

ISSN 2319-2429



Management Guru: Journal of Management Research

International Journal

UGC Listed Journal Under the category- "Social Sciences All" SI.No : 616 Journal No. 45007

Vol. VI | Issue No. 1 | February 2018 | Thane | Monthly Journal

I.C.S.S.R. (W.R.C.) SPONSORED

**NATIONAL INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE ON INDIA'S
DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGES IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

On Saturday 24th February 2018



Organised by

SADHANA EDUCATION SOCIETY

L.S. Raheja
L.S. RAHEJA COLLEGE OF ARTS & COMMERCE

RELIEF ROAD, SANTACRUZ (W), MUMBAI - 400054



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Womenfolk – The jailbirds of Free India

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Abstract: *A multicultural society, India's social fabric is intricately woven into the mesh of patriarchal values. Women, considered to be 'devi' at one end, is marred by the secondary status at the other side. This paper attempts to explore the growing struggles of women in this empowered world of pseudo equality that promises egalitarianism in the garb of the age-old traditions in modern circumstances. A burning issue and matter of debate across the globe, "Women Empowerment" has caught fancy of many reformers but is frowned upon by the orthodox section of the social order. India is one of the oldest civilizations in the world and through centuries a complex vortex of practices has transformed into its customs, traditions and belief systems to then become a part of society's collective consciousness. Through observation it can be concluded that misconstruction of underlying meanings behind the customs has led to the acceptance of imbalanced Gender norms. The study is based on purely secondary data. It reveals the constructive and destructive influences of customs and traditions on present status of women in India.*

Keywords: *Women Empowerment, Custom and traditions, Culture, Gender Bias, Gender inequality*

I. Introduction.

Custom also known as tradition is a bundle of unwritten norms. They are not to be questioned and are passed on from generation to generation until they become a part of a culture or a belief system. History holds the evidence of influences of various cultures on the composite Indian Culture. So varied and diverse was Indian culture that from Mughals to Marathas to the Englishmen, Delhi's throne was considered to be of great significance to all. Its uniqueness intrigues people from all over the world.

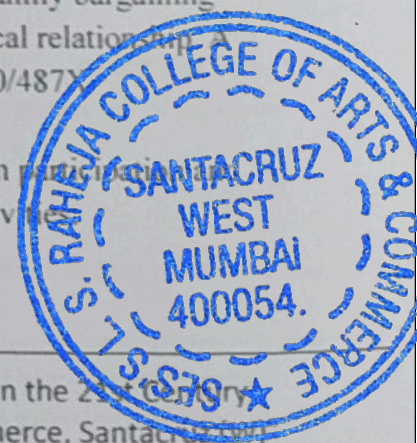
Every society has their own norms that aids in carving the roles and responsibilities of its people. Likewise, India too has its own sets of norms which set apart the Gender roles and equation into the country and predominantly the area of domestication has fallen into the purview of women. Conventionally, an Indian woman had four-fold status-roles – a daughter, sister, housewife and mother. However with changing times and societal dynamics; growing aspirations and expectations; evolving nature of social and economic order is now experiencing far-reaching changes. The contemporary women are now exploring the paths which traditionally were beyond their reach. And in these evolving roles, even though they are donning new hats, it is neither acceptable nor permissible for them to shun away their existing hats defining traditional roles.

II. Review of Literature

Doepke M. Tertilt M. (2011) This study developed a series of non-cooperative family bargaining models to understand what kind of frictions can give rise to the observed empirical relationship.

Study on Issues and Challenges of Women Empowerment in India DOI: 10.9790/487X-17411319 www.iosrjournals.org

Venkata Ravi and Venkatraman (2005) focused on the effects of SHG on women participating in SHG exercises exercising control over decision making both in family matters and in group activities.



National Interdisciplinary conference on India's Developmental Challenges in the 21st Century
Organised by Sadhana Education Society's "L.S Raheja College of Arts & Commerce, Santacruz West, Mumbai"

Bina Agarwal (25 September 2005). "Landmark Step to gender equality". The Hindu - India's National Newspaper, The article highlights the abolishment of few customs which were hindrances in gender equality.

Gender Socialization and the Making of Gender In Indian Context- Sujit Kumar Chattopadhyay.

III. Objectives of the Study

1. To study the impact of customs and traditions on the status of women in the Indian society.
2. To study the varied roles played by women into the contemporary society.
3. To identify the Hindrances in the Path of Women Empowerment.

IV. Research Methodology

This paper is basically descriptive and analytical in nature. The data used in it is purely from secondary sources according to the need of this study.

