
UNIT 1 WOMEN DOWN THE AGES

Structure

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

Women constitute half of humanity. Their status in family, kinship and society has passed through ups and downs in the course of history. This unit presents an account of the position of women in Indian society from ancient to modern times. After studying this unit, you would be able to:

- historically trace the overall position of women;
- analyze the status of women in early India;
- describe their status in pre-colonial India; and
- discuss the changes in women's status due to social reforms and the freedom struggle.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Women have been equal partners with men in the struggle for survival and advancement of human society through the ages. Though they have equal contribution in making history, women have been conspicuously absent in the annals of history and their position in society did not invoke much interest until recently.

Coming to the Indian society, its dynamics are diverse in nature. Interpreting the position of women in such a society is no doubt challenging. Moreover, the task becomes complex due to lack of genuine sources especially in relation to the early ages. Many scholars have expressed such dilemmas in their works on women's status in Indian society (Srinivas 1986, Thapar 1975). According to M.N. Srinivas (1986), the study of status of women in Indian society has many facets. Generalization is quite unattainable because there are variations between regions, between rural and urban areas, among classes, and finally among different religious, ethnic and caste groups. This applies to the study of women's position in both early as well as contemporary Indian society. Romila Thapar (1975) shared this viewpoint and states that the Indian sub-continent has many variations in cultural milieu, family structure, class, caste, property rights and morals which impact status of women. Responding to these dilemmas posed by Srinivas and Thapar, Andre Beteille (1975) states that in order to cater to the diversity inherent in the fabric of Indian society, a sociological viewpoint is needed. Indian society has many structural divisions and women's position should be examined in each of them, i.e, among Hindus and Muslims, among different regions and social strata and so on. This

exercise becomes difficult in the absence of essential documents. Thapar explains that authentic sources that can help in creating a profile of Indian women are not easily available. Moreover, some of the available historical documents are oriented to elitism. Historians, as a result, have not paid much attention to the women's question.

Andre Beteille enlists some significant dimensions for the study of women's position in Indian society. Women's position has to be assessed to see what it is in practice rather than in principle. Traditionalists and modernists make the picture complex. While traditionalists present an ideal picture of women in traditional India using references from a few classical texts, the modernists say that women have been in principle given many rights after Independence unlike in the past when they suffered various disabilities. To demystify the picture, the sociological perspective suggests that one should not make evaluative judgments regarding the position of women in the past or present, or in any stratum of society. Each section of the society has its own value systems and women's position should be examined vis-à-vis these systems since there is no absolute code.

In this context, this unit attempts to present an overview of women's position in society and then discusses their status in the early Indian societies. Pre-colonial India accounts for the medieval period of Indian history. Pre-independent India focuses on modern India and women's situation in it.

1.2 WOMEN IN HISTORY: AN OVERVIEW

It is a fact that women now occupy a subordinate status to men in most societies, the few matrilineal societies being the only exceptions. But this was not always so. Nor is it rooted in biological facts, as commonsense belief goes. Women's status has come to be inferior in historical stages of human civilization. The most famous analysis of this phenomenon is by Fredrick Engels whose *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* denies that women's subordinate position is prescribed by nature. He attributes women's subordination to the institution of private property. The role of economic and political conditions is more important than even those of social customs and legal rules. In the primitive societies, men and women were equals in hunting and gathering food. There was no property to be possessed or to be passed on. The original subordination of women or, to use Engel's expression, "the world historic defeat of the female sex" happened with the coming of agriculture whereby men started domesticating animals, possessed tools and the produced surplus which gave them a sense of property. This was the main cause of the overthrow of 'mother right' and its replacement by 'father right'. With this came up the patriarchal family along with monogamy which controlled women's sexuality to ensure the legitimacy of the heir. Thus '... the man seized the reins in the house also, the woman was degraded, enthralled, the slave of the man's lust, a mere instrument of breeding children' (Engels 1977). This transformation initiated the process of women's subordination in all the later modes of production in which various forms of private property were to gain significance. Engels argued that the female sex can be restored to its original position with the abolition of the institution of private property and ushering in of socialism (Sharma 1983).

The concept of patriarchy is important for an analysis of gender inequality in society. Walby's (1990) theorization of patriarchy in contemporary western societies, especially Britain, may also apply to Indian society to some extent. Patriarchy is composed of six structures: the patriarchal mode of production; patriarchal relations in paid work; patriarchal relations in state; male violence; patriarchal relations in sexuality; and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions. She defines patriarchy as "a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress

and exploit women". The patriarchal production relations exist in households where housewives are the producing class and husbands are the expropriating class. Patriarchal relations in paid work exclude women from better types of work, assigning them those considered as requiring less skill. The state also is patriarchal in nature which shows in its actions and policies. Male violence is often legitimized by the state which refuses to intervene against it or does little to end it. Women's representation in religion, media and education is moulded by patriarchal interests. Walby also states that in Britain there has been a shift from the private to the public form of patriarchy from the 19th century to the 20th century. Private patriarchy is based on household production whereas public patriarchy is focused on public sites like employment and the state. In public patriarchy, the household is not the chief site of patriarchal control though it continues to exert its influence. In private patriarchy, an individual patriarch expropriates women's labour while in public patriarchy there is collective expropriation of her labour. In India, both public and private continue to exert control.

