
Socio-Economic Structures of the Indian Society and Conditions of Women

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India exhibits multiplicity of religions, castes and social classes. Simultaneously, it has attained the standing of the largest democracy - although with weak economic structures. Nevertheless, complex caste system, and growing poverty has posed serious challenges for the weaker sections, especially the women of low class, who are handicapped to demonstrate their economic, social and political visibility, despite of their full contribution in the indoor and outdoor activities. However, the Indian government has acknowledged the equal status of women by initiating executive and legislative actions but these measures have remained in theory and no effective practical implementation could take place, to empower the deprived Indian women. The marginalized role of Indian women in the society can be enhanced by providing them with equal opportunities of education and employment, so that the influence of patriarchy could be minimized and women could play their effective role in socio-economic development of the Indian society.

Introduction

India is a heterogeneous country with different languages, complex caste system, various religions and distinct classes and with its population of 989 million,

makes it the second most populated country in the world. India has witnessed continuous regular elections and since 1952, has had fifteen uninterrupted elections, making it the largest electoral democracy. It has maintained a literacy rate for adult (15+ years), 76.9% for men and 54.5% for women, as according to 2009 figures. Moreover, in recent years, it has shown an impressive rate of economic growth, accompanied by relative political stability. The combination of these two factors is rare in most of the upcoming nations. The economy of India is the eleventh largest economy in the world with the \$1.367 trillion Gross Domestic Product, as estimated in 2010. It is commented that "India is an emerging economy which has witnessed unprecedented levels of economic expansion, along with countries like China, Russia, Mexico and Brazil. India, being a cost effective and labor intensive economy, has benefited immensely from outsourcing of work from developed countries, and a strong manufacturing and export oriented industrial framework."¹ A professor of political science sums up the Indian current situation as follows,

In spite of numerous weaknesses in the Indian political method, its leaders and the caste ridden social structure, there are merits in the manner in which the Indian policy conforms. The answer to what makes India politically stable and economically advanced lies in its uninterrupted political process. India has a history of continuous electioneering and a peaceful transfer of power, which is unique when compared in the regional context-no coup d'états, behind the scene military manoeuvring or civil-military conspiracies.²

Despite of these advancements in the Indian society, it exhibits serious problems in the realm of various socio-economic issues, like a complex caste structure, acute poverty, vulnerability of Muslim minority and last but not

the least, gender disparity. These issues do not only have a negative impact on the overall development of the Indian structures but they also frustrate the achievements of this country, in the shape of relative economic growth and political maturity. A recent Indian government report states that “seventy-seven percent of Indians, about 836 million people, live on less than half a dollar a day. India is considered as one of the hottest economies of the world but now it seems that it needs to do something about the enormous inequalities.”³ It is pertinent to indicate that various economic imbalances of the Indian society has worsened the conditions of already suffering low caste population, in particular, and the women and children, in this category. To investigate the vulnerability of the Indian women, and to understand their needs, we have to understand the socio-economic structures of the Indian society.

Socio-Economic Structures

The first important issue of the Indian socio-economic structure is its complex caste-system, which is considered to be one of the oldest that divides the humanity into rigid divisions, discriminating the lowest strata of the hierarchy. Although, in various parts of the world, societies are divided for different reasons like “within the framework of religious, caste, village community, occupational, and professional ties and within the ramified ethnic structure the country inherited from the colonial and pre-colonial past,”⁴ but the Indian case is unique.

The social classes in India are divided into thousands of endogamous (marrying within the same tribe) hereditary groups. According to the ancient Hindu scriptures, there are four "varnas" (social Classes)": the Brahmins (teachers, scholars and priests), the Kshatriyas (kings and warriors), the Vaishyas (agriculturists and traders), and Shudras

(service providers and artisans). This “plural Indian society”⁵ has become the main obstacle to achieve social and economic development because every caste has definite benefit agenda for its category and discriminatory attitude towards different castes and each of them is keen to retain its traditions and values and is reluctant to mix up with the members of other castes. This narrow approach of the Indian caste system has created socio-economic imbalances in the society.

The Indian constitution made an attempt to dilute the rigidity of caste system by including a clear statement regarding non-discrimination, in Article 15. It states that “the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them. No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition.”⁶ Moreover, realizing the serious problem of inequality on the basis of caste system, the government in 1955, set up the Untouchability (Offences) Act against discrimination, on the basis of the caste status.⁷ It is relatable to identify the magnitude of change in the Indian traditional caste system, due to the growing trends of general population to attain education. While dealing with another aspect of the caste related issue, Srinivas writes, “though, ... democratic government represents one of the major factors that weaken the role of the caste”⁸ but this social stratification has been so deeply entrenched in the society that it reflects on the political settings of the state, on the basis of this very factor, i.e., caste related voting behavior.

