



Gender Justice in Modern India: Legislation, Limitations, and the Legacy of Patriarchy

Nusratuel Islam Itoo

¹ Lecturer in History, Govt Degree College Bani Kathua, Jammu and Kashmir, India

* Corresponding Author:

Nusratuel Islam Itoo
itoonusrat786@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received 08-01-2025
Revised 19-04-2025
Accepted 19-05-2025
Available Online 30-06-2025

ARTICLE ID

CLIO0301004

KEYWORDS

Women's status, patriarchy, gender inequality, Indian history, feminist reform, empowerment, socio-cultural norms.

ABSTRACT

It critically analyses the ways in which cultural, religious, political, and economic frameworks have entrenched patriarchy while concurrently facilitating avenues for change and opposition. During the early Vedic period, women experienced a degree of autonomy and spiritual agency; however, later epochs—namely the Puranic, Islamic, and colonial periods—saw the entrenchment of gender hierarchies, the relegation of women to domestic roles, and the perpetuation of male supremacy through religious texts and traditions. The research emphasises reform movements, including Buddhism and the Bhakti tradition, as well as socio-legal interventions by Indian reformers and female activists in the 19th and 20th centuries. It looks at how policies changed after independence via Five-Year Plans and ideas like Welfare, Women in Development (WID), and Gender and Development (GAD), leading up to tactics centred on empowerment. The essay contends that, while considerable progress in legal, educational, and institutional domains, persistent patriarchal practices continue to subvert women's rights, especially among marginalised communities. Utilising historical records, feminist historiography, and policy papers, the research highlights the enduring dichotomy of empowerment and oppression, promoting a continuous, integrative, and inclusive strategy for attaining authentic gender equality in India.



INTRODUCTION

Gender justice continues to be one of the most urgent, intricate, and varied issues in contemporary India. Despite substantial progress towards gender equality in legal, educational, and political spheres, entrenched patriarchal systems persist in obstructing the complete attainment of justice for women and gender minorities. The core of gender justice encompasses not only the equitable allocation of rights and opportunities but also the eradication of the structural, cultural, and institutional frameworks that sustain gender-based discrimination and inequality. It necessitates a comprehensive reform of both official legislation and the informal societal norms that shape behaviour and perception, guaranteeing that every person, irrespective of gender, may experience a life of dignity, autonomy, and empowerment. This is especially important in India, where women's roles in both public and private life have been shaped and constrained by religious beliefs, caste systems, and socio-economic divisions that have been around for thousands of years. The historical evolution of women's standing in Indian culture illustrates a continuum from veneration to oppression. In the early Vedic era, women were shown as academically competent, spiritually enlightened, and socially engaged. Gargi and Maitreyi are examples of women who were able to go to school and talk about religion. They regularly took part in intellectual discussions and holy chants. But this time of relative freedom didn't last long. As civilisation transitioned into the later Vedic, Epic, and Puranic eras, patriarchal ideals solidified into inflexible social rules. As religious writings like the Manusmriti were written down, women's duties became more and more limited to the home. Their rights to property, education, and spiritual agency were limited, and their worth was mostly based on how well they obeyed their husbands and how much they sacrificed for their children. Child marriage, widow immolation (sati), and the restriction of widow remarriage were entrenched customs that reinforced the patriarchal system.

The Buddhist period momentarily changed this path by giving women more chances to become monks and teaching spiritual beliefs that are fair to everyone. Women were

permitted to become nuns, partake in academic pursuits, and engage in religious ceremonies, therefore experiencing a degree of social mobility and spiritual autonomy. Nonetheless, these advancements were limited in scope and duration, as patriarchal interpretations rapidly reinstated male supremacy, even within Buddhist monastic organisations. The beginning of Islamic governance made things even more difficult when it came to gender roles. Islamic philosophy fundamentally promoted egalitarian ideas; but, its syncretic integration with indigenous patriarchal customs resulted in the normalisation of purdah, limitations on women's movement, and the exclusion of middle- and lower-class women from public responsibilities. Elite women, especially in the Mughal courts, had cultural and occasionally economic power, but this power was only available to a small group of people. The colonial era brought Indian women a mix of problems and opportunities. British colonial authority, although nominally dedicated to civilisational and moral change, often perpetuated patriarchal practices under the pretext of cultural relativism and non-interference in domestic laws. However, the 19th and early 20th centuries saw a lot of new voices calling for change and women's rights. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Syed Ahmed Khan were among of the first people to speak out against cruel customs like sati, urge widows to remarry, and support women's education. At the same time, reform groups in the Muslim community tried to find a balance between Islamic precepts and the needs of contemporary life. Even though these attempts were sometimes based on paternalistic ideas about women's responsibilities, they set the stage for more radical criticisms of gender inequity in the years that followed.

