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THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN MODERN SOCIETY IN INDIA

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Abstract

No doubt the Rig Vedic Women in India enjoyed high status in society and their condition was good. Even the women were provided opportunity to attain high intellectual and spiritual standard. There was no sati system or early marriage. But from enjoying free and esteemed positions in the Rig-Vedic society, women started being discriminated against since the Later-Vedic period in education and other rights and facilities. Child marriage, widow burning, the purdah and polygamy further worsened the women's position. In recent years the role and Status of women has undergone some drastic changes due to globalization and commercialism. So, keeping in view the present paper has the objectives (a) to study the role and status of women from ancient time. (b) to investigate whether the status of women in modern Indian society regarding Equality, Education, Marriage and Family life, Race and Gender, Religion and Culture is maintained or deteriorated. This paper explores that as the society is developed in 21st century the position and respect of women is deteriorated after so many constitutional provisions are not sufficient to get the respectable position in society. In Modern times technology developed, globalization and commercialism come in to existence but the status and position of women is rather deteriorated.

Key words: Polygamy, Globalization, Commercialism, Spiritual, Position, Intellectual.

Introduction

Any study of society is incomplete without study the status, role and even position of women in it. Women constituted the keystone in the arch of Indian society. No doubt the Rig Vedic Women in India enjoyed high status in society and their condition was good. Even the women were provided opportunity to attain high intellectual and spiritual standard. There was no sati system or early marriage. But from enjoying free and esteemed positions in the Rig- Vedic society, women started being discriminated against since the Later-Vedic period in education and other rights and facilities (Nandal and Rajnish, 2014). Indian society based on the spirit that women's cause is men; they rise or sink together, dwarfed or godlike, bond or free. There is no doubt that we are in the midst of a great revolution in the history of women. The evidence is everywhere; the voice of women is increasingly heard in Parliament, courts and in the streets (Sreenivasa, 2006). While women in the West had to fight for over a century to get some of their basic rights, like the right to vote, the Constitution of India gave women equal rights with men from the beginning.

Objective of the Study

The present manuscript is aimed to (a) To study the role and status of women from ancient time. (b) To investigate whether the status of women in modern Indian society regarding Equality, Education, Marriage and Family life, Race and Gender, Religion and Culture is maintained or deteriorated. This paper also intends to give an awareness and insight into the problems faced by women over the years and their role. The study will help us to imagine the participation of women in social, religious, economic and household matters in the ancient times.

Methodology

The methodology of this paper is purely descriptive and required information are collected from different secondary sources like Epics, Vedas, Smritis and Puranas and other publications relating to women in the ancient age. Hindu religious books like Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, and Mahabharata depict the true picture of ancient Indian society. Manusmriti, Rigveda Samhita, Susruta Samhita, Smritis and Puranas have also been the sources of information to examine the social, domestic, economic, educational, religious and political status of women in ancient Indian history. Vedas, the most adored Hindu scripture highlighted the respectable position of women in the ancient society and provided valuable information needed for this manuscript. Rig Veda revealed the economic rights of a daughter who resides forever with her parents.

Review of Literature

Literature survey reveals that women enjoyed equivalent status & rights like their males counterparts in ancient India, (Altekar, (2014), Bader, (2013), Salawade, (2012) It is evident from the works of Grammarians such as Katyayana and Patanjali that women were properly educated in the early Vedic period. Women also had the freedom to select their husbands. This system



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was known as „Swayamvar“. In fact, during this time, women had superior position than the males. In ancient India, though patriarchal system was highly prevalent yet women enjoyed a position of respect and reverence, (Jayapalan, (2001), Mishra, 2006). The status of women and their activities can be divided into three main historical periods, the ancient, the medieval and modern, (Mishra, 2014).

Role and Status of Women in The Rig Vedic and Later-Vedic period

The Rig Vedic Women in India enjoyed high status in society. Their condition was good. The women were provided opportunity to attain high intellectual and spiritual standard. There were many women Rishis during this period. Though monogamy was mostly common, the richer section of the society indulged in polygamy. There was no sati system or early marriage. But from enjoying free and esteemed positions in the Rig-Vedic society, women started being discriminated against since the Later-Vedic period in education and other rights and facilities. Child marriage, widow burning, the purdah and polygamy further worsened the women’s position.

