

## Changing Scenario of Indian Women in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Is it a better world for them?

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### **Abstracts:**

*Though women played a crucial role in the advancement of the society still they are subject to domination by the male in every sphere of life. However, with the emergence of democratic ideals brings a ray of hope to the women. During the past decade, the environment for male dominated power politics has been quite volatile. Taking this opportunity throughout this period there have emerged a number of women political leaders who have been recognized for their contributions to organizational excellence and leadership despite the environmental fluctuations. But invariably even a few years back women are not so welcome to hold & glorify the top positions of different political parties and organizations. But their involvement in the top level organizational settings proved their excellence and commitment. It also proved that they are no more less than the male. The advancement of science and technology improvised the condition of human life but at the mean time it also becomes subject of major concern in terms of human right violation. The caste ridden Hindu society is also not free from the changes made by the democracy. The rigidity and mal practices are gradually decreasing. However, the customs and old traditions still barred women acquiring the equal position as that of men. Here in this article I am going to discuss the status of women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in terms of their political affiliation with special reference to Indian Hindu culture. In this article an attempt is made to examine the suitability of present conditions for the survival of women.*

**Key words:** *Women, Power Politics, Hinduism, Politics, Participation*

### **Introduction**

Analyzing women history is very controversial and a complex one. In the words of Gerda Lerner “*when I started working on women's history about thirty years ago, the field did not exist. People didn't think that women had a history of*

*worth knowing*”. The early scholars of social science were also silent in terms of women rights. Most of them believed that women are inferior to the male. It was J.S.Mill who first of argued for giving equal status to the women. We

know that, since the time immemorial women have made their mark in our society with their courage and commitment to the society as well as in their family. The demands of Parisian women for liberty, equality and fraternity proved that they have the power to change the existing norms of the society. Again in 1908 the women of New York were marching on the streets demanding for shorter working hours, better pay and voting rights. How can we forget the courage of ‘Rani Lakshi Bai’ of India who fought against British Colonial power till her last breathe to safe her kingdom. It is amazing that during the war she was carrying her kid on her back. Another classic example is ‘Indira Gandhi’, the first ever women Prime Minister of India with a high degree of courage to lead the nation with pride and glory. Though these events reflect the bright side of the women but at the mean time it also indicates that how they have fought to get their dues and be in the race with their male counterparts.

### **Methods:**

Here in this paper we are trying to offer an analytical perspective on the position of women in the society based

on statistical data gathered from various sources. Our focus is to situate the present condition of the women and their role in the changing scenario. To justify our points we took records of some historical events. A comparative study is also made to find out the position of Indian women in various aspects of socio-political life.

### **Objectives**

The prime objectives of the paper is to find out the position of women in the socio-political aspects of the society. The paper also try to find out the present position of women in the society and their changing role in the power spectrum.

### ***Women in Power Politics***

Democracy which is stands for equality and justice for all brings an opportunity for the women to get involved in the decision making process of the society. The concept that politics is only meant for the male is changed now. The democratic norms welcomed all sections of the people to the administrative process. Now, regardless their class, caste, gender one can hold the top position of a nation. The political parties are also partially welcomed this changing trends and provides an

opportunity to the women for holding its top position. For example in India Sonia Gandhi led its oldest political party, Indian national Congress. The trend is not new in India. History proved that since the medieval period women occupied an important position in decision making process. Razia Begum, who sworn as the Sultan of Delhi in 1236 A.D. It is worth mentioning here that during that conservative period Razia successfully governed the nation and like a real hero crushed the rebellions like Mh. Junaidi. Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Pratibha Devi Singh Patel sworn as the President of India, the worlds largest democracy.

The country like Guinea and The Philippines also have experienced of having a female ruler. In Guinea, Carmen Pereira acted as the head of state since 1980, and was elected President in 1984. In 1999 he was deposed after a military coup d'etat. In the Philippines Maria Corazón became leader of the opposition after the murder of her husband Ninoi Aquino in 1986. She was brought to power by the people, protesting against the President Marcos's who attempted to remain in power. And most recently on 2011 Dilma Vana

Linhares Rousseff has sworn as the President of Brazil. Dilma Rousseff was a former student leader who fought Brazil's military dictatorship as a guerrilla during the early 1970s and an economist. In case of USA which is regarded as the lone super power of the present world, Hilary Clinton acted as a Secretary of State an important position in USA. Again in Australia Julia Gillard re-write the history as becoming the first ever Prime Minister of the nation in June 2010.

