

Women in the mirror of society

*Dr. Pratibha

Women, like men, have participated in all of the activities performed in the society. But women have to perform some other roles meant for them by society. In a hunting society, for example, women contribute to subsistence. They control and collect materials for survival. In addition to this, women have to prepare food and perform other important activities like child-bearing and infant care. In pre-literate societies allocation of work is done on the basis of gender and generation. In the writings of some notable scholars of the 19th century, it is believed that the matriarchal family is the foundation of human society. Children are traced through the family of the mother, and newly married couples live together with the family of the mother and work for the mother-headed family. The economies of such families are fully controlled by the mothers. About five thousand years ago women were excluded from politics but they continued to exercise varied roles. They had to enjoy legal protection for the property. There prevailed patriarchal civilization. During this period a woman was given draconian punishment if she challenged male dominance. But in the Minoan society of Crete (which took shape in C. 3000 BC) women were provided the right to involve themselves in social, religious and political matters.

Historically, women were suppressed, exploited and used for pleasure by men. Ancient law was against the women which condemned women to the everlasting guardianship of priests, chieftains and husbands for their pleasure. In Manusmriti we find that a woman is always under the subjection of a man, i.e., when she is a child she is under the control of her father, after marriage under her husband and after the death of her husband she is being looked after by her son/sons.

The legal position of women started improving especially since the 9th century. This was as a result of complex social change. Women were allowed to inherit property. This improved their status in the family and society. However, from the 11th century on, women's freedom was

fastly curtailed. In western society, women's position was first restricted by the church and then by the lay society. Male control in the family and society strengthened due to the rise of monarchies. The rise of monarchies helped increase male opportunities in the public spheres. During the Renaissance urban institutions associated men with politics while women with household activities. Women were given due importance in every sphere but sexual equality was disowned.

Women's status in the society gradually improved and they engaged in religious, social and family affairs more actively. Opportunities were enjoyed especially by the women of some elite and well-to-do families and for their families, women from peasant and lower-class families were engaged in the agricultural and allied sector and handicrafts and were debarred from enjoying rights and privileges received by these elite women. In the 17th and the 18th centuries, women were identified with domestic life. The American Revolution and the French Revolution gave some autonomy to women but one important right, i.e., the right to citizenship feminism was sown during the time of enlightened despotism. The process of industrialization helped increase the participation of women in the working force. But the irony was that the women were given a wage not equal to the wage received by men for the same work.

It is universally considered that domestic work is the domain of women. But a variation is found in the division of labour between men and women in non-household activities. Economic and social changes brought about significant changes in the division of labour. In the labour-surplus countries (like India) remarkable changes have taken place in agriculture. This has affected the work of both men and women in rural areas. The use of new technology. changes in the agrarian structure, changes in the division of labour, changes in the production of both manufacturing and consumer goods, and growing inequality in income between different groups of people in the rural areas have severely affected the women, displacing them from many traditional activities, while at the same time enhancing women's activities in some agricultural spheres.

Women are the largest group to suffer from economic discrimination. It is a world-wide phenomenon that full-time women workers on average can only 80 percent as much as men of comparable education and educational background. This is equally true in the case of rural women. In Asia (in green revolution areas) there has been an

increase in the demand for casual labour because of modernization taking place in the agriculture and allied sector and agro-based industries. This has marginalized the small tenants and small farmers who have lost their land. Men workers have, more or less, become mechanized than those of women. This has increased the job opportunity for men pushing women workers into agricultural wage labour.

Women have acquired the right to vote but they have not achieved the right to exercise political power in proportion to their numbers. They have equally failed to have access to education. Rural women especially those living below the poverty line do not get the opportunity of education. Most cases of dropouts can be found among rural girl children even after 73 years of independence.

At the dawn of the 21st century we can guess that Indian women especially the rural women have a long way to go to attain justice in education, employment and in politics. The present volume cannot cover all the multifaceted and wide-ranging issues of women. The collection makes a modest attempt to describe empowering women in education and employment. An attempt has also been made to legal, political and administrative aspects relating to women.

The analysis of gender bias in education. Gender bias is not endemic as discrimination against a person on the basis of sex. UshaNayar, describes that even after fifty years of independence we still have sharp inequalities of caste, creed, tribe and rural-urban divide, and gender cuts across all these layers making women and girls of disadvantaged groups especially those living in the rural areas the most unfortunate members of our society. We all know that women's education is very important for the development of the society and economy. Still women remain uneducated compared with men.

Social science researchers acknowledge that the status of women cannot be improved unless supported by a development programme covering all sections of the society. The empowerment of women through education and employment helps reduce gender gaps. For this it is necessary to change social customs and fix positive attitudes in the minds of all so that the society as a whole would happily approve and participate in the development of women's upliftment. The status of rural women highlighting the factors determining the improvement of the status of poor rural agrarian women of our country. He also points out some of the accompanying issues of empowerment. Chakrabarti

states that women can be largely improved if their contribution in agriculture as a worker, their participation in horticulture, soil reclamation and preservation of forests, etc. are justly recognised. It is well known that women, like men are important

partners in the development of economy and society. The task of women, especially of the rural women are multi-faceted and complex.

The rural women are assigned with a variety of tasks leaving little time for entertainment or pleasure or leisure. In the poor families the economic contribution of women is relatively large when compared with the contributions made by the males; and larger the income of the family the lower is the contribution of women in relation to men. As a key human resource, women are at the heart of development. Participation in education, social economic and political spheres, creates favourable conditions to the pursuits of populations and development goals and now population trends and development programmes have affected the status and well-being of rural women. The Country's concern in safeguarding the rights and privileges of women found its best expression in the Constitution of India. While Article 14 confers equal rights and opportunities on men and women in the political, economic and social spheres, Article 15 prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of sex, religion, race, caste etc, and Article 15 (3) empowers the state to make affirmative discrimination in favour of women. Similarly, Article 16 provides for equality of opportunities in the matter of public appointments for all citizens; Article 39 stipulates that the state shall direct its policy towards providing men and women equally the right of means of livelihoods and equal pay for equal work; Article 42 directs the state to make provisions for ensuring just and human conditions of work and maternity relief; and Article 51 (A) (e) imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. To make this de-jure equality into a de-facto one, many policies and programmes are put into action from time to time, besides enacting/enforcing special legislations, in favour of women.

Reference :

1. Manusmriti, Chapter 9 verse 3.
2. Samuelson, Paul A. and William D. Nordhaus: "Economics (16th edition, Tata McGraw Hill Publishing Company Ltd., 1998.
3. Meir, Gerald M. and Rouch : Leading Issues in Economic Development, Oxford University Press, 2000.