During the early 1900s, independent women's voices began to be heard in the nationalism movement and other areas. Women like Pandita Ramabai, Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay were well-known political figures. They organised women's clubs, went to national conferences, and spoke out about the need for social change. The nationalist fight, especially while Mahatma Gandhi was in charge, got a lot of women involved in the movement. Gandhi's portrayal of India as a feminine entity—Mother India—

coupled with his advocacy for non-violence and self-sacrifice, resonated with conventional beliefs while covertly undermining them to legitimise women's involvement in public rallies, picketing, and civil disobedience. Nevertheless, the instrumental use of feminine imagery often did not surpass the foundational assumptions about women's idealised roles, thereby perpetuating rather than contesting the patriarchal structure. India's independence in 1947 and the promulgation of the Constitution in 1950 were both official steps towards gender equality. The Constitution, based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and ideas of freedom from colonialism, gave women equal rights, protection from discrimination, and affirmative action. Articles 14, 15, and 16 established equality before the law, although Article 15(3) allowed the state to create particular rules for women and children. The Hindu Marriage Act (1955), Hindu Succession Act (1956), and Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (1956) changed the rights of women in marriage, inheritance, and adoption. This was a step forward for Hindus' personal laws. But the pluralistic legal system let religious groups keep their own rules, which were frequently still patriarchal and unfair. For example, Muslim personal law maintained rules that made it illegal for women to inherit equally and allowed unilateral divorce rituals like triple talaq, which the Supreme Court just recently ruled unlawful in 2017.

After India gained independence, a strong women's movement also began to grow. This movement was very important in pointing out the flaws in legislative changes and calling for a more complete approach to gender justice. Starting in the 1970s, independent women's organisations started to bring attention to problems including sexual harassment, dowry killings, custodial rape, and domestic violence. These groups turned away from the elite-focused, welfare-oriented methods of previous reformers and instead focused on lived experiences, intersectionality, and action at the grassroots level. The phrase "the personal is political" summed up their work to shatter the hush around domestic violence and fight the idea that family issues were not open to public scrutiny. Government policies changed at the same time. Five-Year Plans started off focussing

on welfare, but over time they changed to concentrate on development and then on empowerment. The Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980–85) was a turning point since it included a clear chapter on "Women and Development." Later plans included gender issues in larger development initiatives, promoted the creation of self-help organisations, and set up organisations like the National Commission for Women and the Department of Women and Child Development. The Women's Component Plan (1997) and the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001) showed that more and more people were starting to see women as agents of change. Still, these frameworks typically didn't have strict implementation, thorough monitoring, or real results. Also, their top-down approach sometimes didn't deal with the structural causes of inequality, such not having land, caste discrimination, and worker exploitation.

Laws like the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005), the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act (2013), and changes to the Criminal Law following the Nirbhaya case in 2012 have made the legal system even bigger. These laws have definitely made people more aware of the law and given them more options for legal action, but they have also shown how limited legalism can be. There is still a big difference between what rights are promised on paper and what really happens. Women are still afraid to report crimes or get legal assistance because of low conviction rates, slow justice, patriarchal attitudes among police and judges, and social shame. The digital age has also brought forth new types of violence against women, such as cyberbullying, revenge porn, and online stalking. These need new laws and more knowledge of technology. The fight for gender justice in India is closely tied to other forms of power, such as caste, class, religion, ethnicity, and location. Dalit and Adivasi women endure systematic violence stemming from both patriarchal frameworks and caste-based inequalities. Muslim women face both gender-based discrimination and social shame. LGBTQ+ persons are marginalised in predominant gender justice discourses, although the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 2018. These kinds of vulnerabilities call for a more complex, open, and participatory concept of

justice that shows how diverse Indian society is.

Even if there are many problems, there is still optimism on the road to gender justice. Women in India currently have important roles in politics, the courts, academics, science, and business. Grassroots efforts, internet activism, and global solidarity groups have broadened the channels through which women advocate for their rights. The growing prominence of feminist academics, media portrayals, and youth-led initiatives indicates that gender debate has become central. But this visibility has to lead to changes in the way things are set up. Justice, in its most authentic form, cannot be achieved via mere legislative revisions or superficial representation; it requires a thorough reconfiguration of social interactions, cultural norms, and institutional principles.

