

## Social Problems of India

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The woman is the builder and molder of the nation's destiny. Though delicate and soft as a lily she has a heart far stronger and bolder than man-she is the supreme inspiration for man's onward march, and embodiment of love, pity and compassion" (Tagore). Gandhiji echoed the same feelings when he said, "Woman is the incarnation of Ahimsa", which to him meant infinite capacity for suffering. This is the Eastern view about women. But men have indulged in fantastic views about women. Shakespeare's Hamlet identified women with all types of weaknesses, "Frailty the name is a woman". Brutality is justified by the rhyme-

A dog, a wife and a walnut tree

The more you beat them

The better they be.

Shaw considers women a vessel of Life Force, "Sexually woman is Nature's Contrivance for perpetuating its highest achievement". The Hindu view has nothing in common with the European view of women.

During the Epic period, women did not suffer from disabilities. Monogamy was allowed and marriage was a sacred obligation. According to Manu, "The only Vedic sacrament for them (women) is marriage". Dharmasastra also advocated the dependence of women upon men. Woman in Vedic India was considered to be goddess-like the Greek goddess Athena. They enjoyed liberty till the advent of Muslim rule. Havelock Ellis, the well-known student of sex, has beautifully summed up the Indian view of marriage, "Sexual life has been sanctified and divinized to a greater extent than in any other part of the world". Marriage to us is not a convention but a "device for the expression and development of love". Thus sexual relations Indians rose above the apes and dogs. According to Rig Veda married woman is the companion of her husband. Marriage provides the opportunity to enable the community of thought and feeling between the two. Wife and husband lived together for developing love which is not merely flame meeting flame but spirit calling to spirit. Marriage was not an end in itself but the means of gaining self-fulfillment. Polygamy and polyandry were forbidden. Sastras did allow the husband to marry a second time but with the consent of the wife. No religious ceremony was complete without the presence of a wife. In Ramayan, it is pointed out that Rama performed ceremonies with an image of his

wife by his side. Even the position of widows in ancient India was not degrading. According to S. Radhakrishnan "Regarding the practice of Sati or self-immolation, there is no direct reference to it in Vedic literature". Garhya Sutra, which describes ceremonies of domestic life in detail, is silent about it. But remarriage of widows was not recommended: in Smrti books, there is opposition to the remarriage of widows.

During the Muslim rule, women were confined to homes. The woman became the target of the Muslim king's lust. Her position deteriorated and during British rule, women became backward. The rulers preached women's inferiority because they wanted that the generations should remain backward.

With the dawn of freedom, a serious attempt has been made to emancipate women. "Hindu Code Bill" entitled women to share the property of their parents and the right to get judicial separation. The Dowry system is legally banned. Prostitution has been banned in many of the States of India. Widow marriage is encouraged. Women are to be given equal wages for equal work.

Women get equal opportunity of employment. According to the 1971 Census, out of 180 million workers, 149 million were males and 31 million females. Women occupy the topmost position in some fields in India. But unfortunately, 81.7% of Indian women are still illiterate. With regard to the relation of man and woman, we are imitating the west. Marriage is no longer considered to be as sacred as it was. Still, there is a tendency to treat the woman as an object of satisfying lust. We consider women somewhat inferior to men. India's President, Mr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed in his message for the IWY said, "The women of India played a silent, self-effacing role to sustain Indian civilization down the ages. For their greater participation in national life, it is necessary that they should occupy the position at the decision-making and planning levels."

In India, a committee for IWY is constituted with representatives of 33 organizations. The Committee has recommended that giving and taking dowry should be a cognizable offense, provide free legal aid to women in distress, and set up one home for women in each State capital. The Committee wanted "equal pay for equal work" and more facilities for vocational training of women. The Committee felt that woman at home is still exploited; "Housewives cannot just curse and bemoan their fate. They should be inspired to act untidily and vigorously against the dishonest ways of anti-social elements". Conditions of life have changed and the emancipated woman is breaking the trammels that bound her in traditional slavery. She is economically independent, politically equal, and socially free. She is no more confined to home, she is no more intellectual slave of man. So the relation of man and woman needs re-definition and re-adjustment.

