



RESEARCH ARTICLE

INDIAN HISTORY AS A WITNESS OF THE VULNERABILITY OF FEMALE CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

History is the story of past happenings and events. It acts as a laboratory that experiment with the past. Past gives us the answer of our quest regarding People's present behavior. With a deep rooted study of history, knowledge can be gathered regarding the present world, that how it has changed over time. According to a Philosopher George Santayana, "without learning lessons from the past you are deemed to repeat them in future". Our Country, India also witnessed various atrocities and violence from the beginning. Documents as are gathered from the history show how crimes against female child are prevalent from the Vedic age. Mythologies also give us the proof of various atrocities. From that poetic age, the weaker sections were harassed, tortured and hated by the stronger sections. Due to male domination, society experienced violence against minor girls. Though Vedic girls were stated to be respected and honoured, but domination of male power over them are also prevalent. Due to their less physical strength they sometime have to sacrifice themselves at the altar of patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

For the solution of every problem, the sources of these problems are needed to be detected. To know the reason, causes and sources of all problems, one needs to know the Past, how humanity has experienced both negative and positive aspects of life. Studying history thus teaches us how we got into the situation that we are in right now. The search for solutions often requires an understanding of how problems developed or the process how our ancestors have faced problems in the past. As it is well said that history repeats itself, it is important to gather knowledge about the mistakes of the past so that we must not repeat the same mistakes in future. It is already realized that the girls of India are not in safe hands starting from the Vedic Period till today. Due to their tenderness in age, innocence and natural simplicity it is easier to make them victims of such crimes. In schools, playgrounds, relative's homes, and other public and private places, the exploiters taking various advantages abuse them sexually. There are several numbers of laws for their protection. But only laws can't resist the problem. To solve the issue we have to study the condition of girls from early age to modern era. Because it is well said that answers of present questions remain hidden in past. To know the source of these issues we have to study history. It is therefore true to say that historical background is one of the vital parts of research work. Likewise to understand why our girl children are going through immense sufferings, we need to peep into our history. From early times we have to notice, how the girls are being behaved. Why they are usually given a second class status as compared to men.

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To get the result of all these queries we have to move our eyes back to the past.

Status of female child in Vedic days

Our world is going through different problems from the early days of civilization till now. From the early days when our world came into being people gradually learnt to survive in societies. During their fetch of different ways of survival they faced various hurdles and obstacles in life. Gradually for the sake of keeping peace they needed a uniform Social structure, rules and a united society. In around 5000 BCE for the first time humans started to settle down in one place. After that the patriarchal structure started when the male members use to dominate the Society. Gradually groups and families also come into being. With the initialisation of Civilisation, various crimes also started to pollute our world. In spite of all these things the female children were heard to be treated almost equally with men. They are seen to be given education also in several Vedic literatures. Women like Gargi, Maitreyee, Lopamudra, and Lilabati were the most educated known scholars of that age.

Status of female child in medieval period

The girls of Medieval India were the most sufferers. This period saw the worst reduction of women's status in this Country. During that period with the influx of the foreign rulers especially the Muslim invaders, the socio-political scenario of India underwent a tremendous change: rape, ravage, arson, coercion, conversion, exploitation went on recklessly. The social liberty of women sharply declined. Women lost their social respect both in society and family.

“The Mugal emperors and their nobles kept a large number of wives, concubines and slave girls in their harems. The Rajput rulers also followed their example and started keeping their own harems. Akbar had 5000 women in his harem and Raja Mohan Singh kept 1500 women in his harem. Other Mugal emperors and nobles pursued the same practice. Islam prohibits drinking of liquor, wine etc, yet all Mugal were addicted to it. The laxity in morals of the emperors, nobles and rich people had reduced the position of women to articles of pleasure.”¹ Child marriage became a norm during that period. Girls were married off between the age group of 6 to 10.

Status of girls during British Period

The British ruled India for 200 years. During that time except a few women of upper classes, the life of general woman was not worth living. Females of colonial India were seen to be dependent on men and thus facing various types of exploitations. During the time girl children in the name of tradition, custom were married at very early ages. Such child marriage resulted in the sexual abuse of the girls at very tender ages. Maternity mortality rate were also at increase due to the early birth of children. Young girls were also sexually exploited during that century in the form of devdasis. The young girls were first forced to enter the life of devdasi, where they were believed to be the wife of God. Those devdasi were frequently victimized sexually by the priest and other religious authorities of the temple. In South India, one Venkata Ratnam opposed the Devdasi System and another social reformer named Virasalingam Pantulee worked for marriage reform. The British Govt. with the help of Social reformers brought a number of changes for eliminating inequalities between men and woman. During that period, too major movements which affected the position of woman were the Social reform movement of the 19th Century and the Nationalist movement of the 20th Century.