1.3 WOMEN IN EARLY INDIA

In the first four ages (mahayuga) - the Kṛta Yuga (also the golden age) - women had freedom, states Thapar (1975). A later period reference to this age states that 'in the land of the uttarakurus, the traditional ancestral home of the "pure", women were as free as men'. This means that the subordinate status of women was not a universal phenomenon. Even in the early promiscuous societies, primacy was given to the procreative role of children and sexual sanctions were minimum. A high infant mortality rate was a cause of insecurity in the tribes. In these food-gathering tribes, women garnered respect and were treated as procreators. The origin of the state led to a change in this status of women. Peasant societies had experienced a life full of peace and togetherness until then. Now, they started to face conflict and disorder. There were instances of stealing one another's wife and also crops. Property and women became a cause of worry. Law and order required institutions of property and marriage to be recognized. Someone also had to take up the responsibility of dispensing law and maintaining harmony and order. With this gradual development of the state, women's status began to diminish.

Some historians consider that women were equal to men in the early Vedic age. Women held a significant role in rituals and family life and had access to education (Altekar 1956). Using this Altekarian paradigm, Mukherji (1988) views that during the Vedic age (before 1000 BC) women and men shared equal rights and obligations. Both boys and girls were initiated to learning through the upanayana (sacred thread) ceremony following which they could read the Vedic texts. Women scholars composed hymns that were later included in the sacred texts. Women mastered music, dance, fine arts and also engaged in productive labour and agriculture. Marriage was preferred but not mandatory. Sometimes women spent their lives entirely in their parents home. Neither the Rig Veda nor the Griha Sutras made it compulsory for the wife to obey every diktat of her husband. She could participate freely in all religious practices and sacrifices. Though married women had property rights, yet the immovable property was still in the control of patrilineal family. Levirate (marriage to dead brother's widow as per custom) was allowed, so were widow remarriages. All this while, the Aryans were preoccupied in the task of political expansion and women assisted in wars by productive labour in manufacture and agriculture. In this patriarchal society, the birth of a son was much more valued than that of a daughter.

Between 1000 BC to 500 BC, the Aryans politically consolidated Northern India. They turned a section of the vanquished population into slaves and employed them in manufacturing and agriculture, displacing women's active role. In home industries, women continued to spin and weave. With a downward shift in women's

productive role, their status in society reduced. This marked the origin of the subordinate status of women in the coming years.

Vedic studies were professionalized and in place of the father, the acharya became the teacher. Vedas were no longer conceived as compositions of saint-poets but as 'revealed knowledge' that was required to be maintained in its pure form. A person had to study them for twelve years to gain perfection. This made the whole process of learning difficult for women since they got married at the age of seventeen or eighteen years. The elementary form of inequality was in terms of unequal access of men and women to knowledge. Further, demands were made to lower the age of marriage of women to restrict their access to knowledge, thus making them dependent on men. By 500 BC, legal treatises suggested that women be married on or before puberty. Gradually Vedic knowledge became more intricate and required upto sixteen years of devotion. At the same time, the age at marriage for girls was lowered. The upanayana ceremony which was the entry point for Vedic knowledge was done for namesake for women. It was performed without any chanting of mantras and ultimately to complete annulment by 500 AD. At this point, women were bracketed with the Shudras since Vedic knowledge became inaccessible for them like it was for the Shudras. Marriage became obligatory and women gradually began losing their rights. Widow-remarriage was denied. The woman was removed from all productive activities and became fully dependent on her husband or lord. Her subservience to man assumed such a form that it led to self-immolation of a wife on the funeral pyre of her husband. Women were granted some property rights, though, to compensate for this degraded status (Mukherji 1988). However, how this was practiced remains to be questioned (Desai and Krishanaraj 2004).

Similarly, Radha Kumar Mookerji (1958) states that the Rig Veda held women as equal to men in the acquisition of knowledge, even the knowledge of the absolute or brahma. Misconceptions with regard to the status of women in early Indian society existed because of lack of knowledge of original Sanskrit texts, both Shruti and Smriti. These texts include laws, customs and traditions that illustrate the status of women in that society. Though the hymns were mostly composed by male rishis, some rishikas also contributed to them. Religious ceremonies required both the wife and husband to participate without which they were rendered invalid.