Women in the Vedic and the post Vedic Periods

The Indian cultural tradition begins with the Vedas. It is generally believed that the Vedic period is spread over from 300 BC to 600 B.C. Some general observations discussed in this paper regarding the status of women during this vast period.

- (i) **Freedom Enjoyed by Ancient Women:** The degree of freedom given to women to take part in public activities indicates the nature of the status enjoyed by women during Vedic period. Women never observed “purdah”. They enjoyed freedom and even they enjoyed freedom in selecting their male partner. They could educate themselves. Widows were permitted to remarry. Divorce was however not permissible to them. Even men did not have the right to divorce their wives. Women were given complete freedom in family matters and were treated as “Ardhanginis”.
- (ii) **Equal Educational opportunities for women:** Daughters were never ill-treated although male children were preferred to female children. They also received education like boys and went through the “Brahmaachary” discipline including the “Upanayana” ritual. Women studied the Vedic literature like men and some of them like Lopamudra, Ghosa and Sikata-Nivavari figure among the authors of the Vedic hymns. Many girls in well-to-do families used to be given a fair amount of education down to about B.C. 300.
- (iii) **Position of Women in Matters Relating to Marriage and Family Affairs:** Marriage in the Vedic period was considered a social and religious duty and united the couple on an equal footing. Women had the right to remain spinsters throughout their life. Marriage was not forcibly imposed on them Child marriages were unknown. Girls were given in marriage only after puberty that too after completing their education women had the right to select their life-partners.
- (iv) **Economic Production and occupational Freedom:** Vedic women had economic freedom. Some women were engaged in teaching work. Home was the place of production. Spinning and weaving of clothes were done at home. Women also helped their husbands in agricultural pursuits.
- (v) **Property Rights and Inheritance:** Women rights were very much limited in inheriting property. A married daughter had no share in her father’s property but each spinster was entitled to one-fourth share of patrimony received by her brothers. Women had control over gifts and property etc. received by a woman at the time of marriage but the bulk of the family property was under the control and management of the patriarch. As a wife, a woman had no direct share in her husband’s property. However, a forsaken wife was entitled to 1/3rd of her husband’s wealth. A widow was expected to lead an ascetic life and had no share in her husband’s property. Thus, it could be generalized that the social situation was not in favour of women possessing property and yet protection was given to them as daughters and wives.
- (vi) **Women Role in the Religious Field:** In the religious field, wife enjoyed full rights and regularly participated in religious ceremonies with her husband. Religious ceremonies and sacrifices were performed jointly by the husband and the wife. Women even participated actively in religious discourses. There was no bar for women to read or study any of our sacred literature.

Role of Women in Public Life

Women could shine as debaters in public assemblies. They usually occupied a prominent place in social gatherings but they were denied entry, into the “Sabhas” because these places besides being used for taking political decisions were also used for gambling, drinking and such others purposes. Women’s participation in public meetings and debates, however, became less and less common in later Vedic period.



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Status of women during the Epic period:

The women of Epic India enjoyed an honorable position at home. Both Ramayana and Mahabharata Epics had given a respectable place for women; women had been called the root of Dharma, prosperity and enjoyment in both the epics. We find vast references of the expression of courage, strong willpower and valour of women like Kaikeye, Sita, Rukmani, Satyabhama, Sabitri, Draupadi and others. The Ramayana is a glorious illustration for the Hindu ideal womanhood, it glorifies the value of "Pativrata" and idealises womanhood as one of the most venerable aspects of our heritage. The Mahabharata also outlines the duties and the attitude of the wife to the husband.

Women during the Period of Dharmashastras and Purans

During the period of Dharmashastras and puranas the status of women gradually declined and underwent a major change. The girls were deprived of formal education Daughters were regarded as second-class citizens. Freedom of women was curtailed. Sons were given more weightage than daughters Girls were prevented from learning the Vedas and becoming Brahma charinis.

