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## STATUS OF HINDU WOMEN IN MODERN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Medieval India, considered as 'Dark Age' appositely illustrates chaotic wilderness of invaders. They blatantly exploited the Indian soil and took the benefit of the prevailing rigid caste system and regionalism which created a peculiar air of distrust among people and kings. Hindu women's honoured position was refurbished to a demeaning abyss. An indifferent attitude towards females developed through which evil practices stemmed and multiplied the problems of Hindu women. Modern India came as a respite to Hindu women. The present paper tries to examine the status of Hindu women in modern India. It also closely looks at the new challenges being faced by the contemporary Hindu women.*

**Key words:** *modern India, Hindu women, dowry system, gender discrimination, child-marriage, myths*

Modern India brought some respite to the Indian women. It was during the British rule in India that many relevant changes were made in order to ameliorate the pathetic condition of Hindu women. Any investigation of the question of Indian women's reform must necessarily also situate it within the indigenous context of prevalent social formations where upper/middle-class/caste men fiercely debated among each other and entered into varying degrees of collusion and contest with the colonial regime over various issues related to the nature and extent of women's reform (some of the issues were widow remarriage, women's education, age of consent and dowry) (Shampa 2010).

By the second half of the nineteenth century there were reform groups in all parts of British India. They focussed attention on sati, female infanticide, polygyny, child marriage, purdha, prohibition on female education, devdasis (temple dancers wedded to Gods) and the patrilocality joint families. Their activities acted as a stimulus and encouragement to reform-minded individuals in other areas, and gradually reformist organizations with all India identity began to emerge (Tharu et.al 1993). The Viceroy Lord William Bentinck banned Sati in 1829. Social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy had also supported this move. Similarly, remarriage of widows was sanctioned in 1856 and in 1929 a law was passed prohibiting child marriage. The most difficult task in India was to educate women, because only a few Hindu women belonging to the families of zamindars were able to receive basic education. Many teachers, as well as social workers, considered it a necessity and started many educational institutions for women. In 1850s Ishwarchand Vidyasagar started many primary schools in the villages of Bengal. He possessed an immense knowledge of Hindu scriptures and suggested that the dictates of ancient scriptures should not be deformed for one's benefit. He writes, Countrymen! How long will you suffer yourselves to be led away by illusions! Open your eyes for once and see, the India, once the land of virtues, is being over flooded (by) the stream of adultery and foeticide. The degradation to which you have sunk is sadly low. Dip into the spirit of your sastras, follow its dictates and you shall be able to remove the foul blot from the face of your country (Vidyasagar 1976).

Arya Samaj, founded by Swami Dayanand, also propagated women's education. John Drinkwater Bethune established the first women's college in India in Calcutta in 1849. In 1851 Jotiba Phule came forward to educate the scheduled caste girls in Poona. Since then there has been no looking back, as women also started clamouring for education for which they had been indifferent for ages. In 1907 British women doctors participating in India formed the Association of Medical Women in India and proposed the formation of a Women's Indian Medical Service modelled on the IMS (Forbes 1996). These attempts provided the much needed impetus and Hindu women took a hesitant step towards social emancipation. Education made them aware of their rights which gave the much needed impetus to the women's movement. Many great women writers appeared who represented the educated group of Indian women. Toru Dutt, Cornelia Sorabji, Shevantibai Nikambe, Krupabai Santhianathan and Smt. Swarnkumari Ghosal are some of the prominent women writers who had feminist vision. They highlighted the tormented women and their lost voice in their literary texts. They held the myths and social practices responsible for debasing the dignity of women. Toru Dutt's *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d' Arvers* (in French), *Blancaor The Young Spanish Maiden* (in English) illustrate the tragedy, agony and suppression associated with women's life. Cornelia Sorabji was a feminist