Many scholars have challenged these arguments (Chakravarty 2005; Roy 2005). Uma Chakravarty (2004) states that studies of women in early Indian history were mostly concerned with the 'status of women' and its classification as high or low which led them to focus on marriage laws, property rights, and rights related to religious practices. Instead, it is important to analyze the 'structural framework of gender relations' whereby the nature of women's subordination and the causes behind it are seen along with its extent and the form which it adopts in the early Indian society. The subordinate status of women was expressed in the religious traditions that determined social practices. The Hindu society legitimizes social stratification by which women and the lower castes are treated with disgrace. Most importantly, caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy form the core constituents of the Brahmanical patriarchy. Patrilineal succession (important for patriarchal societies) requires sexual control of women and caste purity. Purity of women, which is significant for purity of castes, holds a central place in Brahmanical patriarchy.

The caste system safeguards itself through endogamy, preventing the defilement of women. Miscegeny (mixing of castes), i.e, (varnasamkara) is a cause of anxiety since it destroys the ritual order by polluting the quality of blood through women. Those polluting castes which are an outcome of the union between the woman of a higher caste and man of a lower caste face conviction and strict punishment. Hypogamy or pratiloma is still severely punished through excommunication, ritual

death etc. This shows how upper caste women are a cause of anxiety and to protect them from defilement their sexually subordination is codified in Brahmanical laws and imposed by the state. Women's assent to this process is sought in many ways - through ideology; economic dependence on the male head of the family; class privileges and respect for conforming women and use of force, when needed.

However the gender, caste and class stratification specific to Brahmanical patriarchy reached its present situation much later. In the prehistoric cultures, women's role in production and reproduction were considered important. The evidence from the cave paintings at Bhimbetka (circa 5000 BC) in Central India reveal that there was no rigid sexual division of labour in the hunting-gathering stage. Women's role in the economy was equal to that of men. In the Mesolithic period, they seem to have participated in hunts along with gathering food. However, food gathering was an important source of food in tropical climates. The hunting-gathering tribes are believed to be among the most egalitarian societies based on interdependency.

Women's economic role in such societies was enhanced when clubbed together with their reproductive role. Neumayer (1983) calls these societies 'matristic' because here women were not subordinated by the authority of men or other women. Such societies did not require sexual control of women. Though the Harappan civilization has not been discussed using a gender lens, yet there is evidence to show that some sort of stratification existed by which there were the labouring classes and the ruling classes who lived in citadels. The presence of mother goddess symbols and the figure of the dancing girl may be interpreted to suggest that the Harappans valued the reproductive role of women and accepted their sexuality.

The Rig Veda highlights the ideology of the early Aryans and bears testimony to the conflict between the Aryans and the non-Aryan tribes. The Aryans looked down upon these non-Aryan tribes and considered them to be racially inferior. Aryans tried to control certain areas forcing some men living there to flee. Others were killed. They enslaved the women of these subordinated classes. Women formed one of the first groups to be enslaved and there are more references to *dasis* than *dasas*. This led to stratification between the women of the conquering Aryan tribe and those belonging to the vanquished non-Aryan tribe. The roles and status of these two categories of women varied in society. The Aryan women ruled over slaves and cattle while the *dasis* or the enslaved women were under complete control of the men of the conquering class. The labour and sexuality of these women were exploited. The post-Vedic literature depicts another kind of ideology. Gradually, the Aryan women were marginalized in terms of their productive roles. The coming of agriculture shifted work to the fields from the household and the *dasis* laboured on these fields. The Aryan women were then relegated the task of reproduction. The need to protect women's sexuality also arose especially with regard to the sacrifices. The Satapatha Brahmana elaborates on the fear that the wife might go to another man.

The agricultural economy and the second urbanization (800 BC to 600 BC) led to the formation of caste and class distinctions. Brahmans became important and the patrilineal order became established. This post-Vedic period also marks a departure from the tribal economy with polity being highly stratified due to the private ownership of land. The control over property made the patrilineal system important along with patrilineal succession for kingship. Caste purity became central requiring chastity of women maintained through strict seclusion. A later text Apastamba Dharma Sutra (circa 6th century BC) states that wives have to be under male control. At this time a distinction was made between motherhood and female sexuality where the latter had to be controlled and diverted to legitimate motherhood ensuring purity of castes (mating with approved partner) and patrilineal succession (mating with one man only). Since then female sexuality was required to be managed. Women's intrinsic nature was described as sinful.

Indian society gives primacy to the dual concept of female in Hindu philosophy. According to Desai and Krishnaraj (2004), while the woman is fertile and benevolent, and a bestower of prosperity, she is at the same time thought to be aggressive and destructive. This duality is seen with regard to goddesses where along with the fiery Durga and Kali, there are the compassionate Laxmi and Saraswati who hold equal importance. These goddesses represent shakti, not renunciation that only Sati portrays. Women are both power (energy/shakti) and nature (prakriti). Thapar (1975) states that this duality is a cause of contempt and fear: the fear of getting polluted from women since they are impure on certain occasions. The fear owes its origin to the procreative role of women.