The legislation to dilute the influences of the caste system has been introduced time and again, but generally the attitude of the government has been casual and no serious effort has been made to reform the shortcomings of

the unjust caste related customs. However, it must be recognized that the government has focused on providing equal opportunities for education, to the children belong to different castes, so to minimize the aspects of discrimination. In India, a survey was conducted by *General Social Survey in 1996*. This survey explained that education has liberalized and improved the level of thinking of the people belong to different social classes.⁹ Another cause that altered the rigidity of the caste system lies in the urbanization of the country. A large number of people over a period of time moved to big cities for more opportunities and in the urban environment it becomes difficult to be identified on caste basis, while in villages, people know each other and can trace their lineage, with ease.¹⁰ It should be recognized that due to the new trends as demonstrated in the development of political parties, industrialization and equal access to education, the caste sensitivities have been reduced, to a certain degree.

The second main issue of the Indian socio-economic structure relates to poverty. India has 16 percent of the world's population and according to World Bank estimate, nearly half of India lives under the poverty line. According to Saxena Committee report, India is one of the most impoverished countries, as 49.1% people live below the poverty line, 23 percent of these do not have any ration card and 17.4 percent cards are held by those who are considered as economically better off.¹¹ According to a United Nations report, 220 million people in India suffer from hunger. Prevalence of hunger is found in all age groups ranging from infants to old. Food production has been going down, food imports are rising and food insecurity is on rise. Whereas per capita availability of food grains was 190 kilogram per person per annum in 1979-80, it declined to only 186 kilogram in 2004-05. Since 2004-

05, fast rising prices of food products have made the things worst for poor.¹²

The main causes ascribed to this elevated poverty in India are due to large population, low literacy rate along with complex social caste system and also the confined role of the women in the Indian society.

The chronic hunger is a serious social issue of the Indian society, as it takes the lives of 24,000 people every day. The Indian planners consider the eradication of poverty as a long-term goal. According to Carol S. Coonrod, poverty alleviation is expected to make better progress in the next 50 years, as a trickle-down effect of the growing middle class. According to the author, it is incorrect to say that all poverty reduction programs have failed because the growth of middle class (which was virtually non-existent when India became a free nation in August 1947) indicates that economic prosperity has indeed been impressive in India, but it must be recognized that the distribution of wealth has been uneven.

After the liberalization process that moved the country away from socialist model in 1990s, India is adding 60 to 70 million people to its middle class, every year. Marvin J. Cetron writes that an estimated 390 million Indians now belong to the middle class; one-third of them have emerged from poverty in the last ten years. At the current rate of growth, a majority of Indians will be included in the middle-class by 2025, which point out a worrisome situation as in the consequence of dearth economic progress, millions of people will be left behind with a strong of deprivation. It will intensively sharp the wider class distinction and finally this division will create frustration and violent uprising. Already in East-North of India, there is a violent insurgency going on by the moist

guerrillas, who demand for a just economic system by changing the basic socio-economic structure of India,¹³

There are number of reasons for the existing patterns of poverty in India. Firstly, the agricultural sector could not match with that of the growing industrial development. In fact, the virtual failure of agrarian reform can be attributed to the tooth-and-nail resistance on the part of the land-owning village elite and the elite-manipulated lower echelons of the administration and the “bourgeois” politicians who control the individual state administrations.¹⁴ Secondly, the population growth rate increased rapidly and it is estimated that “even according to optimistic predictions by Indian demographers, the country's population will be stabilized only by the middle of the next century at 1.2 billion, nearly twice the present population”.¹⁵

Kotovskyy points out towards certain steps that can be taken to improve the economic imbalance of the society. The author suggests, The economic imbalances of Indian society can be improved by various ways. first of all, there is a need to introduce different large-scale programs in order to create jobs, particularly in rural areas. Second to mount special purpose programs extending assistance to small and marginal farms (low interest credits, agro technological assistance, etc.). Third, to curb the various pre-capitalist forms of economic and social exploitation and discrimination, eliminating bonded labor, passing legislation banning caste discrimination, etc. The same program includes steps to give landless agricultural laborers plots for homesteads.

