

# **SRIRAM'S IAS**



## **GENERAL STUDIES**

Salient features of Indian society, diversity of India

**(PAPER-II)**

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# Salient features of Indian Society

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## NATURE AND CONCEPT OF SOCIETY

Whenever we try to understand society the fact that immediately comes to our mind is the people around us. With them we have relationships both of formal and informal nature. The formal nature of relationship is defined by rules regulations and the principles of organizations in which we live. For example in school a student learns to understand what kind of respect s/he has to extend to his/her teacher and fellow students. Thus rules are well established that regulate their behaviors in schools. Similarly as he grows up, joins a college or the university, rules accordingly change and students learn to adjust themselves. After completing his education when he joins the service he is governed by the rules of the office.

In other words the society has a formal setting in which a person is governed by impersonal rules and therefore, he feels a degree of constrain to adjust to the rule. Therefore, a society which has formal institutions people tend to acquire the knowledge about the existing procedures etiquettes, manners and behavior. However, in informal settings it is not the rules that govern our behavior in society but is the traditions and norms that govern our behavior and the relationships that we tend to develop with each other. There are many groups which can be cited as an example of informal settings where relationships are defined by the personalized nature. Family, kinship group, village communities are some such groups where we have relationships that are defined by the norms, traditions and customary practices.

Viewed in the context mentioned above it is said that society is all about social relationships that we have with people around us. Sociologists have also defined 'society as network of social relationship', 'pattern of interaction', 'interpretative understanding of social action' in which interacting individuals are aware of the positions of each other, Sociologists are the one who try to understand a disciplined understanding of the wide range of relationships that individuals have with each other and the groups in which they live. They have talked about different type of societies termed as 'simple' and 'compound.' Be it simple or complex the fact that remains unchanged is that each society has its own culture, traditions, social structure and the normative patterns which are characterized by stability and change. That means the structure, culture, the norms of society and its traditions never remain static. They always remain in a state of flux. Two factors which account for fluidity and change are internal and external. That means there are both internal and also external factors of change.

## **NATURE AND CONCEPT OF INDIAN SOCIETY**

The nature of Indian society cannot be understood without having a proper examination of its culture and social structure. So far as the culture of Indian society is concerned it is considered to represent the ultimate values and the normative framework of Indian society. Normally the culture includes both the physical and non-physical aspects of people's life.

**physical aspects** refer to tangible things such as material objects.

**Non-physical aspects** refer to non-tangible and non-material objects such as ideas thoughts, feelings, prejudices etc.

In this context the Indian society and its plural character has to be understood in the background of not the culture only but also its social structure and traditions. Both must be seen as a process of continuity and change. The salient characteristic of Indian society has to be understood in historical backdrop as the Indian society has its origin 5000 years back when Indus valley civilization emerged as the first known civilization which has two notable culture known as Mohan Jodaro and Harappan culture, both represented diversity richness and vitality in its long traditions of inhabiting people of diverse socio cultural cities.

It is pertinent to note here that during a long period of the first known civilization Indian society experienced several waves of immigrants. Those who visited India brought their own culture, tradition, language and religion. Needless to mention the ethnic group compositions of the visitors varied in range and scope. What is important to note however is the fact that all these cultural tradition that the immigrants brought added to the richness, vitality and diversity of Indian society. It is often perceived by the historians that India represented one monolithic culture which brought all the migrants groups culture integrated into one grand society called Hindu society. This however will misrepresent the fact and reality of Indian Society. The noted sociologists of the Indian origin M N Srinivas, in particular, is of the opinion that the cognitive understanding of the Indian society relies heavily on the indological evidence and therefore they tend to understand Indian society in terms of scriptural texts available. Needless to mention that such a perspective may be called a 'book view' of understanding Indian society that highlights the glory of vedic age of Indian History. A closer and pointed analytical focus however would like to examine the dynamics of Indian society keeping in mind the empirical situation that obtains in the field. The studies conducted by historians like DD Kosambi point out the material conditions of earlier time to understand the society of those days.