Manu assigned to women the habit of lying, sitting around, an indiscriminate love of ornaments, anger, meanness, treachery and bad conduct. He drew a direct link between women's basic nature and their sexuality. According to him, women need to be guarded strictly, irrespective of their age so as to maintain the purity of the husband's offspring. Women's subjugation is described in Manu Dharmashastra by which women should never be allowed to be independent. As a daughter she is dependent on her father, as a wife on her husband and as a widow on her son. The Gita allocates the same position to women, vaishyas and shudras and regards them as beings of sinful birth (Thapar 1975).

Ancient texts like Ramayana consider women as weak and sinful and Mahabharata states that women are difficult to be controlled and can hardly be trusted. In this stage, women's sexuality was controlled by subordinating them through the ideology of stridharma or pativrata dharma. Under this, women try to live according to the ideal concept of womanhood set before them, which was in reality constructed by the ideologues of the society. This became an important instrument to control female sexuality and subordinate women under the patriarchal structure making it seem natural and invisible to women. Violence was also used in the case of wives who erred. Lastly, the king was vested with the power to punish such degraded women who committed adultery. The early Indian society shows how Brahmanical patriarchy shaped gender relations to command subservience and obedience from women.

However, in such a grim situation, Buddhism and Jainism provide alternatives to women. Both religions favoured greater freedom for women than did Brahmanism. In particular, Buddhism that spread in from fifth century BC to first century AD ensured varied roles for women: wife and mother; courtesan and bhikkuni. In the beginning, Buddha was opposed to having an order of nuns until Ananda, his prominent disciple, persuaded him. An order of nuns (bhikkuni) in Buddhism and Jainism gave women the option of living in a different way in society (Thapar 1975; Desai and Krishnaraj 2004). In Buddhism, women could join the Bhikshuni-Sangha, the order of the nuns. Many learned women emerged from these Sanghas who, in fact, became teachers of the junior nuns because of their expertise in sacred texts. Women also played an important part in the process of the early Buddhist reformation. Some of these women became chief disciples of Buddha. There were some who were called theris. Buddha mentions thirteen such theris for their spiritual value. A few theris after achieving enlightenment undertook missionary work to spread Buddhism (Mookerji 1958).

In spite of these different viewpoints regarding women's status in early Indian society, scholars agree on certain dimensions. According to Chanana (2003), the status of Hindu women varied in different periods of time. It deteriorated from the Vedic period to the classical period and after that. Texts suggest that women had access to the public domain of education and Brihadaranyaka Upanishad mentions the desire for the birth of a learned girl or pandita. However, patriarchy had begun to exert its control on women's lives in the later Vedic period. Scholars however disagree regarding the time when this downward trend began. There is a continuity

at an ideological level from past to the present with regard to the ‘ideal Hindu woman’. The householder image of an ideal Hindu woman predominates and co-exists besides other images.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) Identify the position of women in early Indian society.

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2) What are the opposite views regarding women’s position in early India?

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1.4 WOMEN IN PRE-COLONIAL INDIA

In pre-colonial India, with the invasion of India by Mohammed Ghauri to the coming of the British authority in Bengal, women’s status in Indian society worsened, states historian K.N. Pannikar (1958). For about 300 years until the time of the Mughals, the social situation in the Gangetic plains remained chaotic. Continuous invasions adversely affected social institutions and political structures which led to large-scale migration of people and unstable economic conditions. Such a social context also impacted women’s status unfavourably. The ‘Purdah’ (veil) became a norm and the Buddhist nunneries that had been established for women’s learning disappeared. The 15th century did bring some respite. However, down South, women’s position was comparatively better. Education was available to them and the presence of many women poets in regional languages and Sanskrit corroborates this fact. Ganga Devi, author of the epic Madhura Vijayam (14th century) wife of Vira Kampa Raya, and Tirumalamba Devi who wrote Varadambika Parinayam are two poets of that era. Women’s prowess at writing can be seen from 15th century Malayalam works Chandrotsavam, Sukuntalam and other Sanskrit dramas. This practice continued even in the 18th century. Manorama Thampurathi of Calicut was known for her classical work in Sanskrit grammar.

The institution of purdah led to the seclusion of women, hindered their creativity and the development of capabilities. The status of Muslim women in medieval times is mentioned in Prof. Mujeeb’s book The Indian Muslims as follows:

There were no formal changes in the law regarding the rights and duties of women...Marriage was considered final and binding on the woman. Mehr (a sum of money agreed upon at the time of marriage) while always accepted in theory could not be realized except by exerting moral pressure on the man through family. Divorce, except when enacted by the man, was unheard of and position of woman relegated to the Zannah. The purdah system was creeping in. Now purdah was observed not only with outsiders but also within the family (Bhatty 1976: 104-105).