Manu, the law giver of Indian society gave the statement that women have to be under father during childhood, under her husband during youth and under her son during old age". At no stage shall she deserve freedom.

Restrictions imposed of social problems in women freedom

Due to the various restrictions imposed on the freedom of women some problems started creeping in. In the social fields, pre-puberty marriage came to be practiced, widow remarriage was prohibited, husband was given the status of God for a woman, education was totally denied to woman, custom of 'Sati' became increasingly prevalent, purdah system came into vogue and practice of polygyny came to be tolerated.

Restrictions imposed of economic problems in women freedom

In the economic field a woman was totally denied a share in her husband's property by maintaining that a wife and a slave cannot own property. In the religious field, she was forbidden to offer sacrifices and prayers, practice penance and undertake pilgrimages.

Factors That Caused the Degradation of Women

Prabhathi Mukharjee, the renounced sociologist has identified some reasons for the low status of women in post Vedic period. These reasons are imposition of Brahmanical austerities on the entire society, rigid restrictions imposed by the caste system and the joint family system, lack of educational facilities for women, introduction of the non-Aryan wife into the Aryan house hold and foreign invasions.

Women in the Buddhist Period

The status of women improved a little during the Buddhist period though there was no tremendous change. Some of the rigidities and restrictions imposed by the caste system were relaxed. Buddha preached equality and he tried to improve the cultural, educational and religious statuses of women. During the benevolent rule of the famous Buddhist kings such as Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka, Sri Harsha and others, women regained a part of their lost freedom and status due to the relatively broadminded Buddhist philosophy.

Women were not only confined to domestic work but also, they could resort to an educational career if they so desired. In the religious field women came to occupy a distinctly superior place. Women were permitted to become "Sanyasis". Many women took a leading role in Buddhist monastic-life, women had their sangha called the BhikshuniSangha, which was guided by the same rules and regulations as these of the monks. The sangha opened to them avenues of cultural activities and social service and ample opportunities for public life. Their political and economic status however remained unchanged.

Ancient Women and Education:

There are some bright exceptions in this dismal picture. The role of women in Ancient Indian Literature is immense. Ancient India had many learned ladies. There were two types of scholarly women the Brahmadhinis, or the women who never married and cultured the Vedas throughout their lives; and the Sadyodvahas who studied the Vedas till they married. Panini mentioned of female students' studying Vedas. Katyana called female teachers Upadhyaya or Upadhyayi. Ashoka got his daughter, Sanghamitra, inducted into preaching Buddhism. From the Jain texts, we learn about the Kousambi princess, Jayanti, who remained a spinster to study religion and philosophy. Often, Buddhist nuns composed hymns. Women did write Sanskrit plays and verses, excelled in music, painting and other fine arts.



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Ancient Women in Politics

Women often enjoyed prominent roles in politics. Megasthenes mentioned the Pandya women running the administration. The Satavahana queen, "Nayanika ruled the kingdom on behalf of her minor son. So did Pravabati, daughter of Chandragupta II, on behalf of the minor Vakataka prince. A little after the Gupta period, queens used to rule in Kashmir, Orissa and Andhra. Princess Vijaybhatarika acted as the provincial ruler under the Chalukya King; Vikramaditya I. Women were provincial and village administrators in the Kannada region.

Status of women in the Medieval India

The Medieval period (Period between 500 A. D to 1500 A.D) proved to be highly disappointing for the Indian women, for their status further deteriorated during this period. Medieval India was not women's age it is supposed to be the 'dark age' for them.

When foreign conquerors like Muslims invaded India, they brought with them their own culture. For them women were the sole property of her father, brother or husband and she does not have any will of her own. This type of thinking also crept into the minds of Indian people and they also began to treat their own women like this. One more reason for the decline in women's status and freedom was that original Indians wanted to shield their women folk from the barbarous Muslim invaders. As polygamy was a norm for these invaders, they picked up any women they wanted and kept her in their "harems". In order to protect them Indian women started using 'Purdah', (a veil), which covers body. Due to this reason their freedom also became affected. They were not allowed to move freely and this led to the further deterioration of their status. These problems related with women resulted in changed mindset of people. Now they began to consider a girl as misery and a burden, which has to be shielded from the eyes of intruders and needs extra care. Whereas a boy child will not need such extra care and instead will be helpful as an earning hand. Thus, a vicious circle started in which women was at the receiving end. All this gave rise to some new evils such as Child Marriage, Sati, Jauhar and restriction on girl education.

