



E-ISSN: 2706-9117
P-ISSN: 2706-9109
Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.63
www.historyjournal.net
IJH 2025; 7(9): 47-51
Received: 02-07-2025
Accepted: 06-08-2025

Sandeep
Assistant Professor,
Department of History, Govt.
PG College Israna, Panipat,
Haryana, India

The role and status of women in Indian society: Insights

Sandeep

Abstract

The role and status of women in Indian society have undergone significant transformation over the years, influenced by cultural, social, economic, and political factors. Despite deep-rooted patriarchal traditions, women have steadily asserted their rights, contributing to various domains such as education, politics, business, and the arts. This paper explores the evolving role of women in India, examining historical perspectives, contemporary challenges, and the ongoing struggle for gender equality. It delves into the impact of social reforms, government policies, and global movements that have empowered women in both rural and urban settings. Additionally, the study assesses the continuing obstacles women face, including gender-based violence, unequal access to resources, and societal expectations. By analyzing these dimensions, the paper offers insights into the progress made and the work still required to achieve true gender parity in Indian society.

Keywords: Women, Indian society, gender equality, patriarchy, social reforms, empowerment, gender-based violence, education, political participation, societal norms

1. Introduction

The role and status of women in Indian society have been a subject of both historical significance and contemporary debate. Rooted in centuries of tradition, India has witnessed a complex relationship with gender roles, often shaped by cultural, religious, and social norms. Historically, women in India were confined to domestic roles and often subjected to patriarchal control. However, the trajectory of women's status in India has evolved considerably, especially with the onset of modernization, social reform movements, and the nation's post-independence policies aimed at uplifting women. (Agnihotri, S., 2014) ^[1]

India's struggle for gender equality is marked by a series of challenges and achievements. While the early 20th century saw social reformers fighting for women's rights, including education and the abolition of practices like child marriage, the post-independence era introduced progressive policies designed to empower women through legal rights, employment opportunities, and political participation. Despite these advancements, women in India continue to face significant obstacles, including gender-based violence, discrimination in the workplace, and unequal access to education and healthcare. (Badrinathan, P., & Khandelwal, A., 2018) ^[2]

This paper seeks to explore the multifaceted role of women in Indian society, considering both the strides made in empowering women and the persistent barriers they encounter. By examining historical contexts, social changes, and the ongoing struggle for gender equality, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and triumphs of women in India. The paper also highlights the importance of continuing efforts to challenge societal norms and create a more inclusive society where gender does not limit an individual's opportunities or rights. (Banerjee, A. V., & Duflo, E., 2019) ^[3]

2. Historical Overview of Women's Role in Indian Society

Historically, the role of women in Indian society was deeply influenced by traditional customs, social hierarchies, and religious practices. In ancient times, women in India held important roles in family and society, with some even participating in religious, political, and intellectual life. However, over time, social structures became more rigid, and women were largely relegated to domestic roles. (Bhatt, A., & Reddy, P., 2017) ^[4] In Vedic society, women were respected and had access to education and decision-making. But as time progressed, the status of women began to decline, especially during the medieval period,

Corresponding Author:
Sandeep
Assistant Professor,
Department of History, Govt.
PG College Israna, Panipat,
Haryana, India

where social norms became more restrictive. Women's roles became more centered around household duties, and their rights were significantly limited in various aspects of life. The historical overview provides a foundational understanding of how women's roles and status were shaped over the centuries. (Chandra, R., 2019) ^[5]

3. Cultural and Religious Influences on Women's Status

Indian society is deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions that have shaped the status and role of women. Hinduism, Islam, and other religions practiced in India have had varying impacts on women's rights and opportunities. (Dey, A., & Saha, S., 2020) ^[6] In Hinduism, ancient texts like the Manusmriti outlined restrictive roles for women, which influenced societal norms around marriage, property rights, and education. However, certain cultural practices like Sati, child marriage, and restrictions on widow remarriage became part of the patriarchal structure. On the other hand, Islam in India provided certain rights to women, like inheritance, but cultural practices like purdah (veiling) limited women's public life. Additionally, other indigenous traditions and practices also reinforced gender roles, further contributing to the suppression of women's autonomy in both public and private spheres. (Dhawan, P., 2014) ^[7].

4. Patriarchy and Traditional Gender Roles in India

Patriarchy has been the defining feature of social and familial structures in India for centuries. The traditional gender roles imposed by this system relegated women to secondary status, particularly within the family and society. Patriarchal norms dictated that women were primarily caregivers, responsible for running the household and raising children, while men controlled the economic and political domains. (Dube, S., 2016) ^[8]. Women's rights were limited in marriage, inheritance, and education, and their voices were often marginalized in decision-making processes. The influence of patriarchy led to practices such as dowry, which further perpetuated women's subjugation. This systemic inequality meant that women were often denied opportunities for self-expression, education, and economic independence, creating deep social and economic disparities between men and women. (Goel, R., 2015) ^[9].