Some women exerted considerable influence in the field of administration. This includes Rudramaba - the Kakateya queen about whom Marco Polo speaks; Razia Begum (13th century); Chandbibi who tried to defend the fort of Ahmadnagar from Akbar; Tarabai the Maratha heroine who spearheaded a resistance against Aurangzeb; Mangammal known for her benevolent rule in the South, and Ahalyabai Holkar whom Sir John Malcolm recognized for administrative skills (Panikkar 1958).

Razia ruled briefly amidst the male-dominated court of fierce Turkish nobles. She had extraordinary skills as a ruler but the opposition of mullahs along with others brought her end. Thapar (1975) quotes a historian Siraj, according to whom:

Sultana Razia was a great monarch. She was wise, just and generous, a benefactor of her kingdom, a dispenser of justice, the protector of her subjects, and the leader of her armies. She was endowed with all the qualities befitting a king, but she was not born of the right sex, and so in the estimation of men all these virtues were worthless.

The Mughal women played an important role in those times. Jehanara and Roshanara (daughters of Shah Jahan), Zebunnisa (daughter of Aurangzeb) wrote poetry. Gulbadan Begum, the daughter of Babur, wrote Humayun Namah. Nurjahan (wife of Jehangir) and Mumtaz Mahal (wife of Shah Jahan) were well versed in Persian literature. However, it would be erroneous to judge the condition of women at large based on a few royal women. Women of the higher classes lived in seclusion, but the women belonging to the cultivating classes did not observe these customs. Polygamy existed overall except in the case of certain groups of society.

The Bhakti movement ameliorated the status of women. The movement began during the medieval period condemning complex rituals and the belief that God could be worshipped only through knowledge and not through devotion. This movement brought God closer to the people irrespective of sex or caste. Use of languages people spoke rather than Sanskrit appealed to women whose lack of knowledge of Sanskrit had isolated them from sharing religious practices and experiences of men (CSWI 1974). The Alvars and Nayanmars used the local dialect in hymns, were against elaborate rituals and propagated an individual's devotion to the god of his/her choice and also advocated women's rights in Bhakti and overall a much freer life. This is also evident in the early teachings of Lingayats, in some degree in Chaitanya's teachings in Eastern India and to a large degree in those of northern India's Bhakti saints - Kabir and Nanak, particularly. Presenting an alternative way of life to women, this movement was a source of solace for them. Some women attained sainthood. Women like Andal, Mirabai and Lalla, Muktabai, Janabai, Vishnupriya are famous women of this period (CSWI 1974; Thapar 1975).

There are many facets of women's situation in medieval India and it is difficult to draw any generalization.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) Compare women's situation in pre-colonial India with that of ancient India.

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1.5 WOMEN IN PRE-INDEPENDENT INDIA

During the colonial period, two major social movements tried to bring changes in the unequal status of women in India. These were the social reform movements of the 19th century and the nationalist movement of the 20th century. According to Desai and Krishnaraj (2004), the social reform movement was 'a key to the intellectual processes that went into the making of modern India'. The social evils that attracted the attention of social reformers were sati, the ill-treatment of widows, ban on widow remarriage, polygamy, child marriage and the denial of property rights to women (Mazumdar 1976). They wanted to make people conscious of these inhumane social customs that had become a part of women's lives. By making education accessible to women and enacting social legislation they thought the process of social change would begin. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, M. G. Ranade, Mahatma Phule, Lokhitwadi, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Durgaram among others voiced concern over the existence of these unjust practices. The revivalists like Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda and Annie Besant considered the old Vedic society as ideal for women and wanted to revive it for women. The social reform movement led to the formation of National Social Conference in 1887 which acted as a forum for social reformers across the country to meet and discuss the practices that were to be reformed (Desai and Krishnaraj 2004). These reform movements aimed to change women's position within the family and the domestic framework and did not foresee any radical change in the social structure (CSWI 1974).

The national movement for independence provided a great impetus in changing the outlook towards women. It began as a middle class movement located in urban centres. Later on, Mahatma Gandhi played an important role in making it a mass movement by including the hitherto subordinated sections of outcastes, peasants, workers and women. Women's participation became an important component of this programme. Though the overall number of women was not large yet their participation had a considerable effect, states Forbes (2004). They challenged the British rule giving legitimacy to the movement and also created space for themselves as activists. Women, young and old, married and single, belonging to rural and urban areas joined the nationalist movement. Earlier, politics was considered a concern of intelligent women only. However, this notion gradually altered. Politics changed the goals and daily activities of organized women. It also opened avenues for politics to be pursued as a vocation by women (Thapar 1975). Education, social reform and women's rights became a concern for some progressive women.

