UNIT 8: CHANGING STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA

UNIT STRUCTURE

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8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to-

- know the status and position of women in the vedic period.
- know the status of women in the mediaeval period
- know the status of women in the colonial period
- know the status of women in the post-independence period

8.2 INTRODUCTION

Society has been patriarchal for most part of recorded history. It is difficult to talk about the position and status of women, with all women being categorised as uniform. There has been infinite variation on the status of women depending on the culture, class, caste, family structure and property rights. Even while women have right to kinship systems, the entire mechanisms of marriage, descent, residence and inheritance were rarely organised in such a way as to guarantee women access to resources or to allow them to secure access for other women. In fact under patriarchal order kinship, conjugal and familial systems tend to construct women in such a way that they hardly live as independent beings and they are seen only in relation to men, thus depriving women of their selfhood and agency

(Pande, 2010, 131). In Indian history, we see major shifts in the position of women in different periods and some of these changes are reflected in the texts that prescribe codes of behaviour and therefore capture the dominant worldview of the period. In this unit we will discuss about the changing status of Indian woman.

8.3 STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE VEDIC PERIOD

The role and status of women throughout ancient and mediaeval period has been far from static ranging from one of authority to freedom to one of subservience. Most of the historical sources by and large refer to the elite sections of society concentrating on the court and the aristocracy and hence when they talk of women they generally refer to women of this class because women from other classes and tribal backgrounds had different norms. Tribal women and women from the labouring castes and classes are rarely visible as they represent those groups which did not have a literary culture and therefore did not leave behind much evidence. However, there are references about them in literature and historians also use archaeological evidence to try and reconstruct the lives of the pre-literate societies.

It is generally accepted that one of the basis of the stratification in society is the economic surplus that is appropriated by a ruling class and in the context of the hunting-gathering society we see that such a surplus did not exist there and there the question of private property does not assume much significance as these societies were relatively egalitarian. It is with the rise of sedentary settlements that we see the emergence of stratification as the existence of a class of non-food producers who lived on the labour of others is seen. In the Indian context a large number of Neolithic settlements are noticed. In the north-western parts of India, the rise of the Indus Valley Civilisation based on urban settlements and long distance trade was excavated a century ago. However, in the absence of any written record and the un-deciphered nature of the Indus seals we are unable to proceed any further and therefore unable to reconstruct the position of women.Though it has often been stated that the position of women was

much better in the Vedic period and things started deteriorating during the post vedic period. We have seen that often examples are given of Gargi and Maitrey who participated in the Sabha and Samitis, it cannot be denied that ancient societies were patriarchal on the simple count that the predominant structure and values of society were oriented to giving men a superordinate status, a fact that was reinforced by sacred literature like the Manusmiriti.

Though Buddha and Mahavira spoke for equality of women, we also notice some resistance from members of the Sangha. As has been pointed out, most of the historical sources of the earlier period generally refer to elite groups, the king, the court and the rich merchants. We have to infer about other sections of society from indirect references. The women of aristocracy were regarded as gentle creatures, the mothers of future rulers. Marriage was frequently a disguise for a political alliance and for those of lesser standing a means of mobility for the family. The aristocratic woman led a well-protected and isolated life. Reference to women from respectable homes moving about veiled goes back to early centuries A.D. and the purdah of Islam intensified the seclusion of women (Thapar, 1975, 8). The women of the artisan families and those of the peasants had a less relaxed life. Here the pressure was not so much from social mores as from the needs of economic survival, where leisure was limited and women participated in the professional works of men. Perhaps the most independent among the peasant women were those who had distinct economic roles, where they had individual access to local markets. There are ample references to such women in the Smriti literature like the Manusmriti, the Smritis of Apastamba and Gautama. In addition, the Jataka stories also offer us many glimpses from the lives of thewomen drawn from royalty, aristocracy, trading, artisanal, hunting, fisher folk and labourers. What clearly emerges from reading the sources like the Sanskrit literature, dramas and inscriptions is a distinction between different classes of women, where royal women needed protection and the subaltern women were more unfettered. This distinction can be seen in the realm of religion also, with Lakshmi and Parvathy being demure

while Kali and Durga being ferocious. According to ancient and later Brahmanical law books, for a woman her dharma was stridharma, and the notion of dharma was not a self-definition but a world view thrust on her with predominantly male interests.