Finland also got Tarja Halonen as their first women President in March 1, 2000. It is worth mentioning here that the great colonial power England still headed (nominal) by a female. It is important to mention here that the above mention women leaders are elected in democratic elections competing with their rivals men. Only in Australia Prime Minister Julia Gillard is appointed to office by a ruling party or executive, and thus not specifically elected to their post. Even the most conservative nations like Bangladesh and Pakistan have the experience of having women ruler. In Bangladesh the trend was begin with the Khaleda Zia who sworn as Prime Minister on March 20, 1991 and still

Bangladeshi government is run by a woman Sheikh Hasina Wajed. In Pakistan for the first time Benazir Bhutto elected as its Prime Minister on Dec. 2, 1988.

Hence it is proved that the 21<sup>st</sup> century brings a drastic change in terms of improving women conditions. The establishment of UNO also strengthens the women's conditions. Hence it can be said that establishment of democracy provides an opportunity to the women to find their individual and collective voice. Like the political field, women also make their presence in all other traditionally male dominated fields. Becoming first women astronaut, Kalpana Chaula marked the victory of women on space. At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the women across the world are placed at a position of advantage and become a crucial player of national politics. Now they are aligned with their conscience and come forward with purposeful strides to fulfill the desired objectives of each and every woman. Thus it can be said that with the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century women marked a remarkable progress in every sphere, be it kitchen or in defense.

### ***Hinduism and Indian Women:***

Since the time immemorial women are treated as the mother of mankind in Indian Hindu society. But we find a two distinct treatment made to the women in Indian society. One side of Hindu society treated women as "Shakti" or the "Women Power" as the ultimate energy. Again, women are also defined as half-batsman of a man, which indicates that according to the Hindu society man is incomplete without a woman and they are symbolized as "Shiv-Shakti". But at the mean time they are subjected to the dowry, child marriage, sati and other related mal practices. The cultural norms of Hindu society always barred woman's mobility as well as an impediment for her participation in the public sphere. It is fueled by the institutions like family, caste and religion. Hindu writers are also not in favoured to give equal status to the women. The propounder of Hindu law Manu opined that "*by a young girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house*". "*In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent.*" The statement clearly

indicates the men's view towards the ability of a woman. Male have a tendency to suppress women and make them dependence class. Again the two great epics of Hindus, Ramayana and Mahabharata also make women as a symbol of sacrifice for the sake and pleasure of her husband. How can we forget the incident of *Sita*, when she forced to go hell for disobeying her husband's decisions and *Dropodi* was forced to uncloth only for the sake of her husbands. However, some women were able to overcome such restrictions and marked their victory over men. *Sabitri* a brave woman was able to provide a new life to her dead husband due to her courage and commitment.

As time passed the trend is radically changed. Especially during the British period women were come forward and joined men hand in hand for their struggle of independence. Under the strong leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, thousands of women willingly participated in the freedom struggle even they faced the bullets of British imperial rulers. The bright side of women history begun with the demanding of *Right to Franchise* in 1917 and finally in 1935 they got the right to vote. However the

mass mobilization of India women has begun with the *Swadeshi* movement in Bengal (1905-8). Under Gandhi thousands of women joined the Salt Satyagraha, which is "generally remembered as the first time 'masses of Indian women' got involved in the struggle for Independence" (Kumar 1995, p. 78). Again in 1942, when all leaders were in jail, the freedom movement was run by the women leaders. Nehru in his book *The Discovery of India* writes that when all the leaders were in jail, women came forward and took charge of the struggle and displayed an un-imaginable state of courage and daring. Woman leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and Aruna Asaf Ali were played a decisive role in the freedom struggle.

Though, overcoming traditional religious and family barriers women participated in the decision making process, but, it was very limited and opened only for the high caste women. The caste ridden Hindu society never welcomes the lower caste people to take leading role. Finally, after the independence, the constitution of India through directive principles of state

policies try to involve all sections of people in its politics and make 33% reservation for women in grass root level. Again fundamental rights of Indian citizens provide them the opportunity to involve in the governmental process without making any distinctions in the name of class, caste and gender. Though Indian constitution wants to make an equal and just society still its cultural norms barred its women to take active participation in the decision making process and their mass mobilization. Still women are fighting for their natural rights. At a time when Indian women marked their victory on space, passed the English

Channel, overcome Mount Everest and take charge of a Plane still Indian women find their proper place in the kitchen only. The rigidity of caste system still continued. The attitude of men is not changed. They never overcome the traditional view that women are only made for serving male and they must work under them. This attitude clearly reflected in every field. The participation of Indian women in its mainstream politics is still very low. The political parties except one or two never welcomes women to take leading role. The following figure clearly ravel the women's participation in mainstream Indian politics.