## EVOLUTION OF INDIAN SOCIETY

The evolutionary course of Indian society and the life and the people suggest that there was co-existence of **plural culture traditions** of Indian society. The contemporary Indian society reveals different levels of social evolution that consisted following stages of its development.

- I. Primitive hunters and food gatherers
- II. Shifting cultivators who used digging sticks and hoes.
- III. Nomads of different types which included breeders of goats, sheep and cattle. *Pastoral groups use animal resource*
- IV. Settled agriculturist who used the plough for cultivation.
- V. Artisans and landed as well as aristocracies of ancient lineage. *(Basket making community) (animal husbandry) Ahirs, Gujjars*

When we focus attention on the religious groupings of ancient times we find the evidence of several world's major religious grouping which includes :

- |                    |          |                                    |
|--------------------|----------|------------------------------------|
| (i) Hinduism       | (82-83%) |                                    |
| (ii) Islam         | (11.8%)  |                                    |
| (iii) Christianity | (2.6%)   |                                    |
| (iv) Buddhism      | (0.7%)   |                                    |
| (v) Sikhism        | (2%)     |                                    |
| (vi) Jainism etc.  | (0.4%)   | Zoroastrians (0.3%)<br>Jews (0.1%) |

The 1931 census classified Indian population under **ten** religious groups. This shows the diversity of religious groups reported in the census data in the first quarter of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The three main dimension of their roles in their social structure may be examined under following heads :

- I. The relation between different castes and religious groups
- II. General role of religion in the economic development
- III. Religion and castes determining socio-economic privileges of people.

## **CONSTITUENTS OF INDIAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE**

The following groups are considered to be the mainstay of Indian social structure:

- (i) The village community
- (ii) The caste system
- (iii) The joint family system
- (iv) The kinship groups
- (v) Ethnic groups and Minorities
- (vi) Rural ,urban and tribal social structure

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIAN SOCIETY**

So far as the characteristics of Indian Society is concerned it is generally acknowledged that Indian society is characterized by both **unity and diversity**. The features of Indian society is treated as policy document and remains a cliché that very often is echoed by social scientist and the nationalist. The fact that remains a puzzle is that very often such a perspective is contested by those who try to either propagate or portray Indian society in this manner. It is pertinent to mention here that a society which has evolved over a period of time witnessed lot of turmoil and storm before it acquired a political character after its independence in 1947. In other words the modern Indian society harbours the salient character of its tradition and cultural legacy of earlier days and also infuse in its overarching and ever expanding universe the traits of global character. Thus the characteristics of Indian society may be understood under following heads:

- 1) Unity
- 2) Diversity
- 3) Harmonious co-existence at global level
- 4) Emerging centre of power in global context
- 5) Providing spiritual leadership
- 6) Pragmatic rationality
- 7) Spreading entrepreneurial skills
- 8) Ambassador of global cultural traits having Indian flavour.
- 9) Harbinger of cultural renaissance.
- 10) Modernization of Indian tradition

**Nature and extent of diversity**

Diversity in India is found in terms of :

- (i) Race
- (ii) Religion
- (iii) Language
- (iv) Caste
- (v) Culture
- (vi) Racial groups

**FACTORS OF UNITY**

The factors of unity in India are its:

- (i) Polity
- (ii) National Culture and festivals
- (iii) Geographical boundaries
- (iv) Education
- (v) Legacy of great rulers
- (vi) Pilgrimage centers

There are certain forces that account for Indian society's unity as well as diversity of Indian society. There are centrifugal tendencies which tends to portray Indian society as divisive factor while there is centripetal forces which accounts for restoring the features of unity. In order to put Indian society's unity and diversity under perspective two dimensions have been highlighted. The First, considers unity to be inherent while the second considers it as questionable and hence it feels its unity threatened. The Idea of unity is also explained in the context of certain concepts usually discussed as melting pot theory, cultural mosaic theory and the plural society theory.