as well as a social reformer. An advocate by profession and a writer by heart, she took up the dilapidated condition of women in her stories. *Love and life Behind thePurdah*(1901), *Sun Babies* (1904), *Between the Twilights* (1908) unveil the mind of women spending their life behind veils. It depicts the reticent womanhood silently enduring the stifling norms of the society which deny women the basic rights to live with individuality and independence. She has also illustrated the inhuman practice of ‘Sati’ which was prevalent in pre-independence India. *India calling* presents a dreadful picture of a woman forcibly taken to the funeral pyre where she endures the physical affliction for three days and succumbs to death. Her first collection of 10 stories deciphers the plight of women who are sexually and socially subjugated by the male dominated Indian society. She also took up the issues of child marriage, child widowhood and fretful marriages. Shevanti Bai Nikambe as a feminist writer advocated the suppression of women in the conventional Indian society. She revealed the trauma of marriage and widowhood. Her novel, *Ratnabai*, portrays the trauma of the protagonist who wants to educate herself. She faces the wrath of her father-in-law’s relatives for inculcating a desire which is not meant for women. The novel exposes the pre-Independence society in which the Indian women were struggling to get the right to education not only in the society but also within their family. The literature produced by these women writers may not possess many literary merits, but it highlights the pathetic condition of women belonging to different sections of society. The dilution of rigid social norms eventually propagated a liberated modern outlook among Hindu women.

The change in the social milieu and its effect on the status and psychology of women encouraged the Indian writers to take cognizance of women’s issues. Many outstanding regional writers □ Homen Borgchain, Narayan Sanyal, Bimal Mitra, N. Mitra, Prem Chand, Yashpal, Nagar, Ashk, to quote a few □ also wrote about this under-privileged class, critically reflecting the prevailing inhumane practices and atrocities in their work. Mantagini, the female protagonist of Bankim Chandra’s *Rajamohan’s wife* (1864), is a woman who values her feelings and affirms her individuality. She represents those Indian women who protest against conventional mores and break the barriers of self-abnegation and denial. Lal Behari Day’s *Govinda Samanta* is a realistic novel, which describes the socio-economic changes occurring in contemporary society. Women characters of the novel □ Aduri, a widow who kowtows to evil practices related with women and Malati, a rebellious woman who is not ready to succumb to the atrocities of her mother-in-law □ form only a part of the plot which adroitly demonstrates the leap from traditional to modern womanhood.

Literature also assisted in spreading the idea of women’s emancipation. It characterized the images of deprived womanhood which gave an impetus to socially upgrade the status of women. Images of rebellious women instigated feminist ideas. Emergence of women writers exhibits that the society started imparting education to Hindu women. Women as political leaders also became motivational figures for the submissive ones. Women leaders include Bhikaji Cama, Dr. Annie Besant, Pritilata Waddadar, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kriplani and Kasturba Gandhi. Sarojini Naidu, a poet and freedom fighter, was the first Indian woman to become President of the Indian National Congress and the first woman to become the governor of a state in India. These women leaders came from different religious backgrounds hence they became the role models not only for the Hindu women but for the whole women community in India.

With the attainment of independence various reforms were made by the government to ensure women’s development in the country. Many new acts were formulated and implemented to ensure better status and rights to women. Laws related to protection of rights of working women, child marriage, dowry, right to property, education and crimes against women were implemented. Hindu women got an opportunity to hone their capabilities and came out of their hibernation era as country developed a liberal approach towards them. Hindu women emerged as writers, doctors, teachers and scientists. A new generation of writers appeared who wrote on themes projecting the miseries and complexities of human lives and concentrating on individual predicament. The mid-1950’s and 1960’s mark the second important stage of women writers like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Shobha De, Nayantara Sahgal, and Shashi Deshpande came out with their works that changed the face of Indian English novel. They opened up a new vista of human nature and man-woman relationship. The problems discussed in their novels are individual, rather than universal. These writers have projected the inner psychological turmoil of women surviving in different sections of the society.

