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## Gender sensitization among women in ancient India and their contemporary relevance

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### Abstract

This paper presents insights from historical study in order to explore the gender sensitization between men and women from ancient to modern period and to study their contemporary relevance in present times. It revealed that there was no gender discrimination existed in ancient period. Girls had equal privileges, in all spheres of life viz., education, marriage, employment etc. But in medieval period, the women were pushed downhill from the highest freedom and status due to the impact of Muslims, corruption vices like purdah system, child marriage etc. In modern era, in spite of several legislative regulations and acts, the discrimination between men and women still exist due to the negative attitude of men towards women and several other atrocities are being faced by women viz., dowry death, rape, prostitution etc. Thus for the progress of nation and for the freedom and right to equality of women, it becomes imperative to have a fresh look on the past so that stratagem of women development could be decided in future.

**Keywords:** Gender sensitization, ancient, medieval, modern, women

### Introduction

"I should treat daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality .....Both are God's gifts. They have an equal right to live and are equally necessary to keep the world going"

Mahatma Gandhi (Young India 1929/1938)

In ancient India, women were considered sacred as our ancient scriptures have pronounced that- "*God lives where women are venerated*". Even while reciting god as divine couple, the name of the feminine typically precedes that of masculine like Sita-Ram, Radhe-Shyam, Gauri-Shankar, Lakshmi-Vishnu and so on (Muthuswamy 2014) [9]. In the Hindu mythological it is believed that all deities are supposed to have evolved from a women form, named as – *Shakti*; means "power" and "strength. From equal status with men in all aspects of life during ancient period (i.e. Vedic and Epic), position of women attained lowest point during medieval period (Jayapalan 2001) [6], particularly after the Muslim conquest in the Indian subcontinent. Till the later stage of colonial period similar situation prevailed. However, at the start of 19<sup>th</sup> century, many reformers started to work for betterment of Indian women and their rights. In Independent India several legislations are framed to give women equal status. The Indian Constitution guarantees to all Indian women equality, no discrimination by the State, equality of opportunity and equal pay for equal work and host of other benefits like maternity and child care leaves. Indian women now participate fully in areas such as education, sports, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology etc.

Despite so much progress on the front of gender equality, India remains one of the most dangerous country in the world for women (Bowcott 2011) [4] and the worst country for women among the G20 countries (Baldwin 2012) [1]. Spate of recent gang rapes, acid attacks and murder/ death of several victims brought the spotlight back on crimes against women in the country. Brutal gang-rape and assault of paramedical student on 16 December, 2012 in Delhi, resulted widespread protests and emotional outbursts across the country. It raked up society and government with renewed demand for reframing laws with strict punishments to deter wrong-doers. Abuse and discrimination against women is taken a steep rise in last two decades (Kaur 2014) [7]. Statistics provided by National Crime Record Bureau (<http://ncrb.gov.in/>) suggest that since 2010, crimes against women increased by 7.1 percent across the nation.

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A total of 2, 28,650 incidents of crime against women were reported during the year 2011 with a rise of 9 percent in rape cases alone from previous year. Data for the year 2012 as reported by National Crime Record Bureau suggest a further rise in number of incidents by 6.8 % from the year 2011.

These rude facts provide a worrisome picture as India's profile as an emerging modern nation bound to take beating given widespread reporting of gender based violence. It is inexplicable given the fact that though over the past few millennia, the status of women in India has been subject to many downs but has never been so low. It is also a matter of great concern as country or cultural unit in India women has always placed at respectable position in family, Hindu scripts, temples and even in democratic process. It poses a larger question: How did these societies with their great and glorious past come to the present gender inequality age? Besides, instead of merely explaining how the degradation of women took place in the present scenario, the greater concern is to reinstate the status of women and develop as society which is gender sensitized.