## **URBANIZATION: THEIR PROBLEMS AND REMEDIES**

### **The Nature and Concept of Urbanization:**

Urbanization is a universal process implying economic development and social change. Urbanization also means, "a breakdown of traditional social institutions and values". However, in India, one cannot say that urbanization has resulted in the caste system being transformed into the class system, the joint-family transforming into the nuclear family, and religion becoming secularized.

Two trends are clear regarding urban life: (1) dependence upon agriculture for livelihood has steadily decreased; and (2) population of towns and cities has increased over the years. Both the trends indicate an increase in the processes of industrialization and urbanization. Towns and cities offer jobs and better amenities, whereas people in villages live a hard life. Due to urbanization, traditional bonds based on religion, caste and family have weakened in the villages. Anonymity, as found in towns, is absent in rural areas.

### **Structure of towns and cities:**

#### **Towns:**

For the Census of India 2011, the definition of urban area is as follows;

1. All places with a municipality, corporation, cantonment board or notified town area committee, etc.
2. All other places which satisfied the following criteria:
  - i) A minimum population of 5,000;
  - ii) At least 75 per cent of the male main working population engaged in non-agricultural pursuits; and
  - iii) A density of population of at least 400 persons per sq. km.

The first category of urban units is known as Statutory Towns. These towns are notified under law by the concerned State/UT Government and have local bodies like municipal corporations, municipalities, municipal committees, etc., irrespective of their demographic characteristics as reckoned on 31st December 2009. Examples: Vadodara (M Corp.), Shimla (M Corp.) etc.

The second category of Towns (as in item 2 above) is known as **Census Town**. These were identified on the basis of Census 2001 data.

**Urban Agglomeration (UA):** An urban agglomeration is a continuous urban spread constituting a town and its adjoining outgrowths (OGs), or two or more physically contiguous towns together with or without outgrowths of such towns. An Urban Agglomeration must consist of at least a statutory town and its total population (i.e. all the constituents put together) should not be less than 20,000 as per the 2001 Census. In varying local

A **city** is defined as a place having population of 1,00,000 or more.

The ratio of rural population to urban has not changed drastically since 1901; but there is a trend towards its slow decline. Today, cities are overcrowded. They contain many more people than the number for whom they can comfortably provide civic amenities. Cities which are state's capitals have become over-burdened. The cities of Delhi, Bangalore and Jaipur have shown rapid increase in their populations over the past two decades. All towns and cities do not have a uniform pattern of population growth and development.

#### **Urbanization in India:**

The following points have been made about the nature of urbanization in India:

1. Whether the nature of urbanization is co-terminus with westernization?
2. Can a valid distinction be made between villages and cities?
3. Urbanization is seen in relation to social change, hence urbanization is not an independent variable of social change; and
4. Urbanization has brought new forms of social organization and association

#### **Features of Urban Life:**

Students of urban life have identified some dominant features that distinguish life in cities and towns from that in village:

1. In the urban context the traditional social structure undergoes a process of loosening up.
2. The quality of human relationships tends to become more formal and impersonal.
3. Ritual and kinship obligations are diluted; caste and community considerations yield to economic logic. This results in secularization of outlook.
4. Urbanization leads to greater functional specialization and division of labour.

5. Urbanization life is organized around community organizations and voluntary associations.
6. Towns have substantial cultural, educational, recreational and religious resources that become institutionalized.
7. Urban areas provide impulses for modernization in society as a whole.

**Major Problems of Urban Life in India:**

Among the myriad problems of urban India following four problems are usually highlighted:

- (i) poverty
- (ii) housing (or the lack of it)
- (iii) civic amenities
- (iv) the great cultural void of the poor.

Nearly half the population of India (or 41 per cent, if we lend credence to official statistic) is below the poverty line. Rural India is better able to disguise and handle poverty; urban India cannot do so. Its poverty is growing, particularly which eludes them in the cities. The poverty directly affects the quality of life, particularly in the areas of nutrition, health and education.