A few Bengali women wrote in support of the Illbert Bill to the Viceroy. Four years after the formation of Indian National Congress, ten women came for its annual meeting. They attended these meetings as delegates or observers. In 1905, the partition of Bengal took place. Women joined the struggle against this division. They boycotted foreign goods and bought only swadeshi goods. Some women also supported revolutionary organizations. They used their traditional roles to hide political activities (Forbes 2004).

Women like Ramabai Ranade, Pandita Ramabai, Bhicaji Cama, Shirin Cursetji were committed to encouraging women into new avenues and careers. After World War I, national women's organizations were formed. These organizations that emerged between 1917 to 1927 were the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC), Women's India Association (WIA) and the National Council of Women in India (NCWI). The All-India Women's Conference (AIWC) established in January 1927 focused on education of women and social reform. Later, it realized the need to deal with all women-related issues (Baig 1958). The NCWI was set up as the national branch of International Council of Women (Forbes 2004). A modern organization of women, the WIA, was begun by Margaret Cousins in 1917 under the guidance of Annie Besant and the Home Rule Movement, which was voicing

people's demand for freedom. The Women's India Association (WIA) operated in South India and provided a platform to women to plan National-level action. It also sent a deputation led by Sarojini Naidu to Montagu in 1919 for political reforms. Indian women insisted on right to franchise and to be able to participate in the political life of the country. The Montagu reform of 1919 did not meet the expectations of Indians. Women also felt disheartened since the conservative British refused to grant them franchise. In India, women and men alike supported the achievement of this right. Sarojini Naidu with a few of her male colleagues spoke to the Parliamentary Committee on Reforms in London. As a result, a compromise was reached whereby the Parliament decided to assign this matter to the newly constituted Indian Legislatures to be set up based on constitutional reforms (Baig 1958).

Among the earliest acts of the provincial legislatures was to grant franchise rights to women along with the permission to enter legislatures as members. In the elections of 1926, women participated. When the legislatures began to function in 1927 after the general elections of 1927 only some women members could join since the franchise was limited only to taxpayers. It encompassed a small number of people and a few women amongst them (Baig 1958). The Pre-Independence period also signifies the introduction of legal reforms for improving women's status in society, especially during 1920-1940. Many laws were enacted to attain this goal which includes the Widow Remarriage Act in 1856, Child Marriage Restraint Act or Sarda Act 1929 prohibiting marriage of a girl before 14 years, Hindu women's right to property which acknowledged women's right to property in joint family property (Desai and Krishnaraj 2004).

The nationalist movement changed with the coming of Mahatma Gandhi who showed that nation-wide action was needed and negotiation or discussion would not lead anywhere (Baig 1958). Gandhi came to India in 1915 and met women involved in the women's social reform organizations. When World War I came to an end and demand for self-rule grew the British imposed the Rowlatt Act to prohibit public protest and remove civil liberties. Gandhi prepared a programme to involve women. However, the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy happened and he had to end this campaign. By then, many women had joined the struggle. He assured them that the movement needed them and also showed faith in their capacities. The programme of the Non-cooperation movement was accepted in a special session of Congress on August 8, 1920. Gandhi outlined an active role for women. Women formed their own independent political organization Rashtriya Stree Sangha (RSS) and asked its members to join district congress committees. In November 1921, around 1000 women demonstrated against the visit of the Prince of Wales to India. Women also picketed shops selling foreign goods and encouraged sale of khaddar. Bi Amma, mother of Shaukat Ali and Muhammad Ali, leaders of All-India Khilafat Committee, urged women to become congress volunteers and join the picket lines, if their husbands got arrested.

In response to Gandhi's call to join the movement, women from all British India provinces came forward. He also insisted that the marginalized sections of women should boycott foreign goods, spin, and join the struggle against British unjust laws. Between the suspension of the Non-cooperation movement from 1922 to 1928 Gandhi focused on reconstruction. He implored upper-class women to learn about the conditions of rural and poor women. Gandhi returned to active politics in 1928 and launched the Civil Disobedience movement, which brought women into public life in large numbers. The participation of women in the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930-32 was different in both quantitative and qualitative terms from the early 1920s.

Gandhi began the Civil Disobedience movement in March 1930 with his 240-mile march from Ahmedabad and Dandi to make salt, defying British laws. Women

gathered in large numbers at every place where he stopped to speak. He addressed village women asking them to picket liquor and toddy shops, boycott taxed salt, spin and wear khadi. On April 6, the salt law was formally broken. The Desh Sevika Sangha (DSS) (women serving the country) an off-shoot of Rashtriya Stree Sangha designed and supervised the programme of the campaign for women in Bombay. Sarojini Naidu was nominated to lead the raid on Dharsana salt works, with sevikas still picketing.

