

Representing Women, Shaping Society: Media and Women's Empowerment in India

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Abstract

Men and women are the two foundational constituents of society, and while they are born equal in worth, they have historically been treated unequally — a condition that persists not only in India but across the world. The Manusmriti itself acknowledges that women give birth to the next generation, bring light to the home, and are the source of prosperity and good fortune; yet in practice, a mother is sometimes cast out of her own household by her children, and a daughter is kept apart from her parents. Swami Vivekananda observed that the progress of a nation can be measured by the progress of its women. Gender bias has persisted from antiquity into the twenty-first century, sustained largely by a social mindset that confines women to the domestic sphere and denies them parity with men. Although the Indian Constitution guarantees every citizen — regardless of sex — the right to equality, women continue to be disadvantaged in personal and proprietary rights, duties, liabilities, and social standing. This paper is organized into five substantive parts: the historical status of women in India, the role of women in Indian society, the history of Indian media, the role of women within the media, and the portrayal of women by the media.

Keywords: women, India, Vedic period, medieval period, independence movement, media history, empowerment, society, development.

Introduction

India is a country of rich cultures and traditions. Women are accorded the status of goddesses in Indian scripture, yet it is observed that, in practice, they are frequently treated as inferior to men. The role of women in Indian society is a critical one: a woman is, at various points in her life, a daughter, a sister, a wife, and a mother, yet history offers numerous examples suggesting that she has rarely received the respect these roles warrant. The Hindi poet Maithili Sharan Gupt captured this condition in a well-known couplet:

अबला जीवन हाय तेरी यही कहानी

आंचल में है दूध आंखों में पानी

("Alas, powerless one, this is your life story — milk in your breast, tears in your eyes.") These lines depict a woman reduced to the role of a mother who bears children, nurses them, and endures hardship in silence — a status that, historically, has continued to erode over time.

There was a period in which women enjoyed status and rights broadly comparable to those of men, but that period belongs to the past; the present is markedly different and, in many respects, harsher. It is often argued that a woman's status in India depends substantially on the family into which she is born, and that women in rural areas are more disadvantaged than their urban counterparts. While this may be broadly true, urban women are not exempt from difficulty: they too contend with gender discrimination and concerns about safety and security.

Objectives of the Study

This paper pursues three related objectives:

- To review the status of women in Indian society, in both rural and urban settings.
- To analyse the role of women within the Indian media.
- To examine how women are portrayed by the Indian media and the extent to which media practice contributes to women's empowerment.

Status of Women in Indian Society: Historical and Contemporary Context

Women in the Vedic Era

The status of women in India has undergone substantial change over time. In the ancient period, women are understood to have enjoyed rights and freedoms broadly equal to those of men. The grammarians Patanjali and Katyayana suggest that women were educated during the early Vedic period, and verses of the Rig Veda indicate that women married at a mature age and were permitted to choose their own husbands. Scholarship on the period generally holds that women enjoyed comparatively high status and extensive rights during the early Vedic and Vedic eras (Kashyap, 2010).

Women in the Medieval Period

The status of women began to decline in the medieval period, a decline that continued under later social and religious influences that further curtailed women's freedoms. Practices such as sati, child marriage, and restrictions on widow remarriage became embedded in social life across many Indian communities. The purdah system, associated with the spread of Islam in India, was adopted widely, and devadasis (temple women) were subject to sexual exploitation. Polygamy was common, and women in many households — including the zenana quarters of Muslim families — were secluded from men outside their immediate family. Women were, in effect, treated as the property of men: dominated by fathers before marriage and by husbands afterward.

Nevertheless, this period also produced women who distinguished themselves in politics, literature, education, and religion. Razia Sultana became the only woman to rule as monarch of Delhi. The Gond queen Durgavati ruled for fifteen years before losing her life in battle. Chand

Bibi defended Ahmednagar against the Mughal forces of Akbar in the 1590s. Nur Jahan, wife of the emperor Jahangir, wielded substantial imperial power and was widely regarded as the real force behind the Mughal throne. The Mughal princesses Jahanara and Zeb-un-Nissa were accomplished poets who also influenced court administration, and Jijabai, mother of Shivaji, served as queen regent in recognition of her ability as both warrior and administrator.

Women during the Independence Era

The situation began to change as national leaders took up the cause of women's participation in the freedom struggle. Mahatma Gandhi openly invited women to join the movement, and figures such as Sarojini Naidu, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, and Aruna Asaf Ali came forward as prominent participants. In the decades that followed, Indira Gandhi became Prime Minister of India, and Kiran Bedi became the country's first woman IPS officer — both achieving international recognition. Their prominence demonstrated that women were not inferior to men, and many women subsequently rose to prestigious positions across sports, politics, administration, science, and the arts.

Women in the Present Era

Following independence, the Constitution of India guaranteed equal rights to men and women in all spheres of life (Kashyap, 2010). Even so, it cannot be said that all Indian women enjoy parity with men in practice. Indian women's experience might be described as two sides of a coin. On one side are women who lack equal rights and access to basic education, who are restricted from leaving the household unaccompanied, and whose autonomy remains subject to a father before marriage and a husband thereafter. On the other side are women — often in metropolitan settings — who are well educated and professionally established, yet who must still contend with unequal treatment in matters of financial independence, personal security, and social status (Global Issues, n.d.).