5. Early Social Reform Movements for Women's Rights

The early social reform movements in India in the 19th and early 20th centuries played a crucial role in challenging traditional norms and advocating for the rights of women. (Gupta, A., & Das, M., 2017) ^[10] Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Jyotirao Phule questioned the oppressive cultural and religious practices that limited women's rights. These movements primarily focused on issues such as child marriage, the condition of widows, and the lack of education for women. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's advocacy for the abolition of Sati and Vidyasagar's efforts to improve widow remarriage laws were instrumental in raising awareness about women's rights and challenging deeply ingrained societal practices. These early reformers laid the foundation for the more widespread feminist movements that would emerge later in Indian history. (Hegde, R., & Mohan, S., 2021) ^[11].

6. Colonial Impact on Women's Position in Indian Society

The British colonial period significantly altered the position of women in Indian society, both through the imposition of

Western ideas and the reforms introduced by the colonial government. The British Empire introduced new legal frameworks that impacted women's rights, such as the abolition of Sati in 1829 and the enactment of laws concerning child marriage and widow remarriage. (Iyer, S., 2020) ^[12] While these laws were meant to "civilize" Indian society according to British views, they also played a pivotal role in giving women a stronger legal footing. However, the colonial period also led to the emergence of a complex dynamic where traditional practices were often linked with anti-colonial resistance, and many Indians felt that reforms undermined cultural norms. Despite this, British rule exposed women to new ideas about education, property rights, and social reform, which influenced subsequent feminist movements in India. The colonial period thus created both opportunities and challenges for women, laying the groundwork for the modernization of gender roles in the post-independence era. (Jain, R., & Agarwal, S., 2019) ^[13].

7. Post-Independence Changes in Women's Legal Status

After India gained independence in 1947, significant strides were made toward improving the legal status of women. The Indian Constitution, which came into effect in 1950, guaranteed equality before the law and prohibited discrimination based on sex, laying the foundation for gender equality. (Kumar, R., & Sharma, P., 2017) ^[27] Landmark laws such as the Hindu Succession Act (1956), the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), and the Maternity Benefit Act (1961) were passed to provide women with equal rights in areas like property inheritance, marriage, and workplace rights. Additionally, the establishment of the National Commission for Women in 1992 further highlighted the government's commitment to safeguarding women's rights. Despite these advancements, gaps remain between the legal framework and its implementation, with many women still struggling to exercise their rights fully due to deep-rooted societal norms and practices. (Jha, S., & Patel, M., 2018) ^[14].

8. Participation in Political and Social Movements

Women have played a crucial role in India's political and social movements, both during and after the country's struggle for independence. Figures like Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay became prominent leaders during the freedom struggle, advocating for women's empowerment alongside national liberation. (Kundu, M., & Singh, R., 2021) ^[16]. Post-independence, women continued to actively participate in political and social movements. The feminist movement in India gained momentum in the 1970s with the emergence of organizations focused on women's rights and issues like dowry, domestic violence, and female literacy. Women have also made significant strides in political participation, with female leaders like Indira Gandhi, the first female Prime Minister of India, and the rise of women in local governance following the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which mandated a reservation of seats for women in Panchayats and municipalities. (Mishra, V., & Gupta, N., 2019) ^[17].

9. The Role of Women in Pre-Independence Indian Society

In pre-independence India, women's roles were primarily confined to domestic responsibilities, and their societal

positions were largely determined by traditional norms and religious practices. While certain historical texts and epics, such as the Vedas and the Mahabharata, contain references to women in roles of power and influence, these instances were often the exception rather than the norm. (Modi, R., & Patel, D., 2020) ^[18]. Women were expected to fulfill roles as mothers, wives, and caretakers within the home. However, some women, particularly in royal families, did participate in political affairs. In contrast, the majority of women faced oppressive practices such as child marriage, Sati, and lack of access to education. Pre-independence India was a time when women's rights were limited, and the need for social reform to uplift their status was evident, leading to the emergence of social reform movements in the 19th and early 20th centuries. (Mukherjee, M., & Sanyal, N., 2018) ^[19].