Sati

The ritual of dying at the funeral pyre of the husband is known as "Sati" or "Sahagaman". According to some of the Hindu scriptures' women dying at the funeral pyre of her husband go straight to heaven so it's good to practice this ritual. Initially it was not obligatory for the women but if she practiced such a custom she was highly respected by the society. Sati was considered to be the better option than living as a widow as the plight of widows in Hindu society was even worse. Some of the scriptures like 'Medhatiti' had different views it say that Sati is like committing suicide so one should avoid this.

Jauhar: It is also more or less similar to Sati but it is a mass suicide. Jauhar was prevalent in the Rajput societies. In this custom wives immolated themselves while their husband was still alive. When people of Rajput clan became sure that they were going to die at the hands of their enemy then all the women arrange a large pyre and set themselves afire, while their husband used to fight the last decisive battle known as "Shaka", with the enemy. Thus, protecting the sanctity of the women and the whole clan.

Child Marriage: It was a norm in medieval India. Girls were married off at the age of 8-10. They were not allowed access to education and were treated as the material being. The plight of women can be imagined by one of the shlokas of Tulsidas where he writes "Dhol, gawar, shudra, pashu, nari, ye sab tadankeadhikari". Meaning that animals, illiterates, lower castes and women should be subjected to beating. Thus, women were compared with animals and were married off at an early age. The child marriage along with it brought some more problems such as increased birth rate, poor health of women due to repeated child bearing and high mortality rate of women and children.

Restriction on Widow Remarriage: The condition of widows in medieval India was very bad. They were not treated as human beings and were subjected to a lot of restrictions. They were supposed to live pious life after their husband died and were not allowed entry in any celebration. Their presence in any good work was considered to be a bad omen. Sometimes heads of widows were also shaved down. They were not allowed to remarry. Any woman remarrying was looked down by the society. This cruelty on widows was one of the main reasons for the large number of women committing Sati. In medieval India living as a Hindu widow was a sort of a curse.

Purdah System: The veil or the 'Purdah' system was widely prevalent in medieval Indian society. It was used to protect the women folk from the eyes of foreign rulers who invaded India in medieval period. But this system curtailed the freedom of women.

Girl Education: The girls of medieval India and especially Hindu society were not given formal education. They were given



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education related to household chores. But a famous Indian philosopher 'Vatsyayana' wrote that women were supposed to be perfect in sixty-four arts which included cooking, spinning, grinding, knowledge of medicine, recitation and many more.

Batter status of women in Southern India comparatively Northern India

The status of women in Southern India was better than the North India. While in Northern India there were not many women administrators, in Southern India we can find some names that made women of that time proud. Priyaketaladevi, queen of Chalukya Vikramaditya ruled three villages. Another woman named Jakkiabbe used to rule seventy villages. In South India women had representation in each and every field. Domingo Paes, famous Portuguese traveler testifies to it. He has written in his account that in Vijaynagar kingdom women were present in each and every field. Nuniz, another famous traveler to the South also agrees to it and says that women were employed in writing accounts of expenses, recording the affairs of kingdom, which shows that they were educated. There is no evidence of any public school in northern India but according to famous historian Ibn Batuta there were 13 schools for girls and 24 for boys in Honavar. There was one major evil present in South India of medieval time. But it was the custom of Devadasis. Devadasis was a custom prevalent in Southern India. In this system girls were dedicated to temples in the name of gods and goddesses. The girls were then onwards known as 'Devadasis' meaning servant of God. These Devadasis were supposed to live the life of celibacy. All the requirements of Devadasis were fulfilled by the grants given to the temples. In temple they used to spend their time in worship of God and by singing and dancing for the god. Some kings used to invite temple dancers to perform at their court for the pleasure of courtiers and thus some Devadasis converted to Rajadasis (palace dancers) prevalent in some tribes of South India like Yellamma cult, (Sharma,2002).