Status is the social position inhabited by a person within the intricate fabric of society, a position naturally connected with both rights and responsibilities. Part of the larger social web, status is relational and naturally linked with other social positions. From a merely sociological perspective, status does not always indicate hierarchical ranking. Still, the benefits, rights, and authority ingrained in certain statuses often lead to unconscious hierarchies wherein some roles are seen as better than others. Within this context, women's position has traditionally been seen as less than that of males in many different countries. Every status is expressed via roles—defined sets of expectations, duties, and behaviour patterns allocated to people within certain social settings (GOI, CSWI, 1974). Status tells "who" a person is; role defines "what" is expected of them. People usually possess many statuses at once, hence they frequently behave in a variety of ways that results in changing role views depending on situational need.¹

For women especially, these roles are rather complex and sometimes contradictory. A woman could play roles including wife, mother, daughter, sister, teacher, manager, labourer, or even leader of the family at once. Her social level results from the combination of all these jobs, which may at times be conflicting and lead to uncertainty, stress, and conflict rather than from any one role. Moreover, women's expectations about rights, respect, and

incentives connected with these positions as well as society views of their real advantages also help to shape their social standing.²

Therefore, evaluating women's situation calls for consideration of both objective (measurable indicators like money, education, property ownership, prestige, options, and power) and subjective (women's lived experiences and understanding of their rights and entitlements). The degree of power, privilege, and autonomy given to women depends ultimately on the relative placement of men and women in a society as well as the values associated to their respective roles. Both in India and elsewhere, it is well known that traditionally women's position has been secondary to men's. Many times, Patriarchy and religion have been found as main causes of this subjugation. But the phenomena is multifaceted, influenced also by political, economic, legal, educational, and other sociopolitical factors.³

Literature Review

The discourse on gender justice in India is deeply rooted in a broad and evolving body of literature that spans across disciplines such as history, sociology, legal studies, feminist theory, and development studies. The literature reveals that the question of gender justice is both ancient and contemporary—an issue that has persisted across centuries of Indian history but has taken new forms and attracted renewed urgency in the modern constitutional era. Scholars have documented how patriarchy, as a system of male dominance institutionalized in social, legal, religious, and economic structures, continues to shape women's lives and limit their freedoms. While progressive legislation has sought to address gender disparities, scholars consistently highlight the gap between constitutional ideals and socio-cultural realities.

The earliest academic engagement with women's status in post-independence India began with the landmark "Towards Equality" report, published by the Government of India's Committee on the Status of Women in 1974. This foundational document exposed the persistent inequalities women faced despite the guarantees of equality in the Constitution. It also underscored the invisibility of women in official statistics, the gendered nature of economic marginalisation, and the cultural and institutional mechanisms that perpetuated

women's subordination. The report catalyzed further academic inquiries into the intersections of gender, law, and development, establishing the need for gender-disaggregated data and feminist policy critique.

Historical accounts such as Mandakranta Bose's *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval and Modern India* (2000) and Mira Seth's *Women Development: The Indian Experience* (2001) offer comprehensive insights into the evolving status of women across India's historical epochs. Bose examines how religious and cultural narratives across Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic traditions have simultaneously deified and marginalised women. The reverence for female deities in Hinduism, for instance, coexists paradoxically with the ritual confinement of real women in patriarchal family structures. Seth, on the other hand, focuses on post-independence policy evolution, analyzing the shift from a welfare-oriented approach to one focused on empowerment and agency. Her work evaluates the implementation of various Five-Year Plans and their implications for women's development.

Alfred De Souza's *Women in Contemporary India and South Asia* (1980) adds a sociological perspective to this discourse, critiquing how institutional religion, caste systems, and traditional kinship structures operate to restrict women's mobility, autonomy, and access to public life. De Souza points out that while reform movements and education have opened up avenues for women, these gains remain largely confined to urban and upper-caste groups, leaving the vast majority of rural, Dalit, and tribal women outside the purview of meaningful empowerment. His analysis foregrounds the need for an intersectional understanding of gender justice that takes into account the differential impact of patriarchy across social categories.

Feminist scholars have been at the forefront of critiquing the state's legislative and policy responses to gender inequality. The work of Flavia Agnes, a prominent legal scholar and women's rights activist, is particularly influential in this regard. Agnes argues that personal laws in India—particularly those governing marriage, divorce, and inheritance—remain deeply gender-biased, with significant variation across religious communities. Her

writings in *Law and Gender Inequality* (1999) challenge the uniform civil code debate by emphasizing the need for community-sensitive reform that empowers women without eroding their cultural identities. Agnes also critiques the Indian legal system's procedural inefficiencies and the patriarchal attitudes of judicial officers, which often deter women from seeking justice.

