



**Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLILJ)**

**Vol.2/ NO.2/Autumn 2012**

## **Out of The Frying Pan into The Fire: Journey of India's Middle Class Women----A Historical Perspective**

Preeti Shukla

---

“Only when a woman respects herself can she earn respect from others.”

FEMINA a popular magazine for ‘modern women’ published a special Independence Day issue with a cover portraying Indira Gandhi as Goddess Durga. The brief note explaining the cover gloated: “To be a woman- a wife, a mother, an individual- in India means that you are the store house of tradition and culture and, in contrast a volcano of seething energy and power that can motivate a whole generation to change its values, its aspirations, its very concept of civilized life.”<sup>1</sup>

**Biju Patnaik**, the then Chief Minister of Orissa, while inaugurating the State level symposium on, “Indian women towards 21<sup>st</sup> century: Orissa a step ahead”, addressed a jam packed girl audience, said, “Wherever you may be, light a lamp as I have lighted here and remove the darkness from the society where you live. If you have done this, you have done a great service to yourself, to the society and to the nation.”<sup>2</sup>

All educated women have responsibility towards those million of women, children who did not have the privilege or advantage of education like those who are educated. 21<sup>st</sup> century

Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLILJ) ISSN 2249-4529, Vol.2/ NO.2/Autumn 2012

URL of the Issue: <http://pintersociety.com/vol-2-issue-2autumn-2012/>

URL of the article: <http://pintersociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/preeti-shukla-6.pdf>

© www.pintersociety.com

means more responsibilities, more determination and greater strength of mind to meet challenges.

## **STATUS OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA**

Women in India have always been a topic of concern. Though she is preached and respected as Durga, Saraswati, Lakshmi, Parvati and Kali, she is also an object of abuse in the form of child-marriage, female infanticide, sati, sexual harassment and many more. Valmiki's Ramayana teaches us that Lankan King Ravana and his entire clan was wiped out because he abducted Sita, wife of Lord Rama, the then King of Ayodhya. Ved Vyas's Mahabharata teaches us that all the Kauravas were killed as they humiliated Draupadi, wife of Pandavas in public. The families were and are all 'patriarchal' i.e. male dominated. It is said that women enjoyed equal status with men in ancient India, in all possible fields of life. There are records of women being educated in the early Vedic period. It could be seen in the works of 'Patanjali' and 'Katyayan'. Women got married at a mature age and were also free to select their husbands. 'Gargi' and 'Maitreyi' are the names of women sages we find in Rig Veda and Upanishads. According to a custom, a prestigious title 'Nagarvadhu' which means Bride of the City was given to a woman for which she had to compete and win. 'Amrapali' is the most famous example in history. It is true that during ancient times in India women were really treated as Durga and Parvati. Child marriage was performed and girls were sent to their husband's home only after they attained puberty. Not all girls were permitted to study.

## **PRE BRITISH RECORDS**

The nineteenth century was the time of political, scientific upheaval in Europe. The British regarded their domination of the sub-continent as proof of their moral superiority, in arguments over how to best rule their colonial subjects in India, they were led to discussions of the ideal relationship between men and women.<sup>3</sup> James Mill, in his influential 'History of British India' (first published in 1826), noted; "Among ruled people, women are generally degraded; among civilized people they are exalted."

Mill explained that as societies advanced, “The condition of weaker sex has gradually improved, till they associate on equal terms with the men, and occupy the place of voluntary and useful coadjutors”. Constructing a clear picture of the lives of women before colonial rule is difficult as there are fewer documents that shed light on the actual lives of women. Julia Leslie’s ‘Stridharpaddhati’ (Guide to Religious Status & Duties of Women) translations are the only text describing the lives of women in the Eighteenth Century.<sup>4</sup> There are no references to women agricultural labourers, market women, or any of the vast army of women who must have been living and working outside the context of the court. Among the higher classes, the female child spent her youth preparing for marriage. Her marriage to a man of the same cast and ideally higher status was arranged by her parents. Following the marriage ceremony she was sent to her husband’s home and required to adjust to their customs. Her husband was to be regarded as, ‘the Supreme God among all Gods’ and served accordingly. The fortunate woman gave birth to sons while useless women who gave birth to only to daughters were treated with disdain. The aging woman watched her children mature and marry and accept the new roles of a mother- in- law and grandmother. If her husband died before her, she became a widow with abstemious habits. After her death, she was to devote his life to his memory, her impurity could never be removed, and she was to live out her life as the most inauspicious all creatures by faithfully performing her duties, a woman helped to maintain an ordered universe.

