

The Changing Roles of Women- An Overview into the Perception of Women Over Time in India



The idea behind this article is to take a look at the way in which Indian women have evolved over time. The intention has primarily been to highlight the examples of women, primarily in India (and also abroad), who have been exemplary in their acts of inspiration. This article attempts at examining the socio-cultural evolution of women over time in India and where they stand now. Examples have been drawn largely from the corporate culture with insight into certain spheres of the problems faced by urban women in corporate world holding senior positions.



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Early in 1932, a young woman was destined to take a decision that would change the way women thought. Later, after the remarkable feat attained by her she would recall that she had always been a secluded child, different in her ways of living life, and a tad too “tomboyish” for tastes of the society then. The lady was Amelia Earhart - the first aviatrix to fly solo across the Atlantic. She was a remarkable woman in every way, not just an epitome of courage and valour but also exemplary in her zeal towards life. Her story continues to inspire millions of women around the globe.

The socio-cultural evolution of women has been a convoluted road. Over the history of time the perception and roles that women were meant to foster has transcended from the nurturer to the provider. The Hindu mythology regards woman as the sign of “fertility” and “abundance” - a source of life sustaining power, the giver of energy. Interestingly, Hindu culture fetes the worship of



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women in all its divine powers, Durga: symbolic of strength, Lakshmi: endower of wealth and Saraswati: the divine bestower of knowledge. But for all the predilection of our culture in its acceptance of woman in symbols of divinity there are still huge chasms to bridge when it comes to women empowerment in India. For every respect paid to the deity, there is a little of it papered away from women in contemporary times. Newspapers and journals flaunting headlines about declining female sex ratio and violence against women are hardly testimonial of our pledge of growing empowerment.

There is an interesting paradox that gets my attention here. Women in India have had an impressive trajectory of profiles in courage, power and astuteness. The brave Rani Lakshmibai to the sagacious Ahilya Bai, Indian women have never shied away from key roles in decision making. Yet our country, even in these modern times, surprisingly shows a high dropout rate in primary education for the girl-child. Not a single day goes by without the news of female foeticide in the northern quarters of our country. Women still continue to be seen as an economic encumbrance in most families even today.

True, there is no dispute to the fact that women at least in urban circles have a wider array of opportunities available to them. Education has empowered them and there is little that she is leaving unconquered. From the corporate boardroom to the jet setting aviator to being the political decision maker, Indian women have been making histories. Indeed, a substantial measure of independence has been achieved by women in the recent past. Women today have made the choice of being on equal footing with men and stepping out of the predefined boundaries set by a patriarchal society.

The history of India offers a fairly wide angled view of the evolution of women and their unique cultural identity. India has always been a land of diversity and opportunity and an attractive destination for invaders from all ethnicities. From

the Huns and Kushans destroying the highly evolved Gupta civilisation to the Mughals of Central Asian ethnicity who defeated Lodi to usurp the throne of Delhi. Each of these invaders brought their own distinct culture and perceptions of womanhood to this country.

The onset of medieval culture was a watershed in defining the status of women in this country. The ancient history of India and Hindu philosophy is testimony to the fact that women were active participants in the social life and political debates in their surroundings. The idea of leading cloistered lives was not particularly appealing and women were revered for their gift of the gab and argumentative power. In Brihadaranyaka Upanishad it was Gargi the revered pedagogue and scholar whose questions Yajnavalkya had to satisfy.

Muslim rule of India changed the identity of women. From the emancipated lives that women led as intellectual individuals (represented in Hindu philosophy) they slowly passed into observing "*pardah*" from their male counterpart. Exclusive quarters for females were established in royal palaces and no woman was meant to be a part of public life. Although zenana intrigues were common and exerted a tremendous influence on the politics of the time, women would no longer retain the intellectual identity so distinct to them. Women were now inevitably someone's wife, mother or daughter, meant to be the "nurturer" but to always be away from the shadows of public life. The seeds of inequality continued to prosper and the abyss due to gender inequality widened. Women remained subjugated. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen in his acclaimed work "The Argumentative Indian" discusses the various forms of inequality. In countries like India, the lack of proper healthcare facilities for women leads to higher mortality rates for them, this being the "survival inequality". The preference towards male child, traditionally considered to be superior in terms of physical and mental capabilities leads to female foeticide- this being "natality inequality".

In a country where women scholars were lauded, it is nothing less than shameful to see girls being denied the basic right to live. However, the idea that women are intellectually inferior is not prevalent in India alone. In United States, women did not get the right to vote till until 1920. Little wonder then that Larry Summers, former president of Harvard University commented that the lack of representation of women in higher echelons of academia was due to their lack of intelligence in comparison to men. Summers, however, was removed eventually in 2006 because of his incendiary and unfeeling remark.

The Constitution in India though has been fairly rational since its inception and there has been no bias so far based on gender. The final phase of India's cultural exposition was shaped by the British Rule. In fact, the post colonial sensibility owes its roots to this period. Although it was a period shaped by deep turmoil politically, it did fashion some of the major upheavals in relation to women's legislation. Prominent reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy spoke out against the abhorrent practice of *Sati* and obtained the permission of the then British Government, who lashed out against such perpetrators with severe punishment.