8.4 STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE MEDIAEVAL PERIOD

Most of the source material that is available for the reconstruction of mediaeval India is written within the Indo-Persian tradition and was composed in a court setting. We do not get much information about the women and their activities. The few women who find mention in the records are women like Razia, Nurjehan, Rudramma Devi, who were exceptions and hence cannot be generalised. We have no information on the domestic life of ordinary women of mediaeval times. India witnessed significant socio-economic changes during the mediaeval period given the rise of new social groups which could not fit into traditional hierarchy. We have a large number of inscriptions of the newly emergent groups who prosper because of the changes in the economy, particularly agrarian expansion and crop diversification. The polities that appear throughout the subcontinent during the middle Ages were not the dispersed fragments of a previous central government, but new formations arising out of the extension of agrarian settlement and the resulting growth of population. During the mediaeval period these newly emerging social groups, attempted to redefine their position and status within the given traditional hierarchy and spearheaded a movement articulating their demands for restructuring the existing order. By declaring that God dwells in each individual and one could attain God through faith these saints brought religion to the downtrodden and henceforth marginalised sections of society. This movement is referred to as the Bhakti movement. What is important here is that women could also now practice bhakti and they were regarded as an equal in the eyes of God. In the 12th century, the Lingayat Movement began by Basavanna rejected many of the Hindu beliefs and customs such as Sati, female infanticide etc. which according to its founder brought disaster to Hinduism (Mukherjee 1974).

He upheld the individuality of women, their right to choose their husbands, remarriage of widows and right to divorce under certain circumstances. The advent of Islam did not make conditions better for women in general and a large number of biases and prejudices continued. The invasions of the Arabs and later the Turks and the subsequent setting up of Mughal rule helped to harden the rules and oppressive practices against women. Any woman found without Purdah was considered as shameless. The practice of polygamy and easy divorce by men and the law of inheritance went against women. Education was denied to them. Restrictions on their rights and freedom got aggravated. During the Mughal period, household was an institution in which gender relations were structured, enforced, and, possibly, contested. During this period the harem metamorphosed into a bounded space which could be understood as a family. The record of routine events (like the king's visits to the royal women, preparation of marriages, and distribution of gifts) were a repertoire of the processes involved in the making of 'hierarchical relationships, building alliances and reinforcing kinship solidarities' (Lal, 2004). The Mughal rulers attempted to put down Sati. Humayun introduced a system of licensing to bring it under some control. Akbar actively pursued the opposition. Jehangir abolished it by law and Aurangazeb pursued the implementation of this law (Baig, 1976). But none of them could pursue their reforms vigorously.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

QA1) Who abolished sati in the mediaeval period ?

QA2) Who is the author of Manusmiriti?

8.5 STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD

The advent of the Europeans into India did not change the situation of women. Like other Western powers, the primary objective of the British in the earlier days was trade. Later when they were faced with the administration of newly conquered areas, they thought it would be safe not only to keep the existing social structure intact but also to induct its religious

pundits (Brahmins) to interpret its rules when necessary. The introduction of English education first started to train Indians for jobs under British administration. This created upper class elites who began to doubt the rationale of many of the existing practices in their society. The establishment and expansion of the British rule also encouraged British missionaries to enter their colonies and start schools, orphanages and destitute homes especially for widows. They stood against sati, child marriage, purdah and polygamy. The new Indian elite exposed to European liberalism of the 18th century through Western education, felt the urgency for reform of their own society. This produced tangible results in the subsequent periods.Women's Movements in the colonial period were chanellised by of two broad movements: (1) social reform movements and (2) nationalist movements.

