Abstract

This paper tries to understand the status of women over the period of time in society. It draws parallels between the fundamental differences in approaches towards women in the West and in India, a trait which can also be witnessed in the realm of their respective religions too. From the realm of mythologies and religions, the paper moves on to give a historical perspective on the issue and further explores the position of women, both in the West and in India. In spite of the superficial differences in the two cultures, the paper observes that with the passage of time, the condition of women kept on deteriorating both in the West as well as in India until the 19th century. The paper specifically pays attention to the happenings of the 19th century and their influence on the gender discourse. The study is mainly based on the textual analysis of myths and religions which give an idea about the portrayal of women in the past and its impact on the contemporary gender relationship. It also identifies the challenges posed by the myths and religion to the idea of gender equity.

Keywords: Gender; Sex; Religion; Mythology; Feminism; Indian Renaissance

1. Introduction

The issue of gender equity is still unresolved in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. There has been a long history of woman subjugation in which they were not allowed equal status in comparison to their male counterparts. Later, women rights movements strengthened with the advent of modernity and democracy and started asserting for the equal rights of citizenship. The historic struggles of women brought many changes to the society. United Nations recognized the issue and declared International Women’s Day on March 8, as a mark of respect to gender equality (Watch, UN Women, 2017). The condition of women has been changing with the time but still, a lot more has to be done guarantee their rights. Though New Zealand was the first country in the world which gave voting rights to women 1893 but there are many countries today where women are not allowed to cast their vote and get equal wages (Dilli, 2015). In this backdrop, this paper tries to unfold the historical reasons of women subordination, identifies the challenges and proposes respective solutions.
Although Gender Equity is a 20th-century phenomenon, the issues of gender have existed ever since men and women started being judged on the basis of gender. The term “gender” is often confused with “sex.” However, to distinguish between the two, “sex” is something biological whereas “gender” is a socio-cultural construct. Beauvoir (1973) says, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” in other words, there is no difference between man and women except their biological differences. This is a more modern and scientific outlook to understand the gender relationship in society but human history has been shaped by myths and religions, therefore, these realities still influence the collective wisdom of society.

2. The Construction of Gender
2.1 Women in the Abrahamic Scriptures

The Bible has been an important text of Christianity which creates the myths about gender:

“And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” *Genesis* 2:7 ([http://biblehub.com/nasb/genesis/2.htm](http://biblehub.com/nasb/genesis/2.htm))

“And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed.” *Genesis* 2: 8

“But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is man…” 11:3

The same thought finds an echo in the New Testament and in the book, there have been instances which show that women, in general, were viewed in poor light. Chapter 11, verse 3 of I Corinthians states:

“I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children; Your desire shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you.” *Genesis* 3:16

On a careful examination of these lines from the Old Testament, one can see how a woman, formed out of the rib taken out of a man, had to owe her allegiance to man. Furthermore, in the same book, Eve, the first woman, was held responsible for the Original Sin as it was considered that she provoked Adam to eat the forbidden fruit which eventually led to their banishment from Paradise. For this act of disobedience the Lord cursed Eve saying:

The same thought finds an echo in the New Testament and in the book, there have been instances which show that women, in general, were viewed in poor light. Chapter 11, verse 3 of I Corinthians states:
“For the man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man” 11:8

“Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.” 11:9

Thus, in Christianity by and large, a woman has been viewed as a mischief monger. She was held responsible for the ‘Original Sin’ and a source of constant seduction, especially by the Pontiffs. It can be rightly said that as ‘religion’ and the ‘men associated with religion’ were prejudiced against women, men too started living in an ‘illusion of superiority’.

The Hebrew Bible provides more or less a similar version regarding the creation of woman that puts her in a highly subordinating context:

But for Adam (or the man) no suitable helper was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs (or "took part of the man's side") and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib (or "took part of the man's side") he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."

- Genesis 2:20b-24,

Islam manifestly ascertains sexism and gender discrimination in precise arithmetical terms:

"The male shall have the equal of the portion of two females"
- Quran (4:11)

and

"and the men are a degree above them [women]" -Quran (2:228)

All these religious and mythical beliefs played an important role to construct the image of a woman.