Several reforms continued through the efforts of radical thinkers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar



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who advocated widow remarriage and their initiation into a new life. Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj received an iconoclastic status when he accepted women as spiritual leaders. The political history during the colonial period is dotted with several reformists who tried to make a difference for women in the country. The uprising of freedom struggle in India witnessed the active participation of women. From radical revolutionaries advocating for armed struggle in Bengal, to women holding political positions of consequence, Indian women were resurging again. In fact, there were many more women in positions of importance in India's freedom struggle than in Russian or Chinese revolutions. In 1925, Congress elected Sarojini Naidu as its first woman president, fifty years before UK would elect Margaret Thatcher as first and only woman leader of Conservative Party. India can today boast of a sizeable participation of women in politics, leading independent parties and making crucial decisions affecting millions. Indeed, the world's largest democracy today can boast of a controversial but tremendously efficient woman prime minister. Her legacy continues today and her vision of modernity for India has taken root in the nation's heartland.

India today has come a long way from the days of yore. Progress has been made towards issues relating to women through numerous legislations for equal opportunities. However, the chasm now exists between the urban and rural India. Urban India now boasts of corporate honchos like Indra Nooyi and Chanda Kochar in the boardroom, yet statistics show that an average village school has no separate toilet facilities for girls. Urbanisation has indeed led to greater scope for development and Indian women have done their country proud in almost all corporate, social and cultural fields; however a separate breed of problems has now taken sway.

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As per a 2007 study by HR experts, women in corporate India earn 40 per cent lesser than what men earn over their entire career. Out of 9000 people on boards of BSE-listed companies, only five are women. Indian companies seriously lack women in senior management roles. Corporate India fares dismally when compared to its global counterparts. Over 77 per cent of the 200 large companies in the world listed by Fortune had at least one woman director on their board as of 2006. Only 36 per cent Indian companies have women in senior management positions- thus being clearly outbid by China who had as many as 91 per cent of companies having women in key positions.

form in the corporate world- known as “glass ceiling”. Researches show that women have been denied positions of consequence in corporate world. Just when companies talk about diversity in work place in a bid to track their gender ratio, it should be noted that they still have to go miles. As per a 2007 study by HR experts as reported in newspapers, women in corporate India earn 40 per cent lesser than what men earn over their entire career. Out of 9000 people on boards of BSE-listed companies, only five are women. Indian companies seriously lack women in senior management roles. Corporate India fares dismally when compared to its global counterparts. Over 77 per cent of the 200 large companies in the world listed by Fortune had at least one woman director on their board as of 2006. Only 36 per cent Indian companies have women in senior management positions - thus being clearly outbid by China who had as many as 91 per cent of companies having women in key positions. Further, most women managers are still considered suitable only for supporting roles such as HR, PR and customer service. The 2007 survey had pegged the figure at 85 per cent.

The debate over glass ceiling is endless despite there being outstanding business leaders, among them Kiran Mazumdar Shaw of Biocon, HSBC's Naina Lal Kidwai, Kinetic's Sulajja Firodia Motwani and Ranjana Kumar, the Chief Vigilance Commissioner to name a few. According to a research conducted by Herminia Ibarra and Otilia Obodaru in Harvard Business review, women score highly on leadership counts as per a survey. However, they fare lower when it comes to envisioning newer opportunities. That may come as a surprise to many, considering the number of successful women entrepreneurs and businesswomen of late, worldwide. From Carly Fiorina, the former CEO of HP who carried out the controversial merger of her company with

Compaq to Nooyi whose acquisitions of brands like Tropicana and many more have only added to Pepsico's coffers.

Back home in India, seven women from Mumbai utilised their culinary skills as early as 1959 to form their entrepreneurial venture for sustainable livelihood. The venture that had started with a seed capital of Rs 80 borrowed from a social worker after many decades later turned into a 5 billion dollar turnover company. Shri Mahila Griha Udyog popularly known as Lijjat papad not only became the most beloved and identifiable FMCG brand in India but to this day continues to support women in their effort to lead sustainable lives. Such will power perhaps shall engender the idea that women can enter into envisioning opportunities for the future as well as men do.

Women entrepreneurs in India have had an impressive track record to say the least. India's very first biotechnology company headed by Kiran Mazumdar Shaw became the second Indian company to cross the capitalisation of U.S dollar one billion on the first day of listing.

The spirit of independence in women has been rekindled with such exemplary figures both in corporate and non corporate world. With a powerful legacy that women have had in India, it is only imperative that we continue that journey. The road ahead will never be easy. Problems in many different forms will continue to rear their head, in forms that we may have barely recognised. People will always continue to disregard the capabilities of women as a collective community, but the journey towards excellence is never an easy one. To quote Robert Frost:

*“The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises, to keep
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep”*