The fourth to distribute necessities of life (particularly food) at fixed prices among the poor through a network of government-controlled "fair price" retail shops. The fifth is

to set aside for the lowest social groups (the untouchables, the scheduled tribes) quotas in legislative and executive governmental agencies and educational institutions and to extend to them assistance in social matters including their day-to-day living.¹⁶

The third issue of Indian society, which is important to discuss here is the vulnerability of the Indian Muslim community. Islam is the second-most practiced religion after Hinduism, with more than 13.4% of the country's population (over 138 million as per 2001 census and 160.9 million per 2009 estimate) identifying themselves as Muslims. India's Muslim population is the world's third largest and the largest Muslim-minority population. Despite of the commitment of the Indian government to secularism, the social stratification of Indian society exhibits discrimination on the basis of religion and this discrimination is visible between the Hindu and Muslim communities. Fifty-two percent of Muslim men and 91 percent of Muslim women are unemployed. Forty-eight percent of Muslims who are older than 46 years can't read or write.

Though, they make up 11 percent of the population, Muslims account for 40 percent of the prison population. They hold only 4.9 percent of government jobs and only 3.2 percent of the jobs in the country's security agencies.¹⁷ While defining the history of Indian Muslims, Ali and Sikand says that after independence of 1947, when Muslims living in India decided to stay in India, Muslims boldly faced the onslaught of communal violence, as they chose to ally with secular forces. But contrary to their expectations, due to discrimination, social stagnation and educational marginalization and economic backwardness, the share of Muslims in government services dropped drastically. According to Asra Q. Nomani, the Indian

government institutions are, by and large, indifferent, if not hostile, to Muslims. This is attributed to anti-Muslim communal prejudice and to the growing influence of Hindu propaganda against Muslims. Another reason for looking down upon the Muslims, resides in the “low caste”, as some Muslims have that background. When compared, a clear distinction is noticed between the Hindu and Muslim localities, as it is clearly witnessed that the latter are much more deprived than the former, in terms of government expenditure for various developmental schemes.

It is pointed out by Asra Q. Nomani that basic infrastructural facilities, such as proper roads, sewage systems, banks, dispensaries, health facilities, schools, etc. are largely conspicuous by their absence in most Muslim localities.¹⁸ This sense of deprivation and negligence towards the Muslims has disturbed the socio-economic structure of the Indian society, still further. The demolition of the Ayodhya Babri Mashid in 1992, the Bombay riots of 1993, and the Gujarat riots of 2002 give enough testimony that a considerable tension exists between the two communities, for various reasons.

Women Related Issues

The above mentioned socio-economic problems have made the condition of women more vulnerable in the Indian society because males have significantly outnumbered females and this imbalance has increased over time despite of the fact that India's maternal mortality rates in rural areas are among the world's highest. From a global perspective, India accounts for 19 percent of all live births and 27 percent of all maternal deaths. Even though, the Indian society exhibits the growing trends in women population, it is pertinent to mention here that out of 989 million population, 120 million are women who live in poverty and only 84 percent women are economically

active in earning their livelihood from an overall population of the country. Therefore, women dependence over their male members of society has increased over the period of time and consequently, it causes many gender related issues. Carol S. Coonrod has categorically defined seven various areas of discrimination against women in India like malnutrition, poor health, lack of education, overwork, unskilled, mistreatment and powerlessness.¹⁹

This marginalized role of women in the Indian society is commonly observed in women belong to low class, however, the status of upper class women in quite different. Although, the Indian constitution grants women equal rights with men, but strong patriarchal traditions persist in the society, which shapes the submissive role of women to their men. In most Indian families, a daughter is viewed as a liability, and she is conditioned to believe that she is inferior and subordinate to men. Sons are idolized and celebrated - consequently less attention is given for education of girls. India has the largest population of non-school-going girls.

The constitution of India further guarantees free primary school education for both boys and girls up to age 14, but this goal has not been achieved as the primary education in India is not universal. Overall, the literacy rate for women is 39 percent versus 64 percent for men. The rate for women in the four large northern states - Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh - is lower than the national average: it was 25 percent in 1991. Attendance rates from the 1981 census suggest that no more than 1/3 of all girls (and a lower proportion of rural girls) aged 5-14 are attending school.²⁰ The mindset of the Indian parents to deprive their daughters of education is that education of girls brings no material return to the parents, as they have to get married and severe ties with

their family. Therefore, their work is restricted to household activities and agricultural fields where no formal education is required. Another reason which is responsible for the lack of education in the Indian women is the reluctance of parents to send their daughters to schools. This takes place in a gender biased settings of the Indian society which hardly grant space to women, to be recognized as an equal member of the family.