8.6 STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

In the post-Independence period during the first few decades, the major concern was for overall economic growth. This was immediately followed by another decade, which witnessed an increasing concern for equity and poverty alleviation. Gender issues were subsumed in poverty related concerns and there were no specific programs which aimed at women. Women during this period were involved in movements like the law and famine relief movement but did not start to pick up issues involving their oppression until the 1970s. NGOs and other such organisations from the 1970s onwards started emphasising on women's development and provided women avenues for collectively voicing their concerns. These grass root organisations have questioned the welfare approach towards women and incorporated an empowerment participatory approach. While questions about the success of these organisations are often raised, it is often seen that women exposed to some amount of mobilisation show great potentialities, receptiveness and defining capacities (Banerjee, 1992).

The myth of equality for women was shattered by the path breaking, Towards Equality Report of 1974. It focused attention on the fact that despite

many progressive social legislations and constitutional guarantees, women's status had indeed not improved much. Women continued to have an inferior status in many areas like political, economic and social sphere. The report pointed out to a sad fact that society had not yet succeeded in framing the required norms and institutions to enable women to fulfill their multiple roles. The increasing incidence of practices like dowry indicated further lowering of the status of women. The report also pointed out that the concern for women and their problems which received an impetus during the freedom movement had suffered a decline in the last two decades. In the post-independence period, the women's movement has concerned itself with a large number of issues such as dowry, women's work, price rise, land rights, political participation of women, Dalit marginalised women's right, growing fundamentalism, women's representation in the media etc. It had also been able to draw a large number of women around three major issues: girl child, gender violence and globalisation. The constitution guaranteed equal rights to both the sexes. Article 15 and Article 16 (2) of the constitution forbids discrimination and accepts all as equal in the eyes of the law (Article 14). In the early 1950s a series of legislations such as the Hindu Marriage Act, Hindu Succession Act, Dowry Prohibition Act and Equal Remuneration Act were passed. The emergence of independent India as a welfare state also affected the contours of Indian women's movement. The government Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) promotes welfare and development services for women, children and under privileged sections of the society. It has a nationwide programme for grants-in-aid for welfare activities with a special emphasis on women's welfare. The period from the late 1960s has been marked by an economic crisis and stagnation, rising prices, increasing landlessness and generalised discontent both in the rural and urban areas. The left parties took interest in the economic crisis and started organising movements. Though women's issues were not taken up, women were mobilised in large number and they participated in the general struggle of the rural poor, tribals and industrial working class. Women's organisations such as Shramik Mahila Sangathana (the working women's organisation)

took up the issue of rising prices of essential goods, adulteration etc. This saw its culmination in the anti-price movement of 1973 as a united front organisation of women belonging to political parties such as CPI (M), Socialist Party, Congress and even non-political women. The political parties mobilised women to achieve their own political gains. This resulted in the establishment of National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) by the Communist Party of India. The economic hardships of the rural masses also drew the attention of some political parties. While pressing for better working conditions for peasant women, issues like wife beating, alcoholism, dowry and sexual harassment from the upper castes were also given attention. Thus in the early 1970s while elite women's organisations were conducting cultural activities and beauty shows, the poor women were getting entrenched into serious movements. The decade from 1975 to 1985 saw the emergence of autonomous women's movement. The year 1975 was declared as the International Women's Year (IWY) which was later extended to a decade. The government appointed the Committee on the Status of Indian Women (CSIW) in 1971 to examine the rights and status of Indian women and to suggest certain measures to enable women to play their proper role in the building up of the nation. Paying unequal wages to women for equal work is a part of the general discrimination against women in the work place especially in the agriculture, plantations, mines and other unorganised industries. Working women's hostels, legal facilities and trade union rights were not available to women. Mortality rate among women is higher than that of men due to malnutrition. Violence against women appears in the form of dowry deaths, wife battering, mass rape during caste and communal riots, gang rape, sexual harassment of women and stereotyped representation of women in media. Along with these, poverty and deprivation affect the conditions of dalit and tribal women, many of whom are forced to prostitution. Autonomous women's movements emerged during the international women's decade which provided an opportunity towards attention on women's issues. In 1975, March 8th was celebrated as international women's day for the first time. Important features of the

