

The Journey of the Indian Woman: Change or Status Quo?
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Background

To trace the long and difficult journey of the Indian woman till this century, to ascertain whether there has been a positive change in her status or not, is a daunting challenge. As a famous French philosopher once said: "Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose." In other words, the more things change, the more the status quo prevails. It would also be useful to undertake, as I have attempted, a comparative analysis with the journey of women from Pakistan, after Pakistan's creation, and China after the Revolution. In India, statistics demonstrates that inequality prevails everywhere, particularly in rural India. Change is most noticeable in urban areas. The 21st century educated Indian woman in our highly urbanized city centers is very different from her sisters in the village, particularly in rural North India. Yet, change has also come to these conservative bastions, change which has brought with it social upheaval, inter-caste feuding and economic upward mobility for some sections of the under privileged, including women. This change has also brought with it a new and ugly phenomenon particularly in our city centres, of violence against women, a violence which is ugly and which questions the basis of our norms of civilization and culture. We all know of the Nirbhaya gang rape. I was Ambassador of India to the Netherlands when this terrible tragedy occurred. With the approval of MEA, I opened a Condolence Book in the Embassy so that the Dutch and the Embassy, including myself, could grieve together. I explained to my Dutch friends that this was an aberration in our society, not a customary occurrence. Today in 2016 after so many gang rapes and assaults on women, I am not so sure. Addressing the nation on the eve of Republic Day in January, 2013, Rashtrapatiiji Shri Pranab Mukherjee eloquently articulated the dilemma facing our country today. He said and I quote:

"There is a law of the land. But there is also a higher law. The sanctity of a woman is a directive principle of that larger edifice called Indian civilization. The Vedas say that there is more than one kind of mother: birth mother, a guru's wife, a king's wife, a priest's wife, she who nurses us, and our motherland. Mother is our protection from evil and oppression, our symbol of life and prosperity. When we brutalize a woman, we wound the soul of our civilization."

The beginning of the journey

To trace the journey of Indian women we must go back into our history. When did the decline begin? Equal status of women in our society, it has been pointed out by some historians, is part of our civilizational norms, our culture and our history. This is questionable, even though many parts of India including Kerala and Assam, still enjoy matriarchal systems. Rigid historical analysis confirms that in the Rig Vedic period, women enjoyed equal status with men. Buddha, who pre-dated Christ by 600 years or so, in his teachings gave lower caste women, along with men, an opportunity to escape from the discrimination practiced against them in the caste ridden, Brahmanical structure of the late Vedic period. This has been elegantly portrayed in Tagore's "Chandalika" where a lower caste woman becomes a Buddhist nun to escape discrimination. The decline and decadence of Hindu society since that time, along with the distortions of the caste system, sharply impacted the position of women in society. The changes were visible. By the time of the Guptas, because of the rise of a new, non-agricultural middle class, their position declined further, as documented in the 'Smritishastras'. The most damaging was the 'Manusmriti' which in chapter IX detailed the lowest class in society as reserved for women. The best English translation has been George Buhler (www.sacredtext.com). Manu's infamous advice that a woman at birth was the property of her father, after marriage the property of her husband and in the old age, the property of her son became the justification to deny a women property rights. The Gupta period witnessed increasing child marriage, sati, prostitution, Devdasi system and polygamy. Upper class women were forced into seclusion and were only educated in arts and music. They were not allowed to read the sacred texts.

From the 10th century onwards, and until the establishment of Turkish rule with the Slave dynasty and then the Mughals who came from Samarkand and settled in Delhi, India saw a series of invasions across the Khyber Pass, bringing new culture and social norms which India, as a true melting pot of civilizations, absorbed, assessed, assimilated or rejected. As a result, the Purdah for Muslims and the Ghunghat for Hindus became institutionalised and marked a retrograde step backwards for women cutting across religion and society. It resulted in women being socially excluded and being discriminated against in education, in health care, etc. Thus the degeneration over the centuries in the status of women commenced during this period.

Journey of women under Colonial rule and in our National Movement

Under colonial rule, and with the introduction of English and modern education, some changes commenced. After the First War for Freedom in 1857, a reformist movement of

great significance for women, the 'Brahma Samaj' started in Bengal and gradually spread throughout India. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and his followers introduced important changes which were carried forward by the 'Brahmo Sabha', a movement of reformist Bengali Brahmins to fight social oppression. These included attempts to abolish 'sati', polygamy and child marriage and encourage widow remarriage. Efforts were made to bring back property and inheritance rights for women. Women's education was encouraged. Subsequently, women played an important part in India's burgeoning independence movement.