Social scientists have not made any concerted studies of the cultures of the pavement dwellers and slum dwellers; all we have are some socio-economic surveys which provide bare but stark statistics. Novelists, short-story writers, and some exceptional film makers, on the other hand, have provided penetrating and incisive insights into their ways of life. There are many simple, hard-working men and women living in the slums, but they also have extortionist dons, boot-leggers, and smugglers. They have dens of vice and the flesh trade. These aspects present the ugly face of urban life.

There are few civic amenities for the poor. Water taps work only for an hour or so in the morning and evening. As slum areas have but a few public taps, there are long rows of people waiting their turn to fill their vessels. Most hand – pumps are in a state of despair; the few that work are overused. There are few lavatories; most people have to ease themselves in the open, pigs and stray dogs provide some sanitation, but they also spread disease. The roads and lanes are slushy. Primary health centres are not adequately staffed and stocked. Important life – saving drugs are always in short supply and have to be bought from druggists. The schools, in uninviting settings,

impart only nominal instruction. Public transport is expensive and crowded. Cinemas and video parlours provide some entertainment, to be supplemented by drinks, drugs, and gambling

Most pavement and slum dwellers find themselves detached from their tradition moorings, living in a cultural void. Many of them live away from their families, unable to adapt to the urban ethos. They lead lonely lives or fall into evil company. Those living with families also encounter many problems. While men are away at work there is not much security for the women left behind in the slums. As parental authority becomes weak, adolescents become unmanageable.

#### **Remedial measures of combating problems of urbanization:**

Remedial measures suggested for removing the problems. The problem of urbanization has acquired certain distortions and imbalances in the planned processes of development. Given the alarming situation and the condition that prevails in rural areas the push factors are likely to operate in the villages. Thus, urban areas will continue to attract village populations. Besides this there is going to be a natural increase in the population of town and cities. This is unavoidable. However, adequate measures of planning and efficient management of the problems associated with it may provide some relief to the people living in village and the urban areas. Some of the remedial measures are given below:

1. Planned communities for the migrants with adequate housing facilities.
2. Efficient public transport
3. Improved water and power supply
4. Improved sanitary conditions
5. Improves health infrastructure for preventive and curative medicine
6. Improved education facilities
7. Improved civic amenities

The needs of the poor have to be kept in mind so that they have an access to good living condition. What is all the more important is the fact that these civic amenities and infrastructural facilities need to be extended in rural areas as well, so that large scale migration of displaced population due to economic compulsions may be checked from moving to urban centres.

## **Communalism, Regionalism and Secularism**

### **Introduction :**

Since Independence, the central leadership has confronted several major challenges to the unity of the country. These have included the integration of some 562 semiautonomous princely states into the Indian Union in the years immediately after Independence.

Despite numerous successes, therefore, in resolving some of the major problems threatening the unity of the Indian state since Independence, some of the problems are so severe that the central government finds it difficult to maintain the unity of the country. Moreover, the remaining problems cannot be considered to be merely the unresolved remnants of old conflicts but reflect a fundamental structural tension in the Indian political system between forces seeking to strengthen further and centralize more decisively the Indian state and regional and other forces demanding further decentralization, and interdependence between the center and the states.

Most scholarly observers of contemporary Indian politics agree that since Independence there has been a considerable decay in the functioning of political institutions and in their public legitimacy. From a comparative perspective, however, India's political institutions appear quite differently. The performance of India's political institutions compares favorably in many respects with those of her neighbors or with most other post-colonial societies. Indeed, the Indian political regime is one of the most democratic in the world by most conventional measures of political participation, electoral and party competition, and persistence of parliamentary institutions. It is also among the least repressive regimes in the world. With admittedly major exceptions such as the annihilation of Naxalites, terrorists, and those suspected or wrongly accused of being in those two categories. The repressive and brutal measures taken against presumed militant, insurrectionary, and secessionist groups in Punjab, Kashmir, and the northeast, opposition politicians and students and others who engage in public demonstrations against the regime or the dominant party are not normally harassed or imprisoned without cause and are certainly not tortured. There is a free press and ordinary people are free to speak their minds in public and private. It is in this background that the concept of secularism, communalism and regionalism assumes importance.