Another form of gender discrimination is violence against women. In India, in every 26 minutes a woman is molested, every 34 minutes a rape takes place, every 42 minutes a sexual harassment incident occurs, every 43 minutes a woman is kidnapped, and every 93 minutes a woman is burnt to death over dowry. These figures present gloomy picture for the Indian women particularly the women who belong to the low class status, the women belong to this class derive their status primarily from their child bearing role and their value is often measured by the number of sons they have. Women themselves depend on male children for social status and economic security and are often reluctant to use contraception prior to having a son. Family planning practice rises significantly among women who have two or more sons. The cultural practice of woman eating last in family takes a toll on her health if it is a household of low economic status.²¹

The worst kind of discrimination against women is domestic violence which remains a serious issue for the Indian society. "For too long now, women have accepted it as their destiny or have just acquiescence their right to raise their voice, perhaps, because of the justice system or the lack of it or because they are vulnerable, scared of being ostracized by their own because domestic violence still remains a taboo for most women who suffer from it or for other reasons best known to them."²²

However, the Indian government has recognized the women related issues and efforts are being made to bring awareness among women, especially the one who belongs to the low/middle class of society. The constitution of India has acknowledged equal right and opportunities to men and women in social, economic and political spheres through article 14, 16, 39, 42 and 51.²³ Likewise, the legislative measures have been designed from time to time to stress on the provisions enshrined in the constitution to safeguard the rights and interests of women, besides protecting against social discrimination, violence and atrocities and also prevent social evils like child marriages, dowry, rape, practice of sati etc. The Government has enacted 41 direct or indirect legislations, bearing on women. The government keeps reviewing and amending these acts according to the societal demands and obligations.²⁴ Some of the women specific legislations are as follows:

Table 1
Women Related Legislation by the Government of India
1954 – 2005

Title	Dates	Purpose	Comments
The Special Marriage Act.	1954	To provide a special registration form of marriage and divorce, irrespective of religion or faith, so that marriage could be validated.	It helped to regulate the procedure of marriages and divorces.
The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act.	1956	To combat trafficking and sexual exploitation for financial purposes. The prostitutes could operate without soliciting their customers in public. Organized prostitution is illegal and forbids a sex worker within 200 yards of a public place. The sex workers are not protected	While well-intended, the draft bill is vague; the term 'sexual exploitation' is not clearly defined. Without this, the bill's provisions could lead to greater harassment of prostitutes and their clients.

The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act.	1987	Under no circumstances, voluntary possession of the body of a deceased woman, along with her property, is to be treated as dowry for the purpose of dowry prohibition.	An attempt to commit sati or to abet such an attempt is punishable with imprisonment or
The Dowry Prohibition Act.	1961	The Act prohibits the husband, any other relative or a person associated with the husband or relative, from demanding, receiving or taking any dowry.	imposition of a fine. The Act gives the Collector of District Magistrate the power to prohibit sati and the power to remove temples and other structures erected in honour of sati. Through this Act, the funeral practice among some Hindu communities, in which recently widowed women and their families as they would either voluntarily or against husband's and coercion, immolate herself in her husband's funeral pyre, became rare with time.
The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technique (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act.	1971	The Act states that the conditions under which a pregnancy can be ended or aborted, the persons who are qualified to disclose the sex of the fetus. It also prohibits any advertisements relating to pre-natal determination of sex and implementation.	According to the Commission on National Abortion in India, every year an average of about 7 million abortions take place annually and around 20,000 women die as a result of this investigation of science has resulted in quicker and related complications.
The Family Courts Act.	1984	The Act was enacted to amicably settle family disputes. The person who contravenes the provisions of this Act is punishable with imprisonment and fine.	The State Government, after consultation with the High Court and by notification has established a Family Court in the city of Jaipur. However, such courts were established only for the cities or towns whose population exceeds 1 lakh. The State Government has established a Family Court in the city of Jaipur.
The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act.	2005	The Act includes relations of consanguinity, marriage, or through relationships in the nature of marriage, adoption, or joint family thus, 'domestic relationships' are not restricted to the	husbands or live-in partners who would be guilty of domestic violence can be put behind bars for a year and fined Rs 20,000 and all crimes in the Domestic Violence Act are non-bailable. The Act

		marital context alone.	could play a stellar role in protection of women's rights in the household and in guarding them from domestic violence. In the very first instance, a recognition of domestic violence as something unacceptable, where it has become yet another social practice, is necessary and indeed, commendable in a patriarchal society.
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Sources: Usha Rani Bansal, Constitutional provisions Regarding Women, *Paper presented at the International Conference on Women and Politics in Asia, Hallstand, Sweden, June 6-7, 2003.* <http://www.indoindians.com/index.php/20090114828/Dr.-Usha-Rani-Bansal/women-empowerment-in-democratic-india-a-myth-or-reality>

