

Status of women in India

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1975 has been declared by the United Nations to be the International Women's Year. By doing so it has posed the question clearly that the status of women in varying degrees is obviously far from one of equality with men all over the world, with the possible exception of most of the socialist countries where the whole State policy and its machinery has been geared to ensure that women truly participate in social production with their menfolk on absolutely equal terms.

The 25th Anniversary of the formation of our Republic is indeed a significant occasion to take stock of the position that the women of this country enjoy and the progress they have achieved since the days of colonial domination.

Our Constitution certainly provides for equality and the fact that there should be no discrimination on grounds of sex, religion etc. is enshrined in the Fundamental Rights. The Directive Principles of State Policy in Chapter IV of the Constitution affirm the right of full and equal franchise for all adults.

The Parliament of India has enacted various laws which give equal rights to women in marriage, divorce and inheritance. But a uniform civil code is yet to be framed, because while enlightened sections of the public are in favour of it, the backward looking elements in religious minorities have yet to grasp the far-reaching implications of such a law.

On mature re-election, however, we feel that even if women can sometime attain the pinnacles of political decision-making, our Prime Minister is an eloquent example—by and large they have as yet to get out of the morass of feudal oppression, a legacy we have inherited from centuries gone by.

It is widely known that before Independence, during the days of British Rule, arrangements for the education of the masses being practi-

cally non-existent, orthodoxy and dogmatism flourished and people, particularly women, remained steeped in poverty and ignorance, shackled to traditions, customs and age-old superstitions. But the wheels of change have started revolving from the later years of the nineteenth century. And several illustrious men and women pioneered the social reform movement in many parts of our country.

No Sex Rivalry

It must, always be borne in mind that the women's movement in India was not one in which it was ever a question of man against woman, born of rivalry between the two sexes. We refused to think ourselves as a class apart from the entire people of our country and insisted on being regarded as citizens who were equally responsible.

Besides, one must never forget that all the celebrated reformers, such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others—were valiant champions of women's social liberation. They raised their voice against inhuman and oppressive social customs to which women were subjected during the degenerated feudal epoch in India. What is more I must repeat that it is well to always remember that women's right to education, to become economically independent and determine for themselves their way of life, was born at the outset in the minds of several great men-leaders who had the courage to wage war for our legitimate demand to be free and equal at a time when we were not only slaves of a foreign power but also like enslaved by social obscurantism at its worst. Unlike in several so-called advanced societies, the politically conscious men of India did not oppose the fundamental truth that women were not meant to be subservient creatures.

Women on the Forefront

There is, therefore, today no profession or academic body in

India where women have not entered and have not made a mark. Mrs. Ashima Chatterjee, President of the prestigious Indian Science Congress for the past year is an eminent woman chemist. Dr. (Miss) Padmavati, the renowned Cardiologist, has just been elected to the Indian Academy of Medical Sciences. Besides such outstanding persons, we have over 20,000 qualified women doctors with graduate degrees and higher qualifications not to mention architects, engineers, writers, artists, sculptors and last but by no means the least, one who directs the destinies of nearly six hundred million men and women, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, India's Prime Minister for nearly a decade.

The academic world alone has a large share of women participating in it in this country. In fact there are 23,450 women teachers in the Universities and graduate women teachers in schools account for 94,200 and there have been women Vice-Chancellors. Similarly in civic bodies eminent women have been elected as Mayors in Metropolitan cities, and at the rural level they have led panchayats as Pramukhs and many are being elected to hold ministerial positions.

In the International sphere many Indian women were chosen to head world organisations and they acquitted themselves with great ability. The U.N. and its affiliated agencies provide many women of distinction opportunities to render valuable help.

The administrative services in India have their share of women in increasing numbers and there are women in the armed forces including even a contingent of Parachute jumpers trained in medical relief. In Broadcasting and T.V., several women find themselves in executive positions and they are thus beginning to influence the functioning of the mechanism of the State in several spheres. In the film and on the stage, from the early thirties of this century women have crashed in with spectacular results, a fact that could not have been foreseen fifty years ago. The Indian film world has however, yet to pro-

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duce women who can influence the direction and production of films of greater artistic merit and social significance.

