Macmillan Publishers, New Delhi, Voll 3.

4) Desai Neera & Krishnaraj Maithreyi : *(1987) Women in Society in India,* Ajanta Publications, Delhi.

5) Singh, Upinder: *(2008) A History of Ancient and Early India: from Stone age to the 12th century*, Pearson Longman, New Delhi.



8.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No.1: Patriarchy means male is the head of the family who holds the primary power in every sort of decision making or political leadership.

Ans to Q No.2: The books on the Vedic period claims about women that the position of women during the Vedic age was good.

Ans to Q No.3: Sati was abolished in 1829.

Ans to Q No.4: The different elements that divide the Indian society are rank, gender and caste.

Ans to Q No.5: The popular cult of worship in the early period which is related to fertility is the cult of Mother Goddess.

Ans to Q No.6: Therigatha are collection of 72 poems written by Buddhist nuns.

Ans to Q No.7: The time period of Sultanate Period is from 1206 A.D to 1526 A.D.

Ans to Q No.8: Sultan Raziya was the first female to ascend the throne of Delhi.

Ans to Q No.9: Polygamy is a system where a man can marry several wives.

Ans to Q No.10: Jauhar is a kind of mass suicide specially practised by Rajput ladies in Medival Rajputana.