women's autonomous movement are that women organised themselves and led the movements and fought against oppression, exploitation, injustice and discrimination. The women's organisations that emerged during the autonomous movement period could be divided into six categories:

- Autonomous groups whose main propaganda is agitation and to raise consciousness.
- Grass root or mass based organisations like trade unions, agricultural labourers' organisations, democratic groups, tribal organisations etc, in which women's issues like wife beating, sexual harassment by the landlords, alcoholism of men have been taken up.
- Groups that concentrate on providing services, shelter homes etc. to needy women.
- Professional women's organisations such as doctors, lawyers etc. that seek to agitate against discrimination and more often create alternate channels for professional activity.
- Women's wings or fronts of the political parties.
- Groups involved in research and documentation on women's issues.

The above mentioned groups and organisations take up women's problems and its members are mostly women and they are run by women. Saheli, Manushi, Stri Shakti, Stri Mukti Sangathana, Pennurimailyyakam etc. are some known women's organisations. All these groups have taken up various issues like atrocities against women. They issue pamphlets, collect signatures to support demands, organise protest rallies, make demonstrations to mobilise public opinion etc. They also organise street corner meetings, street plays, skits and songs and poster exhibitions. They also bring out feminist magazines to raise awareness among women. The autonomous movements besides creating general consciousness among women, exposed the conversation of the judiciary in the Mathura Rape case, by removing the bill boards and stopping shows where women have been shown or used as sex symbols. These autonomous movements have also given rise to special interest groups involved in the anti-dowry and anti-rape campaigns. More research is being carried out on subjects related

to women. In the academic field, women's studies became an upcoming field to be taken more seriously during the 1970s (Patel 1975). As a result of the pressure created by the women's movements, amendments in the laws regarding rape, dowry, marriage etc. were made.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

QB1) In which year Committee on the Status of Indian Women was formed ?

Q B2) Name four women's organization.



8.7 LET US SUM UP

- The role and status of women throughout ancient and medieval period has been far from static ranging from one of authority to freedom to one of subservience.
- Most of the historical sources by and large refer to the elite sections of society concentrating on the court and the aristocracy and hence when they talk of women they generally refer to women of this class because women from other classes and tribal backgrounds had different norms.
- During the medieval period these newly emerging social groups, attempted to redefine their position and status within the given traditional hierarchy and spearheaded a movement articulating their demands for restructuring the existing order.
- By declaring that God dwells in each individual and one could attain God through faith these saints brought religion to the downtrodden and henceforth marginalised sections of society.
- This movement is referred to as the Bhakti movement. What is important here is that women could also now practice bhakti and they were regarded as an equal in the eyes of God.
- The introduction of English education first started to train Indians for jobs under British administration.

- This created upper class elites who began to doubt the rationale of many of the existing practices in their society.
- The establishment and expansion of the British rule also encouraged British missionaries to enter their colonies and start schools, orphanages and destitute homes especially for widows.
- They stood against sati, child marriage, purdah and polygamy.
- In the post-Independence period during the first few decades, the major concern was for overall economic growth.
- This was immediately followed by another decade, which witnessed an increasing concern for equity and poverty alleviation.
- Gender issues were subsumed in poverty related concerns and there were no specific programs which aimed at women.
- Women during this period were involved in movements like the law and famine relief movement but did not start to pick up issues involving their oppression until the 1970s.



8.8 FURTHER READING

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