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The modern era has engulfed Hindu women with new challenges. Education and economic independence has empowered them yet they are unable to transcend social conditioning. It is responsible for imparting a subordinate status to Hindu women in contemporary India. The major factors of social conditioning, responsible for demarcating limitations on women, are – restriction associated with puberty, inculcation of self-abnegation, imitation of feminine archetypes, and marriage which is perceived as the ultimate goal for women. A woman's life is circumscribed by these factors of social conditioning.

### **Dowry System**

Hindu Women, in modern India, are critically aware of their marginalised roles in conventional social structures, and want to attain selfhood by transcending them. Centuries old male-dominated society does not let male ego accept the equality of sexes. It is to be understood that women will not recuperate from their deprived state until they are socially accepted as individuals. Even though women are educated and economically independent, they still find their lives torn asunder between traditionalism and modernity. The constricting influence of its conventional norms has a severe effect on women's inner-self. Women are not able to liberate themselves from the stifling social practices which are embedded in the society as an inseparable entity. Dowry, an obnoxious system, is still prevailing in modern India. Demands from the groom's family in terms of property, assets, money, and jewellery have to be fulfilled in most cases before the consummation of marriage. It is not only leading to innumerable dowry deaths of women in India every year but also to female foeticide. One woman dies every hour due to dowry related reasons on an average in the country, which has seen a steady rise in such cases between 2007 and 2011, according to official data (TOI 2013). People are less interested in female child as they not only have to educate her but also simultaneously accumulate wealth for her marriage. They prefer to have a male progeny which carries the family lineage and looks after the parents in old age. It is a common fact that the sex ratio in India is lower than international standards i.e. sex ratio in India is 933 while the world average is 986. A number of causes are responsible for the continuous decline in the sex ratio e.g. poverty, illiteracy, culture and preference for a male child (Srinivasan, Durg et.al 2010). *Statistics on Women in India 2010* given by National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (NIPCC)<sup>1</sup> has revealed the inclination of the society towards a male progeny. According to the survey conducted by the organization, 22.4 percentage of Indian women wanted to have more sons whereas 2.6 percentage of women wanted to have more daughters than sons in the year 2006. 20% men want to have more sons whereas 2% men want to have daughters (Table 31 117 2010). Dowry system still has a strong hold on Indian society which makes the birth of a girl questionable. Her existence is not only distasteful for the family but also burdensome. Materialistic voraciousness of the society is aggravating the plight of girl child. *A Handbook on Statistical Indicators on Indian Women, 2007*<sup>2</sup> given by Ministry of Women and Child Development Government of India reveals 6581 dowry deaths in India in the year 2001 whereas 7618 dowry deaths in the year (2007).

### **Gender Discrimination**

The impact of social conditioning is such that the Hindu women are unable to liberate themselves from the limitations associated with each role assigned to them. The Hindu society has traditionally insisted on inculcating a particular code of conduct among the girls. Feminine traits such as self-abnegation and servility are considered laudable among girls, especially in middle class society. Myths, ceremonies and rituals abet the traditional mindset of the society. This leads to gender discrimination. In Hindu society, the established religious myths and rituals are highly responsible for proclaiming men as superior to women. Birth of a son is still considered as a way towards salvation as he is treated as the carrier of family lineage. It is the boy who performs all the rights at the death of his parents. It gives him a closer link with them than the daughters. Vrinda Nabar comments in her book *Caste as a Woman*, It is clear that the birth of a daughter is a letdown in some absolute sense. A woman who bears a son, on the other hand, is exalted as someone who has fulfilled her mission as a female. She herself is conditioned into experiencing a sense of achievement at having done so. If the other aspects of bearing a daughter (her presence being temporary and therefore an alleged source of grief) enter the picture at all they do so at a later stage. Moreover, they are wilfully regarded as an unalterable situation and in this way the whole boy-girl syndrome is perpetuated and rationalised (Nabar 1995).

