

ACCULTURATION AND WOMAN'S STANDING

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The author discusses in this article one of the vital aspects of Indian society, viz., status of women.

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One of the vital aspects of Indian Society is the status of women. The Universality of a high or low status of women has always been denied. The above fact can be evidenced from the stratificational study of culture change and women's position. The diversities in the position of an individual are always found because the status itself depends upon and is conditioned by certain situations, traditions and environment at a particular place and time. Again the position is largely determined by certain functions that a woman or man undertake to do, also by the behaviour and inter-relationship with others. Also, to some extent women's lot has always been controlled by the will of her lord. They never dared to rebel because they have accepted their inferiority as the converse of men's superiority. As womanhood is relying on so many factors and therefore naturally, there has always been diversification in her status.

Even Plato and Aristotle have offered divergent views. According to Plato women should be admitted to all the rights and duties of men and that the state was the loser in keeping them on a low level. Aristotle, however, considered men superior to women and hence their natural rulers. Therefore it can be inferred that in the social fabric the change in women's lot is necessary.

To understand one's status, a considerable portion of his culture is studied and hence an

individual's personality can very easily be judged by his or her resultant behaviour in a particular culture or society. Consequently it can be said that to search out the real socio-economic standing of women, the study of their relationship to different patterns and traits of culture is indispensable. Women's standing is thus an integral part of culture and a slight progression or retrogression in a specific culture pattern will bring a major or minor alteration in women's position. It can be emphasised that the position of women in any society is a significant pointer to the level of culture of that society.

On the same path and tracing identical approach, the position of women was determined in Alipur Village (a Northern Indian Village, situated about eleven miles northward to Delhi). The more emphasis in this study is laid on the rights of women when in husband's house and when in father's house; in marriage; in interpersonal relations in the situation when they are widows; in property and its inheritance; in their freedom to movement. The diverse opinions in connection with the above mentioned spheres when evaluated, and interpreted also have helped in predicting that the old conventions are the greatest agencies of resistance to the elevation of women's standing. The introduction of new conventions may still take a long period.

Most of the emergence in women's standing has largely been owing to the changes in

last half century. Previous to that they were regarded intellectually, morally and physically inferior. The old outlook towards wives was in the form of drudges and slaves of men. The villagers never recognised womanhood as entirely and exclusively dependable, honourable, sane and wise. The concept was that making the living is women's main concern. It has been informed that men controlled religious matters; political affairs, the family authority and also the division of labour. But there were certain approved fields of endeavour, such as wifehood and motherhood where she enjoyed considerable freedom. The women themselves were never worried about their rights and believed as firmly as their menfolk that woman's place is in the home.

As a result of infiltration of new ideas through various agencies and avenues as Arya Samaj, education, speeches in independent movement delivered by various speakers, mass contact with the Punjabis, the implementation of Five-year Plans women now have better understanding and somewhat new outlook. No doubt, the majority of the women are still illiterate but they now understand marriage laws, the property laws and the personal laws enacted by the legislation to raise their status. In a way, they are now in a transitional stage between the newly emerging social order caused by reactionary forces and the dead weight of the old society. Though women are gradually and with a very very slow intensity emerging from a long subservience to men but still because of certain blockades there are few women lawyers, doctors, journalists, editors, architects and engineers. There are, however, two women teachers in the village. The analyzed study with regard to the effect in the position of women is made in the under-mentioned determinants of culture.

Family, Interpersonal Relations and Status.—The family which is the smallest unit in social organization is patrilineal and so the property is inherited from father to son and not to daughter. The head of the family is always a male. But if father is not alive, then the consultation of the mother in certain matters has been recognised. In a situation where a father does not have a son then he adopts some near kin. But if the parents have a daughter the property is given to her but in an indirect manner. Her husband is kept as *gharjamai* and ultimately she takes the whole possession. A woman is respected more provided she follows the age-old concepts of an ideal woman such as one who does maximum work in the household and also in the fields, who does not intervene and backbite any one, who is faithful to her husband and does not seek extra-marital relations and one who never opens *parda* outside the house and also in the house when elders are present. But now there are other avenues through which much can be added to the house economy. Some girls are no more educated, have learnt some cottage industries and spend much time on them which escapes them from hard toil of fields. Two to three girls are regularly appointed and such womenfolk are comparatively honoured more. The ideal pattern of womanhood was also represented by certain obligations which should be preserved by a woman for instance, she should not show her hair to males, she should get up from the *charpai* if somebody is passing by and she should stop her movement when she comes across someone on the way, and finally, she had to massage the tired limbs of elderly women in the house. But none of them in the strict sense is found today though exceptions are there. In the eyes of old people this is degradation but the younger generation does not mind it