Women professionals faced a range of problems. Those who worked in institution for women and children were sheltered by the work place; employment in institutions serving both sexes was more problematic. Women generally found marital status afforded a degree of protection yet they had to balance household demands with those of their profession. Unmarried women, including widows, found it difficult to find a place to live and a way to protect themselves from sexual harassment. The higher their salaries & the more supportive their families, the easier these problems were to resolve. As a consequence; the accounts of women professionals vary markedly: some women were accorded a great deal of respect and met with few problems pursuing their professions, others complained bitterly about the hardships they endured. Records say it is not that women only lived up to the ideal; there were also women who rebelled against the ordeal. A few women became educated, attained fame and commanded

armies but most were denied men's opportunities to acquire knowledge, property & social status. By this second half of nineteenth century there were reform groups in all parts of British India. They focused attention on sati, female infanticide, polygyny, child marriage, purdah, prohibitions on female education, devadasi (temple dancers wedded to Gods), and the patriarchal joint family. Women started learning, reading, writing; that is, experiments in female education started as an effort of educated Indian women. Many of these schools were geographically limited, communally bound and caste sensitive. There were schools for female only, the teachers were females and curricula were geared to gender specific socialization.

### **WOMEN S WORK IN COLONIAL INDIA**

Women's new professional opportunities as well as their employment in urban areas were a consequence of British domination. Colonial rule transformed the traditional economic system and in the process fundamentally dislocated the non-agriculture village-based economy. The decline of the local economy and with it the demise of local small scale services and industries left many women unemployed. When machines were introduced, men replaced women. The modern sector – the economic sector that emerged with colonial rule – provided women with new opportunities in the field of teaching and medicine but to a few women. Poor, illiterate women often found employment in exploitative industries. <sup>5</sup>

In 1920s and 30s the jobs created were for women much like themselves: educated, able to move about freely and comfortable interacting with both men and women. Medicine was one of the new careers opened to Indian middle class women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Wealthy Indians – maharajas, landowners, industrialists contributed in the construction of hospitals and dispensaries. Kadambini Basu/Ganguly one of India's first women doctors graduated from Bethune College married her long time mentor and friend, was a successful doctor, a good wife and mother. There are accounts of her that attest to her personal supervision of the household and devoted attention to her five children. <sup>6</sup> The dominant gender ideology constructed women as dependent housewife; the reality was that thousands of women worked to survive. Urban areas acted as magnets, not just for men seeking jobs but also for women seeking guardians. Poor and uneducated, they found work as maid servants, coolies and prostitutes. Maid servants were

employed in every middle-class home yet their employers seldom thought of them as workers. One of the criticisms of Indian middle class families was that they made drudges out of widowed female relatives too. The lives of India's working women deteriorated under colonial rule. Jobs in the modern sector did not offset the decline of traditional industries for either men or women, but women suffered the greater loss. Because labour was plentiful women continued to work in the unskilled mechanized sector where they were poorly paid and unlikely to advance to better positions.<sup>7</sup> The new professions open to women – teaching, law, medicine – required education and family support. Nevertheless there were professional women who gained respect, independence and personal satisfaction. Especially significant for the history of middle class women in India is the fact that most of these new professional women worked with women and contributed to the development of new educational and medical institutions.

An informal survey completed in 1932 estimated that 90% of Indian women were wage-earners and only “married women among the well-to-do families and those of higher social standing do not work for wages”.<sup>8</sup> In the elections of 1937, six million Indian women could vote as a result of the Government of India Act of 1935 which granted that women above 21 years of age could vote and even contest elections either to general seats or to seats reserved for women only. Women in the age of transition, actually in the period between the campaign for 1937 Legislatures and the first election in free India saw women come alive politically. In the early years of the twentieth century a few women began participating political meetings and expressing their opinions. But, these were such rare occurrences that the presence of middle class women in political arenas seemed to evoke even greater reverence for Mother India. In 20's women joined public demonstrations, by 30's they marched protested and courted arrest in movements led by Gandhiji. Equally important was that Gandhiji assured their husbands and fathers that these politically active women would not rebel against the family. These new generation women were young, educated, unmarried, willing to undertake dangerous and difficult tasks.

## **WOMEN OF CONTEMPORARY MIDDLE CLASS IN INDIA**

The most striking feature of contemporary India is the rise of a confident new middle class. It is full of energy and drive — and it is making things happen. That it goes about in an uninhibited, pragmatic and amoral fashion is true. It is different from the older bourgeoisie, which was tolerant, secular and ambiguous. The new class is street-smart. It has had to fight to rise from the bottom, and it has learnt to maneuver the system. At one point of time way back in 1970s & 80s we went on asking ourselves “Is it ‘Doordarshan or stri-darshan’.(Woman- watching)?” Doordarshan’s construction of New Indian Woman (The Nai Bhartiya Naari) reshaped gender politics within the Indian family and class. When the directors, producers and doordarshan officials were asked why had been so intent on telecasting women-oriented programs, many replied that ‘middle class’ women constituted a large part of their target audience and they felt that Doordarshan’s programs would have to resonate with those women’s experiences. The ‘Women Question’ of Indian Nationalism was thus recast in terms of the construction of modern Indian woman( from middle class) who would participate in nation’s entry into the “twenty-first century”. These middle class women were not just looked upon moving towards the twin goals of development and modernization, but also as custodians of the unity of the nation; who would protect the integrity of the nation. In literary works of many writers the neuroses and claustrophobia experienced by struggling middle class women to acquire upward mobility is powerfully depicted.