The new basis of relationship, apart from economic and sex are to be discovered. Man and woman must realize their complementariness and base their relationship on equality and mutual respect. Woman wants more freedom, more facilities, and more rights. Domestic life has its drudgery and its own taboos. This has created many sociological problems. It needs a new family pattern to harmonize the claims of motherhood with the claim of freedom and greater social mobility.

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Social problems in India center on the connected issues of poverty and inequality. Particularly in rural areas lower castes and marginal social groups, such as tribal people and Muslims, are generally poor. India's poor face disease, scarce educational opportunities, and often physical abuse by those who control their livelihood. It is difficult or impossible for the poor to escape and enter the modernizing sector of society, where discrimination on the basis of caste or community is less prevalent. In all classes and in urban as well as rural areas, discrimination and at times violence against women is almost taken for granted.

Poverty has been reduced in India since independence, although in 1994, 35.04 percent of the population still lived below the poverty line. The industrialization has created jobs in the cities, and rural workers have been able to diversify their sources of income. Urban workers at entry-level, however, are usually forced to live in appalling conditions in slums.

Modern water supply and sanitation arrangements are rare in the poor areas of most towns and cities and are lacking entirely in most villages. As a result, many Indians suffer and even die from diarrhea, malaria, typhoid, and cholera. India has succeeded in eradicating smallpox and has brought down the overall death rate, in significant part by investing in a health care system that includes hospitals, clinics, and drug manufacture and distribution. By the mid-1990s acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) emerged as a serious problem. To combat the disease, the Indian government, with help from volunteer groups, established a vigorous AIDS awareness program.

Part of the problem of disease and poverty in villages is that poor people cannot afford the money and time it takes to provide treatment for their children, many of whom are already weakened by an inadequate diet. Girls of all classes are given less medical care than their brothers and so die in greater numbers. Many parents prefer sons, who remain with them and provide security for them in old age. Because daughters often require a dowry at marriage and are unlikely to

earn an income that could raise a family's economic position, they are seen as a liability. By the mid-1990s, the spread of family-planning facilities and the increase in confidence that children would survive to adulthood helped reduce the preferred family size to just three children: two sons and a daughter. Second and third-born daughters, especially in families without sons, continue to die at rates greater than average.

Discrimination against women does not end with childhood, nor is it confined to the countryside. Although India has had a woman as prime minister, the percentage of women serving in political or administrative office still remains very low. Some women are major leaders of grassroots movements, and women play an active role in India's vigorous press. Yet women are rare in senior business positions and in the legal and medical professions. Women's movements to combat violence against women have had considerable success in raising awareness of the issue and stimulating government action.

Discrimination against lower caste members, including the Harijans or former Untouchables, is still a problem in India. As result violence between castes sometimes breaks out. Since independence, many lower caste groups have mobilized politically

And have achieved positions of power or leverage in several states. More than 50 percent of the positions in the national civil service were reserved for members of lower castes by the mid-1990s. Efforts were reserved organize the landless and the homeless, however, have not enjoyed the same success. In rural areas, men of lower caste traditionally serve those of higher caste. This situation has aggravated caste conflict and has helped to keep the poor politically and socially weak.

Relations between Hindus and Muslims have also been problematic. After the partition of British India into India and Pakistan, Muslims of the northern provinces who stayed in India—where they were a minority—became vulnerable. Riots between Hindus and Muslims have occurred on occasion since the mid-1960s. Muslims in rural areas remain largely untouched by the conflict. Riots tend not to occur in areas where there are structures of mutual social or economic advantage—for example, in towns with a large industry owned by Hindus and employing Muslims. Also, at the personal level, there are many examples of friendships and mutual respect. Muslim leaders have served as presidents of India, and Muslims have held positions of great prominence in all fields, including the military.