Gender sensitization is one of the most crucial issues of present day society. Gender sensitivity is often used to mean the same as gender awareness. But it is actually the beginning of gender awareness, which is more analytical and critical; questions gender disparities, and motivate one toward actions to address gender issues. It is commonly referred as the social construction, related to the role of men and women, performed in the society. Gender sensitivity is the ability to recognize gender issues and women's different perceptions and interests arising from their different social position and gender roles. The aim of gender sensitization to make people aware of the power relations between men and women in society and to understand the importance of affording women and men equally opportunities and treatment. Thus endeavor were made in proposed study to know the issues related to gender sensitization prevalent in ancient period and their contemporary relevance to modern period.

## Material and Methods

The present research was conducted to explore gender sensitization of women from ancient period and to study their relevance in contemporary life. Since this study was based on historical aspects, secondary sources were used for collecting evidences which included books, Vedas, Upanishads, and Ramayana. Relevance of gender sensitization in contemporary life was also explored through literature available after independence. The three periods covered in the study were ancient (Vedic, Epic, Smirti and Sanskrit) Medieval (Indus valley civilization, Buddhism and Jainism) and modern according to Bhattacharji (1981) [2].

## Results and Discussion

### B. Ancient period

In Vedic (1500-600 B.C.) and Epic (600B.C. -500A.D.) period, women had respectable position. They were honoured and were empowered as ideal wife and played an active role in social and religious functions. The wife and husbands were the equal halves of one subsistence. A glance at the table 1 clarifies that, women enjoyed equal right and status like men than in other periods. There was no discrimination between boys and girls with respect to education but such privileges were available to women of upper caste only. However women did not enjoy freedom in selecting their life partner. In Smirti and Sanskrit period (200 B.C.-200 A.D.), women in general were not treated as shy, mute or dine. They were partially dependent on men for education and other affairs. It could be thus said that towards the end of Epic period, slight discrimination between men and women was started. Gradually this attitude increased during period of Smirti and Sanskrit. As depicted in Table1 that female remained dependent on their father, husband and children. Male was dominant in society. Women had no freedom to participate or enjoy any of the activities. Men married women only for progeny and household duties. Women were always under their feet and wage discrimination was also there.

**Table 1:** Gender Sensitization in Ancient Period

Vedic	Epic	Smriti	Sanskrit
No discrimination	In diff. attitude toward daughter and son	In diff. attitude toward daughter and son	Wage discrimination
equal right and status	Women were respected honour and righteous	Obedient meet and shy personality	NI
NI	Lower status and dignity in lower class	NI	NI
Dependency of women on male partner about marriage	Dependency of women on male partner about matter related to marriage	Dependency of female on male partner for all matter	Male dominance
Equality in education	Partial dependency in education and other affair	No freedom in any sphere	No freedom in any sphere
Subordinate position after marriage	Women honoured as idle wife	Inferior position	Equality in treatment in men and women regarding facility and resources
Helped each other in routine work	Active participation of women in social and religious function	No sacrifice allowed	NI
Birth of daughter was undesirable in global cast	NI	Religious ritual not allowed	NI

NI → No Information available

### B. Medieval period

The findings presented in table 2 disclose that there was a great discrepancy in the position of women in both the periods i.e. Indus valley and Buddhism and Jainism. Specifically in Indus valley civilization (2500 B.C. to 1075B.C.), the birth of daughter was not welcomed by the family. They were dependent on male relatives after and before marriage just like

in Smirti period (Luniya 1978) [8]. The female element was subordinated to the male.

While in the era of Buddhism and Jainism (600B.C.) it was not so. Women occupied the highest form of freedom, unity and the highest path of spirituality. The Hymn in the history of Buddhism indicated a beautiful picture of women in that glorious era. It showed that Buddhist nuns had the wonderful

insight. They were Buddhist but admitted as nuns and allowed to preach by church. (Vashishta 1976) [18].