V. India – A Patriarchal society

Like many prominent cultures across the world, India too has followed patriarchal values since the times unknown. It won't be wrong to say that the society have always belonged to men. The social structure of the patriarchy is deals with the power status of male, his authority, control and domination of the man and the oppression, suppression, humiliation, sub-ordination and subjugation of the women. According to Gerda Lerner, an Austrian born American historian and author, patriarchy means the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over the children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It suggests the dominance of men in all the significant institutions of society. Women generally are denied of this access to power. This unequal distribution of power and dynamics of power in the patriarchal structure thereby forms the basis of inequalities faced by the women. The assumption of the secondary status and marginalization of women trivializes the existence of almost half of the Global Population.

A man sets the rules and is considered as the master of the house and a woman is expected to define her status in relation to the chief-male of the household. Simone de Beauvoir writes: "Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being". (Beauvoir 16). She further writes: "Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man". (Beauvoir 25). By this means, a woman is denied every opportunity to carve a niche and identity for herself.

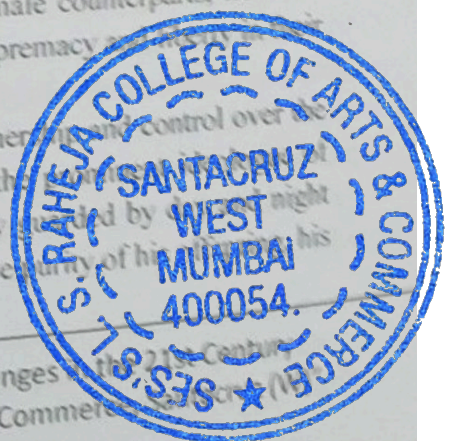
VI Status of Women in ancient times

The status of women presents and explains the role of women in the Society. It denotes to her rights and duties in social domain.

The status of women across history has never been constant. Historic evidences establish the fact that the status of Indian women have passed through two phases – the period of subjugation and the period of liberation.

Vedic period was considered to be golden era for the womenfolk. Men and women played equally important roles. A man in the absence of woman was considered inadequate. They enjoyed equal rights and privileges in the social, cultural and religious strata as their male counterparts, however their economic rights were limited. Women were educated and enjoyed supremacy in their domestic lives.

However post-vedic era, with the establishment of *varna* system and; ownership and control over the land, the gender equilibrium started to witness a sharp decline. Manu, the author of the *Manu Smriti*, the Bramhanical system most explicitly argued that "women must be closely guarded by their husbands, regardless of their age.... carefully guarding the wife of a man preserves the purity of his lineage".



family, himself and his means of acquiring merit. It is women's nature, which requires them to be thoroughly restrained. He also explained that, their essential nature will drive women into seeking satisfaction anywhere, anytime and with any one" (ibid: 581). Manu deprived women of her economic rights too. He says, "A wife, a son and a Slave, these three are declared to have no property, the wealth which they earn is for him to whom they belong".

Even though the Epics equated the rights of women and presented them in high regards, the social reality gradually but firmly established women as the inferior ones, equating their identity to in animation and objects of possessions. The *puranic* period led to yet another setback with its establishment of male oriented traditions and ritualistic supremacy. With reference to the status of women, during this era, Ram Ahuja, writes: "In the social field, pre-puberty marriages came to be practiced, widow remarriage was prohibited, husband was given the status of god for a woman, education was totally denied to women, custom of sati became increasingly prevalent, purdah system came into vogue and practice of polygamy came to be tolerated. In the religious field, she was forbidden to offer sacrifices and prayers, practice penances and undertake pilgrimages". (Ahuja 94). Buddhist era aided in restoring the position of women to some extent in the social and religious domain but economic domains remained untouched.

As the time lapsed, purity of women was being equated to maintain the purity of the caste. The ideologies of 'pativrata' and 'stridharma' gained wide acceptance and became the highest goals for a woman to prove her chastity and loyalty towards her husband. Therefore, "the idealization of chastity and wifely fidelity as the highest duty of women, reinforced through custom and ritual, and through construction of notions of womanhood which epitomize the wifely fidelity as in the case of Sita, Savitri, Anasuya, Arundhuti and a host of other similar figures in Indian mythology" (Chakravarti, 1993:585).

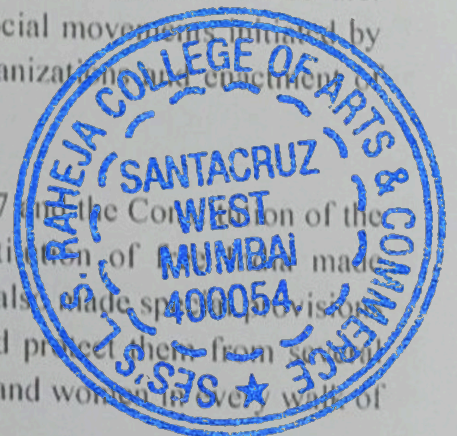
This concept of purity subjected women, especially those belonging to the upper castes, to the *purdah* system. Polygamy and preference of male child over a female worsened the status of women.