The literature also reflects a growing concern with gender-based violence and the state's inability to provide adequate protection. The scholarship of Nivedita Menon, especially in *Seeing Like a Feminist* (2012), critically examines how legal and cultural narratives construct and constrain women's autonomy. Menon dissects the criminal justice system's failure to account for the social stigma, fear of retaliation, and institutional apathy that prevent women from reporting sexual assault or domestic abuse. She also critiques the media's role in sensationalising violence without addressing its structural roots. Her analysis expands the understanding of gender justice beyond the courtroom to include societal attitudes, media representation, and cultural imagination.

Usha Sharma's *Gender Mainstreaming and Women's Rights* (2004) investigates the international and national frameworks that guide gender policy. She traces the influence of global feminist movements and development paradigms such as Women in Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD) on Indian planning processes. Sharma evaluates the institutionalisation of gender concerns through the creation of the Department of Women and Child Development and the implementation of gender budgeting. Her work acknowledges the progressive intent behind these measures but also warns of their superficial implementation and limited grassroots penetration.

More recent scholarship has expanded the scope of gender justice to include digital violence, LGBTQ+ rights, and neoliberal restructuring. For example, scholars such as Ratna Kapur argue that gender justice must also account for the commodification of female bodies in a neoliberal economy, the rise of conservative religio-political forces, and the exclusion of queer identities from mainstream feminist discourses. In her essay "Erotic Justice," Kapur critiques how feminist legal

strategies often align with nationalist and moralist agendas that regulate rather than liberate women's bodies.

Development economists such as Bina Agarwal have focused on the material dimensions of gender justice, particularly access to land, credit, and employment. In her seminal work *A Field of One's Own* (1994), Agarwal demonstrates how land ownership and control over productive resources are crucial for women's economic security and bargaining power within households. Her analysis challenges the state's narrow focus on welfare and argues for a redistributive justice model that recognises women as producers and not merely beneficiaries of development.

Dalit feminist voices have also contributed significantly to the literature by exposing the caste-blindness of mainstream feminism. Writers such as Gail Omvedt and Sharmila Rege argue that upper-caste feminist narratives often fail to account for the violence, exclusion, and indignity experienced by Dalit and Adivasi women. Rege's concept of "Dalit feminist standpoint" urges scholars and policymakers to include caste as a central analytic in any conversation about gender justice in India.

The Indian women's movement, both as a field of practice and a subject of study, is another rich area of literature. The evolution from welfare-oriented women's organisations to radical, autonomous groups in the 1970s and 1980s is well documented in works by Vina Mazumdar, Kumkum Sangari, and Sudesh Vaid. These scholars highlight how grassroots mobilisation, protest politics, and feminist epistemology have shaped the contours of gender justice in India. They also critique the co-optation of feminist agendas by donor agencies and political parties, warning against the depoliticisation of gender discourse.

Indian Women's Status Across the Ages: A Historical Perspective

An exploration of women's status in India must necessarily account for temporal and spatial variability, as social structures and relationships evolve over time. Historical inquiry thus provides critical insights into the dynamics of women's subjugation, the devaluation of their contributions, and the

legitimizing role of social, religious, and cultural norms. These forces, which took root in the distant past, continue to influence gender relations to the present day.

It is essential, however, to acknowledge several constraints in reconstructing this historical narrative:

- The documentary record extends back approximately four millennia, but remains sparse and of contested authenticity.
- Historiography has traditionally been dominated by male perspectives, often marginalizing women's voices and experiences.
- Women themselves, having internalized patriarchal values, frequently became transmitters of traditions that perpetuated their subordination.
- Women do not constitute a homogenous category. Differences in caste, class, religion, region, and community mediate the ways in which they experience inequality. For example, while middle-class women historically faced restrictions on employment, peasant women participated actively in agricultural labour, and elite women were largely excluded from the labour market altogether (Gupta, 1982: 154).
- Social change and reform efforts have impacted women unevenly, leading to differentiated outcomes.
- Objective markers of high status do not always align with subjective experiences of empowerment or fulfilment.

Given these complexities, this analysis does not purport to offer an exhaustive account of women's status across all religious and regional contexts.

The Vedic Period: The Foundations of Women's Status in Ancient India

The Vedic period is often romanticized as a golden age for women in India. However, simplistic assertions about women's equality during this era warrant critical scrutiny. According to de Souza (1980: 187), while women may have enjoyed greater freedoms

compared to later periods, this should not be misconstrued as comprehensive gender equality.

