Historical perspective of violence against women in India through various ages

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Abstract
History is the study of the past human activities and the human society everywhere is composed of males and females and the society is stratified on the basis of sex. Women constitute half of the population, and thus, a significant segment of every society. Every human being is born free, but the women’s freedom has always been neglected in the name of custom, honor, family welfare and social prestige. In Indian society, the position and status of women has been continuously changing in the course of time. The change of socio-political conditions too has affected the status of women. The women has been bounded as a mysterious creature as well as a devoted mother and self-sacrificing wife during various periods of time through which the human civilization has evolved out from its primitive roots to an advanced scientific and technical culture.

Keywords: Stratification, Social Prestige, Mysterious Creature, Primitive Roots, Technical Culture.

“A Wife is half the man, the best of friends,
The loot of the family and its perpetuity,
The source of well being...
Wives are friends, in the wilderness”.
- Vastyayana

Indian Woman has passed through various phases from the ages to which history can take us back to now. She enjoyed respectable status in some of the earliest ages and by and by suffered and crushed under the wheel of decline. Many factors are responsible for the changes in the status of woman, e.g. Marriage System, Education, Religion and Purdah.

If person born an Indian Woman cultivate extra patience, docility and capacity for suffering taught by our grandmothers. It is not considered as a slow process of cultivation but it is taken for granted, that person is born with them along with flesh and blood.

In the Vedic age, there were high ideals of womanhood. The Rig Veda had gently but firmly put men in their light position. Woman was protected by the Gods, the man was countered her guardian, in no way her superior. Throughout the Vedic period, woman was given a status equal to man( Indra Kulshresthra 1990:34).

In the age of the Upanishads, there were rishis like Gargi and Maitreyi. Women could own property and widow could remarry. Women were not secluded from men and they freely
participated in public life. Child Marriage was unknown. Monogamy was a general rule, but there were cases of Polygamy among the rich and the ruling classes other Sati was unknown. The position enjoyed by women in Rig Vedic period deteriorated in later Vedic civilization. A daughter began to be regarded as a curse. All moral and social rules framed by male dominant society ignored their Identity, Individuality and Integrity. Evil and in human practices came to be inflicted upon them in the name of custom. The Scholastic counterpart of the Vedic ages were gradually reduced to mere household drudgery and this plunged Indian Society into abysmal darkness. The Story of the Suppression of Indian Womanhood is an old one dating back to Ancient India When Manu laid down the Hindu social code.

Manu equated women with animals and drums and sanctioned their beating. According to his code, even if the husband is deceased, stupid, poor, blind, deaf, bad tempered or in great distress, yet if his wife treats him with disrespect she will suffer all the tortures of hell. Her only religious duty devotion through word and dead at her husband’s feet (Sushmasood (ed) 2006:59)

The great sage Yajnavalkya says that the woman is bad omen, like a dog or black-bird-vulture, a mongoose, a rat and a Sudra – the expiation for killing there in the same.

Taitriya Samhita says that the woman is only an object of sexual enjoyment. Women can be treated like a shuttlecock in game played by men folk (Shefali Moitra (ed) 1996:37).

In the Ramayana, Sita was wrongfully suspected and insulted with cutting words in public and Rama’s unprotesting silence consigned her to the flames. Rama’s treatment of a wholly caste and emotionally devoted wife is the limit of mental violence.

The Mahabharata has so many instances of Physical and mental cruelty to women. The most crucial incident is the public insult of Draupadi in Dhataratha’s Court. The physical and mental cruelty involved in the episode shows the object helplessness of the woman who could be subjected to violence with the society condoning, even approving it. The another incident in the Mahabharata is, Draupadi suffered a subtle degree of mental violence when she had to marry all five brothers although her own desire was for Arjuna.