Another important feature depicted in Table 2 is that during Indus valley there was the beginning of Muslims era and great degradation of women in Muslim society was noticed. Women become mentally weak, deficient, due to purdah system involved with all forces. To maintain their dignity and chastity they were generally kept in secrecy and not allowed to show their face in public places and even to attend mosques. Gradually this purdah system affected other Hindu women also. They started disappearing in public places and took veil and accordingly become physically and mentally weak. Such restrictions on women in Indus valley were so strictly adhered that, even the physicians were not allowed to see their patients during this period. (Sengupta 1974) [14].

Contradictory to this, purdah system was not seen in Buddhism, Jainism and even in ancient period. (Table 2). There was no equality in wages, besides, women workers were badly beaten by their master if they did not act accordingly to their will. Probably the food and clothes were given to the wage earners during this period as it was in Sanskrit period, due to which women took less interested in their work and might have been beaten (Majumdar 1952) [10].

**Table 2:** Gender Sensitization in Medieval Period

Indus Valley civilization	Buddhism and Jainism
Birth of daughter was not favoured.	-
Dependence on male relatives	Highest form of freedom and opportunity
Great degradation in Muslims society	
Mental weak and deficient in wisdom	Highest path of spirituality to women
Subordinate position	Enjoyed equal status with men
-	No equality in wages
-	Had membership as nun in Buddhist church

**C. Modern period**

“Inequalities, discrimination and violence still cast a long shadow over the lives, livelihoods, mind and bodies of girls and women everywhere-even where laws have been passed, even where doors and minds have been opened.” Women’s emancipation is remaining at such abysmally low level that has inevitably led to their economic and psychological impoverishment (UNICEF).

The position of women and the attitude of men towards women in present time reveal some amazing contradictions. In spite of several laws, acts and statues enacted for the advancement of women and to ensure their rights and privileges at par with men, the discrimination still exists between men and women. Women in India are still exposed to numerous social issues. Though crime against women like a rape, molestation, honor killing, incidences of domestic violence are also reflective of women status in society. (Sharma 2014). There is large gap between the enactment of laws and its actual implementation (Bhuyan and Panigrahy 2006) [3]. The reason for this is believed to be largely historical, but it is not so., as noticed from the earlier periods.

In-depth investigations presented in Table 3 highlight the facts that, instead of fast developing country, women in India were still prey to many abhorrent customs and vices due to which their situation was bleak all round. The declining sex ratio in India amply portrays the discrimination shown towards women at the stage of birth. They suffered from several

personal, social and economic constraints. The fundamental difference recognized was in the psychology of men and women. Women were considered as the weaker sex physically, emotionally, morally and intellectually. They remained the victims of sexism-male chauvinism and institution sexism etc. and faced problems viz; rape, wife battering, dowry deaths,kidnapping and abduction,prostitution, eve-teasing, etc. (Nagindrappa and Radhika 2003).

**Table 3:** Gender Sensitization in Modern Period

Steadily deteriorated inferior species and has no hold in property
Suffered from personal, social, economical and political constraints.
- Large gap between the enactment of laws and its actual implementation
Women considered as the weaker sex physically, emotionally and intellectually
- Male is qualitatively superior to the female
- No equality of rights and privileges
- Women’s powerlessness and indignities in political affairs.
- Wage discrimination

On political plane too, women’s participation was limited. No doubt, some of the enlightened women have come up and entered in the politics and become prime minister, chief minister in India, but till date women’s participation is insignificant. Only wealthy and well-to do women had such privileges. The large masses continued to face powerlessness and indignities.

The prevailing misconceptions among women are:

- Women only to do domestic work
- Each member of family shares benefit equally,
- Technology benefits both men and women equally,
- Women voices are heard through their male relatives,
- Women are incompetent at certain activities.

(Singh 1999) [17]

Such discriminations amongst women thus violate the principle of equality and prosperity, affecting the growth and development of women. Looking to this gender problem, the government recently has become more sensitized about these issues and accordingly the concept of women empowerment and entrepreneurship came into existence, so that women have an access to resources and power on an equal footing to their male counterparts. The socio economic empowerment must be ensured by the nation to minimize the exploitation which can help to improve the status of women as it was in ancient period.

