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Women in India

The status of **women in India** has been subject to many changes over the span of recorded Indian history.^[4] Their position in society deteriorated early in India's ancient period, especially in the Indo-Aryan speaking regions, and their subordination continued to be reified well into India's early modern period. Practices such as female infanticide, dowry, child marriage and the taboo on widow remarriage, have had a long duration in India, and have proved difficult to root out, especially in caste Hindu society in northern India.

During the British East India Company rule (1757–1857), and the British Raj (1858–1947), measures aiming at amelioration were enacted, including Bengal Sati Regulation, 1829, Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, 1856, Female Infanticide Prevention Act, 1870, and Age of Consent Act, 1891. Women's rights under the Constitution of India mainly include equality, dignity, and freedom from discrimination; additionally, India has various statutes governing the rights of women.

As of 2018, some women have served in various senior official positions in the Indian government, including that of the President of India, the Prime Minister of India, the Speaker of the Lok Sabha. However, many women in India continue to face significant difficulties. The rates of malnutrition are exceptionally high among adolescent girls and pregnant and lactating women in India, with repercussions for children's health.^{[e][11]} Violence against women, especially sexual violence, has been on the rise in India.

Women in India during British rule

During the British Raj, many reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Jyotirao Phule fought for the betterment of women. Peary Charan Sarkar, a former student of Hindu College, Calcutta and a member of "Young Bengal", set up the first free school for girls in India in 1847 in Barasat, a suburb of Calcutta (later the school was named Kalikrishna Girls' High School). While this might suggest that there was no positive British contribution during the Raj era, that is not entirely the case. Missionaries' wives such as Martha Mault née Mead and her daughter Eliza Caldwell née Mault are rightly remembered for pioneering the education and training of girls in south India. This practice was initially met with local resistance, as it flew in the face of tradition. Raja Rammohan Roy's efforts led to the abolition of Sati under Governor-General William Cavendish-Bentinck in 1829. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's crusade for improvement in the situation of widows led to the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. Many women reformers such as Pandita Ramabai also helped the cause of women.

Kittur Chennamma, queen of the princely state Kittur in Karnataka,^[13] led an armed rebellion against the British in response to the Doctrine of lapse. Rani Lakshmi Bai, the Queen of Jhansi, led the Indian Rebellion of 1857 against the British. She is now widely considered as a national hero. Begum Hazrat Mahal, the co-ruler of Awadh, was another ruler who led the revolt of 1857. She refused deals with the British and later retreated to Nepal. The Begums of Bhopal were also considered notable female rulers during this period. They were trained in martial arts. Chandramukhi Basu, Kadambini Ganguly and Anandi Gopal Joshi were some of the earliest Indian women to obtain a degree.

In 1917, the first women's delegation met the Secretary of State to demand women's political rights, supported by the Indian National Congress. The All India Women's Education Conference was held in Pune in 1927, it became a major organisation in the movement for social change. In 1929, the Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed, stipulating fourteen as the minimum age of marriage for a girl. Mahatma Gandhi, himself a victim of child marriage at the age of thirteen, he later urged people to boycott child marriages and called upon young men to marry child widows.

Independent India

Women in India now participate fully in areas such as education, sports, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology, etc. Indira Gandhi, who served as Prime Minister of India for an aggregate period of fifteen years, is the world's longest serving woman Prime Minister.

The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)),^[21] equality of opportunity (Article 16),^[20] equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)) and Article 42.^[20] In addition, it allows special provisions to be made by the State in favour of women and children (Article 15(3)), renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51(A) (e)), and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief. (Article 42).^[22]

Since alcoholism is often associated with violence against women in India,^[23] many women groups launched anti-liquor campaigns in Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and other states.^[22] Many Indian Muslim women have questioned the fundamental leaders' interpretation of women's rights under the Shariat law and have criticised the triple talaq system (see below about 2017)

In 1991, the Kerala High Court restricted entry of women above the age of 10 and below the age of 50 from Sabarimala Shrine as they were of the menstruating age. However, on 28 September 2018, the Supreme Court of India lifted the ban on the entry of women. It said that discrimination against women on any grounds, even religious, is unconstitutional.^{[27][28]}