## Secularism

The word "Secular" has many meanings in the Indian context. To begin with, secular connotes 'anti-religious'. To be secular is to be anti-religious, an atheist or agnostic. Like-wise, a secular state must be actively hostile to religion, discourage religious practices, prevent the growth of religious institutions. The secular state in this sense has never existed in India. A small minority of atheists do, but this is nothing new. There is a long and venerable tradition of atheism in Indian culture; it follows that such secular persons have existed even in the past.

Secondly, the word "secular" means not anti-religious but non-religious. On this view, the secular state is non-religious but permits religious practices outside its sphere. It neither encourages nor discourages religion. It keeps off all kinds of religious and quasi-religious activities. Although Nehru may not have always lived upto this ideal, this may well be the nehruvian conception of secularism. Third, the word "secular" has also been identified with multi-religious. Its defenders argue that in India, a land that has given birth to and nourished some of the major religions of the world, a state policy of indifference to religion is neither justified nor workable. Since most people in India are religious, the state cannot keep away from religious matters or adopt a stance of mere neutrality between the religious and non-religious. Rather, it should actively promote religion. The state should play a positive and dynamic role in the pursuit of a religious life. But in a land of many religions, the state cannot discriminate in favour of any one religion. It should grant equal preference to all. So the word "secular" here clearly means an equal preference to the religious and the non-religious and within religions equal respect for all religions. It does not take long to guess that this is the Gandhian conception of secularism. Fourth the word secular has come to mean multi-communal. This degeneration has been characteristic of the Indian polity over the last 25 years or so. To be secular is to grant equal preference to the fanatical fringe of all religious communities. Here, the more desirable, universalisable aspects of all religions are overlooked or deliberately neglected and their closed, aggressive and communal dimension is over emphasised.

The BJP has systematically undermined each of the four connotations of the word "secular" and has infused it with a meaning consistent with the rest of its ideology. It attacks the first conception for being anti-religious, the second for being indifferent to religion, and the third and the fourth for granting equal preference to all religious and communal practices. Each of these, for the BJP, is pseudo-secular. For the BJP, secularism in the Indian context must mean granting special favours to a particular brand of freshly manufactured, aggressive Hinduism. To be secular is to favour a particular communal group. The argument behind it is simple minded but dangerous. India is a uniquely religious land; religion has a special place in the life of every Indian. No state in India can afford to ignore this fact and therefore it should actively promote religious life. But it must not favour all religions equally. Hinduism is the religion of the majority and therefore the state must favour the Hindu over other religious groups. To even conceive this within traditional forms of Hinduism is impossible, so a new aggressive Hinduism is necessary to articulate this demand. The word "secular" must accommodate this brute fact; either it goes or it must be clipped to mean "pro-aggressive Hinduism". This is positive secularism because it is positive towards this brand of Hinduism. Needless to add that a such a position is highly contentious because it has neither been endorsed by the state nor has it been found reasonable.

**Communalism:**

Communalism operates at different levels ranging from individual relations and interests to the local, institutional and national politics and to communal riots. There is a whole range of social relations and politics over which communalism pervades today and this spread of communalism involves two inter-related central issues. First is the state of consciousness in society. The second is communalism as an instrument of power, not purely for capturing state power, but for operating in political, social and economic domains and at almost all levels of social organization.

Religion is an integral factor in the existing state of social consciousness in our society. It provides an identity of being part of a community to all those who believe in the same religion. It is perceived and believed that those who belong to the same religion have a certain common identity. It is this belief in commonality which is used for communal mobilization. That is communalisms, and communal mobilisation are based (or a possibility of creating a perception) that there are identities which are based on religious belonging. Such an identity, in fact, can be manipulated for purposes of power at various levels. The increasing efforts at communalisation are a part of this process, that is, manipulation of religious consciousness to serve the interests of certain political parties. The mobilisation of sections of society on the basis of religious beliefs for the purpose of power is central to the intensification of communalism today.