Women have, of course, full and equal rights of franchise but out of 524 elected and nominated members in the Lok Sabha there are currently only 25 women in the Rajya Sabha, they account for 18 out of a total of 241 members. This proportion in the State Assemblies is maintained and should be cause of concern for all the progressive political parties who enjoy a national status.

Again, while there are 2.8 million men who have university degrees, there are only 700,000 odd women. Out of them, it is estimated, there are only 15,000 who are employed. But we have only been speaking of a minority as educated working women constitute around 2.5 per cent of all employed women.

Our deplorable condition becomes apparent when we consider the fact that only 18.72 per cent of Indian women are literate even though the percentage for men is not very much higher i.e. 39.45. Girls drop out at different stages while in school (i.e. when they attend it at all) in varying proportions and very much faster than boys, as they are required to help the family at home. Though the reason for this is primarily economic, it also reflects the persistence of feudal values and age-old attitudes towards women.

The percentage of working women to the total working population is approximately 19 and most of them are employed in agriculture or in unskilled sweated jobs in towns and cities. It is precisely in this sector that their exploitation is more intense and equal pay for equal work does not exist.

The women's movement in

India in this International Women's Year has to face these facts by striving to insist that the rights that exist in our constitution must be implemented without further delay. We are in doing so, not seeking any favour because we have earned the rights to equality.

We are capable of sharing the tasks of national development, if given greater opportunities and have been involving ourselves in actions to safeguard India's independence and for world peace.

That the vast majority of our sisters have to be made conscious of their rights and responsibilities is obvious. They have to be made politically aware and the message of enlightenment has to be taken from village to village, and to the poorer pockets of urban areas. In the factories and in the fields we must help them to organise themselves and exercise their inalienable right to equality. Some helpful social legislation has, of course, been enacted but no effort has been made on the part of the Government to set up an effective machinery for the implementation of these laws in practice. We, who believe that unless women are conscious partners in the cause of eliminating discrimination in all its forms and aspects, affecting every citizen, man and woman, owe

it to ourselves to act in unity and light the torch of enlightenment wherever darkness prevails at present.

Educational facilities must be made available on a much wider scale, vocational and technical training centres made available for women, and a network of health centres must spread out in both urban and rural areas. The domestic drudgery involved in house keeping can be lessened if kindergartens and child care centres are organised so that women have the leisure to study and participate in the cultural life of the country. We have an enormous field to cover in the years ahead. Let us bear in mind, therefore, that nearly 220 million women in the rural areas are denied the minimum facilities of modern development and are completely unaware of the possibilities that science has opened to us. This appalling state of affairs must end and 1975 should see the beginning of movement when social reformers spread out to every village in India.

1975 must be a year when the saying that the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all, both men and women, becomes a reality and not remain a mere verbal platitude, to be mouthed by slogan-mongers and self-seekers. We do not wish to look upon the question of our status in society in a superficial sense. We do not wish to be a part of the status conscious outlook, where wealth and its ownership determine a person's position in society. We are confident that a future with limitless possibilities for those who want to broaden their horizons lies ahead of us.

(Courtesy : University News)

NURSES BUREAU TO COMMENCE FUNCTIONING SHORTLY

We are pleased to announce that the Association has undertaken the assignment of running a Nurses Bureau and this project is likely to be put into operation in the near future. The objectives of the Bureau are to provide quality nursing care to patients either in the Hospital or at home for special duties on payment whenever needed.

Qualified nurses with midwifery training or B.Sc nursing desirous of undertaking private duty in hospitals or home nursing care in Delhi may get themselves registered with the NURSES BUREAU of the Trained Association of India. For further details contact :

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L-16 Green Park, New Delhi.