The Government of India declared 2001 as the Year of Women's Empowerment (*Swashakti*).^[14] The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women came was passed in 2001.^[29]

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 is a legislative act in India that seeks to protect women from sexual harassment at their place of work. The Act came into force from 9 December 2013. The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 introduced changes to the Indian Penal Code, making sexual harassment an expressed offence under Section 354 A, which is punishable up to three years of imprisonment and or with fine. The Amendment also introduced new sections making acts like disrobing a woman without consent, stalking and sexual acts by person in authority an offense. It also made acid attacks a specific offence with a punishment of imprisonment not less than 10 years and which could extend to life imprisonment and with fine.^[36]

Timeline of women's achievements in India

The steady change in the position of women can be highlighted by looking at what has been achieved by women in the country:

- 1848: Savitribai Phule, along with her husband Jyotirao Phule, opened a school for girls in Pune, India. Savitribai Phule became the first woman teacher in India.
- 1917: Annie Besant became the first female president of the Indian National Congress.
- 1953: Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit became the first woman (and first Indian) president of the United Nations General Assembly
- 1963: Sucheta Kriplani became the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, the first woman to hold that position in any Indian state.
- 1966: Indira Gandhi becomes the first woman Prime Minister of India
- 1972: Kiran Bedi becomes the first female recruit to join the Indian Police Service.^[51]
- 1979: Mother Teresa wins the Nobel Peace Prize, becoming the first Indian female citizen to do so.
- 1984: On 23 May, Bachendri Pal became the first Indian woman to climb Mount Everest.

- 2007: On 25 July, Pratibha Patil became the first female President of India.
- 2009: On 4 June, Meira Kumar became the first female Speaker of Lok Sabha.
- 2018: In February, 24 year old Flying Officer Avani Chaturvedi of the Indian Air Force became the first Indian female fighter pilot to fly solo. She flew a MiG-21 Bison, a jet aircraft with the highest recorded landing and take-off speed in the world.^[57]
- 2019: On 2 December 2019, sub-lieutenant Shivangi became the first woman pilot in the Indian Navy.

Politics

India has one of the highest number of female politicians in the world. Women have held high offices in India including that of the President, Prime Minister, Speaker of the Lok Sabha and Leader of the Opposition. The Indian states Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh,^[59] Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan and Tripura have implemented 50% reservation for women in PRIs. Majority of candidates in these Panchayats are women. Currently 100% of elected members

Education

The literacy rate is lower for women compared to men: the literacy rate is 60.6% for women, while for men it is 81.3%. The 2011 census, however, indicated a 2001–2011 decadal literacy growth of 9.2%, which is slower than the growth seen during the previous decade. There is a wide gender disparity in the literacy rate in India: effective literacy rates (age 7 and above) in 2011 were 82.14% for men and 65.46% for women. (population aged 15 or older, data from 2015).^[81]

Workforce participation

Contrary to common perception, a large percentage of women in India are actively engaged in traditional and non-traditional work.^[82] National data collection agencies accept that statistics seriously understate women's contribution as workers.^[22] However, there are far fewer women than men in the paid workforce. In urban India, women participate in the workforce in impressive numbers. For example, in the software industry 30% of the workforce is female.^[83]

Land and property rights

In most Indian families, women do not own any property in their own names, and do not get a share of parental property.^[22] Due to weak enforcement of laws protecting them, women continue to have little access to land and property.^[92] In India, women's property rights vary depending on religion, and tribe, and are subject to a complex mix of law and custom,^[93] but in principle the move has been towards granting women equal legal rights, especially since the passing of The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005.^[94]

Crimes against women

The map shows the comparative rate of violence against women in Indian states and union territories in 2012. Crime rate data per 100,000 women in this map is the broadest definition of crime against women under Indian law. It includes rape, sexual assault, insult to modesty, kidnapping, abduction, cruelty by intimate partner or relatives, trafficking, persecution for dowry, dowry deaths, indecency, and all other crimes listed in Indian Penal Code.