For the boycott of foreign cloth, the spinning wheel (charkha) was popularized and picketing of foreign cloth began. Women like Jaishri Raji, Hansa Mehta, Perin Captain, Joshiben Captain, Lilavati Munshi, Maniben marched to the shops of foreign cloth. The British Government, to safeguard its Lancashire and Manchester interests, declared picketing illegal and arrested picketers. In the first ten months of 1930 there were 17,000 convictions of women alone. Gradually, foreign cloth markets of many cities were badly affected. Women also picketed the auctions of the licenses of liquor shops. This also led to reduction in revenue from liquor sales (Baig 1958).

In 1931, at the Karachi session of the Indian National Congress a resolution proclaiming the fundamental rights of people was adopted. An important clause was "there shall be no discrimination on the ground of sex". This marks 'a new era' for women. In 1935, when provinces got more responsibility they introduced political reforms. Franchise was increased. The voting rights included literate people besides taxpayers. For women, wives of voters were also given franchise, and seats were reserved for women in the State legislatures. Women at that time opposed these initiatives because they wanted equal opportunities and not special treatment of any kind. However, their statements were not paid much attention. The 1936 elections saw participation of many women in legislatures who became Ministers, Deputy Speakers etc. Women were already active in Municipalities and local boards. In the freedom struggle, women belonging to different classes joined making a difference and that is how women became important entities of the political world.

In 1942 when the Second World War reached India's soil, Gandhi realized that India could become secure only if the British left. India had no conflict with Japan and Japanese strikes were aimed against the British and not Indians. As a result, the Congress passed the 'Quit India' resolution on August 8, 1942. Gandhi raised the slogan "Do or die". Many Indian women, men and leaders were arrested to restrain the movement. Aruna Asaf Ali played an important role in the 1942 movement. Along with Lohia, she published bulletins and edited the Inquilab. She had to stay underground for four years to escape arrest (Basu 1976). This movement was the final stage of the Indian freedom struggle.

When power was transferred to India in 1946 and the first Interim government set up, it included a woman. The constituent assembly met in December and there were 14 women members. These were Ammu Swaminathan, Dakshayani Velayudhan and Durgabai from Madras; Hansa Mehta from Bombay; Malti Chowdhury from Orissa; Sucheta Kripalani, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Purnima Banerjee, Kamala Chaudhari and Begum Aizaz Rasul from U.P.; Sarojini Naidu from Bihar; Begum Jahanara Shah Nawaz from Punjab and Lila Roy and Begum Ikramullah from Bengal. In 1947, with India becoming free, the political parties also encouraged them to represent in Central and State legislatures (Baig 1958).

Basu (1976) summarizes women's contribution to the freedom struggle as follows: 'women organized themselves into groups and were willing to join processions, face police firing and go to prison. They broke the salt law, picketed shops selling liquor and foreign manufactured cloth. There were women who joined terrorist groups and helped in editing and publishing banned newspapers and manufacturing

bombs. Young girls in their teens and women with children went to prisons where conditions were not at all comfortable’.

The movement for emancipation of women in India went through various stages. In the early nineteenth century with Raja Ram Mohan Roy’s initiative, efforts were made to ensure that instead of religious basis, humanitarian and rational aspects are applied to social customs like Sati, Child marriage, Widow remarriage. In the mid-nineteenth century, there was a lot of emphasis on women’s education. The next phase was marked by the entry of women into the political sphere. This highlighted a shift. Women’s empowerment no longer remained dependent on the social reformers but became a larger political struggle. Women’s involvement in political activity led them to discard many taboos that had until then overshadowed their lives. Women’s struggle for their own freedom was strengthened by their participation in political struggle. In India, feminism and nationalism were related with each other, according to Basu (1976).

Women in former colonial countries became much successful politicians than in industrialized countries of northwestern Europe and USA. Now, this is a reason for low involvement of women in political matters in independent India.

Education

In British India, there were some emissaries of women’s as well as men’s education. These were the missionaries, the Indian social reformers, the ‘philanthropic’ foreigners with concern for women, and the British government according to Chanana (1988). She contends that issues related to women’s education need to be comprehended by locating these within their social context. Since these issues portray women’s role in society and are a product of it they need to be understood. The history of Indian education reveals many superstitions that impeded the education of women, states Wasi (1958). William Adam in a Report on the State of Education in Bengal (1836) observes:

Of the total female population, 16,792 are between fourteen and five years of age, that is, are of the age at which the mind is capable of receiving in an increasing degree the benefit of instruction in letters. The state of instruction amongst this unfortunate class cannot be said to be low for, with very few individual exceptions, there is no instruction at all. Absolute and hopeless ignorance is in general their lot. The notion of providing the means of instruction for female never enters into the minds of parents...A superstitious feeling is alleged to exist in the majority of Hindu families, principally cherished by women and not discouraged by the men, that a girl taught to write and read will soon after marriage become a widow... and the belief is also entertained in native society that intrigue is facilitated by a knowledge of letters on the part of females. Under influence of these fears, there is nothing done in a native family to promote female instruction, but an anxiety is often evinced to discourage any inclination to acquire the most elementary knowledge (Wasi 1958).