Statistical evidence indicates that in a majority of reported rape cases, the accused is known to the victim. The Delhi gang rape of 16 December 2012 — in which a young woman was assaulted by six men despite being accompanied by a male companion — drew national and international attention to the persistent insecurity faced by women even within the capital of the nation.

Media in India: Historical Development and Forms

Indian media has a distinctive and varied history. It encompasses several forms of mass communication, including television, radio, cinema, newspapers, magazines, and internet-based websites and portals, governed primarily by private and semi-governmental organizations. Alongside these forms of mass media, traditional or folk media — folk song and music, folk

dance, yatra, drama and theatre, puppetry, and street theatre — continue to exist in both rural and urban settings (Kumar, n.d.).

Each branch of Indian media has its own history. Newspapers are the oldest of these forms: James Augustus Hicky founded the Bengal Gazette in Calcutta in 1780. Cinema arrived in India in 1913, radio broadcasting began in Pune in 1927, and television was introduced in 1959, initially for educational purposes; it gradually gained popularity, and Doordarshan launched a dedicated entertainment channel in 1991. The internet entered Indian media in the final decade of the twentieth century. With the advent of new technologies — mobile phones, tablets, notebooks, and outdoor media — these newer platforms are collectively described as "new media."

India today has more than 70,000 registered newspapers and over 690 satellite television channels, with an estimated 380 million radio users and 130 million television users. Internet usage, estimated at around 120 million users in 2013, was projected to reach 140 million by 2014, with young Indians drawn increasingly toward social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and blogging platforms. Mobile telephony has grown especially rapidly, with an estimated 251 million mobile users projected for 2014, opening substantial new channels for communication (Kumar, n.d.).

Women in Indian Media

As journalism developed into a profession, women were long restricted by custom and law from entering it, and those who did enter faced significant discrimination. Nevertheless, women worked as editors, reporters, sports analysts, and journalists even before the 1890s. In the contemporary period, this picture has changed substantially: women now work across virtually every field, including administration, entrepreneurship, medicine, law enforcement, computing, and politics, and the media industry in particular employs large numbers of women across all types of roles, including senior leadership positions.

Many aspiring journalists look to pioneering figures such as Homai Vyarawalla, India's first woman photojournalist, and Prabha Dutt, a trailblazing reporter with the Hindustan Times who — according to her daughter, the journalist Barkha Dutt — convinced her editors that women reporters were capable of far more than covering local flower shows. Barkha Dutt herself became known for her coverage of the 1999 Kargil War. Other prominent figures include Maya Mirchandani of NDTV, Suhasini Haider of CNN-IBN, and Anjali Kamat of the US-based Democracy Now, each of whom has served as an inspiration to aspiring female journalists. Even so, it remains a persistent pattern that women journalists are disproportionately assigned "soft" beats, based on an assumption — often unstated — that they are less suited to covering hard news.

At the same time, women are frequently portrayed as objects of entertainment or attention rather than as subjects in their own right, particularly within the advertising industry. It is not unusual for advertisements unrelated to women's interests or needs — for cement or steel rods, for example — to feature a woman whose presence appears designed chiefly to attract attention rather than to convey relevant information.

Role of Media in Women's Empowerment

Communication plays an important role in women's development, and the media is central to this process. Media has a significant part to play across virtually every dimension of social life — from managing population growth to spreading literacy and improving quality of life for the wider population — including in the empowerment of women specifically. Media can help create awareness among women of their own potential as agents of social change.

The concept of "development communication" refers to the use of mass media to advance social development in developing countries, and because women constitute an integral part of society, the media arguably bears some responsibility for contributing to their empowerment. Everett Rogers (1962) argued that media can support development by cultivating "opinion leaders" who act as intermediaries between policymakers and the wider public. Applying this framework, media that helps to cultivate opinion leaders holding positive attitudes toward women could meaningfully advance women's empowerment at the grassroots level. Media can also directly raise public awareness of women's rights through targeted programming and public discussion of relevant issues.

Discussion

This paper brings together three related dimensions: the changing status of women in Indian society, the development and reach of Indian mass media, and the representation and participation of women within that media. Its central argument is that media can contribute to women's empowerment by raising awareness, stimulating public discussion, and giving visibility to women's achievements. At the same time, media representation can also reproduce gender stereotypes, particularly where women are used primarily as objects of entertainment or as tools of advertising rather than as full subjects in their own right.

This discussion is best understood as a conceptual and descriptive review rather than as an empirical study based on a defined sample of media content. The paper does not employ a systematic sampling procedure, coding framework, explicit research questions, or a formal data-analysis method; its conclusions are accordingly interpretive rather than statistically derived, and should be read as a synthesis of secondary sources and existing scholarship.

Conclusion

Much as a cart requires both of its wheels to function, men and women together constitute the two essential parts of society, and a society cannot be fully formed or developed in the absence of either. Many men are aware of this reality even if they remain unwilling, in practice, to accept it. It is equally true that the suppression of either sex is detrimental to the health of a developing society.

At present, the media already plays a meaningful role in advancing social welfare, but it retains considerable capacity to do more — particularly in raising awareness among the wider population and among disadvantaged groups. Women's empowerment is one of the areas in which a stronger media presence could make a substantial difference. Across the board, media retains significant untapped potential to contribute to the advancement of women.

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