Crime against women such as rape, acid throwing, dowry killings, honour killings, and the forced prostitution of young girls has been reported in India. Police records in India show a high incidence of crimes against women. The National Crime Records Bureau reported in 1998 that by 2010 growth in the rate of crimes against women would exceed the population growth rate.^[22] Earlier, many

crimes against women were not reported to police due to the social stigma attached to rape and molestation. Official statistics show a dramatic increase in the number of reported crimes against women

Child marriage

Child marriage has been traditionally prevalent in India but is not so continued in Modern India to this day. Historically, child brides would live with their parents until they reached puberty. In the past, child widows were condemned to a life of great agony, shaved heads, living in isolation, and being shunned by society.^[17] Although child marriage was outlawed in 1860, it is still a common practice.^[108] The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 is the relevant legislation in the country.

According to UNICEF's "State of the World's Children-2009" report, 47% of India's women aged 20–24 were married before the legal age of 18, rising to 56% in rural areas.^[109] The report also showed that 40% of the world's child marriages occur in India.

Domestic violence

Domestic violence in India is endemic. Around 70% of women in India are victims of domestic violence, according to Renuka Chowdhury, former Union minister for Women and Child Development. Domestic violence was legally addressed in the 1980s when the 1983 Criminal Law Act introduced section 498A "Husband or relative of husband of a woman subjecting her to cruelty".

The National Crime Records Bureau reveal that a crime against a woman is committed every three minutes, a woman is raped every 29 minutes, a dowry death occurs every 77 minutes, and one case of cruelty committed by either the husband or relative of the husband occurs every nine minutes. This occurs despite the fact that women in India are legally protected from domestic abuse under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act.

In India, domestic violence toward women is considered as any type of abuse that can be considered a threat; it can also be physical, psychological, or sexual abuse to any current or former partner.^[114] Domestic violence is not handled as a crime or complaint, it is seen more as a private or family matter.^[114] In determining the category of a complaint, it is based on caste, class, religious bias and race which also determines whether action is to be taken or not.^[114] Many studies have reported about the prevalence of the violence and have taken a criminal-justice approach, but most women refuse to report it.^[114] These women are guaranteed constitutional justice, dignity and equality but continue to refuse based on their sociocultural contexts.^[114] As the women refuse to speak of the violence and find help, they are also not receiving the proper treatment.^[114]

Dowry

A map of the Indian dowry death rate per 100,000 people, 2012.

In 1961, the Government of India passed the Dowry Prohibition Act,^[115] making dowry demands in wedding arrangements illegal. However, many cases of dowry-related domestic violence, suicides and murders have been reported. In the 1980s, numerous such cases were reported.^[82]

In 1985, the Dowry Prohibition (maintenance of lists of presents to the bride and bridegroom) Rules were framed.^[116] According to these rules, a signed list should be maintained of presents given at the time of the marriage to the bride and the bridegroom. The list should contain a brief description of each present, its approximate value, the name of who has given the present, and relationship to the recipient. However, such rules are rarely enforced.

Female infanticide and sex-selective abortion

In India, the male-female sex ratio is skewed dramatically in favour of men, the chief reason being the high number of women who die before reaching adulthood.^[22] Tribal societies in India have a less skewed sex ratio than other caste groups. This is in spite of the fact that tribal communities have far lower income levels, lower literacy rates, and less adequate health facilities.^[22]

Honor killings

Honor killings have been reported in northern regions of India, mainly in the Indian states of Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, as a result of the girl marrying without the family's acceptance, and sometimes for marrying outside her caste or religion. Haryana is notorious for incidents of honor killings, which have been described as "chillingly common in villages of Haryana".^[120] In contrast, honor killings are rare to non-existent in South India and the western Indian states of Maharashtra and Gujarat. In some other parts of India, notably West Bengal, honor killings completely ceased about a century ago, largely due to the activism and influence of reformists such as Vivekananda, Ramakrishna, Vidyasagar and Raja Ram Mohan Roy.^[121] In 2010, the Supreme Court of India issued notice in regard to honor killings to the states of Punjab, Haryana, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.^[122]

Accusations of witchcraft

Violence against women related to accusations of witchcraft occurs in India, particularly in parts of Northern India. Belief in the supernatural among the Indian population is strong, and lynchings for witchcraft are reported by the media.^[123] In Assam and West Bengal between 2003 and 2008 there were around 750 deaths related to accusations of witchcraft.^[124] Officials in the state of Chhattisgarh reported in 2008 that at least 100 women are maltreated annually as suspected witches.^[125]

Rape

People in Delhi, India protesting after a young student was gang-raped in Delhi in December 2012.