Social reformers like raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidhya Sagar, M.G Ranade, Gopal Hari Deshmukh, and Karsandas Mullji were among the notable persons who took initiative for taking measures by the British Govt. for the betterment of women's status. Among Muslims Khwaja Altaf Hussain Hali and Shaikh Mohammad Abdullah propagated the importance of girl's education during the colonial period. Though the British rules initially decided not to interfere with the traditional social fabric of India, but only in the latter half of the 19th Century and first quarter of 20th Century they witnessed the vulnerability of Indian girl and took some steps to abolish or change some customs through legislative measures. While Revivalists such as Dayanand Saraswati and Vivekananda made efforts to improve the status of woman by evoking the ancient Indian norms of purity and duty. However some bold voices challenged the set patterns. Jyoti Rao Phule raised his voice against the tyranny of Brahmanical traditions, and worked for equality and education of the oppressed classes and woman. Gopal Ganesh Agarkar was the foremost among the few who advocated the rights of woman on the ground of equality. Pandit Ramabai dared to challenge age old traditions which had hindered the development of women.²

¹ L.P Sharma: Medieval history of India, 1000-1707 A.D. Vikash publishing house. Pvt. Ltd Delhi, 1981.P.P 508-509

² Women in Indian society - Neera Deshai and Usha Thakkar Page No-3 : Published by national Book Trust, New Delhi, 2001

British Govt. thus with the help of the reformers in order to improve the status of Indian girls, in the year 1819, with the initiatives of Brahma Samaj, enacted the Native Marriage Act. This Act banned Polygamy and fixed the age of marriage as 14 for girls and 18 for boys. Later in the year 1929, in order to avoid various hurdles of the previous Act, the British Govt. fixed the age as 18 for girls and 21 for boys by enacting child marriage (Restraint) Act, 1929.

The British Govt. also enacted Abolition of Devdasi System 1929, for the degenerated system of Devdasis. The motto was to stop the immoral practice of prostitution in the name of religious practice. These steps have paved the way in removing the obstacles in the progress of women. Not only this, they tried in eliminating inequalities between male and giving proper respect to the other half of the Society]2 But the ultimate reality is that, inspite of all these measures taken by the British rules, the major number of Indian girls are still victimized. All those efforts made by the colonial Govt. was not fruitful to full extent in towns and cities girls were benefited to a certain level, but the village girls remained in dark. They were deprived, less taken care of; less fed and are bound to many at very early ages. They were abused, tortured and treated as sexual object very often. Male dominated over their body and soul. On 20th October, 1936, Gandhiji for the sake of development of woman quoted “If you women would only realize your dignity and privilege, and make full use of it for mankind, you will make it much better than it is. But man has delighted in enslaves till the slaves and the slave holders have become one in the crime of degrading humanity. My special function from childhood, you might say, has been to make woman realize her dignity. The idea of imparting education to the girls was also emerged during that period. After the Bhakti movement, the Christian Missionaries took initiatives for education girls. The Hunter commission too took active part for female education. Since then, there had been a practice started among the Indian citizens for sending their daughters to school. Though the number of girls studying was low, yet a notable increase in the number of girl students was experienced from 1941 onwards.

Status of Indian girls during post Independence Era

In the year 1947, India got its much awaited Independence from the British rule on the blood and sacrifice of our freedom fighter. Independent India also took Oath of a free civilized, peaceful country. The then Indian Govt. after Surveying the condition of India felt that various hurdles were there which may come on the way of development of Independent India. One of those reasons was the backwardness and exploitations done on Indian girls. At that point of time several Social reformers showered their blessings on the Indian in the form of their deep concerns and reformations all over the country. Issues on girl child like child marriage, female infanticide, purdah, devdasi system which were ruining the minor females life in India, were taken into special consideration. The girl children at that time have to face various sacrifices in the name of tradition, religious custom and also for the sake of protecting respect of the Society and their families. Independent Indian Govt. Social reformers, voluntary organizations come forward for the upliftment of girls in the form of providing education, urbanization, vocational trainings etc. The first two decades of independence were dominated by studies of middle class,

educated urban woman who were taking up Jobs and facing the conflicts brought on by their dual roles. The political contest of post 1975 research on women was quite different the explosive facts on women education, health, work and Political participation revealed in the findings of the report of the status of women committee appointed by the govt. of India 1974 exposed the shocking condition of Indian woman even after three decades of independence.