The *Rigveda* (circa 1500–1000 BCE), reflecting early Vedic culture, exhibits significant reverence for female divinity and nature, exemplified in the worship of the Mother Goddess (Shakti). Women appear to have had access to education and intellectual pursuits, as evidenced by figures such as Gargi, Maitreyi, and Aditi, and their contributions to Vedic hymns (Seth, 2001: 17). Marriage customs also reflected a degree of agency, with women having the right to remain unmarried (as *Brahmavadinis*) or to choose their partners later in life following the *Brahmacharya* phase.⁴

Moreover, women actively participated in religious rites and shared responsibilities within the household. Divorce and remarriage, under specific circumstances, were socially sanctioned, and monogamy appears to have been normative, albeit with provisions such as *niyoga* to address childlessness (Datta, 2000: 8). Women were also involved in martial, veterinary, and artisanal pursuits.

Nevertheless, these privileges largely applied to upper-caste (primarily Brahmin) women, leaving the conditions of women from other social strata largely undocumented. By the later Vedic period, patriarchal norms intensified, codifying gender roles and reinforcing male authority. Ritual purity, lineage preservation, and social stratification increasingly relegated women to subordinate and domesticated roles (Bose, 2000: viii). This shift marks the genesis of a more rigidly patriarchal order, characterized by the curtailment of women's autonomy and the consolidation of male dominance.⁵

Women's Status in the Buddhist Era and Beyond: A Historical and Sociological Reflection

With Buddhism's arrival in the sixth century BCE, Vedic religion underwent a major departure from the ceremonial and priest-dominated customs defining it. Driven by self-interest, dishonest priests at that time had commodified religion and multiplied pointless ceremonies for their own benefit. In this setting, especially with regard to women's social situation, the Buddhist teachings were clearly subversive. Unlike the Vedic hierarchy that progressively marginalises them, the Buddha

taught all people—regardless of gender, caste, or degree of education. Among his first students were women, and the founding of an order of nuns alongside monks provided women before unheard-of spiritual paths. Buddhist nunneries became sanctuaries providing release from patriarchal boundaries for many women limited by domestic violence.⁶

Women's increased access to education and intellectual life throughout this epoch shows their interaction with Buddhist books. Though the husband stayed socially better than the woman in the home, Buddhist ideas brought a far more equal married ethos with reciprocal respect and acknowledgement. Moreover, daughters were no longer seen as unpleasant responsibilities and marriage ages changed from past times. Still, patriarchal values were reasserted after the Buddha. Female monastics found themselves underprivileged compared their male counterparts as monastic leaders understood Buddha's teachings to fit accepted societal systems. Though Buddhist philosophy is inclusive, social stories progressively reinterpreted women as weak, temptresses whose inferiority was justified both within monasteries and the larger community. In the end, even if Buddhism provided paths for spiritual balance, it left much of earthly life—and with it, gender inequalities—under the control of customary practices.⁷

After the Buddhist era, throughout the Puranic and Epic stages of Hinduism, women's situation worsened yet further. There was much ambivalence in these latter times. Women were revered as gods or representations of shakti on the one hand, while on the other they were represented as morally and sexually dubious creatures needing strict supervision.⁸ Written between 200 BCE and 200 CE but formalised much later, iconic books like the *Manusmriti* were essential in solidifying gender subjugation. Aimed presumably at strengthening the family as a social unit, Manu's recommendations raised the concept of purity and suggested women as their main danger. Women were therefore limited mostly to the home, denied official schooling, and forbidden from reading holy books or taking part in Vedic ceremonies. Their value was mostly determined by their responsibilities as obedient women, dedicated entirely to serve their husbands—a responsibility offered as their only road to

atonement.⁹ These repressive laws permeated married practices. Driven by concerns about lineage and the supposed need to defend female purity, child marriage became to be common. Extreme behaviours like sati, in which widows immolated themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres, also became ritualised and reflected the ingrained sense of female dependability and expendability. Those who survived were stigmatised and marginalised, seen as messengers of bad luck. Marriage became permanent; Manu clearly denounced divorce, therefore committing women to perhaps repressive partnerships even if she acknowledged few examples for it in past writings. Women therefore were legally and socially designated as their husbands' property, denied property rights, and caught in a thick web of ceremonial duties (vratas).¹⁰

The already unstable situation of women was further worsened by the entrance of Muslim authority. Though Islam's basic principles promoted equality, its absorption into India's socio-cultural context had different results. Ladies in the middle and lower strata suffered growing isolation and servitude while Mughal royal ladies exercised great economic influence and supported the arts. Once firmly ingrained, the purdah rule limited women's movement and reinforced domesticity as their main occupation. Particularly among elites, polygamy severely degraded women's position; access to religious and secular education became more limited.¹¹

The Bhakti movement, which ran approximately from the 14th to the 17th century, arose as a spiritual counter-current among these repressive circumstances. Reformers transcending caste, class, and gender, Kabir, Ravidas, and Nanak stressed human equality before God. By means of dedication (bhakti), women discovered new spiritual agency; literacy and study of texts became less crucial, and direct contact with the divine took front stage. Still, their transforming power was fleeting and vanished after its charismatic leaders passed as these movements were more focused on spiritual than on social transformation.