Rape in India has been described by Radha Kumar as one of India's most common crimes against women^[126] and by the UN's human-rights chief as a "national problem".^[127] Since the 1980s, women's rights groups lobbied for marital rape to be declared unlawful,^[126] but the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 still maintains the marital exemption by stating in its exception clause under Section 375, that: "Sexual intercourse or sexual acts by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under fifteen years of age, is not rape".^[128] While per-capita reported incidents are quite low compared to other countries, even developed countries,^{[129][130]} a new case is reported every 20 minutes.^{[131][132]}

New Delhi has one of the highest rate of rape-reports among Indian cities.^[132] Sources show that rape cases in India have doubled between 1990 and 2008.^{[133][134]}

Sexual harassment

Eve teasing is a euphemism used for sexual harassment or molestation of women by men. Many activists blame the rising incidents of sexual harassment against women on the influence of "Western culture". In 1987, The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act was passed^[135] to prohibit indecent representation of women through advertisements or in publications, writings, paintings or in any other manner.

Trafficking

The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act was passed in 1956.^[138] However many cases of trafficking of young girls and women have been reported.

Women's safety laws

1. Guardians & Wards Act, 1890^[139]
2. Indian Penal Code, 1860
3. Christian Marriage Act, 1872
4. Indian Evidence Act, 1872^[140]
5. Married Women's Property Act, 1874

6. Workmen's compensation Act, 1923
7. Indian Successions Act, 1925
8. Immoral Traffic (prevention) Act, 1956
9. Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961^[115]
10. Commission of Sati(Prevention) Act, 1987
11. Cinematograph Act, 1952
12. Births, Deaths & Marriages Registration Act, 1886
13. Minimum Wages Act, 1948
14. Prevention of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012
15. Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929
16. Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application,1937
17. Indecent Representation of Women(Prevention) Act,1986
18. Special Marriage Act, 1954^[141]
19. Hindu Marriage Act, 1955
20. Hindu Successions Act, 1956
21. Foreign Marriage Act, 1969
22. Family Courts Act, 1984
23. Maternity Benefit Act, 1961
24. Hindu Adoption & Maintenance ACT, 1956
25. Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973
26. Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971
27. National Commission for Women Act, 1990
28. The Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act, 1994
29. Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005
30. Sexual Harassment of Women at Work Place (Prevention, Prohibition & Redressal) Act, 2013^[142]
31. Indian Divorce Act, 1969
32. Equal Remuneration Act, 1976
33. Hindu Widows Remarriage Act, 1856
34. Muslim women (protection of rights on divorce) Act, 1986

Social opinions

In the wake of several brutal rape attacks in the capital city of Delhi, debates held in other cities revealed that some men believed women who dressed provocatively deserved to get raped; many of the correspondents stated women incited men to rape them.^{[143][144]}

Health

The average female life expectancy today in India is low compared to many countries, but it has shown gradual improvement over the years. In many families, especially rural ones, girls and women face nutritional discrimination within the family, and are anaemic and malnourished.^[22] Almost half of adolescent girls are chronically malnourished.

Sex ratios

India has a highly skewed sex ratio, which is attributed to sex-selective abortion and female infanticide affecting approximately one million female babies per year.^[160] In, 2011, government stated India was missing three million girls and there are now 48 less girls per 1,000 boys.^[161] Despite this, the government has taken further steps to improve the ratio, and the ratio is reported to have been improved in recent years.^[162]

Sanitation

In rural areas, schools have been reported to have gained the improved sanitation facility.^[166] Given the existing socio-cultural norms and situation of sanitation in schools, girl students are forced not to relieve themselves in the open unlike boys.^[167] Lack of facilities in home forces women to wait for the night to relieve themselves and avoid being seen by others.^[168] Access to sanitation in Bihar has been discussed. According to an estimate from 2013, about 85% of the rural households in Bihar have no access to a toilet; and this creates a dangerous situation for women and girls who are followed, attacked and raped in the fields.^[169]