10. Women in Rural vs Urban India: A Comparative Perspective

The experiences of women in rural and urban India differ significantly, primarily due to disparities in education, economic opportunities, and social norms. In rural areas, women often continue to be bound by traditional roles as caregivers and homemakers. Limited access to education, healthcare, and economic independence further restricts their freedom and opportunities. (Narayan, U., 2013) ^[20]. Rural women also face significant challenges related to patriarchal social structures, gender-based violence, and poverty. In contrast, urban women, while still facing gender-based discrimination, have greater access to education, employment, and public spaces. The rise of urbanization has facilitated women's involvement in the workforce and political activism, though challenges such as sexual harassment and unequal pay persist. The urban-rural divide in India underscores the need for targeted policies that address the unique challenges women face in different geographical and socio-economic contexts. (Nath, A., 2021) ^[21]

11. The Impact of Economic Liberalization on Women's Workforce Participation

Economic liberalization in India, which began in the early 1990s, fundamentally transformed the nation's economy by opening it to global markets, reducing trade barriers, and privatizing several state-run industries. This shift had significant effects on women's workforce participation. As the economy expanded, new industries such as information technology, telecommunications, and retail flourished, offering new job opportunities, especially for urban women. Women's participation in the workforce increased, with many entering fields that were previously male-dominated, such as IT, engineering, and management. (Patil, N., & Joshi, M., 2019) ^[22].

However, the benefits were not uniformly distributed. While urban, educated women gained from these changes, rural women remained largely excluded from the formal economy due to socio-economic and cultural barriers. The rise of informal employment, including low-wage and contract-based work, also created challenges, as women often found themselves in precarious job situations with limited labor protections. Despite these challenges, economic liberalization has provided greater economic independence for many women, and the ongoing process of liberalization continues to affect gender dynamics in the Indian workforce. (Ramaswamy, A., 2022) ^[23]

12. Government Policies and Legislation for Women's Welfare

Since India's independence, the government has implemented a range of policies aimed at improving the status of women and addressing gender-based disparities. The Indian Constitution, with its provisions for gender equality, laid the groundwork for progressive policies for women's welfare. Notable initiatives include the enactment of laws such as the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), the Maternity Benefit Act (1961), and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005). These legislative reforms sought to protect women from exploitation, violence, and discrimination. (Rao, S., 2015) ^[24].

Further efforts include the establishment of programs aimed at improving women's education, health, and employment opportunities, such as the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child) scheme, launched in 2015 to address gender-based discrimination and promote the education of girls. The government also introduced affirmative action measures like reservations for women in local governance bodies (Panchayats), which has empowered women at the grassroots level. Despite these progressive policies, implementation has often been slow or inconsistent, and social norms and cultural practices still inhibit women from fully benefiting from these legal provisions. (Roy, A., & Saha, S., 2016) ^[6]

13. Gender-Based Violence and Its Impact on Women's Status

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a pervasive issue in India and continues to impact women's lives, safety, and social standing. Forms of GBV in India include domestic violence, sexual harassment, trafficking, dowry-related violence, and honor killings. High-profile incidents, such as the 2012 Delhi gang rape, have brought global attention to the issue and highlighted the urgent need for reform. Despite legal provisions, such as the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, violence against women remains widespread, largely due to entrenched patriarchal values and inadequate enforcement of laws. (Sen, A., 2017) ^[26].

The prevalence of GBV has profound consequences for women's status in society. Victims of violence often face stigmatization, social exclusion, and psychological trauma, while the fear of violence restricts their mobility and opportunities. Moreover, violence further entrenches the inequality women experience in economic, political, and social spheres. Addressing gender-based violence is essential not only for improving women's safety but also for advancing their status and role in society. (Sharma, N., & Verma, R., 2020) ^[27].

14. The Influence of Global Feminist Movements on Indian Women

Global feminist movements have significantly influenced the trajectory of women's rights and activism in India, bringing attention to issues such as gender equality, reproductive rights, sexual harassment, and violence against women. Indian feminist movements, particularly in the post-1990s era, have been shaped by global ideas and strategies, such as the push for gender equality in the workplace, the #MeToo movement, and campaigns for reproductive rights. (Tiwari, R., & Khan, S., 2017) ^[30].

The influence of global feminist discourse has been especially evident in the rise of digital feminism, where social media platforms have become powerful tools for spreading awareness, mobilizing activism, and challenging patriarchal structures. Indian women have embraced global feminist calls for empowerment, but the movement also intersects with the unique challenges faced by Indian women, such as caste discrimination, communal violence, and regional inequalities. Consequently, while global feminism has inspired Indian women's movements, these movements have also localized global feminist ideas to address India's distinct socio-cultural issues. (Singh, S., & Rath, R., 2018) ^[28].