Women's standing had dropped historically by the advent of British colonial control. Women—especially from the higher castes—were subjected to severe types of persecution under

the constraints of illiteracy, ceremonial responsibilities, child marriage, widowhood, and purdah. Social criticism of widow remarriage was strong, and sati and female infanticide were common practices. Though less physically limited because of their economic duties, the lower-caste women suffered under difficult circumstances and deliberate denial of dignity. Against this background of general societal malaise, reformers from the 19th century started questioning firmly established patriarchal standards. Advocates of female education and widow remarriage as well as the eradication of sati, pioneers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy pushed for Legislative actions then included bans on sati and the Age of Consent Bill.¹² Within the Muslim community there emerged parallel reform initiatives. Though within conventional lines, reformers like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan promoted women's education. Attempts were made to balance Islamic ideas with social change, and eventually newspapers and girls' schools arose. But social opposition, especially from upper-class families following rigorous purdah, limited the influence of these initiatives.¹³

Women began to be agents of their own liberation in early 20th century. Leaders such as Pandita Ramabai and Ramabai Ranade started campaigns against societal ills and set up organisations for widows. The institutionalising of the women's movement in India came with the founding of groups like the Women's Indian Association (1917) and the All India Women's Conference (1927). Though first benefiting mostly wealthy and middle-class metropolitan women, these initiatives set the groundwork for more general social change. But the nationalist movement headed by Mahatma Gandhi mobilised women in bulk and sparked their integration into public and political life. Gandhi's focus on nonviolence, self-sacrifice, and the mother image of Mother India connected powerfully with society conventions, therefore justifying women's active involvement in the independence struggle. Women working in many roles, in the home and in public demonstrations. The independence fight therefore changed the roles of women, stressing their contributions as well as the many aspects of their exploitation.¹⁴

Reflecting both the hopes of a new country and international human rights

standards, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Indian Constitution embraced gender equality upon independence. Explicitly prohibiting discrimination based on sex, constitutional clauses gave the state authority to carry out positive policies for the progress of women. Particularly those pertaining to Hindu personal laws—such as the Hindu Marriage Act (1955) and the Hindu Succession Act (1956)—legislative improvements in the 1950s greatly increased women's legal rights involving marriage, inheritance, and adoption. Apart from legislative changes, the government's attitude to women's development changed over consecutive Five-Year Plans. Originally presented from a "welfare" perspective, policy programs first shifted towards "development" and finally "empowerment." These changes mirrored evolving conceptions of women's responsibilities in society and growing awareness of the need of their whole development. Even if much progress has been achieved, the legacy of firmly ingrained patriarchal rules still shapes gender interactions in modern India. Still, the combined efforts of reformers, activists, and legislators have produced a more supportive climate for women's agency and public life involvement.¹⁵

The welfare model dominated official view of women's development in India in the years after independence. National resources were mostly directed towards market-oriented production throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, therefore leaving vulnerable groups—including women—dependent on residual social programs. Initiatives aimed at nutrition, home economics, and child welfare, among other areas, mostly supported the conventional picture of women as homemakers, wives, and mothers. Underlying this strategy was the presumption—based on Western nuclear family models—that women relied economically on male breadwinners. As a result, women's contribution to active and developmental activities got little attention and they were mostly seen as passive consumers of social programs. Women were thought to indirectly gain from development via the household's economic growth. Instead of the individual woman, the family became the main provider of welfare; most of the work in giving services to women fell to volunteer organisations. Still, by the early 1960s, there was

a slow awareness of the particular rights and demands of women workers, and problems with women's working circumstances started to get little attention. Though in a small and scattered way, later Five-Year Plans started include issues about the education, health, and dietary requirements of the female child.¹⁶