The process of communalisation draws upon communal solidarity which is both a contemporary construction and an outcome of objective historical development during the colonial period. For constructing communal solidarity a selective appropriation of the past is being attempted, by equating Hindu with Indian. The contemporary communal mobilisation derives sustenance from a Hindu interpretation of the past. Needless to say, it is a backward projection of the needs of the present day communalism.

Two good examples of this are the attempts to establish Hinduism as a homogeneous religion from ancient times and, secondly, the notion of the existence of Hindu community from early times. The very stimulating work done by Romila Thapar on the ancient history of India considers in detail the social and ideological dimensions of Hinduism as well as its historical evolution.

The Hindu community, as Romila Thapar has very rightly remarked, is an "imagined community". It is not a community which really existed. In the past, the communities were based on location, on occupation, on caste and sometime on sects. Even in contemporary society, secular communities are more in operation than religious communities. An individual in society spends more time in secular pursuits than in religious matters.

Today communalism is primarily an instrument for acquiring power. And power is, to begin with, acquired at the grass-root level and, therefore, it has got to be contested at that level. These local associations or communities, the grass root communities, are a way of positing an alternative to communalism.

## **Regionalism**

States reorganization has been a dominant problem of federalism. The problem of regionalisms has acquired importance in political circles. The situation of Punjab, Kashmir and Assam and the north east has been of crucial significance despite its special status and its particular form of regional autonomy, the central government and political leaders have intervened as much or more in Kashmir since independence than in any other state of the Union. Consequently, the history of its politics from Independence until the outbreak of the recent internal war cannot be understood without knowledge of center-state political relations and alliances.

There are three prevailing explanations for the rise of an insurrectionary movement amongst Kashmiri Muslims against the Indian state in Kashmir. One is an argument which always presents itself in movements such as these, that it reflects the primordial desires of the Kashmiri Muslims. In fact, however, the course of modern Kashmiri history demonstrates the opposite: the absence of any clear universally accepted ultimate goal for Kashmiri Muslims, let alone the rest of the non-Muslim population of the state.

The second explanation is that the Indian state has taken a "too soft and permissive attitude" with political forces who have set out to exploit the special status of Kashmir and to manipulate religious and separatist sentiments for their own political advantage.

A third explanation, the point of view adopted here, is rather that the central government has been not "soft and permissive," but manipulative and interventionist and that it has not kept its promise to respect in practice the limited autonomy granted to Jammu & Kashmir under the terms of accession.

Many alternative explanations for the resurgence of regional and communal conflicts in the past fifteen years have been offered, including the persistence of immutable primordial cleavages in Indian society, their underlying bases in economic or class differences, and specific policies and political tactics pursued by the central and state governments. The analysis here has given primacy to the latter. However, it is also true that the problems in the Punjab, in the northeastern region, and in Kashmir have been complicated by the presence of other factors which were not present in the linguistic reorganizations of states which took place during the Nehru period.

In the Punjab case, the most important difference is the fact that the Sikhs are a separate religious as well as linguistic group. In the northeast, the issues have been tangled by the presence there of several tribal minorities, whose demands have been secessionist, by the migration of large numbers of people from other provinces of India, particularly West Bengal, to the northeastern states of Assam and Tripura especially, by illegal migrations from Bangladesh as well, and by the presence of large numbers of both Hindus and Muslims among the migrant and local populations. In Kashmir, the issues have been complicated by the internationalization of the dispute, the special status which Kashmir has had since its integration into the Indian Union, and



its perceived integral connection with the opposed founding ideologies of the two principal successor states to the British Raj.

Nevertheless, the argument here is that the policies pursued by the government of India after Nehru's death have played a major role in the intensification of conflicts in these regions and have in the process highlighted a major structural problem in the Indian political system. That problem arises from the tensions created by the centralizing drives of the Indian state in a society where the predominant long-term social, economic, and political tendencies are toward pluralism, regionalism, and decentralization. Although the same tensions existed in the Nehru years, central government policies then favored pluralist solutions, non-intervention in state politics except in a conciliatory role or as a last resort, and preservation of a separation between central and state politics, allowing considerable autonomy for the latter.