Things changed rapidly with the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi and the rise of our National Movement. Gandhiji upheld the equality of women and insisted that they should become part of the National Movement. He saw the veil as a retrograde effort to push women back and deprive them of their equal status. He supported women's education, widow re-marriage and tried to change the conservative social norms of that time. At that time and age, Gandhiji had stated:

“Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate, in the minutest details, in the activities of man, and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him”.

His efforts came to fruition when India's Constitution was adopted by the Constituent Assembly on 26th Jan, 1950. These rights were enshrined as Fundamental Rights and guaranteed to all Indian women equality, no discrimination by the State, equality of opportunity, and equal pay for equal work. In addition, it allowed special provisions to be made by the State in favor of women and children, renounced practices derogatory to the dignity of women, and also allowed for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief.

Journey of women in post-Independent India

Legal empowerment of women in India thus began in 1947 with the Indian Constitution which guarantees equal right including equal pay for equal work, unlike the American Constitution, where this right was subsequently given through a constitutional amendment. Post-1947, women flourished. There were equal educational opportunities as well as equal opportunities for entry into the civil service etc. Access to health care also improved dramatically. The problem arose when it came to implementation of these rights. There were many obstacles and roadblocks arising out of poverty, underdevelopment and conservative social values in significant segments of our population. One should also

remember that the British left India as a very poor and socially underdeveloped nation with appalling literacy figures. When India became independent, its overall literacy rate was only 31% and for women it was 22%. This rendered more difficult and time consuming the process of social revolution.

The problems of empowerment of the Indian women are more complex than one imagines. To take one example, of education: in India, there was initial strong resistance to co-education in some parts of India, traditionally male bastions and socially conservative. There was a shortage of women teachers and absence of toilets for girls in Schools. In homes where the mother was not educated, ignorance prevailed about the need to educate the girl-child i.e. of the value of education. One can recall a famous Telegu poet who had announced in the Fifties, "Educating a girl child is like watering a plant in a neighbour's garden." With such regressive societal attitudes and ingrained biases, what happened thereafter was a revolution of sorts and was in fact, almost a miracle. The Government of that time, in the 90's, introduced the concept of the mid-day meal. This ensured that in many poor families, children especially the girl child, were increasingly sent to school because they were in a safe environment and were given a free meal. A concerted effort was made to recruit women teachers and to build more toilets for girls and to wear down the resistance towards universal, compulsory, co-educational system of education. These measures worked very well in those States which were socially advanced and where the fruits of economic development were able to percolate down to the lowest levels. Other States lagged behind. This impacted the status of women in those States, notably in the North Indian heartland but also in Bihar and Jharkhand.

Road blocks in the journey: institutionalised violence against women

In a vast country like India with a huge rural-urban divide and widespread conservative values, it was to be expected that the journey of the Indian woman towards emancipation and equal rights saw many obstacles and road blocks. Much has been written about the evils of child marriage, dowry, domestic violence, acid throwing, female infanticide, sex selection, abortion and sexual harassment. Despite legislation, sensitisation campaigns and efforts of civil society, the Indian woman had to struggle very hard to try to establish her equal status in society. Then a new phenomenon started of institutionalized violence against women. In my view it is a relatively modern phenomenon. It has been endemic in the West ever since women started the struggle for emancipation. It is often forgotten that the struggle for universal suffrage in the West was a long and sometimes violent process similar to the abolition of slavery. Throughout history, violent assaults on women and rape were

considered by men to be a legitimate tactic of war to humiliate the enemy and to protect one's own. It is being practiced today by ISIS against those women whom they consider to be infidels. It has also been practiced by Boko Haram in Nigeria. Acts of war, external or civil, are accompanied by extraordinarily cruel acts of violence and rape of women opponents. It is the most effective form of intimidation.

In India, with the introduction of education for women and the girl child, improvement of indicators of social and economic development and rising expectations from an upwardly mobile newly created lower middle class; there was a mass movement of unemployed rural youth to sophisticated urbanised city centres. What happened when rural India which was mainly agricultural, conservative and under-developed came to urban India which was progressive, socially emancipated and forward looking? In the clash of these two India's, institutionalised violence against women, resulting often in rape, started increasing at an alarming rate. Since our judicial process was regarded as complex and time-consuming, bystanders and witnesses often preferred to turn away and move on, rather than give assistance or stop such acts. As a result, our cities have become increasingly unsafe and women are increasingly subjected to public pressure from conservatives and sometimes family members that they restrict their social freedom, dress etc for the sake of personal safety. This had been firmly rejected by most professional working woman who had struggled so hard to achieve those rights guaranteed to her by our Constitution. Social activism in favour of women's rights had already commenced in the 70s. It gained momentum after violence against women became the norm rather than an exception. Pressure on women to conform and compromise remains. Witness, as an example, some of the decisions of the Khap Panchayats. Women have been urged to marry early, not to carry mobile phones and not to wear Western dress. It is as if the onus is on the woman to escape assault and rape through her obedient and submissive behaviour.