The violence in this and in many other episodes are implicit and made possible only because the woman has been defined as an object of enjoyment. Therefore, she can be violated with impurity. Individuals like Kunti, Ghandhari and Draupadi had protest on certain occasion, but by and large society managed to keep such protest in abeyance. So physical and mental violence could continue with impurity(Radha,R 2019:266).

During the Buddhist period, women were not denied learning. They took active part in public life, but did not enjoy the right of Vedic Studies. The Buddha does not seem to have a very high opinion of women. At first, he was not even prepared to found an order for nuns. It is narrated that his foster mother Mahaprajapati begged to be admitted into the Sangha, but he refuse. But after Ananda, the favorite discipline of the Buddha convinced him and then Buddha turned down Ananda’s proposal to found an order of nuns, he allowed the order of nuns to be formed. No widow was expected to remain single in memory of her dead husband. She could either marry to join the nunnery. Sati was unknown at the time of Buddha (P.Thomas 1964:83)

During the Maurya period, though child marriage had not come into practice, early marriage of girls was advocated to maintain their bodily purity. The custom of Sati was in vogue. The education
of women already under a setback from later Vedic Period. Consequently suffered due to the lowering of the marriageable age.

Manu Says, “Day and night women must be kept in dependence by the male of their families. Her father protests her in childhood, her husband protests her in the Middle Age, her son in her old age, a woman is never fit for Independence”(R.Radha 2019).

The growing importance attached to Physical Charity led to gradual discouragement of Widow Remarriage, divorce and the encouragement of the Sati. With no education worth the name, with no voice in the selection of the bridegroom, with no inheritance from father, with no social approval for pursuing an Independent life, women became dressed up dolls with no purpose other than playing second fiddle to man’s life.

The position of women really deteriorated in the Gupta age, through general learning could be acquired by women of high birth, as a rule the women folk which had lost its right to Vedic learning long ago never regained it. In fact, even chanting of Vedic Mantras in many ceremonies concerning her, were forbidden. Her sole concern in life, in short should be the promotion of her husband’s welfare.

Polygamy was widely prevalent. The Widow was required to observe a life of celibacy and simplicity. She was in fact encouraged to self-immolation. For those who cannot go through this self-sacrifice, a rigorous life of vows and facts were prescribed and enforced. Women of higher families used the Purdah when they appeared in Public. Dowry emerged as an institution in this period.

During the Harsha Period, the condition of Women did not show any striking improvement. The practice of Polygamy was fairly common which further deteriorated the condition of women.

The period between A.D.1206 and 1761 witnessed further deterioration in the position of Women. In this period female infanticide, Child Marriage, Purdah, Jauhar, Sati and Slavery were the main social evils. The birth of a daughter was considered bad luck. Giving freedom to Woman was thought of doom. During the Mughal Period in India, the invasions of foreigners into the country, jeopardised the security of Women’s life as they were often carried away by the invaders. A Woman thus became a ‘Commodity’ and therefore came to be considered a liability instead of an asset to the family. It narrowed down the Social liberties of Women and the Jauhar and Sati now in their heads, for now women began to be countered a liability instead of an asset to the family and taught that it was mere acceptable to die than be slaves of Marry into Muslim homes.

The Muslim conquest as we have seen let to large scale immolation of Women, especially among the Rajput who considered it a lesser evil than capture by the invaders. Bernier, the French man, during his travels witnessed many instance of Sati in India, on one occasion while journeying from Ahmedabad to Agra, he saw in Rajputana, a Sati seated on funeral pyre of her husband with stoic encourage while flames started lagging rained her (Ram Ahuja 2009:151).

Women were largely uneducated and remained confined to their homes. Conservatism, Superstition and belief in magic, Sorcery and Witch craft were part of Women’s existence. In the Medieval period these are exhibited the pitiable position of Women in Society. The Devadasi System and Polygamy aggravated the Women’s position to the background.
The practice of dowry is Scourge on Indian Womanhood. This was responsible for female infanticide in generally and particularly in Rajput families. Stridhana was the word mentioned for dowry. Sometimes the evils of dowry system drive women in to prostitution.