2.2 Women in the West

It is alarming to note that it was not just these religions that looked down upon women but some eminent thinkers also expressed their reservations against women. According to Plato, (Grube, 1992) women, in general, lack the strength possessed by men and for that reason he did not consider them equal to men. Furthermore, for him, they were also a source of conflict. Even the much admired
Rousseau (Rousseau, 2004) dubbed women as “the sex that ought to obey.” The renowned psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (Freud, 1925) also considered women inferior to men. In his paper entitled, ‘The Psychical Consequences of the Anatomic Distinction between the Sexes’ he wrote, “Women oppose change, receive passively and add nothing of their own.” These and many other views of Freud continue to generate controversy even today.

However, with the advent of the Feminist movements, there has been a paradigm shift as the feminists challenged the traditionally held male dominated view on women. Mary Wollstonecraft (Woolstonecraft, 2004) one of the pioneers of Feminism, began A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with a critique of philosophers like Rousseau and John Locke who raised questions on women’s education. In his much-acclaimed book Emily, (Rousseau 2004) stated that women do not need rational education and should only be imparted is domestic education. This statement of Rousseau enraged Wollstonecraft and in her book, she argued that women ought to be educated as it is essential for the all-round development and for raising good children. She was of the view that women should be viewed as men’s companions, not mere wives. Another groundbreaking work on Feminism was Simone de Beauvoir’s (Beauvoir, 1973) The Second Sex. In her book, de Beauvoir argues brilliantly that ‘femininity is manufactured in society’ and that ‘one is not born but rather becomes a woman.’ In the West it was as a result of efforts made by feminist activists like Wollstonecraft, de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kate Millet, Teresa Billington, Greig, Margery, Corbett Ashby, Margaret Atwood, Susan Brownmiller, Norah Elam to name a few, who campaigned for the rights of women and their rights such as suffrage, equal pay for equal work, property rights, and many more, that the perception of Western societies towards women has changed to quite an extent and the Western woman, by and large is a liberated woman today.

2.3 Women in Indian Myths

However, in the Hindu Pantheon, goddesses like Durga, Kali, Saraswati, and Lakshmi, to name a few, occupied a respectable position. Furthermore, Hinduism also talks of the Sankhya concept in which both Purusha (male creative energy) and Prakriti (female creative energy) are considered equally important forces of creation.

In this tradition, the Early Vedic period also saw a number of eminent women scholars. For instance, in the Rig Veda period, women seers called ‘Brahmavadinasis’ like Vach, Apala, Mandhatri, Godha, Khela, Mudgalani and Lopamudra composed various hymns of the Rig Veda. Another celebrated woman mentioned in the Rig Veda was the legendary warrior Vishpala. When Vishpala lost her leg in a battle, she demanded a “leg of iron” so that she could continue fighting. Maitreyi, a renowned scholar of the Upanishad period is well known for her philosophical discussions along with her husband Yajnavalkaya. Besides Maitreyi,
Gargi and Aitreyi were also learned and qualified women of the period. Bharati, the wife of the great philosopher Mandal Mishra, once defeated Shankaracharya in a debate.

All these examples speak volumes about the status and caliber of the ancient Indian women. The women of the Early Vedic Period had a right to choose their own husbands and could remarry if their husbands died. They participated in religious ceremonies and even possessed political rights to attend assemblies. Thus, on the whole, women occupied a significant position in Early Vedic Period and the men folk acted in accordance with this ‘shlok’ from Manusmriti, “YatraNariAstuPujyanteRamanteTatraDevata” which means that the Gods reside in places where a woman is worshiped.

However, as time passed, the condition of women started deteriorating. This was a result of superstition, illiteracy, and ignorance that had crept in society by then. Women were boycotted from religious ceremonies, lost the rights to choose husbands and attend political assemblies. Furthermore, malpractices of the day such as child marriage, Sati Pratha and Devdasi Pratha added to the plight of women. One of the main reasons for this dilemma could be man’s “evolution”. As man progressed, he entered into civilization. Civilization was possible for a man and not for other animals because of the immense possibilities of his brain. This brain promoted man from being a mere animal to being someone who was ‘cast in the image of God.’ Prof. Carl Johan Calleman observed in his highly valued work, 'The Global Mind and the Rise of Civilization: The Quantum Evolution of Consciousness' (2014) - "Civilization is a product of the human mind, which is in resonance with the global mind. The pyramids, writing and numbers of early civilizations, were, for instance, created by the new eight-partitioned, compartmentalized mind emerging at the beginning of the Long Count." In the pre-civilization era, when man’s brain was not very developed, he was simple, lived in harmony and was nearer to Nature. This could be seen as the reason why the gender differences and gender-related problems were not so prominent in the pre-civilization and early civilization eras. It is astounding to know that civilization is often equated to complexity. For instance, even the New World Encyclopaedia (Civilization, 2017) refers to civilization as “a complex human society in which people live in groups of settled dwellings.” It further sees civilization and society as two facets of the same coin when it states that:

Civilization can be viewed as the external manifestation and culture as the internal character of a society. Thus, civilization is expressed in physical attributes, such as toolmaking, agriculture, buildings, technology, urban planning, social structure, social institutions, and so forth. Culture, on the other hand, refers to the social standards and norms of behavior, the traditions, values, ethics, morality, and religious beliefs and practices that are held in common by members of the society.
It can clearly be perceived that as man became more and more civilized, he moved further from Nature. This can be seen as the root cause of all the maladies. Once a man found his way out of the jungles and made his way into the settlement, he started making use of his mental faculties which developed considerably over time. The man who was mentally more capable of acquiring knowledge became the more “learned” man. This “knowledgeable” and “learned man” started behaving in a patronizing and condescending manner, drawing boundaries around himself. This attitude could have possibly given rise to the caste system in our country. The “learned” man emerged as the Brahman, who maintained a strong hold on religious affairs and was instrumental in keeping the low caste people and women at bay. As settlements emerged, the political system also got complex. As there were tensions between various factions, the men who possessed muscular strength were sent to war fronts. This gave rise to yet another prominent caste, the Kshatriyas who emerged the warring class. As the Kshatriyas possessed physical strength, they too considered themselves superior and confined their womenfolk to the four walls of their houses. Later, Islam brought with it some more malpractices like the ‘Purdah’ system. During the Medieval times, women started being seen as mere commodities and became so vulnerable that it started being seen as a curse to be born a woman. Despite all efforts to confine women in the four walls of the house, the Medieval period also saw a great number of headstrong women like Razia Sultan, Chand Bibi, Jijabai, Mirabai and Durgawati, to name a few.

The above-mentioned malpractices were rampant in the Indian society and kept escalating until the Indian Renaissance ushered in a new era of hope and reforms. It is interesting to note that the Indian Renaissance, which had its roots in the freedom struggle, contributed immensely in women’s liberalization. It was as a result of the laudable efforts made by crusaders like Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshav Chandra Sen, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Dadabhainoraji, Syed Ahmed Khan and Mahatma Gandhi, that brought about women’s empowerment. Women participated actively in the National Movement. They held public meetings and rallies, organized picketing of shops selling foreign goods and alcohol, went to jail and even laid down their lives in order to free their Motherland from the foreign yoke. The contribution of women freedom fighters like Kittu Rani Chennamma, Rani of Jhansi, Begam Hazrat Mahal, Sarojini Naidu, Preetilata Waddadar, Lakshmi Sahgal, Kasturba Gandhi, Beena Das, Kanaklatha Baruah and Indira Gandhi will remain etched in the hearts of Indians forever.

3. Women in the 19th Century (Indian Woman: Past and Present)

If we look at the scene today, the status of women has undergone a sea change both in the West as well as in India. In the West, women have become liberalized to quite an extent and are gradually being seen as an integral part of the
socio-economic structure. Today, women both in the West and India are at the helm of important affairs. The contribution made by prominent women like Madam Curie, Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi, Chandrika Kumaratunga, Hillary Clinton, Kiran Bedi, Kalpana Chawla, Sunita Williams, Saina Nehwal, Sania Mirza, and even Malala Yousafzai, the young Pakistani education and women’s activist needs no mention. However, the gender problem still looms large, especially in the developing and the underdeveloped nations where extremist militant organizations like Boko Haram and the ISIS have been wreaking havoc on the lives of females need to be brought to justice.

The declining female sex ratio along with the ever increasing cases of prenatal DNA gender tests resulting in forced female feticides and the rise of crimes against women bear testimony to the dire need of redressing gender issues but the lacuna in-laws and the over-burdened judiciary are usually lax in complying with the issues. The need of the hour is to implement women oriented policies of the Central and State governments at grass root levels so that women are truly empowered. It is unfortunate that policies like Kanyadhan, Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakrama, reservation for women in local electoral bodies, to name a few, do not serve the real purpose of women representation. The Women Reservation bill has been pending for decades. All these loopholes, unfortunately, point towards the lack of political will to empower women where it really matters.

The 16th Lok Sabha has just 59 women parliamentarians which is the highest since independence. Rao (2016) a leading RTI activist in the area of transparency, accountability and governance makes an interesting observation – "Central to the question of women’s representation in Lok Sabha is the appetite for women to take the political plunge and jump into the fray along with and against male candidates, getting tickets from their respective parties to contest elections and finally winning the seats that they contest. While popular perception might be that few women are willing to or have taken the political plunge, a number of women contestants tells an interesting story. Between 1957 (the earliest data available) and 2015, the total number of women contestants has increased from 45 to 668. That is a whopping 15 fold increase in the number of women contesting. If we looked at the data for male contestants for the same years, the number has increased from 1474 to 7583, a five-fold increase. The 15 fold increase in women contestants indicates towards the growing appetite for women to enter the political fray and willingness to be part of political decision-making."

Due to the very small representation of women in Parliament, it is not possible to formulate proper policies related to women’s issues. Furthermore, the Union Budget 2013-14 has allocated Rs. 200 crores for new women welfare schemes. Since independence many measures have been taken to improve a lot of women, however, these measures are superficial as they seldom percolate to the grass root
A large number of women-related issues, especially those related to the voiceless women still needs to be addressed. In spite of the efforts on the part of the government, activists, and NGOs, women related crimes are rampant in society. Gender discrimination in wages is a regular feature, especially in the unorganized sector. For example, the Banaras Silk Industry has custom bound laws of inheritance, and the ownership and control of property tend to work against women. Similar is the plight of women workers in tea and coffee plantations, jute industry and various mills and factories across the country. The working conditions of these women are hazardous in every respect including health. However, holding mere discussions on women’s issues will lead us nowhere until concrete solutions are found to provide women a dignified status.

The following are some ways which can help in resolving the gender issue:

The gender issue can be resolved to a large degree by promoting women’s education. Women’s education is essential for a truly developed world. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, (Vivekananda, 1944) “There is no chance of the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing.” Swamiji was deeply pained seeing the deplorable condition of women of his motherland and he expressed his anguish in the following words, “It is very difficult to understand why in this country so much difference is made between men and women, whereas the Vedanta declares that one and the same conscious self is present in all beings. You always criticize the women, but what have you done for their enlistment?” In his scheme of education for women, Swamiji laid stress on physical education too. He wanted women to be physically strong and fearless so that they become capable of sustaining themselves in every way. Swamiji was dedicated towards the cause of women and throughout his life, he fought relentlessly for the cause of women. His disciple Sister Nivedita also played a major role in promoting women’s education particularly in the villages of West Bengal.

However, education cannot be the answer to all the crimes against women. Today, although the literacy rate has gone up, but so has the crime rate. The need of the hour is to implement stricter laws for crime against women. It is also important to note that the issues that confront women cannot just be redressed through laws and various welfare schemes. All the golden schemes and pro-women laws can serve no purpose until they are implemented to empower women. The women who are at the receiving end ought to be uplifted so that they become capable of empowering themselves. It is observed at times that some overbearing women try to subjugate their weaker counterparts. In India, many domineering mother-in-laws can be held responsible for the deaths of their submissive daughter-in-laws. Similarly, many dictatorial daughter-in-laws are to be blamed for the deplorable condition of their parents-in-law. If gender equality has to be achieved, it is essential that the mindset of both men and women to be transformed. We have to be progressive in our outlook so that we may bring about the change that we aspire.
Women empowerment can also be brought about through capacity building programs. An empowered woman has a positive self-image. The quota system introduced at the political level (Panchayat, Legislative Assemblies and Parliament) has contributed towards empowering women politically. Women should also be empowered economically because if they are financially independent, they can contribute more towards their family earnings and provide stability and security to their families. Furthermore, they can also contribute towards building the national economy. Social and cultural empowerment of women should also be brought about. Women should be promoted to cultivate their innate qualities like forgiveness, kindness, compassion, love, understanding and creation. It is remarkable to note that Lord Krishna also aspired to be a woman for the aforementioned six essential feminine qualities. It is ironic to see that in order to survive in this cruel patriarchal world women are being molded as men which seem to be unnatural for a woman’s strength lies in being a woman, not a man.

4. Conclusion

There is no dearth of pro-women laws and schemes in our country but despite all constitutional provisions and other legislative measures, the situation of women hasn’t changed much. The declining sex ratio and an increase in the rate of crime against women are matters of grave concern. The need of the hour is to create awareness about the problems faced by women and to bring about an attitudinal change in the thinking of both men and women and also help the women who are at the receiving end in helping themselves. However, before bringing about a social reformation, each one of us has to bring in a transformation inside us and not just witness the change outside but be the change that we want to be. In this way, we will be contributing honestly towards building a better society. Some simple steps are recommended which we can follow in our daily lives in order to bring about a positive change. The most fundamental things that we can sincerely practice are simplicity and honesty, as was advocated by the Father of our nation, Mahatma Gandhi. Earlier in the paper, it was stateded that all problems created by man resulted because of his complex thinking. How far can a man go with a complex thinking? It is a result of man’s complex thinking that he became narrow-minded. This narrow-mindedness has been largely responsible for making him authoritarian. And keeping in mind that man is all mind and woman all heart, this man who perceived himself as a “rational being” started subjugating woman who was more about emotions and feelings. Since then the vulnerable woman has been bearing the brunt of gender inequity.

Mahatma Gandhi said in 1921-"Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, so shocking or so brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity to me, the female sex, not the weaker sex. It is the nobler of the two, for it is even today the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge" (Young India, 15-9-1921, p. 292).
If we are really serious about uplifting our womenfolk, we have to make sincere efforts to set ourselves free from the shackles of manipulation and “tradition” and make a fresh start. William Blake (Blake, 2000) puts it beautifully when he says, “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow clints of his cavern.” If we want our world to change we should take examples from noble souls like Mahatma Gandhi who believed in simplicity of thought and action. Once we simplify our thinking and living, our minds will automatically be cleansed of all complexities and we will start viewing the world as an organic whole and this will eventually lead us towards Truth. Once we start understanding that this world is not about confrontation and control but about co-operation and assimilation, we will start experiencing a positive change inside ourselves which will automatically be reflected in the society as well. It is just a matter of practice.

The need of the hour is to become aware and sensitive to the problems faced by women and find effective measures to eradicate them. Emancipation of women is impossible unless their rights are recognized as Human Rights which ensure equality and dignity to the members of the entire human race and prohibit “all forms of discrimination on grounds of gender of fundamental freedom and human rights” (Pandya, 2003).

Frans Timmermans, the Vice-President, Better Regulation, Inter-Institutional Relations, the Rule of Law and the Charter of Fundamental Right and Věra Jourová, Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality introduce the ‘2017 Report on Equality between Women and Men in the EU’ with these words - “We have come a long way in Europe with how we ensure equality between women and men. Nevertheless, we must be vigilant as we see that many gains in this field are being put to the test. In the context of persistent economic inequality and rising intolerance – both online and in the public sphere – it is essential for the EU to reaffirm its strong commitment to gender equality. The principle of equality between women and men has been enshrined in the EU treaties already since 1957. Since then, a lot of progress has been made, women have reaped the benefits of education and significantly increased their presence in the labour market” (Timmermans and Jourová, 2017).

The need of the hour is to empower women on all fronts so that they are able to steer the ship of their life confidently. However, the points mentioned in the paper should not be confused with the “real things”. The plight of the intellectuals is that we often mistake the words for the “real thing (Pandey, 2010)” and bask in the glory of our academic accomplishments. As academicians, we should not limit ourselves to the written word and strive towards achieving something more tangible. We academicians are fortunate to be dealing with adolescents who are like wet clay and the academician like a potter has the capacity to mould the young minds and
change their mindsets in order to bring about a positive change. If this is achieved, our world can become a better place to live in, in the years to come.

References