Soon after gaining independence India witnessed serious discrimination of girl child every Society from the earliest stages of life, through her childhood and adulthood. Some of the atrocities were practiced specially against the girl child like female genital mutilation, child marriage, sexual exploitation, exploitation for meeting high demand of virgin girls. Moreover, she is the most unwelcomed person in the family, less fed, given less care and health attention. Various laws were passed, modified amended and encouraged. But middle class and high class women particularly in large urban agglomerations were much benefitted. In villages and small towns those reformations could not reach the door of the young girls to that extent. Indian constitution came into force with various special provisions for women and child. Initiatives were started for bringing effective change in the status of Indian girls through several legislations. In the post independent India, Series of laws were passed for the upliftment of females. These legislations were brought in order to give equal rights and privileges with men, to eliminate inequality between sexes, to curb the problems of sexual abuse and to remove barriers coming in the way of self development of women. Thus the status of girls though was raised in the eyes of law, but practically they are still far from equal to men in every sphere of life. In practice, they continue to suffer discrimination, harassment, humiliation and exploitation both at home and outside home. Theoretically they might have been given more freedom, but in reality, they still suffer many hardships, inhuman dignities and unworthy treatment everywhere

Status of Indian girls during modern period

21st Century has seen tremendous changes in the status and position of Indian girls. Various legislations and many other emancipatory actions of the Social reformers no doubt raised their status. The constitution framers and other legislative bodies were very much conscious of the problem of women empowerment hence they ensured that the principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian constitution. Various Govt. and non-government organizations also are there who are trying their level best to uplift the status of girls in India. Now the rate of girl illiteracy is also quite improved. Laws are available for their education, child marriage, child rape, molestation, outraging their modesty etc. Recently in the year 2012, specific sexual abuse of children law is also enacted named as POCSO.

But girls in towns and cities are mostly benefitted. They are given proper education, and care. But in various Indian villages they are not aware about the rights the girl child. The long run supremacy of male power over the female in all respect in the patriarchal society of India mainly is the reasons of some specific crimes against the girls. The conditions of the girl child in rural areas are beyond description. In cities due to

presence of more educated class, they are quite aware regarding the education, care and consciousness needed for their girl child. But villagers are less educated and superstitious. They even treat the birth of girl child in their family as omen. Girl children are often neglected, less fed, tortured, harassed and are sexually abused both at homes and outside home. Village girls are mostly the victims of illiteracy, poverty, neglect and unawareness. The Condition of 21st Century Indian girls even after 70 years of Independence from British rule, are not good and praise worthy. Though education reached the door of maximum people, but more other factors led to the vulnerabilities of girl both at mature ages and tender ages. Girl child are the worst sufferer from the very beginning of their life. Firstly their birth is an unwelcome event. After their birth they are abused in various cases both at home and outside their home. They are not safe even of their homes. Some 6 types of crime like child rape, molestation, sexual abuse, child prostitution take place with the girl children to a large extent in our Society.

Indian cities also witness vulnerability of girl children. Though their literacy rate is comparatively higher and their awareness level is also better, but in several cases they become the victim of growing consumerism, modernization etc. In the grip of growing consumerism, violence against girl children has been rapidly increasing. Due to economic factor the girl children are often pushed into the red light areas of the cities. Thus they are either compelled to choose prostitution or unintentionally abused for sex with the economic development and growth of modernization, sex industries also growing to a large extent in big cities and towns. Urge of making more money, will of maintaining city life styles and the high demand of young adolescent girls are some of the push factors of sex trade done by them. Minor girls are also trafficked for the purpose of commercial sexual abuse. Due to immaturity they can be easily victimised by the abusers. The girl children who are immature, simple and innocent are also not safe in their home, market, Schools etc. Modernisation is leading to the development of tourism. In tourist definitions, foreigners, pedophiles and other tourists by the lure of gifts, food and toy usually make the poor girl child their victim of sexual exploitation. Moreover traders of sex industries are also providing young girl prostitutes to the tourists, many unfortunate girl children all over the Country are even sold by their parents for some sum of money to the traders of girl.

The tender girls thus are not safe anywhere in the Society. They are sexually abused by the relatives at home. Taking advantage of their immaturity, innocence and inferior age, their relatives often abuse them sexually. In schools and school buses girls are also often seen to be harassed sexually. Bus conductors, senior students, teachers and non-teaching staffs take advantage of their dominant position and abuse the school girls sexually. With the growth of modernization, many legislation, development and technologies are also growing. But all these failed to eliminate the poor fate of Indian girls. Though modern thoughts, policies and principles knocked the door of several Indians, but all these failed to provide protective shield to our innocent little girls. There is no lack of laws, but all these will go in vein unless we improve our thoughts towards them. Moreover awareness are also needed everywhere regarding the rights of the girls.