

wknd | special



Are women freer in free India?

Women can work and vote; are guaranteed liberty, rights and healthcare. But what of equal pay, social equity? ‘We have all the opportunities. We have only to take our rights to freedom equally with men,’ writes Begum Hamid Ali

As far as women’s rights for equality are concerned, there is no doubt that they have attained “freedom” in reality. The very fact that woman finds an equal place throughout in the Constitution of India answers the question finally in the affirmative. We have all the opportunities. We have only to take our rights to freedom equally with men...

Special measures for women, such as maternity leave and allowances... are also there.

Equal pay

The article which concerns women most closely gives rights against exploitation, namely, “prohibition of traffic in human beings and forced labour.” With the right to form associations and unions... a good part of the demands made on behalf of women labourers is conceded.

Another Article lays down that the State shall direct its policy towards securing “equal pay for equal work both for men and women,” and that “citizens, men and women, have equal rights to an adequate means of livelihood.” The Constitution of India has systematically worked out a way of life which, taken at its true value, would neither cut us off from our age-long cultural ties nor prevent us from developing into the most modern-minded, 20th century citizens.

What is a matter of deep concern to all thinking men and women is whether women have become aware of the fact that all doors, all avenues are open to them and whether they are taking advantage... Do they realize what advantages they have obtained over their mothers and grandmothers overnight by one stroke of the pen?

Chance of work

Gone are the days when no woman could hold office in the State, in the civil services or even in the universities. Women could not practise at the Bar even after passing law examinations...

In those days it was common for men and women to live apart in different sections of the house. The zenana (women’s part of the house) contributed largely to the difference of the mental outlook on life of the two sexes. Their actions and thoughts and interests were entirely cut off from each other’s. The men had their literary interests, social work, political organizations, club life and opportunities of physical development and enjoyment of nature. For the women was reserved the kitchen, the care of the family and drudgery of housework.

The working-class woman was somewhat better off in this respect. No seclusion hampered her movements and she could at least enjoy a walk, whereas the “secluded woman” had all the disadvantages of her higher status in life!

No more purdah

We look back with dismay and a good deal of amusement on the time when women appeared on station platforms in

the form of good-sized tents pushed from behind, front and sideways! Carriages covered over with sheets and chicks were a common sight in those days, while now they are rarely seen.

How were we moved from our static position even before changes came through the change of Government? The first great mass movement of women coming out of their homes took place when Gandhiji moved through the length and breadth of the country like a streak of lightning, organizing women’s protest meetings in support of abolition of “indentured labour”. Women came out by hundreds and it became easier and easier as time went on to draw them out from all social service, economic and political meetings.

Year by year the women’s apathy was changed into enthusiastic support for the Swadeshi movement, the khaddar movement, spinning and weaving, and Khilafat movement (which broke the chains of seclusion for a large minority group in the country). Quickly, on top of this, came the movement for Swaraj, which brought out women to work for political freedom shoulder to shoulder with their sons and husbands ready to go to jail or to carry on the business or farm work for their absent menfolk. This political upheaval went on side by side with their mental development.

Effects of war

The first World War also had a good deal to do with the awakening of Indian womanhood. When we were dragged into the fray without the consent of India, we realized as never before the degradation of being a conquered country and the resentment caused by it was very great. The loss and grief of thousands of homes bereft of fathers, brothers, sons and husbands roused a burning desire for freedom, freedom from foreign rule, freedom to be a self-governing unit of the world.

In the wake of this movement, while the new British constitution of India was still on the anvil, educated women all over the country quickly organized themselves and made representations to the British Parliamentary Committee to be given adult franchise without reservation for women and with joint electorates which would make for unity in the country. At the same time, they worked hard to abolish the custom of child marriage by holding mammoth meetings and sending in petitions signed by women of a minority community who would have been exempted from the Prevention of Child Marriages Act had

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not this petition strengthened the hands of the Viceroy who was able to disregard the wish expressed by orthodox men. The measure... was at last passed in the nineteen-thirties for all communities and groups of people.

Fight for freedom

Organized women also set out to brush aside outdated, outworn customary laws, demanded legislation for equal rights of marriage, divorce, guardianship and above all of inheritance. The younger generation quickly reacted to these new ideas of unity and breaking through caste and race restrictions and inter-marriage became more and more frequent...

We have seen a vast change in the manners and customs of our people in the last decade. The natural calamities of famine, floods and earthquakes were followed by the second World War which caused an economic upheaval... Later came the partition...

Freer movements

These events have further broken down caste restrictions and have also brought out women from their seclusion in still larger numbers. Dearth of housing has also had a vital effect in their everyday life. Very few homes now have separate living rooms for men and women. All the family living together brings the men and women into closer association...

Every literate girl or woman sees a prospect of earning her livelihood in the near future, whether she is married or remains unmarried...

Working women

It appears to me that the working-class woman has advanced even more quickly than the home-making domestic women. The impact of politics, formation of labour unions, teaching and propaganda done by various political parties to gain her vote have made a serious breach in her humdrum unthinking ways of life. She now begins to understand that standing alone spells weakness but standing together by dozens of hundreds (in their unions) means a point of vantage...

Taboos gone

Another satisfying fact about the working class