Journey of the Pakistani woman

Is the situation similar or different in South Asia or among our neighbors? When we trace the journey of the Indian woman across millennia, we must remember that it was also the journey of the Pakistani woman before Partition. Pre 1947, Muslim women from now Pakistan's Punjab played an important role in the freedom struggle and in the Quit India Movement. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, believed in women's rights. His sister, Fatima Jinnah, a leading crusader for women, may have become the first women President of a predominantly Muslim majority nation, had General Ayub Khan allowed free and fair elections. Why then is it generally acknowledged that the status of the

Pakistani women is one of systemic gender subordination? As in most feudal, conservative societies, the unequal status can vary across classes, regions, and the rural/urban divide. One must also acknowledge that there have been some positive developments but these have been overshadowed by the overwhelming influence of the conservative religious class in Pakistan who are antagonistic towards the issue of equal status of women in Pakistani society. It has been argued that testimony of a woman can carry half the weight of a man. Even rape victims have not been allowed to use DNA evidence to prove their cases. A blind woman who was raped was punished for being an adulteress. Rampant domestic abuse and a high rate of child marriages and forced marriages still remain. Honor killings are another heinous crime, regularly practiced across Pakistan, which is currently one of the dangerous countries in the world for women.

Despite the improvement in Pakistan's literacy rate since its creation, the educational status of Pakistani women is among the lowest in the world. The literacy rate is still lower for women compared to men: the literacy rate is 45.8% for females, while for males it is 69.5% (aged 15 or older, data from 2015). The attitudes towards women in Pakistani culture make the fight for educational equality more difficult. The lack of democracy and feudal practices of Pakistan also contribute to the gender gap in the educational system. Feudalism leaves the underpowered, women in particular, in a very vulnerable position. Although girls have the right to get an education legally, in many rural regions of Pakistan girls are strongly discouraged from going to school and discriminated against, as there are violent acts such as acid throwing which many girls fall victim to for attending school. Health care figures are equally discouraging. The female infant mortality rate is higher than that of male children while the maternal mortality rate is also high, as only 20 percent of women are assisted by a trained health care provider during delivery.

Pakistan's efforts to divert international attention from the deteriorating condition of status of Pakistani women by focusing on its Nobel laureate, Malala Yousafzai, who at 17 became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize and the first Nobel Peace Prize winner from Pakistan has not been at all successful. In my view, the journey of the Pakistani woman towards equal status is conditional on Pakistan's own journey towards a more egalitarian, less feudal, less conservative and more democratic society. Surely, the Father of the Pakistani nation, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, whose sister Fatima, a practicing dentist, did so much for women's rights in those early years of Pakistan's nationhood would approve of this change, if it ever takes place.

Journey of the Chinese woman

Let me now move to our largest neighbor, the People's Republic of China. The long march of the Chinese woman particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries resulted in a significant improvement in their status after the Revolution and the establishment of the modern Chinese State under the control of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) in 1947. Nevertheless and despite difficulties in obtaining data in what essentially remains a closed society, there is compelling evidence regarding their unequal status, be it in health care, access to education or domestic violence. Until the formal abolition in 2015 of the 'One Child Policy', there is also documentary evidence regarding forced abortions, sterilizations, adoptions and female infanticide, all of which constitutes a gross violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which China is a State Party.

On education, the gender gap in current enrollment widens with age because males are more likely to be enrolled than females at every age group in the People's Republic of China. In health care, while there have been significant improvements from the traditional Chinese culture, which was a patriarchal society based on Confucian ideology, even today women do not possess priority in healthcare. Health care is still tailored to focus on men. Another phenomenon is of the missing women of Asia which is highly visible in China. The ratio of men to women in China is much higher than would be expected biologically, and gender discrimination has contributed to this imbalance. Dr. Amartya Sen, Nobel Laureate asserted in 1990 that over 100 million women were missing globally, with 50 million women missing from China alone. He attributed the deficit in the number of women to sex-selective abortion, female infanticide, and inadequate nutrition for girls, all of which had been encouraged by the one-child policy, which is being gradually phased out since 2015. Domestic violence is another issue. In 2004, the All-China Women's Federation compiled survey results to show that thirty percent of the women in China experienced domestic violence within their homes. The Chinese Marriage Law was amended in 2001 to offer mediation services and compensation to those who subjected to domestic violence.