**Table: 1.1. Participation of women in general elections**

Year of Election	Number	Percentage
1952	22	4.4
1957	27	5.4
1962	34	6.7
1967	31	5.9
1971	22	4.2
1977	19	3.4
1980	28	5.1
1984	44	8.1
1989	27	5.29
1991	39	7.07
1996	40	7.36
1998	44	8.07
1999	49	9.02
2009	69	12.02

Source: Election Commission of India's

The above mentioned table shows that Indian women still lagging

behind the male. But it is a good sign for Indian women that their participation as



a common voter is increasing day by day. Again in terms of literacy they also make progress. But at the mean time sex ratio which indicates the status of women in society and determines the conditions of women whether she enjoys that rights to survival, protection and development or not is decreasing. The sex ratio in 2010 was 1000: 933 and in 2011 is 1000: 940. Though the ratio is little improved than 2001, but still women are fighting for survival. It clearly indicates that still now parents are only crazy for boy child not for girl. Thus it can be said that though India has a female head, still Indian women cannot overcome the traditional barriers. The Hindu culture never welcomes mass mobilization of woman and places them in kitchen. Our ancient values always favoured the male and give us the lesson that it does not matter how much she is literate, whether she is in urban or rural area, she should be stay behind man. It is the man (father, husband) who decides for them and our women silently accepted their decisions. But the same man outside their home worshiped women as the ultimate energy. In other words we can say that in Hindu society

there is gape between theory and practice.

### ***Is it a Better World for Women?***

Since the later half of 20<sup>th</sup> century the concern for making a better world for women has begun. The women rights movement got mass support when the common problems like gender discrimination, inequality, injustice and limited opportunities continued to confront women in all spheres of life. The advancement of science and technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century helps the movement to get its momentum worldwide, but it was only 1966 the term Women's Liberation came into existence and becomes popular in the print media. And within a short span of time the voice of women reached to the all parts of world and regardless their class, caste, colour all women came forward for achieving their common goals. Now they are in a better position. But at the mean time we cannot forget the high rate of crime that took place against them.

We all know that 21<sup>st</sup> century marked a remarkable progress in terms science and technology which are now using against the women. Now we are in a position that we can determine a child's sex before his/her born. Though

in every country showed their faith towards the protection of women's right but girl humiliation start before her born at the age when she was in embryo stage. We often noticed that a lot of parents kill the fetus after sex test. If somehow they cannot do that the baby girl gets lot of negligence in her future life. So, how can we say that the present advancement in science and technology is beneficial for women? Still, our society is not in a position to accept women as equal to the men. The statement made by the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, on 8 March 2007 that *"Violence against women and girls continues unabated in every continent, country and culture. It takes a devastating toll on women's lives, on their families, and on society as a whole. Most societies prohibit such violence — yet the reality is that too often, it is covered up or tacitly condoned"* clearly reveals the truth of the society.

It is often seen that violence against women and girls is a problem of pandemic proportions. A survey result reveals that at least one out of every three women around the world has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime and it is

interesting to see that the abuser are usually someone known to her. Out of ten countries surveyed in a 2005 by the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 50 percent of women of Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Tanzania these countries reported having been subjected to physical or sexual violence by intimate partners, with figures reaching staggering 71 percent in rural Ethiopia. Only in one country (Japan) did less than 20 percent of women report incidents of domestic violence. In this context the developed countries are also not free from this social cancer. A report published by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2003 estimates that the costs of intimate partner violence in the United States alone exceed US\$5.8 billion per year. Again it is noticed that every one women out of five has the experienced of rape or attempt to rape in her life time. A voluntary organization in its report published that 20 percent of girls had experienced at least one incident of physical sexual abuse in Geneva and Switzerland. In terms of India, though since the period of epics women are worshiped but the rate of violence against women are very high. In 1999,



crimes against women including rape, molestation, sexual harassment, abduction, dowry deaths and cruelty at home were 127 cases per million persons in India. The major cities are becomes hub of crime incidents against women.