Table 1 show that there are not many women related Acts, which have been legislated. The first deals to maintain a proper record of marriage and divorce. Second was to combat trafficking and sexual exploitation for financial purposes. Third was to prohibit the request, payment or acceptance of a dowry, as consideration for the marriage. Fourth was to minimize the ratio of abortion. Fifth was to make family court to settle the disputes. Sixth was to end the traditional practice of Sati. Seventh was to prevent pre-natal determination of sex, in favour of a Son. Eighth was to protect women from domestic violence.

Apart from the above mentioned laws for the rights of Women, a "National Commission for Women Act" was also enacted in 1990, to establish the women commission for surveillance and to facilitate the grievances and to accelerate the socio-economic development of women. The

commission's preview is to receive the complaints related to domestic violence, harassment, dowry, torture, desertion, bigamy, rape and refusal to register FIR, cruelty by husband, derivation, gender discrimination and sexual harassment at work place. It is important to note here that the Commission has no concrete legislative powers. It only has the powers to recommend amendments and submit reports which are not binding on State or Union Governments. The Commission does not have the power to select its own members. This power is vested with the Union Government and in India's volatile political scenario, there is a good possibility that the Commission may be politicized. Further, the Commission is dependent on grants from the Union Government for its financial functioning and this could compromise the independence of the Commission.²⁵

It is to be noted here that despite of executive and legislative measures of the government regarding women's equal status, no significant change could take place in the societal attitude, towards women and these all efforts remained in theory, and could not be implement with the intend in which they were designed. The main reason of this non- implementation being the patriarchal mind set of the society, which remains a dominant feature of the Indian society. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan pointed out that, "gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance."

The women's recognition as an equal member of the Indian society as at par with men is currently not visible in India. Unless there is a transform of the societal attitude, the prevailing social discrimination against women would remain strong and there is a little chance of improvement in

the social and economic status of women. This transformation of society can take place, if the women of all classes in India receive equal opportunities of education, training and chances of employment, at par with men.

Conclusion

From the above discussion we can derive that the conservative structures of the Indian society have drastically affected women's position more than that of men and ultimately the status of female population has been marginalized. Notwithstanding, that the socio-economic structures of the Indian society is in the process of change, the conservative mindset and practices are deeply entrenched in the social system. India, being a dynamic society, in terms of democratic structures and having a fairly large middle class, a number of corrective measures were taken by the government, by passing various laws, to address the women issues.

The real aim remains in the fact that the socio-cultural structures must be modified, where the women are accepted as equal to men and that they are provided ample opportunities to educate and choose professions of their choice. This cannot be changed with the laws, alone. There has to be bigger and consistent social movements, for that purpose. However, the Indian social scientists and policy makers hope that various executive and legislative measures would help considerably the Indian women to attain their near equal position, at par with men. It is only by achieving this goal that India can claim to become a part of the global modernizing process.

To minimize the socio-economic discrimination on the basis of caste differentiation, it becomes important to find out ways to reduce the impact of rigid class system. In this regard, it is only possible if the governments, both federal

and state focus to provide equal opportunities of education and jobs for the children of low casts. That will help to reduce class discrimination as education helps to liberalize and improve the level of thinking of the people, belonging to different social classes.²⁶ Such changes would provide better opportunities of growth for the women, belonging to the lower class. Second, it is estimated that the growing trends towards urbanization of the country would dilute the impact of rigid caste system as many people are settled in big cities due to better opportunities and the city residents do not identify themselves with their caste origin, as much as the villagers do, where people are known to each other in a more intimate way.²⁷ In sum, the urban population, though belong to different castes, are least concerned about their identities, due to the impact of democratic institutions, industrialization and equal access for all, towards education.

Concluding, we can say that the Indian women can achieve their goal of equal status in this patriarchal society, first, by equipping themselves with proper education so that they could attain better chances of jobs of their choice, irrespective of their social status and their economic background. Second, the role of state becomes important, as mostly the women related laws have not been actively pursued and implements. Given the awareness in the Indian society, especially amongst women themselves, and the policy makers that the female population must attain their due status in the society, it can be hoped that the Indian women will be able to provide an example for the other countries, to follow.

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