In a vast country like China, the status of women declines in rural areas and in China's far flung territories or where there are significant ethnic minorities of a different religion. Clearly, the majority view does not prevail in these areas with regard to equal status of women. Among the Uyghur's it is said:

“Firewood serves for winter, a wife serves for her husband's pleasure.”

Another popular saying is:

“A woman without a husband is like a horse without a halter.”

These demonstrate that Chinese women have a long journey ahead to change the status quo.

My own journey as an Indian woman and as a Diplomat in India's Foreign Service

As a professional diplomat with 38 years in the Indian Foreign Service, I am often questioned about my own journey and the situation now in the Foreign Service in the 21st century? In my view, our Foreign Service has come a long way in changing gender stereotypes. In the early years, women diplomats were forced to resign if they got married. We lost two promising women diplomats, including Mrs. Rama Mehta, the wife of late Foreign Secretary Shri Jagat Mehta, due to this bizarre rule which had to be challenged before it was overturned. Similarly, when I joined the Service in 1976, I was informed that as a single officer I would get half the Foreign Allowance of my male married colleagues. In those days and the trend continues till today, it was difficult for women to get married and to remain married because of the challenges posed by long separations and refusals of male spouses to travel with their wives leaving their career behind, as women spouses were expected to do. Therefore this rule targeted women officers. I recall the economic hardship on my first posting because of this discriminatory rule. I am grateful to a then unmarried male colleague who challenged this diktat successfully. Another discriminatory rule was that in the event of marriage between two Foreign Service officers, the women officer would get half the Foreign Allowance of her husband. This rule also took many years to change.

The journey of women in our Service began with Ms. C.B. Muthamma who joined in 1949. She had to go to court many times, once to get a foreign posting and then to get her legitimate promotion to Secretary Level, called Grade I in Foreign Service. She had documented that the justification given for no foreign posting was that she may have to go to airport at night on duty! We have indeed come a long way with three women Foreign Secretary's beginning with Mrs. Chokila Iyer, followed later by Mrs. Nirupama Rao and my batch mate Mrs. Sujata Singh. We have had two Foreign Service women Ambassadors to Washington, Mrs. Meera Shanker and Mrs. Nirupama Rao. Other glass barriers were broken too. We got a woman Spokesperson when Nirupama Rao became JS (XP) Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj became India's first women Chief of Protocol while I was made the first woman Head of Administration and Personnel (JS [AD]) in 1998 which had hitherto been a male bastion. Women have also been posted to the Middle East and to war torn countries such as Libya, Lebanon and Afghanistan. Both my colleagues in Libya and Lebanon stayed with the Indian communities under extremely trying conditions of war and bombings and did not desert their posts. Their roles have been acknowledged by the

Government. Another colleague was Deputy Chief of Mission in Kabul under very difficult circumstances. There are some barriers still to be broken. Till today, no woman has been posted as our Permanent Representative in New York. No professional woman diplomat has been sent as our High Commissioner to London etc. I am confident that these barriers will also fall. Today, we have Ms. Beno Zephine who at 25 made history when she became India's first 100 per cent visually challenged person to be inducted into our Foreign Service. She remains upbeat and confident about her future in the Foreign Service.

To speak of my own story, it is important to recall that Sylvia Plath, the famous British "Poet Royale" who tragically committed suicide when challenges facing professional women of her day became too much for her, had said in the "Bell Jar" in 1963:

***"I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree...
One fig was a husband and a happy home and the children,
and another fig was a famous poet.....
I wanted each and every one of them,
but choosing one meant losing all the rest....."***

The above truly symbolizes the choice between the domestic idyll and a professional career as the unique dilemma of women even today.

I post-graduated in June '75, joined St. Stephen's college as a lecturer in July '75, gave the civil service exam without informing the Principal of St. Stephens College (was afraid of being sacked) and was called for the interview in March '76. Since 32,000 people gave the exam with me, I was sure I would not qualify. Destiny however had other plans for me. For me therefore empowerment began in childhood. Growing up, going to college or then in the Foreign Service, I was always treated as an equal. There were isolated incidents of "eve-teasing" when I was in college but they were not vicious as they are now.