Women's Struggle and Reforms

Though women of India are not at par with her counterpart in Western world but she is struggling hard to make her mark in men's world. There have been social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekanand, Swami Dayananda Saraswati who have helped women gain their previous status in society.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was strictly against the evils prevalent in society in his time. He is the one who has done women a great favour by abolishing Sati lawfully. He himself married a widow thus setting the example for the whole society. Along with 'Dwarkanath Tagore' he founded "Brahmo Samaj" for the reform of Indian society and emancipation of women.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was popularly known as Vidyasagar, which means sea of knowledge. He was a pillar of social reform movement of Bengal in 19th century. He strongly supported women education in Bengal and went door to door to persuade people to send their girl child to school. He also did a lot in the field of widow remarriage. He opened many schools for girls.

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule

Jyotirao Govindrao Phule was a real philanthropist. He was the one to open first girl school in India. He is also credited with opening first home for widows of the upper caste and a home for newborn girl children so that they can be saved from female infanticide.

Swami Dayananda Saraswati

He was the founder of Arya Samaj and gave a cry, "back to Vedas". He translated Vedas from Sanskrit to Hindi so that a common man can read it and understand that the Vedic Hindu scriptures gave utmost importance to women. He emphasized for the equal rights for women in every field. He tried to change the mindset of people with his Vedic teachings. **Mahatma Gandhi**. The social reformers of 19th century laid down the stage for the emancipation of women but it was Mohan Das Karam Chand Gandhi under whose influence these reforms reached masses. He was the one who liberated Indian women from the clutches of 'Purdah' and other social evils. Gandhiji was strictly against the child marriage and favored widow remarriage. He urged the youth to come forward and accept young widows as their life partner.

Independent India

Women in India now participate in all activities such as education, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology, etc. The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity (Article 16), equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)). In addition, it allows special provisions to be made by the State in favour of women and children (Article 15(3)), renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women



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(Article 51(A) (e)), and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief, (Article 42).

Modern Indian Women

The status of women in modern India is a sort of a paradox. If on one hand she is at the peak of ladder of success, on the other hand she is mutely suffering the violence afflicted on her by her own family members. As compared with past women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality, they have to still travel a long way. Their path is full of roadblocks. The women have left the secured domain of their home and are now in the battlefield of life, fully armored with their talent. They had proven themselves. But in India they are yet to get their dues. The sex ratio of India shows that the Indian society is still prejudiced against female. There are 933 females per thousand males in India according to the census of 2001, which is much below the world average of 990 females. There are many problems which women in India have to go through daily. These problems have become the part and parcel of life of Indian women and some of them have accepted them as their fate.

The main problems of Indian women include

Lack of education

In India women education never got its due share of attention. From the medieval India women were debarred from the educational field. According to medieval perception women need just household education and this perception of medieval India still persists in villages of India even today. Girls are supposed to fulfill domestic duties and education becomes secondary for them whereas it is considered to be important for boys. The lack of education is the root cause for many other problems. An uneducated mother cannot look after her children properly and she is not aware of the deadly diseases and their cure, which leads to the poor health of the children.

Lack of power

In India a large percentage of women do not have power. They cannot take decisions independently not even related to their own life. They have to take permission of male members for each and every issue.

Poor Health

The malnutrition results in poor health of women. The women of India are prejudiced from the birth itself. They are not breastfed for long. In the want of a son the women wants to get pregnant as soon as possible which decreases the caring period to the girl child whereas the male members get adequate care and nutrition. Women are not given the right to free movement that means that they cannot go anywhere on their own if they want and they have to take the permission of male member of family or have to take them along.

Maternal Mortality

The mortality rate in India is among highest in the world. As females are not given proper attention, which results in the malnutrition and then they are married at an early age which leads to pregnancies at younger age when the body is not ready to bear the burden of a child. All this results in complications, which may lead to gynecological problems, which may become serious with time and may ultimately, lead to death.