The Women in Development (WID) method brought a conceptual change in the 1970s. Unlike previous models, WID acknowledged women as active participants in social, political, and economic life rather than just as consumers of development. This paradigm accepted the systematic lag women suffered and suggested corrective actions within current systems to reduce gender gaps. It became clear as poverty reduction and providing basic requirements dominated global development debate in this decade that women, particularly those categorised as the poorest of the poor, were very vital in maintaining home wellbeing. Understanding their disproportionate burden for satisfying basic requirements, development planners started to see women's involvement as essential for optimising returns on investment. Particularly for underprivileged women, this awareness spurred measures encouraging group organisation and community-based income-generating activities, therefore helping women to occupy useful positions.¹⁷

Critics of WID surfaced by the late 1970s and into the 1980s, highlighting its inability to confront firmly ingrained structural inequities. The Equity Method developed in response. Inspired by the 1974 Report of the Commission on the Status of Women in India, which underlined ongoing inequalities notwithstanding current social programs, the sixth Five-Year Plan (1980–1985) included for the first time a separate chapter on "Women and Development." This signalled a fundamental intellectual change. Women were seen as vital contributors to national progress rather than as welfare targets. Emphasising health, education, and employment, the Plan developed a multidisciplinary approach and gave women's access to training and employment first priority. To unite activities with women in mind, new institutional systems like the Ministry of Human Resource Development and its Department of Women and Child Development were established. Integrated projects such the IRDP, DWCRA, and TRYSEM showed attempts to

encourage women—especially those from underprivileged groups—self-employment and income generating. Although expansion remained a top goal, these policies suggested a fresh concern for redistributive justice.¹⁸ Emphasising the convergence of women's development initiatives across several sectors, the Seventh Five-Year Plan (1985–90) carried on this integrated strategy. This time witnessed more institutional strengthening with the founding of the Department of Women and Child Development as a nodal agency. But participatory techniques first became more well-known during the Eighth Plan (1992–97). By now society was realising the undervaluation of women's labour, particularly in the informal sector, and the importance of raising knowledge of their financial contributions. The Plan sought to position women's organisations as active planners and implementers of development projects, therefore empowering their grassroots level presence. Further institutionalised women's political empowerment was the founding of the National Commission for Women and the adoption of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which compelled women's involvement in local government.¹⁹ Building on these advances, the Gender and Development (GAD) approach developed in the 1980s to address WID's shortcomings. GAD shifted the emphasis from the inclusion of women in current systems to a critical analysis of the social and institutional settings that support gender inequality. It was clear by the end of the 20th century that while women's access to resources had increased, underlying power dynamics still limited women's full involvement and advantages from progress. Emphasising how closely gender relations—along with class and colour—are ingrained in society systems, the GAD viewpoint demanded radical actions meant to achieve gender equality.

This viewpoint was improved even further by the empowerment strategy, which guided the Ninth and Tenth Five-Year Plans. Empowerment was seen as a complex process including psychological elements like confidence and self-esteem in addition to political, legal, and financial spheres. Emphasising the importance of an enabling environment to allow women to enjoy their rights as equal members in society, the Ninth Plan (1997–2002) officially approved the

National Policy for Empowerment of Women (2001). This Plan also unveiled the "Women's Component Plan," which mandates the direct benefit of at least 30 percent of resources allocated in all spheres connected to women. Notwithstanding this progressive perspective, the Plan lacked clear change goals and deadlines. By contrast, the Tenth Plan (2002–07) set quantifiable targets for gender equality including decreasing newborn and mother death rates, providing universal primary education, and therefore eliminating gender differences in literacy and salaries. A whole plan stressing social empowerment, economic independence, and gender justice helped to promote these goals. By doing this, the Tenth Plan stood as a more concentrated effort to turn policy pledges into observable results.²⁰

Concurrent with state-led projects, the women's movement in India was equally crucial in shaping the conversation around gender and development. Driven by rising awareness of ongoing gender disparities and social injustice, women's activity reappeared in the 1970s after a period of relative silence following independence. Manushi's 1979 release marked this rebirth and the start of a second wave of the women's movement. While political parties established women's wings within their party structures to handle gender problems, independent women's organisations sprouted, confronting social inequities at local level. By means of sex-selective abortions, these organisations tackled a range of problems including sexual assault, dowry deaths, sati, and female infanticide. Emphasising their attempts to uncover and challenge elements of oppression firmly ingrained in the family's private realm, the feminist slogan "the personal is political"²¹

Women's group activists went beyond just legal lobbying. They were successful in changing public opinion, impacting laws, and establishing national and worldwide forums for women's rights. But the 1990s brought further difficulties as neoliberal and conservative economic forces joined to undercut female equality. Women's organisations, however, vigorously opposed these developments by revealing how religious scriptures had been distorted and used to support patriarchal control. Emphasising the egalitarian basis of all major religious traditions, their efforts questioned the continuation of discriminating personal laws

under the cover of maintaining community identities. Furthermore, the women's press became a potent tool for spreading awareness and organising support, therefore helping to produce a more complex and educated debate on gender justice in modern India.