Suppression of spontaneity in childhood also casts its shadow in adulthood of girls, making them timid, weak, vulnerable and open to violence after marriage. As per Census 2001, among the important religious communities, sex ratio is highest in Christianity (1009) and lowest in Sikhism (893). Sex ratio is 931 in Hindu religion.(9). The literacy rate for females is highest in Jainism (90.58%) followed by Christianity (76.19 %), Sikhism (63.09 %), Buddhism (61.69 %), Hinduism (53.21%) and Islam (50.09%).(11). (Ministry of Women and Child Development 2007). As per Census 2001, among the important religious communities, the literacy rate for females is highest in Jainism (90.58%) followed by Christianity (76.19 %), Sikhism (63.09 %), Buddhism (61.69 %), Hinduism (53.21%) and Islam (50.09%).The gender gap in literacy rate is lowest in Jainism (6.83 %) and highest inHinduism (22.95 %). (Ministry of Women and Child Development 2007).

### Child Marriage

This age old practice is still rampant in many states of India. Government took some immediate measures to reduce the incidence of child marriage. The Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed in 1929 which was later amended in 1979, 2006 and 2008. Early marriage is defined as a marriage in which the bride is below 18 years and the groom is below 21 years. Girls who bear children before they close their adolescent growth spurt remain physically under developed and have greater risk of complications of pregnancy and maternal death (NIPC 2010). According to the data generated by NIPC in 2010, the percentage of rural as well as urban women aged 20-24 years married before 18 years in the year (2007-2008) is 48.7 percent and 29.4 percent respectively (NIPC 2010). The problem is more witnessed in rural areas. Low literacy rate and conventional attitude towards Hindu women is responsible for it. Women in rural areas are perceived as the producer of family lineage and their solemn responsibility is to look after the domestic affairs of the family. Higher Education is still not meant for most of the girls.

### Myths

Social and religious doctrines give men the claim to absolute authority. the need to develop a different approach towards myths and stereotypes in her work. . Deshpande in her essay *The Indian Woman – Stereotypes, Images and Realities*, states about the influence of myths in reshaping the life of people which can never be easily avoided, Myths condition our ideas so powerfully that often it is difficult to disentangle the reality of what we perceive from what we learn of ourselves through them. In India, myths are perhaps even more powerful, for they have been with us in a long unbroken tradition. Our epics and puranas are still with us and among us, in the stories told to children, in plays, dances, songs, poems, even jokes – and now, most influential of all, in movies. Over the years they have been reinvested, reshaped, regionalised. The myths continue to be a reference point for people in their daily lives and we have so internalised them that they are part of our psyche, part of our personal, religious and Indian identity (1997).

Myths are responsible for the debasement of Indian women at social level. Not only the domineering status of man, which is often treated as a manifestation of infallible patriarchal authority, but also the archetypes which act like traditional moulds producing their clones, are responsible for the subjugation of women. The life cycle of middle-class Hindu women draws the attention towards the fact that archetypes generated by social myths do not permit unhindered growth to them at any stage of their lives. The interpretation and appraisal of the conventional traits by Indian society will enable us to establish correlations between the predicament of Hindu women and established social dogmas. A critical evaluation of these myths is rather difficult as they have been organically assimilated in the Indian life style. It is not only the change in the status of women which is necessary, but also the segregation of the myths from the life and rearing pattern of the average Indian man.

However, contemporary Hindu women are raising their voice against oppressive codes of the society and are on their quest for self identity. They are trying to ultimately attain it by rationally interpreting their own emotional reactions to their past and present. Their rights have been assimilated into the Indian judicial system but the challenge before them is to get a social acceptance. The stage when women come out of their cocoon of silence and assert their true-self is true feminism. Education, economic independence and feminist ideology have given them confidence to raise their voice against the suppressive norms of the society. They have realized their potentialities and this awareness of selfhood will help them to nurture their self-identity. Hindu women's journey from sati to self-actualization is a saga of discovering the lost identity.

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**Notes:**

1. Statistics on Women in India 2010. National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development: New Delhi. 2010.
2. *A Handbook on Statistical Indicators on Indian Women, 2007* given by Ministry of Women and Child Development Government of India. New Delhi. 2007.

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