Comparatively, the birth of a male child is considered as an occasion of great rejoicing. Even the women who are regarded mad, start attaining a great respect after she has given birth to a son. Thus, it is obvious that right from the birth a great discrimination in matters between male and female starts, and it is the boy who enjoys all amenities and facilities. The girl is regarded as *Paraya Dhan* (other's property) and *Kikar* (a babool tree with thorns). She is less cared physically. The above mentioned two local words can very well explain the inferiority of womanhood in a wider sense.

Marriage.—The idea of early marriage, both in case of males and females is gradually diminishing. But certain lower castes, such as *Chuhras* and *Chamars* marry their children at a very early age. However, the girl is sent to the husband's house only when she reaches puberty. First, the idea governing early marriage was the unpalatable criticism of neighbours about the young age of the girl. Secondly, the parents wanted to marry her before their own eyes. The changed attitude now is due to the danger that some girls became widows at a very early age and then they had to spend their whole life in the same channel. Another is the effect of education. The usual defence is that the girl or the boy is receiving education and we cannot accept the relation. Though the people well understand that legally there is a limit to marriage age but this hardly influences the people.

The girl is not at all consulted in the matter of her marriage. The parents themselves take the initiative and previously they utilised the services of a go-between, (barber). The girls never dared to say anything and the go-between used to engage the boy after explaining the whole social and economic background of the family in which engagement had to be made. No re-

quirements or suggestions from spouses were offered. Hence in this matter of engagement the girl or the boy had almost equal position. But now the services of a go-between are no longer required, the girl is sometimes consulted and the boy is always made to agree by telling him all details. Exceptions are still there in some families who are of very very old type in all respects. The boy before he is engaged sees the girl. The girls too sometimes desire to see their would-be husbands. This is done in an indirect manner without bringing it to the notice of the boy. In some families who are well educated, the spouses who have to indulge in marriage sit together for a long time and talk about each other. The idea of establishing a matrimonial relation with a family which has a sound economic position, good social standing was prevailing. Also bride's industrious nature, her smartness and outer appearance were heavily stressed. Now the preferences are based on bride's merits to a great extent. Every family whether literate or illiterate now prefers an educated bride and that's why in the beginning they enquire about the standard upto which the girl is educated. Individual merits are now gaining importance. But among the 'Banias' (the traders) the richness of family is still a great consideration because they take bride price. As a result of this preference for education almost all the villagers send their daughters to village schools so that they may seek good and settled husbands. Through this long and complicated avenue women are coming forward and ultimately their status.

Widow Remarriage.—In this region there has been a great diversification of the idea of widow remarriage. The Brahmins, Banias and one or two lower castes never practised widow remarriage but in the rest of the castes it did happen. Among the Brahmins and Banias the widows either lived with their

parents or lived alone in their husband's house. The idea was that the woman after marriage should not be touched by others except by her own husband. But as the time passed the young widows started some immoral business and also elopements prevailed. When this sort of moral crime and decadence started people thought widow remarriage as a good appliance to check it and from that time onwards widow remarriage among Brahmins and Banias started. Among the other castes a widow could remarry. Generally she married to the elder or younger

brother of the deceased husband but if no such candidate was found then to some near relative. This remarriage is entirely and exclusively dependent upon the widow and everything is left to her choice. The process of remarriage is locally known as "Chuhri Pahrana". Widows with children also remarry. A widow is regarded as unlucky and unfortunate and her position is also lowered down.

It appears therefore that social change positively catalyses the elevation in woman's standing.