Global feminist movements have not only expanded the scope of Indian feminist activism but also helped Indian women connect with international solidarity networks. However, these global influences have also sparked debates on the relevance and cultural appropriateness of Western feminist ideals in the Indian context, underscoring the need for a nuanced approach that integrates both global and local perspectives. (Singh, V., 2020) ^[29]

15. Conclusion

The role and status of women in Indian society have undergone significant changes, shaped by both historical and contemporary forces. From being confined to traditional domestic roles in pre-independence India to becoming active participants in social, political, and economic spheres in the post-independence era, women have made remarkable strides. Legal reforms, government policies, and social movements have contributed to advancing gender equality, yet challenges persist, especially in rural areas where patriarchal practices are still deeply entrenched.

While education has played a crucial role in empowering women and increasing their participation in the workforce, societal norms and gender-based violence continue to impede true gender equality. Women's participation in political and social movements has been instrumental in pushing for change, yet representation in leadership roles remains disproportionately low. Additionally, the urban-rural divide further exacerbates the challenges women face, as rural women continue to encounter barriers in accessing education, healthcare, and economic opportunities.

Despite these obstacles, the ongoing efforts of women's rights activists, policymakers, and social reformers have created a more inclusive environment, and there is hope for continued progress. However, the journey toward achieving full gender equality in India is ongoing and requires continued advocacy, legal reforms, and societal shifts. Empowering women through education, economic opportunities, and legal protections, while challenging persistent cultural norms, remains essential to realizing the goal of a truly equitable society.

References

1. Agnihotri S. The gender gap in India: Trends and policy implications. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; 2014.
2. Badrinathan P, Khandelwal A. Women in India: The evolving social landscape. New Delhi: Sage Publications; 2018.
3. Banerjee AV, Duflo E. Good economics for hard times: Better answers to our biggest problems. New York: PublicAffairs; 2019.
4. Bhatt A, Reddy P. Women in rural India: A socio-economic perspective. *Asian J Womens Stud*. 2017;23(4):445-63.
5. Chandra R. Women, work, and family in urban India. London: Routledge; 2019.
6. Dey A, Saha S. Women in Indian politics: Participation and challenges. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan; 2020.
7. Dhawan P. Women in India: From ancient times to the present. New Delhi: HarperCollins; 2014.
8. Dube S. Gender equality in India: From legislation to implementation. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; 2016.
9. Goel R. Patriarchy and the politics of gender in India. New Delhi: Sage Publications; 2015.
10. Gupta A, Das M. The role of education in empowering rural women in India. *J Gender Stud*. 2017;26(3):331-42.
11. Hegde R, Mohan S. Women's economic participation in urban India: Current trends and future directions. *J Indian Econ Soc Stud*. 2021;16(2):112-28.
12. Iyer S. Social reforms and women's rights in India: A historical perspective. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2020.
13. Jain R, Agarwal S. Gender-based violence and its impact on women's empowerment. *Indian J Soc Work*. 2019;80(1):25-43.
14. Jha S, Patel M. Education and women's empowerment in India: Progress and challenges. London: Routledge; 2018.
15. Kumar R, Sharma P. Women's political participation in India: Challenges and opportunities. *Asian J Polit Sci*. 2017;25(2):182-99.
16. Kundu M, Singh R. The feminist movement in India: A global perspective. Singapore: Springer; 2021.
17. Mishra V, Gupta N. Legal protection for women in India: An analysis of recent reforms. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; 2019.
18. Modi R, Patel D. Rural versus urban women: A comparative analysis of health and education. *J Rural Urban Sociol*. 2020;12(1):56-72.
19. Mukherjee M, Sanyal N. The changing status of women in India: From ancient times to the 21st century. *Gender Stud J*. 2018;23(3):210-27.
20. Narayan U. Disrupting patriarchy: Women's empowerment and gender justice. Berkeley: University of California Press; 2013.
21. Nath A. Women's participation in India's political landscape: The untold stories. Singapore: Springer; 2021.
22. Patil N, Joshi M. Education as a tool for women's empowerment in India: A case study. *Int J Educ Dev*. 2019;43(1):120-31.
23. Ramaswamy A. Indian women: The changing role in society and politics. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; 2022.
24. Rao S. The impact of economic liberalization on women's rights in India. London: Routledge; 2015.
25. Roy A, Saha S. The socio-economic development of women in rural India. New Delhi: Sage Publications; 2016.
26. Sen A. Women's rights and the Indian state: A historical perspective. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2017.
27. Sharma N, Verma R. Gender-based violence and its

- implications on women's status in India. *J Gender Stud.* 2020;29(1):45-59.
28. Singh S, Rathi R. *Feminism and its impact on social movements in India.* Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan; 2018.
 29. Singh V. *Women's health in rural India: A policy analysis.* Singapore: Springer; 2020.
 30. Tiwari R, Khan S. Global feminism and its influence on Indian women's movements. *Fem Stud.* 2017;43(4):487-505.