In the Foreign Service, the challenge in those days was the need to constantly prove that you deserve the equal treatment you are getting: i.e. no concessions, no excuses, no flexibility in one's schedule etc. No such burden is imposed on one's male colleague. On the contrary, if he is alone and drinking secretly, he is excused. If he is incompetent, he is given the necessary guidance and suggestions to improve. When one was younger, one resented this inherent discrimination, born of the need to continuously demonstrate that you are just like a male officer. I always rejected the efforts of my colleagues to call me a

“brother officer”, noting I am neither anybody’s brother nor sister. I am a colleague and deserve the same treatment. This imposes a huge burden when one is young, in a stressful job and married to a demanding husband with a mother in law who inquires why her daughter-in-law cannot be “more normal” like other women. When I was in PMI, New York, I had to face this situation and I did – head on. The situation becomes more challenging when you have small, demanding children and an equally demanding boss who in a stressful moment will say, “As a woman you decided to enter a man’s world. It is your fault and your choice”. You learn to compromise. The compromise usually, for those of us who are highly ambitious and wish to succeed is at the expense of the family. It frequently results in breakdown of family relationships.

Let me assure that there is no single role model for an empowered woman. I am no role model for anyone. I made my life and I live it according to the actions which I took, knowing what the consequences would be. If I have regrets, I keep them to myself. Looking back now, I realize I could have done better as far as my family life is concerned. But those were difficult times. Growing up in the 60’s and joining Foreign Service in 1976 with no family member having ever been in the Foreign Service to give guidance. One day I was a family person and then suddenly on the 28th of November 1978, I was on this Air India plane to Paris via Rome with two tin trunks of clothes and books and 20 US dollars in my pocket to face my new life alone in an apartment in Paris and in a world where there were no mobile phones, no computers, no fax machines and no easy form of communications. I was cut off from my beloved father who wrote to me once a week by diplomatic bag. I learnt how to drive in the busy streets of Paris on my own, to park my car between two cars like the French do, to speak French as the French do but exactly like them. It was a difficult transformation. But I did it, though sometimes I wasn’t sure I could do it.

Indian society sometimes regarded us with suspicion because we were so different. It is only years later when social values had changed in India that I become, to my own surprise, a role model for my family, for my relatives, for the children of my friends. I realized that it was important to sensitize those who admired my success that behind every successful and empowered woman, there is a story and that story is the price the woman pays for the success. Remember what Sylvia Plath said – those of us who want both figs, end up losing one – painfully.

My story ends here. It is a story of my own empowerment. All professional women, I am sure, have different or similar stories to narrate. In our quest for equality and equal rights, we sometimes have to either compromise or pay the consequences.

Concluding Reflections

The journey continues. It is a dynamic process but the status quo has changed. The process of implementation of fundamental rights and subsequent Parliamentary legislation has had a definitive impact. The nation is changing and there is much greater support including from men regarding the need for equal status of women. Many rights have been gained. The position of women in India compared in the perspective of India's neighbourhood or globally, may not be as stark as it often portrayed in international media.

E.H. Carr in 'What is History' had stated:

“Facts speak only when the historians call on them to speak..... in a sense, a fact is and cannot be more sacrosanct than a perception”.

The perception internationally is that the position of India's woman does not do credit to its history, culture, civilisation and democratic liberal norms. Delhi has been called “the rape capital of the world”. Is this true? Is this fair? How does one change this perception? This calls for deep reflection. In my view, in this journey women have to take the nation with them. Complete victory is only possible when society changes and that change percolates to the lowest levels in rural India.

In the meantime, what can be done to change the status quo? Education for all and rising literacy rates should have an impact in the long run but our education system needs to be less paternalistic and more inclusive towards girls and women. These values, to be effective, need to be inculcated at an early age. This has to be accompanied by stringent laws to deter crimes against women. It is troubling that even the introduction of the death penalty does not seem to have had a deterring effect in reducing these heinous crimes. In many cases, the threat of the death penalty has been instead a death warrant for the victim, who is raped and then murdered to ensure she cannot identify her violator and send him to the gallows. A life term in an Indian prison, with the constant threat of attacks by inmates, since rapists are detested by ordinary prisoners, would be a much bigger deterrent and may save the life of the victim. There is so much more that our cities can do to ensure safety for women, from better street lighting to cctv cameras to much better policing. The public too must be much

more vigilant and not callously look the other way. Public support is intrinsic to the issue of better safety.

Let me conclude by two quotations about this journey from the founding mothers of the women's movement in the 70s and thereafter. Their message for the continuation of this journey is more relevant than ever before.

Simone de Beauvoir in "The Second Sex" had said:

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a Woman."

Germaine Greer noted:

"One may not reach the dawn, save by the path of the night."

She added:

"Freedom is fragile and must be protected. To sacrifice it, even as a temporary measure is to betray it."

Let me end here.

Ambassador Bhaswati Mukherjee

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