Now women in India are at the cross roads. Before British came to India, during the middle ages foreign invasions and conquests made the condition of Indian women worst in the History. When the British came from a far-off country they neither settled in India not identified itself with her interests. On the contrary the western ideas and ideals began to influence our society for the first time. The Reform movement and National movement generated Social consciousness among women.

The second half of the 19th century witnessed several reforms regarding the position of women in Indian society. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar started agitation for widow remarriage and were successful in getting the Hindu Widow Remarriage set passed in 1856.

After our Independence with the rapid development of the media it appears that a modern educated girl in big cities of India neither cares for religion and spiritual perfection nor hanker after domestic life as before. But spirituality is something that can never grow old, never fade off, and never die. As the nation cannot change its soul, so it cannot also change its ideas. That is why even during the turbulent modern age of over materialism over realism, over individualism, over rationalism and over cynicism are still there, inspiring and heartening thousands of Women in all walks of life (O.C. Sharma (ed) 1994: 236).

Women have gained noticeably in importance at parliamentary and ministrative and professional levels. The Women had the right to participate in political activity on equal terms. Women constitute almost half the country’s population, which has been deprived of its self-respect and subjugated into a grim existence. As India enters the 21st century Indian Women are beginning to Stir. Now itself, in the traditional families the husband was like dem god. The wife’s role was to look after him and his comforts. The whole world revolved round him. He does not like his wife to be Independent, there are feelings of jealousy and suspicion. He uses physical force to keep his wife subdued or creates hurdlesin her work to prove his superiority. This is the major cause of tension at home and contributes in a big way towards the rising graph of cruelty.

The most of the males still think that the women’s most important job is to take care of the husband and the children. That she is suited only for certain types of jobs. The recent UNDP report states that, “even under the law, the equality of Women, in many societies is not yet answered lot alone in practive” (S.K.Ghose, 1999:1030).

In India, women are guaranteed equality, freedom, opportunity and protection by the constitution, Several legislations and count decisions. Nevertheless, Women continue to be victims of domestic violence, family violence, violence in the community and at work places.

The Status of women in our society can be caused by strengthening Women’s role in economic, social, polititical and cultural life and providing equal opportunity and share in the fruits of development. Any measure to climative violence against women without raising their social status and life without equality as enshrined in the universal declaration of Human Rights, would hardly facilitiate any further reduction in violence against women.

Even today, various forms of violence against women are prevalent in our society. Many cases remain unreported due to cultural norms, apartheey or ignorance over the past five years the
phenomenon of women burning and rapes has registered a sharp increase throughout India. In 1995, at All India level 1,06,471 cases were registered under crime against women, compared to 98,948 in 1994 and 83,254 cases in 1993.

An Article on ‘Status of women in India – A depressing Scenario' which appeared in the Tribune of Chandigarh edition of 15th April, 1999 points out that rape takes place once in every 54 minutes, eve-teasing in every 51 minutes, molestation once in every 26 minutes and dowry deaths in every 1000 minutes.

Violence against women in not a myth, but reality. It exists and exists everywhere. The type, frequency, intensity and control of violence against women may vary from time to time or place to place, but it is there everywhere women on many occasions, are victimised by all sorts of discrimination, deprivation and obstruction in goal achieving responds. This incident may occur in the family, officer, agricultural fields, industries or even public places.

Still more aganizing is the failure of control system in modern India due to which the intensity frequency and type of violence against Women are increasing day by day. The worst part of the problem is that women today hot feeling safe and secured even in the family. Immediate control of violence against women needs cooperation from the society, voluntary organisation and governmental agencies.

Men and Women are the two eyes of nations. But in History of human kind women were the oppressed and suppressed beings. Vivekananda says, 'The country and the nation which do not respect women have never become great not will ever be infuture'.

References: