



## 1. Women of India i.e. Bharat: A Historical Journey

**Prof. Anupma Kaushik**

Dept of Political Science and Public Administration

Dr Harisingh Gour University, Sagar, MP

Email- kaushikanupma@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

*Women are a diverse group so it is very difficult to generalize about women however women do have certain common experiences and this paper tries to bring up the commonality of women's historical journey in India without forgetting the women in other parts of the world. The paper tries to see the journey of women of India i.e. Bharat, from ancient times to contemporary times, within the context of women all over the world and also in the context of political and economic changes occurring in the world which includes what have been the challenges before them and what have been the opportunities. The paper finds out the reasons why they had better status at certain times and places and also the reasons that led to deterioration in their status. It also deals with the progress achieved by Indian women since independence and what more needs to be done. The paper also tries to identify the solutions or future roadmap.*

**Key words:** Women in *Bharat*, Women in India, Women in China, Women in Europe, women in Middle East

### **Introduction**

Women are almost half of the world's population and are a diverse group. They are not a monolith. Differences exist among women on the basis of age, place, time, family, region, race, religion, wealth, work, education, country, leadership, ideology, political condition, etc. A woman living in a developed, democratic country in Europe will have a different life than a woman living in Afghanistan or Ukraine war zones. Similarly, a woman living as a slave or serf in dark ages in England and a woman living in England today will have very different lives and experiences. Hence experiences of women, their condition, their status depends upon which time zone they are. If they are in ancient times their lives will be different from women in medieval



times or from contemporary women. A woman's own age also matters. If she is young she is attractive, inexperienced and immature and same woman in her forties or fifties will be more confident, experienced and mature. A wealthy woman does not have same problems as a poor woman. A woman with a supportive family will have more opportunities to become successful than a woman without a family or with an unsupportive family. A woman living in a theocracy like Saudi Arabia will have a different life than a woman living in Sweden today. Hence it is very difficult to generalize about women however women being women do have certain common experiences and this paper tries to bring up the commonality of women's historical journey in India without forgetting the women in other parts of the world.

**Women in Ancient Times:** The condition of women in ancient times was better than their condition in medieval times the world over. A look at the status of women in ancient times in *Bharat* tells that women in ancient times received education. Some of them were *Ved-drishta*. They had the freedom to choose their life partners. There were no *purdah* and no child marriages in *Vedic* times. Many Goddesses were worshipped by men and women.<sup>1</sup> Children were known by their mothers name too such as *Anjani putr Hanuman* (meaning *Hanuman* son of *Anjani*), *Kaushalya nandan Shri Ram*, *Devki nandan Shri Krishan*. Men were also known by their wives name such as *Sita vallabh Shri Ram Ram* the beloved of *Sita*), *Parvati pati Mahadev* (*Mahadev* husband of *Parvati* ). The condition of women of *Bharat* started deteriorating with attacks by Greeks in 327 AD, Huns by 458 AD. Attacks, wars and conflict always create vulnerable situation for women. Since attackers not only eyed the material wealth but also the women. Hence the defenders put many restrictions upon women in order to protect them. These restrictions may have come from best of intentions but they did put women under many constraints. So in ancient *Bharat* women encountered some restrictions on their movement and choice of life partner in marriage. In ancient Greek religion many Goddesses are mentioned. Athena was Goddess of wisdom, intelligence, courage and honour. Other Goddesses such as Demeter and Persephone were also revered by Greeks.<sup>2</sup> Ancient Egypt also had Goddesses such as Isis, Hathor, Bastet, Astarte, Maat, Nephthys, Seshat and Serket. Women in ancient Egypt had high status and were regarded as almost equal to males and held prominent positions. In 3000 BCE Mereneith and in 30 BCE Cleopatra VII ruled as Queens in Egypt.<sup>3</sup> In ancient China too Goddesses were worshipped. Ancient Chinese worshipped Goddess named Xi-Wang-Mu

Xiwangmu who lived in a castle of gold in the Kunlun Mountains. She was also known as ‘Queen Mother of the West’ as she lived in the land of Xihua (West Flower).<sup>4</sup> She was the Goddess of immortality and rewarded her followers with eternal life but punished those who angered her. Another Goddess worshipped by ancient Chinese was Guanyin who was Goddess of mercy, wisdom, liberation and compassion and a patron of sailors and fishermen. She had a *Bhartiya* connection as she was originally Tara born from the tears of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. She came to China via Silk Road. The story is that she incarnated as Miaoshan and refused to marry unless her marriage eliminated illness, suffering and death. So she was allowed to enter a temple but was executed by her father. She went to *Yamalok* and turned it into a paradise so Lord *Yam* send her back to earth and she lived on Fragrant Mountain rescuing sailors and fishermen. Nuwa is the mother deity of human beings. She was born at the beginning of creation and fixed all the mistakes to make everything perfect. She created human beings as she was lonely but soon she was tired and hence created marriage so that they could reproduce. She also gave them gift of fire, writing, skills, music, culture and divination. Change was Goddess of moon and Zhi Nu was Goddess of weaving.<sup>5</sup>

**Women in Medieval Times:** Medieval times i.e. the period between fifth and fifteenth centuries were difficult for women as their position deteriorated due to attacks, invasions, wars, conflicts, expansionism, fundamentalism, patriarchy, misogyny etc. Patriarchy reigned in Europe and West Asia during this period. In Medieval Europe, women were clearly considered inferior to men. Women faced many legal, economic, religious challenges. Married women were dependent on their husbands. They could not sign agreements; nor testify in court. They could not borrow money in their own name. However women worked in the markets. As per criminal law, women were tied up and burnt to death for committing murder. Some modern historians attribute this to misogyny.<sup>6</sup> According to them, the reason was that at this time there were three prominent Abrahamic sects in Europe - Christian, Jewish and Muslim. In these sects, the beginning of humans was believed to be from Adam and Eve. Eve was held responsible for Adam’s expulsion from paradise. It is believed that Eve brought ignorance and evil into the world. She is naturally disobedient and responsible for sexual arousal among men; hence she i.e. woman should remain under the control of man. Therefore, in this period in Europe, women were considered to be the property of their close male relatives. They were made to sit on the left side of the church. The

Latin word for left means evil or dreadful.<sup>7</sup> At this time, there was a severe famine in Europe and the plague called 'Black Death' halved its population. For the above reasons, the Middle Ages were also called the Dark Ages in Europe. Even during the Renaissance period, a woman had to surrender her property to her husband upon marriage. At this time there used to be 'witch trials/hunts' in which intelligent and uncontrollable women were killed by branding them as 'witches'. In this way, about fifty thousand women were killed.<sup>8</sup> Women termed as witches were wise old women who worked with herbs to find cures for various ailments. They had inherited the knowledge from their ancestors. They were made the scapegoat and blamed for every misfortune like spread of bubonic plague, animal's death, a bad harvest and curdled food. Pope Leo X decreed that all those convicted for these were to be executed. During this time poor women openly solicited their bodies for money on the streets of Europe. They were known as – the whore or prostitutes and were at times killed.<sup>9</sup> Women were also subordinate to men in West Asia. In West Asia the new religion discriminated against women. Men could have four wives and could easily divorce them. In *Bharat* too women were pushed into insecurity due to attacks in North West *Bharat*. Fear of abduction, selling, *harem*, prostitution resulted in *purdah*, child marriages, girl infanticide, less education, polygamy, *jauhar*, *sati*, and dependence on males. However these ill practices were restricted to northern part of *Bharat*. Southern part of *Bharat* did not have these practices as it did not face the kind of attacks north had faced.

**Women in Modern Times:** Europeans found sea passage to rich world in the east and exploited it since late 15<sup>th</sup> century. Columbus reached America in 1493 and Vasco de Gama reached *Bharat* in 1498. They controlled large parts of Asia, Africa and America and exploited it in every possible way. They acquired wealth, knowledge, culture, education, science and technology. Through this knowledge they shook of fundamentalism and theocracy in Europe resulting in reformation, renaissance, humanism, and prosperity leading to democracy and welfare state in Europe. The condition of women in Europe also started to change due to all this. Women also started to read and write and discuss their own condition and it gave birth to western feminism in three waves and various types starting with liberal to radical. The two world wars gave women the opportunity to work as men went to war. Meanwhile, science and technology enabled women to have smaller families. It also gave them machines to save time and energy for example cooking gas, washing machine, mixer, grinder etc. Due to machines now women could do most

of the work earlier reserved for men such as digging or driving. Machines were used instead of muscles of men for most such works. All this improved condition of women in Europe. However, West Asia remained theocratic and fundamentalism reined there which meant women continued to live restricted lives although in many places they were now wealthy due to oil and gas exports. In places like *Bharat* and most of Africa and America initially women suffered due to colonization and exploitation which resulted in poverty, inferiority, destruction of agriculture and industries. However in later years they benefitted from technology. For example in *Bharat* British colonization resulted in famines, bubonic plague, acute poverty, destruction of agriculture, deindustrialization, destruction of *gurukul* education. The ill practices which had developed during invasions continued for example female infanticide, female neglect, child marriage, repeated pregnancies, *purdah*, female illiteracy, polygamy, *sati*, permanent and pathetic widowhood. Some social reformers made efforts to remove some of the hardships that women faced and also to provide some opportunities to women. There were efforts to stop infanticide, *purdah*, *sati*, polygamy. There were efforts for widow remarriage and raising age of marriage. During British rule women entered freedom struggle. From *Maharani Lakshmibai*, *Rani Chennama*, women in *Azad Hind Fauj*, to revolutionaries like Durga Bhabhi, Pritilata, Usha Mehta, Madam Cama sacrificed for *Bharat's* independence. Many women also adopted *Khadi* and *swadeshi*; participated in picketing, rallies, demonstrations and boycott of British goods; involved in collection of funds; suffered *lathi charge*; stood trials at courts; served prison sentences and laid down their lives. Women also took care of families while men served prison sentences. Participation in freedom struggle enhanced respect for women in the country.

**Women in Contemporary Times:** Women of earth today inhabit three worlds. One category is of women in western democracies who had started the feminist movement in the western world demanding legal equality vis-a-vis men, have achieved legal equality. Later on feminism developed many more forms like radical feminism and in due course was over taken by ideas like wokeism and gender fluidity. Another category is of women in West Asia and North Africa who are followers of Islam and who lack legal equality vis-a-vis men. They live in a world where women are legally subordinate to men. Another category of women are those who live in countries like *Bharat*. For most women law is in their favour and they have special rights and opportunities in law but in reality some women still face a lot of problems due to poverty,

insecurity, violence, and law not getting implemented properly. And for Muslim women personal law too is against them and puts them in a legally subordinate position vis -a-vis Muslim men.

**Women in Politics in the Modern times:** In the west women got voting right decades after men. New Zealand was the first country to grant national voting rights to women in 1893 while men got it in 1879. Kate Sheppard led the monster petition on which more than 25,500 women signed.<sup>10</sup> In many western countries white women were granted right to vote before black and native women. For example in USA white women got it in 1920 but black women got it in 1965. In Canada white women got it in 1918 but Asian Canadians got it in 1940s and indigenous women got it in 1960. In Australia white women got it in 1902 but indigenous women got it in 1962. In Switzerland women got it in 1971, in Portugal in 1976, in Kuwait in 2005 and in Saudi Arabia in 2015. *Bharat* granted voting rights to women along with men after independence.<sup>11</sup> Finland was the first country where women became members of parliament in 1907.<sup>12</sup> Women are about 24 % of national parliaments in the world however in Rwanda women are 56%, in Cuba 53% and in Bolivia 52% in national legislature. Nordic countries like Sweden have 43% women and Denmark has 37% women in national parliaments. Caribbean nations have 42% women while USA has 24%.<sup>13</sup> In *Bharat* in 17<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha 15 % members were women. Indian parliament has passed 128<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment which has reserved one third seats for women.<sup>14</sup> Sirimavo Bandaranaike was the first woman to assume position of Prime Minister in 1960, followed by Indira Gandhi in 1966, Golda Meir of Israel in 1969, Margaret Thatcher in 1975 and first woman president was Finnbogadottir of Iceland. In 2024 in 28 countries women are working as Head of State/ Government.<sup>15</sup> Currently India has a women President named Droupadi Murmu and USA has a Vice President Kamala Harris. Worldwide about one fifth of government ministers are women but some countries have gender parity such as Spain, Albania, Colombia, Canada, France.<sup>16</sup>

**Women of *Bharat* at Independence:** Women had participated in freedom struggle and gained respect due to it. Fifteen women became **members of the Constituent Assembly** of *Bharat*. **Constitution granted equal political rights** to women. Women also became **cabinet minister** (Rajkumari Amrit Kaur), **Governor** (Sarojini Naidu), **ambassador** (Vijaylakshmi Pandit), judge (Anna Chandy) immediately after independence. However, there were many problems faced by women during this period. The **independence was accompanied by violence** on Hindu and Sikh



women especially in area which became Pakistan. 125000 women were abducted and many were converted and forced into marriages. Women were tortured, raped, paraded, tattooed, mutilated and disfigured.<sup>17</sup> Many committed suicide and many were killed by family members to escape the horror. Later some women were brought back to *Bharat* but by then they were ‘broken’ by repeated rapes and starvation.<sup>18</sup> Another problem was that of **refugee women**. Women with or without their family were forced to leave their homes and move to *Bharat* from what had become Pakistan due to violence unleashed by Pakistanis. Most had to leave all of a sudden without taking much with them. They were robbed on the way of whatever they had. So the refugee women faced poverty, displacement, disowning, exploitation and prostitution. Apart from these although the constitution provided for gender equality but the laws were biased against women. There were **inequalities in law** such as polygamy; lack of equal inheritance; anti women service conditions of IFS and IAS which forced women to resign if they got married; and husbands control over women.<sup>19</sup> Moreover the society during invasions and colonial periods had turned **patriarchal** due to influence of rulers. Society had put many restrictions over women due to various kinds of insecurities. Injurious practices such as female infanticide, neglect of girl child and child marriage continued, and others like dowry developed. **Female illiteracy** was also a reality as invaders and colonial powers had destroyed the education system of *Bharat*. When British left *Bharat* female literacy was about nine percent only.<sup>20</sup> Women also suffered due to destruction of education, skills, agriculture and cottage industries during British rule. They faced acute poverty and lack of opportunity and resources. They also suffered due to bad law and order and resulting restrictions and exploitation.

**Tacking the Negatives:** After independence various governments made following efforts for tackling the negatives and to empower women:

1. The **constitution of *Bharat* granted equality** and prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex. Directive Principles of State Policy also had provisions for equal remuneration and Uniform Civil Law for gender equality.
2. Governments since independence enacted **many laws** which strengthened women’s status in law. To illustrate Hindu Marriage Act 1955 ended polygamy, allowed divorce and maintenance for Hindu, Sikh, Jain and Buddhist women. Hindu Minority and

Guardianship Act 1956 made mother natural guardian of minor children. Hindu Succession Act of 1956 gave women inheritance rights in family property. Many more laws like Immoral Traffic Prevention Act 1956; The Maternity Benefit Act 1961; Dowry Prohibition Act 1961 and 1986; The Medical Termination of Pregnancy act 1971; Hindu Women Right to Property Act 1973; Equal Remuneration Act 1976; Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act 1986; 33% Reservation to Women in local bodies 1992; National Commission for Women 1992; Pre Conception and Pre Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act (Prohibition of Sex Selection) 1994; Protection from Domestic Violence Act 2005; Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013; Criminal Law *Nirbhaya* Act 2013<sup>21</sup>; Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act 2019 to end instant Triple *Talaq*; *Nari Shakti Vandan Abhinandan* Act 2023 for 33 % reservation to women in Parliament and Assemblies etc.

3. Governments since independence enacted **many schemes** to strengthened women such as National Crèche Scheme, Short Stay Homes for Women Victims of Violence, *Balika Samridhi Yojna*, Mid Day Meal, Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls-RGSEAG, STEP, *Janani Suraksha Yojna*, *Kishori Shakti Yojna*, MGNREGA, *Ujjawala*, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*, *Indradhanush*, *Mudra Yojna*, *Mahilan Shakti Kendra*, *Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojna*, *Swadhar Greh Scheme*, One Stop Centre and Universalization of Women Helpline etc<sup>22</sup>
4. There were some pro women **court judgments** which also empowered women relating to maintenance, custodial rape, service condition of air hostess, share in fathers property to Christian women, sexual harassment at workplace, bigamy and uniform civil code, equal remuneration, triple *talaq*, inter caste marriage, compulsory registration of marriage, custody of minor child, termination of pregnancy, acid attack victims etc.<sup>23</sup>
5. Some women took up the opportunity and became **pioneering women** in almost every field way before women occupied important positions in the west. To illustrate first Vice Chancellor Hansa Mehta in 1946; first Governor Sarojini Naidu in 1947; first District Judge Anna Chandy in 1937; first IFS C B Muthamma in 1948; first commercial pilot Prem Mathur in 1947; first Director General of Botanical Survey of India Janaki Ammal



in 1954; first President of UN General Assembly Vijay Laxmi Pandit in 1953; first PM Indira Gandh in 1966i; first IPS Kiran Bedi in 1972; first Chief Justice of High Court Leila Seth in 1991; first President Pratibha Patil in 2007.

6. **Media and education** were used to make people aware of family planning, gender equality and women empowerment. The propaganda for years convinced people to have small families with just two kids. Government gave bureaucrats targets to achieve goals to vasectomy and tubal ligation for women as well as propagated contraceptive pills, implants, injectables, patches, vagina ring, intra uterine devices, condoms etc.<sup>24</sup>
7. However a very important role was played by **science and technology**. It provided birth control methods which enabled women to plan their family and limit number of children. With limited number of children women had time and energy to do other things like study, have a career, earn money etc. Earlier women with many children had to devote all their time and energy in taking care of children and deal with continuous cycle of pregnancy, child birth and child care. Science and technology also provided many gadgets in the kitchen like gas stove, mixer grinder, washing machine, etc which saved women from drudgery of house work along with saving time and energy which now they could devote to doing other things. Another way in which science and technology helped women was medical facilities which saved women and young children from untimely deaths and many diseases. Assured of longevity of life of their children and propaganda by government women started to opt for two children only. The government propaganda of - '*Hum do hamare do*'- 'Have two children only' also benefitted women. This along with medical facility and house gadgets enabled women to manage both home and work.

### **Comparing Status of Women at Independence and Now:**

1. **Sex Ratio:** In 1951 sex ratio was 946 women to 1000 men. In 2011 it deteriorated to 940 women for 1000 men however as per 2023 National Family Health Survey (NFHS) there are 1020 women to 1000 men.<sup>25</sup>
2. **Literacy and Literacy Gap:** At the time of independence female literacy was 8.9 percent and in 2011 it was 64.63 percent and as per 2023 National Family Health Survey

(NFHS) female literacy is at 71.5 percent.<sup>26</sup> Literacy gap between men and women at the time of independence was 18.3, now it is 14.40.<sup>27</sup>

3. **Maternal Mortality:** In 1950 maternal mortality was 2000 per 100000 births and in 2013 it was 167 per thousand 100000 birth and in 2020 it was 97 per 100000 births.<sup>28</sup>
4. **Marriage Age:** In 1961 mean marriage age for women was 16 years and in 2010 it was 21 years. The average marriage age for women is 22 years.<sup>29</sup>
5. **Life Expectancy:** In 1951, women life expectancy was 31.7 years and in 2020 it increased to more than 70 years.<sup>30</sup>
6. **Fertility Rate:** In 1951 fertility rate was 5.7 children per women, it decreased to 2.5 in 2010 and further decreased to 2.01 in 2023.<sup>31</sup>
7. **Contraception Use:** In 1970, 13 percent women used contraception but now it has increased to 67percent as per 2023 data of NFHS.<sup>32</sup>
8. **Women in Politics:** In 1951 there were 4.5 percent women **in Lok Sabha** and in 2023 it increased 14.4 percent,<sup>33</sup> in 1952 there were 7.3 percent women in Rajya Sabha and in 2023 it was 13 percent;<sup>34</sup> in 1947 there were 4.7 percent women in union cabinet and in 2023 it increased to seven percent; there was one woman Governor in 1947 and in 2023 there were three women Governors; there was no woman Chief Minister and woman President in 1947 but in 2023 there were one President and one woman Chief Minister.
9. **Women in Judiciary:** India got its first woman Supreme Court judge in 1989 and now there are three women constituting 9.3 percent of Supreme Court judges. Maximum percent was 12 percent in 2022. There were 11.5 percent women judges in High Courts and only 15 percent of all advocates in the country were women in 2022.<sup>35</sup> Although women students constitute about 50 percent of total law students in India.<sup>36</sup> This shows that women are active while they are students and young and single but after they are married they have more responsibilities and as a result they lag behind men as lawyers and judges. Same trend can be seen in other career too.
10. **Women in Education:** All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) reports that women's participation in higher education is rising at a faster rate than men especially in SC, ST group. Women are doing much better in arts and social sciences than in science, technology, engineering and mathematics courses.<sup>37</sup> There are 2.07 crore female students

in higher education in India constituting 48% of total enrollment.<sup>38</sup> The 2019-20 reports tell that there are more women teachers at pre primary level than male teachers.<sup>39</sup> In 2015 there were about 50% women faculty in universities but only three percent women Vice Chancellors.<sup>40</sup> This data has improved in recent times however gender parity among Vice Chancellors is a distant dream. Some scholars call this glass ceiling due to family responsibilities and workplace prejudices.<sup>41</sup>

11. **Women in Police and Administration:** There are 11.75 percent women in police in India in 2022 which is 2.4 lakh women and of them 1.8 lakh are at constable level.<sup>42</sup> The central government is trying to enhance it to 33 percent, with each police station to have at least 13 women police women.<sup>43</sup> In the initial years after independence women were discouraged to enter police and administration due to colonial legacy. In 2022 14 percent of secretaries to central government were women.<sup>44</sup>
12. **Women in Law:** There are many pro women laws in India so much so that some critics now accuse that there are so many pro women and anti Hindu men laws that Hindu men and Hindu marriages are now in a very vulnerable state.<sup>45</sup> However there are some areas that still adversely affect the women. To illustrate- Muslim Personal Law still propagate polygamy, triple *talaq*, child marriage, discrimination in property rights. In Christian law mother does not have right in sons property; in Hindu law women's property goes to her in laws too; in Parsi law non Parsi wife and her children are not recognized.

**Future Roadmap:** The status of women has improved significantly since independence however there are certain step that needs to be taken to further improve the situation such as:

1. Gender equality in all laws especially Muslim Personal Law, Parsi Law, Christian Law etc.
2. Proper implementation of existing laws and schemes to improve opportunities and facilities for women.
3. Good law and order to end crime against women and to increase their safety, confidence and opportunities.
4. Gender sensitization through education and media to use pro women laws and not misuse them.

5. To encourage men to respect and appreciate women especially women homemakers who devote their time and energy taking care of family as well as women who also earn money and who take up dual responsibility.
6. Sensitization and support to women regarding self responsibility among women for taking up some work at home or outside to earn some money too.
7. Sharing of roles and responsibility by men to ease dual responsibility of women.

**Conclusion:** Women in ancient *Bharat* were empowered and respected and appreciated by society however during middle ages and British times due to invaders and colonialists *Bharat* and its men and women went through terrible times and to save themselves and their *Dharma* many practices developed which were bad for women. With independence condition of *Bharat* and its women improved through laws, education etc. Later modernization and globalization brought in the concept of empowerment through jobs and money earning. Advancement in science and technology and concepts like feminism further encouraged this process. The process has some advantages and some disadvantages. Biggest disadvantage is that women who work outside have dual responsibilities and are unable to take care of children the way a stay at home mother can and hence suffer from guilty consciousness. The advantages are quite obvious-money, knowledge and position gave women a feeling of being in control and empowered. Families benefitted with extra money women brought in. On the other hand women who stayed at home had satisfaction of taking care of children properly but suffered from guilt of lost opportunities and wondering about what they would have achieved had they pursued a career. However Indian women have travelled a long way since independence and excelled in every field they have entered but there are still miles to go.

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