The medieval India, witnessed a spate of invasion that led to the breakdown of social institutions and wide spread economic depression. Needless to say, the condition of the oppressed became worse. Ramanujacharya's Bhakti movement in the fifteenth century introduced a positive development in the social and religious life of Indian women. Saints like Chaitanya, Nanak, Kabir, Meera, Ramdas and Tulsi stood for the right of women to religious worship.

Colonization brought along a next era of change in the Indian society. Economic and social structures witnessed significant modifications. New laws were established to eradicate the social evils that withheld the development of women. In his book, Indian Social System, Ram Ahuja listed six factors that according to him brought a welcoming change in the status of Indian women. These are: industrialization, spread of education, weakening of the caste-system, social movements initiated by some enlightened leaders and social reformers, growth of women's organizations and enactment of social legislation. (Ahuja 96-100)

VII Status of Women in Contemporary Times

India was freed from the shackles of the British Rule on 15th August 1947 and the Constitution of the country was adopted on 26th January 1950. The makers of the Constitution of India made provisions for equal rights for men and women in all walks of life. It has also made special provisions for women and children to ensure them their right to dignity of life and protect them from social evils of the society. The Fundamental Rights guarantees equality of men and women in every walk of



life. Article 15 assures that the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of sex and says: "Nothing in this Article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women." However, in spite of these women favouring provisions, the fight for gender equality is far from over. Issues like female infanticide, gender-discrimination, sexual harassment, marital-violence, dowry, child-marriage, malnutrition, preference for a male child and many more continue to dig their venomous fangs in the overall development of women. The population census of 2011, revealed the overall sex ratio in India at 940 females per 1000 males. On the contrary the sex ratio was 972 in 1901 and 946 in 1951. The child sex-ratio further represented a sorry state of affair at 918 females per 1000 males. (ENVIS Centre on Population and Environment) The census division of the government cites reasons like – neglect of the girl child resulting in their high mortality at younger ages; High maternal mortality; Sex-selective abortions and Female infanticide – for the consistent decline of the sex ratio of the country. (Source: Census India).

The literacy rate among boys are higher than that among girls. Even though they care making their mark on the professional grounds, yet the Monster Salary Index of 2017, determines that in 2016 Indian women earns 25% than the Indian men. (Monsterindia.com). The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), the ministry of home affairs wing that collates annual data on crime in the country in its records reported a rise in the cases under the "crime against women" category. As per the 2017 report, the crime rate against women rose from 41.7% to 53.9%, between 2011 and 2015. Up to 3,27,394 cases were reported in 2015 alone, including 34,651 cases of rape, 4,437 cases of attempted rape, 59,277 kidnapping and abductions, 7,634 dowry deaths, and a whopping 1,13,403 cases of domestic cruelty, among others. Unfortunately, 'reported' is the key word here, given that a majority of crimes against women remains unregistered, even in 2017. (Source: NCRB)

Apart from this the patriarchal values continue to haunt the overall development of the women. The changing dynamics of the society and women emerging out of their homes to make a career are taking up additional responsibilities to prove themselves and their abilities. Indira Nooyi, CEO of Pepsi Co in an interview with David Bradley, brought these role conflicts to fore when she mentioned of the day, she got the news of her promotion as the CEO. Instead of congratulations, the lady was asked to fetch the milk pouch as the dutiful wife, daughter, daughter-in-law and the mother. (source: youtube). This drudgery, stands true through the cross-sectional areas of the society. Women today are contributing their family's income and their earnings are used to meet the family expenses. They are working at par with men at equal, if not better, competency standards. Yet, women are required to shoulder all the domestic chores like cleaning, cooking, washing and child-bearing roles.

VIII Conclusion

Indian society has principally been biased towards men. Women's roles continue to gravitate and revolve around men. Women are expected to conform by the decree of their domestic patriarchs and abide by their fathers, brothers, husbands, in-laws or sons.

Evidences point out that there is a great disparity between the constitutional position of Indian women and the bitter reality of their plight and predicament. They are facing issues and problems such as gender-discrimination, child-marriage, dowry, malnutrition, rape, marital violence, harassment, social subjugation and exploitation, economic dependence, ignorance, superstitions and slavery. Crimes against the women continues to increase. Over a period of time women empowerment became a hot topic of debate but overall scenario is that patriarchical structures have only complicated the multiple roles women are expected to play in the changing dynamics of this world.