## **ROLE OF WOMEN AND WOMEN'S ORGANISATION**

Before we embark upon women's status it would be proper to have some idea about the concept associated with women's position. In a lay man term role refers to the behaviour of an individual in society. Sociologists use the term in the context of position that a person occupies in society. Thus the roles are the bundles of socially defined attributes and expectations associated with social positions. When people occupy social positions their behaviour is determined mainly by what is expected of that position. For example, in school teacher performs the role of a teacher while the same person may perform a different role as a father or mother in home.

What is pertinent to mention here is that both the roles that a person has to perform as father or mother is expected of them to perform in a given situation.

### **Roles are also of two types – (a) Ascribed and (B) Achieved**

Ascribed roles are those roles which are determined by birth and the achieved roles are the roles which an individual acquires by virtue of skills that a person develops. For example, the skill of an engineer or a doctor is acquired by completing the course while one becomes male or a female by birth. Thus the status of a doctor is acquired through training while the status of a male or a female is bestowed upon them by virtue of birth.

Viewed in the context of the definition discussed above when we examine the role of a woman in India we find their status to be quite ambivalent. Our historical text portrays them as 'Devi' or 'the Goddess' who is to be worshipped while else where they are portrayed as occupying such a low position that they deserve to be beaten. Their subordinate position is hallowed by tradition and the religion. The Feminist contest the arguments of those who tend to argue that the Vedic period was the golden age of Indian womanhood. It is generally argued that the status of women was very high in the period, and that it was only with the coming of invaders, especially Muslims, that restrictions began to be placed on women. The Feminist scholars argue that such a portrayal of women's status was the product of the 19<sup>th</sup> century interaction between colonialism and nationalism. The nationalist historians (Altekar & R.C. Dutt) argue that the evils and the low status of Indian Women were attributable to Muslim Invasions.

A notable historian (Uma Chakravarty) Questions the construction of past at several levels, First, she points out that even the status of upper caste women was not high as is depicted. Second, defining the past in terms of Vedic India presents a falsely homogeneous picture. Thirdly, even from the Brahminical source the structure of institutions ensured that the subordination of women was complete long before the arrival of Muslims.

**The critical readings of the classical text suggest the following:**

As for property, not only they were denied of it, they themselves were treated as property. They were given as a bride i.e., they were gifted to groom along with other goods. They were excluded from participating in a variety of material transactions, from giving and receiving Dakshina on ritual occasions. Women had limited recognition as wives and mothers within the patriarchal structure.

### **Social Reform Movements & changing women's status**

The focus of the reform movement was directed towards widow's oppression, bridging gender gap in education; strive for widow remarriage, end child marriage and many other disabilities that came in the way of improving women's status. The majority of women were governed by local customs and traditions. The abolition of sati was one of the major incident that was recorded from Bengal province governed by the chief British opponent of sati, William Bentick. Therefore, when the Sati Abolition Act was passed in 1829 there was hardly any visible protest registered even from the orthodox Hindu communities. Thus the women's position became a central issue in the debates over social reform in 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the nationalist leaders refused to make it part of the political negotiation with the colonial state. It means the new patriarchy which nationalist discourse set up as a hegemonic construct remained insulated. Thus articulating complex and contested interrelationships between women on the one hand and on the other emerging notions of citizenship, nation and community were the salient feature of the social reform movements of 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The era of social reform was succeeded by the period of the national movement when women began to work collectively against male supremacy. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the formation of women organisations against the discriminatory practices under patriarchy provided first wave of movement that saw women's participatory role in politics. The Indian Women's movement has hundreds of organisations but none can be treated as the most representative of the entire women's movement. Thus it is important to reflect upon some of them because in its essence their voices reflect the concern of women issues in general. Some are called new or autonomous, others criticised as separatist, harbouring Marxist ideology and conservative etc. But what is significant to note is that all these organisations form part of the Indian women Movement.