CONCLUSION

In their socio-cultural and historical path, Indian women presently occupy a difficult and defining junction. Consciousness of women's rights across many socioeconomic levels and geographical areas of the nation has clearly grown perceptibly and widely. Particularly from the 1980s and with notable acceleration throughout the 1990s, developmental projects aimed at women have grown dramatically in reflection of increasing institutional and policy-level attention to gender equality. Still, as Seth (2001: 256) wisely notes, patriarchal cultural norms show a startling consistency even with these developments. Deeply ingrained gender stereotypes still penetrate not just mainstream society structures but also affect tribal cultures as shown by the rising frequency of violence against women in historically more egalitarian environments. Notwithstanding significant improvement in social resource availability and economic involvement, these benefits have not commensurately resulted in improved status in the home. Often even among the educated and wealthy, issues such as marital violence, incest, and persistent son preference highlight the ingrained character of patriarchal beliefs that oppose legislative and developmental measures. Legal changes have helped Hindu women's rights in

areas such as marriage, succession, and inheritance grow; equivalent gains have not been consistently extended to Muslim and Christian women, whose position is still mostly determined by customary and religious personal regulations. In the framework of polygamous marriages and divorce, Muslim women still have vulnerabilities; Christian personal laws include limiting clauses against remarriage. Laws exist to defend women's rights, yet societal shame, ignorance, and cultural opposition restrict their effectiveness even in this regard. For instance, Hindu women seldom ever pursue legal action to protect their rights. Notwithstanding legislative prohibitions, the dowry system shows the pervasive and ingrained nature of female inequality across socioeconomic and religious lines. Moreover, modern issues like rising rates of sexual harassment and the objectification of women in media representations still threaten the advancement in improving the objective status indicators of women. Legislative clauses and development initiatives, although important, are not enough to really empower unless they are backed by thorough social reform. Women's efforts to improve their position often run into opposition, especially in cases where males see such programs as endangering their traditional rights and authority within the home and society. Strategies meant to improve women's status in society must be presented not as zero-sum propositions but as mutually beneficial efforts for significant and permanent change. The ideal of a really fair and equal social order cannot be realised unless gender equality is seen as beneficial to all people of society.

REFERENCES

1. Aga Khan Foundation. *Understanding Women's Experience in Natural Resources Management*. Aga Khan Foundation, 2001, p. 45.
2. Agrawal, Rashmi, and B. V. L. N. Rao. *Gender Issues: A Road Map to Empowerment*. Shipra Publications, 2004, p. 88.
3. Bose, Mandakranta, editor. *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India*. Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 23.
4. Ibid.
5. Bhat, Rashid Manzoor, and Lakmini Gamage. "Exploring Widow Remarriage: A Study of Vedic India." *Journal of Accounting Research, Utility Finance and Digital Assets*, vol. 3, no.3, 2025, pp. 595-601.
6. De Souza, Alfred. *Women in Contemporary India and South Asia*. 2nd ed., Manohar Publications, 1980, p. 119.



7. Dutta, Krishna. "A Controversy over a Verse on the Remarriage of Hindu Women." *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India*, edited by Mandakranta Bose, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 145–147.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Firdaus, Zakia. "Muslim Women's Up-liftment under the Nineteenth Century Socio-Cultural Paradigm." *Women's Link*, vol. 7, no. 3, July-Sept. 2001, p. 37.
11. Government of India, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, Department of Social Welfare. *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India*. Government of India, 1974, p. 310.
12. Ibid.
13. Government of India, Planning Commission. *The Eighth Five Year Plan*. Government of India, 1992, p. 254.
14. Ibid.
15. Government of India, Planning Commission. *The Tenth Five Year Plan*. Government of India, 2002, p. 189.
16. Government of India, Department of Women and Child Development. *Annual Report 2002-03*. Government of India, 2003, p. 67.
17. Ibid.
18. Gupta, A. R. *Women in Hindu Society: A Study of Tradition and Transition*. 2nd ed., Jyotsna Prakashan, 1982, p. 102.
19. Sharma, Usha. *Gender Mainstreaming and Women's Rights*. Authors Press, 2004, p. 53.
20. Seth, Mira. *Women Development: The Indian Experience*. Sage Publications, 2001, p. 221.
21. Sivananda, Swami. "Lord Buddha." *Lives of the Saints*, Divine Life Society, p. 77.