## **GENDER & MIDDLE CLASS**

In Amitav Ghosh’s novel ‘The Shadow Lines’, the protagonist accompanies his family to visit long- lost relatives who live in a poor part of Calcutta. As he dragged away from staring at landscape of poverty and hopelessness surrounding his relatives home, he reflects on his own anxieties about his middle class status; ‘I was already well schooled in looking away, the jungle-craft of gentility. But still, I could not help thinking it was a waste of effort to lead me away. It was true, of course, that I could not see that landscape or anything like it from my own window, but it’s presence was palpable everywhere in our house. I had grown up with it. It was that landscape that lent the note of hysteria to my mother’s voice when she drilled me for my exams... I knew perfectly that all it would take was a couple of failed examinations to put me where our relative was’ (1990:131-132). Being middle class is just not about acquiring financial security; it was also about attaining and maintaining respectability, sexual modesty, family

honour. Put another way, middle- classness is a moral virtue, a structure of feeling, the habitation of a safe space that distinguished one from less fortunate(less worthy) others, and advantage point on the world. And since respectability, sexual modesty, family honor were predicted on the conduct of women, women's behaviour is mentioned especially intently. Hence, the aspiration of families to acquire middle class status resulted in a particularly close watch on women's bodies, movements' behaviour, clothes & speech patterns. Women, it can be argued, tend even today to be confined to a 'private domain- the domestic world of the family, children and the household Men, on the other hand, live more of a 'public' life and they determine how wealth and power are distributed. Their world is that paid work, industry and politics. "Good daughters" always deferred to the authority of patriarchal family; in contrast, those who transgressed their assigned place in the patriarchal family were severely punished by Exile, profound emotional anguish or suicide. Women, who ostensibly stepped out, stepped outside the confines of the home to intervene in public life. We find in modern times, these women have channelized their energies into reforming Indian society. These changing roles of women middle class women converged with the dilemmas of many lower middle class families who are struggling between the economic compulsions to permit their daughters to seek employment. The middle class is supposed to be neither poor nor rich, neither too conservative nor progressive and soon in a familiar litany that sees virtue in modernization and claims to embody it. 'The common man' is a familiar phrase used in media and in everyday discourse; it is also the name given to the iconic figure created by the veteran cartoonist R.K. Laxman, where he says the common man represents us all and that in his act of mute spectatorship, there is always an alertness and endurance. The middle class woman used education to improve the earnings of the next generation living in a tussle between individuality & community. She argues that since they did not have any help from elder elites, their success is self- made.

Laxmi, a 45 year old woman living in Bangalore, is barely literate, and that makes her work as a cook difficult, since she has to order provision but with the help from two of her employees (revealingly women, whom she calls "akka" or elder sister) she is putting her three daughters through state schools and even got one into the college. From a remote village with no education and truth to tell, not much culinary skill either- she has charted a path for her daughters straight into the Middle Class. (Her husband drinks and cannot hold down work) She asks for money to help them study, because her earnings can do no more than feed and clothe them. "Those girls

are going to finish their studies and take real jobs”, she says. She gestured around the confines of the kitchen. The fact that there can indeed be more is going to be more important to her girls, to the middle class, and to India itself. It may well be understood that the fight is not against men as such. Woman of 21<sup>st</sup> century has learnt to assert herself and take her due and not to only ask for her rights. The fight is against social system, obsolete traditions, detrimental social norms, useless customs and rituals which have ostentatiously chained us all. These shackles are braking and woman is marching forward to redraw her role along with the roles of others. Constitution confers equals rights on all; it is not that these men concessions they are going to avail.

No, NOT in the Twenty First Century.

#### REFERENCES:

- 1) Femina 14, no. 17 (August 17, 1973), P5.
- 2) Orissa Review # Feb- Mar 2005.
- 3) James Mill, “The History of British India”, 2 Vols. (New York).
- 4) I, Julia Leslie, The Perfect Wife: The Orthodox Hindu Women according to the ‘Stridharmapaddhati’ of Triyambakayajvan (Delhi, OUP, 1989) PP 3- 20.
- 5) Mukul Mukerjee, “Impact of Modernisation on Women’s Occupations” .
- 6) Malvika Karlekar, “Kadambini and the Bhadrlok” , EPW, 21 no. 19 (April 26, 1986) PP .
- 7) D.R. Gadgill, Women in the Working force in India,(Bombay Asia Publishing House, 1965) P 27.



- 8) Survey of Women's Interest and Distinctive Activities, 1930-2, RWC, Box 33.
- 9) Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan, Real & Imagined Women (London and NewYork, Routledge, 1993) P 115.
- 10) Geraldine Forbes, Women in Modern India, Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- 11) India's middle class failure; Chakravarti Ram Prasad.

**About the Author-** Preeti Shukla, Department Of English, Shyam Lal College (Evening), University Of Delhi.