The period from the late 60s onwards, may be called the second wave with a resurgence of political activity by women. During this period there was a growth of middle class women's organisations of working women fighting for their right to (a) independent livelihood and (b) basic resources like credit, training and access to new technology. The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Ahmadabad and Working Women's Forum in Madras was formed. Another group of organising dalit labourers in Tamil Nadu were the Landless Labourers Movement (LLM) and the Rural Women's Liberation Movement (RWLM). In the National Conference on

Perspectives for Women's in Bombay three groups out of a total of 85 opted to present their organisational functioning.

The second wave saw mass participation of women in popular upsurges against the government and power structures in general.

The third wave is said to have emerged in the late 70s with a specific feminist focus. The period saw the growth of autonomous women's groups in towns and cities without party affiliations or formal hierarchical structures. Since the 80s, there has been a large scale co-option of feminist agenda or rhetoric by the state. It has been adopted by the state as the slogan of women's empowerment. The feminists lament that the govt programmes aims at empowering women only to the extent that it would serve the purpose of education for population control through drive against child marriage. The growing support of the state and the NGO-isation of the women groups have taken up women issues for protest and pressurising govt to take up proactive measures in support of vital issues concerning women. In the 90s women's groups at the national level emerged and they were:

1. All India Democratic Women's Association,
2. All India Women's conference,
3. National Federation of Indian Women,
4. Mahila Dakshta Samiti.

Other national level organisations i.e., YMCA, the Joint Women's Programme and Centre For Womens Development Studies have also taken up issues of women's reservation bill in the parliament. The Women organisations have taken up several issues in course of women's movement- the issues which are of critical importance that needs to be highlighted.

**Development Issues:** The national conference of women's movement was held in December 1997 where while addressing the problems of women activists questioned the very model of development. They expressed concern over increasing impoverishment of large segments of working population, the ecological crisis, the new economic policy that lays stress upon profit maximisation under the goals of economic development simply neglect issues of natural resource that are the source of women's livelihood. All the marginalised sections of the people are exploited in the interests of capital.

**Sexual Violence against women:** The issue of sexual violence has been raised by many women's organisations in terms of: (a) the fundamental rights of women (b) the role of state and bureaucracy in improving the public services like street lighting, women's lavatories, public transport etc (c) the need to have better laws to check the incidents of crime against women.

Dowry and dowry related crimes were reported in large numbers during 80s and 90s. The recent spurt of crime against women pertain to Rape, Sexual harassment, kidnapping, acid throwing, Female foeticide, the large scale practice by doctors providing facilities of abortion of unwanted fetus after ultrasound test etc. Women's organisations succeeded first in the state of Maharashtra in 1988, subsequently the

central legislation in 1994 in the form of PNDT ACT was passed. Similarly, last year the public protest in which leading women organisations took up the case of rape last year on December 16 saw Varma Committee report pointing out the loopholes in Rape laws existing earlier.

**Health Issues relating to women:** Programmes of UNICEF, ICDS and WHO also operate on the premise that the women's primary role is that of mothering the child and looking after their health. It is presumed that the high infant mortality rate, Malnutrition, maternal mortality rate, child marriage continue to prevail due to ignorance and lack of gender sensitivity.

**Work Participation Rate:** The work participation rate of men still continues to be higher in comparison to men. What is all the more depressing is the fact that for women work is available only in unorganised sector and not in the organised which does not allow any job security to them. The Equal Wages act was passed in 1975, assuring equal pay for equal work or work of a similar nature but such acts have no meaning in the unorganised sectors where works are given to them at the whims and fancies of the employer

**Reservation for Women in Representative Institutions:** The percentage of women representation in the parliament has fluctuated between 3.4 per cent in 1977 to barely 10 per cent in 2009 and the situation is not very different in the state assemblies either. The Panchayat Act as a result of the constitutional Amendment in 1992 is no denying the fact is a welcome change but the women have yet not been recognised as an agent of social transformation. It is in this context that the women organisations may play a proactive role. The feminist perspective assumes significance in this context.