Women were completely dependant on their father, husband or brother and they prayed and performed rituals for longevity of these men, states Forbes (2004). If learning to read could result in the death of the husband, it was equivalent to committing suicide. Therefore, female education became unacceptable. Women as subjects of patrilineal and patriarchal systems ensured subservience to the existing norms and denied education to fellow women. Many women who had learnt to read before 1870 reported that they hid this achievement from others. Wasi (1958) states that in Bombay the situation was not any better. From 1823 to 1829 no girl

pupils attended indigenous school. There was domestic instruction for some Muslim and high-caste Hindu families but the number of these girls was miniscule. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the Father of Modern India, advocated women's education, denounced polygamy, and opposed child marriage. There was a debate regarding the most suitable kind of education for women (Forbes 2004).

The first girls' schools were begun by Missionaries. However they were unable to make a significant difference to the state of girls' education. With government support around the 1850s, they made some progress (Forbes 2004). Some British officials also undertook initiatives in their own capacity to encourage girls' education. J.E.D Bethune, Law member of the Executive Council of the Governor-General and President of the Council of Education from 1848 to 1851, introduced secular schools having realized that Hindus were not in favour of sending their girls to mission schools due to the religious instruction offered there. This school, set up in 1849, was highly successful. Indians came in support of this experiment and tried to replicate it in other regions. The work of Raj Ram Mohan Roy and Bethune emphasized the importance of education for women.

The Indian Education Commission of 1882-83 made the following suggestions with regard to the education of girls:

Female education is still in an extremely backward condition and needs to be fostered in every legitimate way...Public funds of all kinds - local, municipal and provincial - should be chargeable in an equitable proportion for the support of girls' schools as well as boys' schools; and that the former being in an earlier stage of development, should receive even something more... (Warsi 1958).

The Commission deliberated on ways to deal with the popular prejudice against the education of girls. It emphasized the importance of women teachers in motivating girls to come to schools. There was some progress made on all these aspects.

Women gradually started enrolling for higher education. In 1878, a few Indian girls were studying in Universities and a decade later was even going off to America for higher education. In 1888, an Indian woman went abroad to study medicine. One of them went for the Bachelor of Civil Law Course at Oxford in 1892. Higher education became available to women gradually since British who were putting sanctions against women in their own country did not favour such measures for women in their colonies. Indians were concerned about education of people and of women in particular (Baig 1958).

Only by the third decade of the twentieth century, large sections of women became literate. There were not many night schools to extend adult literacy. In 1921 and in 1937, efforts were made to open night schools. Female literacy along with the overall adult literacy became a component of social and educational policy. In 1951, the female literacy was 9.3 per cent. States with relatively high female literacy were Kerala (46.1 per cent), Delhi (29.9 per cent), Coorg (24.1 per cent). It was lowest in Manipur (2.3 per cent), Rajasthan (2.9 per cent), Himachal Pradesh (2.3 per cent), and Vindhya Pradesh (1.4 per cent) (Warsi 1958).

After independence, women's question in relation to tradition and modernity emerged within the larger context of culture and society. Issues of widow remarriage, age of consent of marriage, sati, property rights and education were debated. Some people supported the return to tradition to rebuild Indian society. However, the definition of tradition is not so simple. Others were in favour of social reform or radical change in society (Thapar 1975).

Check Your Progress 3

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) Identify the roles of women in the freedom struggle.

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1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have reviewed the profile of women in Indian society from the past to the near present times. In hunting and gathering societies women had more of an equal role compared to men. With settled agriculture, women’s subordination began and they lost all control over their lives. The Rig Vedic society treated women better than the later period. This shift has been explained differently by scholars. Buddhism and Jainism allowed women to join their order of nuns and devote lives for their own salvation. In medieval times, the Bhakti movement provided opportunities to women to play varied roles rather than the usual ones. A few women exerted a lot of influence in administration like Razia. In Mughal times, women contributed to art and literature. The modern times are marked by two movements of social reform and the freedom struggle that changed the sphere of women. The social reformers held women’s issues central. The legislation on abolition of Sati, widow-remarriage, etc improved their state in society. Due to Gandhi’s vision, the freedom struggle witnessed direct participation of women. Women took part in the Civil Disobedience movement in much larger numbers than in the non-cooperation movement. This indicated the beginning of the struggle for their rights.

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