Mistreatment

In India violence against women is a common evil. Not just in remote parts but in cities also women bear the brunt. They are subjected to physical and mental violence. They are the one who work most but are not given their due. The women is not safe anywhere neither at home nor at workplace. Every hour a woman is raped in India and every 93 minutes a woman is burnt to death due to dowry problem. There are many laws such as The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, The Hindu Succession Act of 1956, The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, The Hindu Women Right to Property Act of 1937, The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, to protect women and punishment is severe but the conviction rate of crime against women is very low in India.

Overworked

Indian women work more than men of India but their work is hardly recognized as they mainly do unskilled work. Their household chores is never counted as a work, if a woman is working in a field to help her husband it will also be not counted as a work. A study conducted by Mies in 1986 states that in Andhra Pradesh a woman works around 15 hours a day during the agricultural season whereas a male on an average works for around 7-8 hours, (Gadhre, 2015).



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Dowry

It's a serious issue. Courts are flooded with cases related to death due to dowry harassment by husband and in laws. In ancient times women were given 'Stridhan' when they departed from the house of their parents. This amount of money was given to her as a gift which she can use on her and her children but her in-laws did not have any right on that amount. This amount was supposed to help the girl in time of need. Slowly this tradition became obligatory and took the form of dowry. Nowadays parents have to give hefty amount in dowry, the in laws of their girl are not concerned whether they can afford it or not. If a girl brings large amount of dowry she is given respect and is treated well in her new home and if she does not bring dowry according to expectations of her in laws then she has to suffer harassment. Due to this evil practice many newlywed women of India have to lose their lives.

Female infanticide/foeticide

As women were supposed to be and in some areas of India are still considered to be curse by some strata of society their birth was taken as a burden. So, in past times they were killed as soon as they were born. In some of the Rajput clans of Rajasthan newly born girl child was dropped in a large bowl of milk and was killed. Today with the help of technology the sex of the unborn baby is determined and if it is a girl child then it is aborted down. In all this procedure women do not have any say they have to do according to the wish of their husbands even if she does not want to abort, she has any choice.

Crimes against women

Police records show high incidence of crimes against women in India. The National Crime Records Bureau reported in 1998 that the growth rate of crimes against women would be higher than the population growth rate by 2010. Earlier, many cases were not registered with the police due to the social stigma attached to rape and molestation cases.

Trafficking

The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act was passed in 1956. However, many cases of trafficking of young girls and women have been reported. These women are either forced into prostitution, domestic work or child labour.

Special Initiatives for Women

- Some special initiations have been taken in recent years in this regard viz: i. National Commission for Women in January 1992, this statutory body with a specific mandate to study and monitor all matters relating to the constitutional and legal safeguards provided for women, review the existing legislation to suggest amendments wherever necessary was setup. ii.
- Reservation of women in Local Self Govt. The 72nd and 73rd constitutional Amendment Acts passed in 1992 by Parliament ensure one-third of the total seats for women in all elected offices in all Rural and Urban Local Bodies.
- The National Plan of Action for the Girl Child (1991-2000 AD) The Action Plan is to ensure survival, protection and development of Girl Child with the ultimate objection of building up a better future for the girl child.
- National Policy for Empowerment of women, 2001 The Department of Women and Child Development in the Ministry of Human Resources Development has prepared a 'National policy for Empowerment of Women in the year 2001. The goal of this policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women.

Conclusion

It may thus be concluded that in Vedic India, women did not enjoy an inferior status rather they occupied an honorable place. They had ample rights in the social and the religious fields and limited rights in the economic and the political fields. They were not treated as inferior or subordinate but equal to men. We have honoured our country as our Motherland "Bharat Mata" and our nationalism has grown up from the seed Mantra "Vande Mataram". Position of women in society is the index to the standard of social organization. Through this study we come on conclusion that as the women has equal participation in human development. She is half of the human race. But she lacks in society. Women are not treated with respect as in the ancient Indian society. Lot of crime against women is seen in modern society. Constitutional provisions are not sufficient to get the respectable position in society. Some certain changes inside mind-set of women as well as man are required.

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