**Contemporary relevance of gender sensitization aspect and future challenges:**

While tracing the changes in gender sensitization aspect of women in different periods from the ancient to medieval eras, it becomes clear that women have passed through several ups and downs. In ancient period there was no gender discrimination existed at all. Girls had equal privileges, in all sphere of life viz., education, occupation, marriage etc. The attitude of men towards women was also positive. But in medieval period, discrimination between two sex were started, infect the seed of uselessness of daughter and usefulness of son were sown in this period. The women were pushed downhill from the highest freedom and status degraded due to impact of Muslim, corruptions vices. In Buddhist period women did not attend rightful position due to orthodox views. Discrimination against girls and women in modern era is also devastating reality. It result in millions of individual tragedies, which add up to lost potential for entire countries. Instead of respect and reverence status of women in India, both

historically and socially, it is hard truth that still; they are struggling for their own identity, shouting for diffusion of their voices and fighting for their own esteem. Every day, they cross among the fears and fraught for individuality. Despite the constitutional guarantee of equality of sexes, rampant discrimination and exploitation of women in India continues. The incidence of dowry deaths, woman sexual harassment, molestation and ill-treatment of women are on increase. Therefore it is high time now that women should get a respectable and dignified position in the Indian society. There is an urgent need to consider and implement the following steps:

- Awareness in the women as well as society should be created and their equal rights should be effectively implemented.
- Attitude of men toward women should be changed as it was in the ancient time. Men should realize and give due importance and recognition to women. They should feel that without female it is very difficult to lead successful life. Both of them are equal partner and should participate in each activity. Similarly feudal attitude must be given away entirely and democratic views should be promoted. An appropriate gender environment must be created so that voices of women could be heard.
- There is need to change traditional value and factors such as early marriage, repeated pregnancies, pervasive social generating activities etc. which contribute to depression of female youth's social status.
- Government must take innovative steps to eliminate the violence and inequality against women rape, dowry deaths prostitution etc. The laws should be strictly adhered, against all these rampant gender problems. Similarly the benefits of law should reach to women sufferer.
- There should be equal commitment by both the sexes for work at home and outside as it was in Vedic period.
- Women should not be projected as sex symbol or property symbol in different media. Instead an ideal image should be projected so that entire community could recognize the importance of women and her role in family development.
- There should not be degrading of women in matrimony such as bride price, dowry, sati etc. Girls should be left free to select their marriage partner, as it was in ancient time. Women should not be confined to only household duties, but should be allowed to participate in development programmes. Women should be made self-reliant, self-propelled and self-dependent.
- In the era of globalization and with revolution in means of communication and information technology, the media role has become more crucial for women empowerment in Indian modern society
- There is a need to develop women not only for the sake of development of the country but also development of women for women's welfare, development and thus empowerment. Employment gives economic status to women, economic status gives way to social status and thereby empowerment to women (Shukla & et.al 2014).

Thus gender parity is possible only when media, political authorities, religious societies and moreover men and boys are engaged at an early age in the battle against this discrimination along with women and government. The same is stresses recently by the head of the UN's women empowerment body 'Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka' in New York that there is a need of engaging men in India for fighting abuse and discrimination against women.

## Conclusion

The status of ancient women was respected and reverend by society but gradually in medieval period due to Muslim culture degradation of women was noticed. And the same is existing in present era. Studies shows there is direct link between a country's attitude toward women and its progress and economically. The status of women is the central to the health of society. If one parts suffers, so does the whole. Therefore it is high time now that women should get a respectable and dignified position in the Indian society. Awareness in the women as well as society should be created and their equal rights should be effectively implemented. In the era of globalization and with revolution in means of communication and information technology, the media role has become more crucial for women empowerment in Indian modern society. Foreign Indian High Commissions need to pass a message to populace that India cannot forever take pride and bask in glory of their military, IT, science, medical and economic prowess. NOT when half the population, its women, have yet to feel the equality, social justice and human rights.

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