Hence, it can be said that though the democratic ideals improvised the women conditions, but unable to change the man's attitudes towards women. Still they are placed under male and treated as an object of providing pleasure to them. Their position is not improved. The common women are still fighting for their place and crime against them is increasing day by day. It is often noticed that offenders are always freed and get much protection from the society than the victim woman. Man is always protected by the norms, values of the concerned society. In many cases we find that the victims are not willing to lodge any cases against the offender due to fear of losing honour and dignity. So, how can we say that the present era brings tremendous change in the social structure? It is true that the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the era of hope. The concept like multiculturalism, postmodernism got immense importance worldwide, but the very nature of these terms is only in

books. Practically they are not applied, even women becomes their own enemy. Lack of awareness among them and limited knowledge about the changing nature of the society helps their male counterparts to dominate them. We have many laws which protect the women rights and many international as well as national organizations are working for improving women's condition. But the question is how much we familiar with these? The number is very less. Almost 60% of women never heard about women laws or those organizations which are working for them in their lifetime. It is also very interesting to notice that almost 40% highly literate women go with her husband's decisions when she going to vote or take any other decisions. It indicates their natural tendency to recognize male as superior. So, I think present world give us a luxury life style but still our attitudes are outdated. We cannot recover from the evils of our society.

Now we are thinking for making a new world on moon, we are going to invade outer space, but what we are doing for women the mother of mankind. Is it our conservative nature or we are in fear that one day women

suppressing us? Yes, of course it is our fear. They have the ability, so, we are not in a position to bring them in our mainstream politics or decision making process of the society. I want to term this situation as “*threat to identity*”. Now we find that in every sphere of life women proved their ability. So, it may demolish the ego of men, who think that these are meant for them only. To save their identity they are not willing to support the inclusion of women and not in a position to provide equal opportunity to women. And the women are also not in a position to suppress the traditional barrier and silently give their consent on male made norms. This is a *circular relationship* that happens in the present world. Let me illustrate, like a circle it does not matter how much we expand its radius it must be revolves around one epic centre. Like that we are talking about women rights but practically we are never tried to come out form our traditional attitudes which is not in favour of women. We cannot give up our ancient beliefs and still we follow them strictly. With a small example I want to justify my statement. One doctor who is in charge of one’s life, but he is not sure about his own life. So he takes helps of

astrologers and wears many rings equipped with different stones to eradicate evils from his life or to make his life batter. Now the question is, if a doctor is not sure about his treatment than how we can believe him. The situation is same in case of women. Though they are claimed that they are equal to men but they are arguing for reservation. We know that reservation is provides only for the weaker sections. Are they weak? Reservation is not the solution. To make them better we have to make human rights viable and give up our outdated attitudes and we must welcomed women to every sphere of life as like men.

### **Conclusion**

Hence it can be said that though women reached in the space, run the government of many developed and developing countries still they are regarded as the second class citizens of the society. However, the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century welcomed a new shift in earth. It is the era of change. Almost in every society in some extent people changed their attitudes towards women and welcomed them to the mainstream decision making process. In this changing shift, ancient values

transformed to a better one. Love for identity and desired to show their inner ability will rule the roost and women with their inborn ability will show the path of global transformation. It is the time to change the circular relationship. We will happy that these changes have already begun and soon it will eliminate men's superiority. It is good news for us that women of all races, castes, class, and nationalities come together to becomes the forerunner of this change. The mythological Hindu Shakti soon wakes up and will show the real Shakti. It is the time to realize the proposition of Hindu believes that a woman is the Half-Batsman of man. It is the time to show that they are the integral part of the man's life and it is our duty to keep balance in the society.

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**Notes:**

**Sita:** Wife of Lord *Rama*, Indian God, a woman with a pure heart and, a symbol of sacrifice. She was kidnapped by demon *Ravana* and her husband recovers her after a prolonged battle. But soon she was forced to leave her husband's home due to her husband's commitment to his people. Interesting that she was innocent.

**Droopodi:** another brave woman of Indian myths. She had 5 husbands and due to the defet in the gambling their rivals forced her to unclothe but due to the grace of God *Krishna* she was saved.

**Sabitri:** known as *sati* Sabitri for her faith on her husband. She saved her husband's life when he was killed by byte of a snake. To make this she forced the *Jam* the God of Death with her courage and intelligence to return her husband's life.

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