2.1 Introduction

Women constitute not only half the world population but also sway the growth of the remaining half. They produce half the world’s food supply and account for 60% of the working force but comprise only about 30% of the official labour force, receive benefits of only 10% of the world’s economy and surprisingly own less than 1% of the world’s real estate. They have little access to productive resources and negligible control over family income.

This discrimination is the result of the gender bias which forms an inherent part of global society. Some of the visible and reported gender bias malpractices prevalent in Indian societies are female fetus termination, killing the girl child at birth, less nutrition, medical care, education and freedom due to preference for the male child, marriage before puberty, dowry death, legal discrimination, professions exclusively earmarked for men, precarious widow-life, etc. While such practices and activities are prevalent in Indian Society, they are fortunately not the lot of every Indian women and are confined to certain communities and section of society.

Even in such a situation the important role of women in procreation, upkeep, management and development of the family, as well as in performing diverse economic, social, political, religious, national and international roles, cannot be denied. Despite the fact that they deserve equal status, honour, dignity, rights and consideration, certain complex factors have reduced the status of women in human society to a lower level, leading to gender biases generally manifested in a loss of freedom, drudgery, malnutrition, and economic and sex exploitation.

2.2 Women in India: A Historical Perspective

Women have occupied a significant, albeit paradoxical place in Indian society through the ages. This is evident in historical accounts, ancient stories, poetry and narrations. Throughout, women have been viewed as the pivot around which the family revolves.

In the Vedic Age, women enjoyed a privileged status, in no way less than men. After the Vedic Age, the position of women in society weakened. Further, during the Muslim period the customs and traditions which advocated subordination of women exacerbated prevalent Hindu thinking of the time. Seclusion of women, for reasons of security and respectability, female infanticide, and other such practices became commonplace at the time of Muslim rule and persisted thereafter. At a later period in history, during the early British regime, the situation was no better.

However, with the passage of time, the British presence had the effect of generating self-awareness among women and they made their presence felt in the freedom struggle. Thousands
came forward as volunteers at the call of Mahatma Gandhi who spurred the movement for women’s emancipation. He addressed women directly, inspiring and encouraging them to shed their stereotyped roles and render their services to society as educators, politicians and working professionals.

The twentieth century saw the emergence of Mahila Samitis and other organisations devoted to the upliftment of women. They educated society about the ill-effects of the purdah system, child marriage and ill-treatment of widows. They campaigned for equal rights for women in franchise and education. As a consequence of their efforts and women’s indirect participation in the World War, “the Indian Reforms Act of 1921 enfranchised a small section of Indian population for the first time and women were also included” (Devi 1982). Thus, the situation has gradually improved with time.

2.3 Demographic Status

The variation in the sex ratio (women per thousand men) in India had gradually declined (Fig. I) and is expected to remain stable at the present estimate of 931. The ratio is divergent with geographical position and urban/rural locations in each state.

The life expectancy of women and men are approximately the same. The average variation is 0.9 year. The life expectancy remained constant at 26 years up to 1925, and then it increased linearly at the rate of 5.6 years per decade. The present estimate is 62 years (Fig. II).

The average marriage age for woman had crossed 18 years, the legal minimum, in 1981. The fertility rate is 4.6 births per woman. Age-specific death rate data indicates higher mortality rate for infant children and adults in rural areas.

2.4 Health and Medical Status

A series of sample surveys of the health and medical status of women and men in several areas has been undertaken. Some important findings are:

(i) Even the nutritional status of the children in Punjab, the richest Indian state, indicate clearly that 20 per cent female child as against 40 per cent of the male child could acquire normal nutritional status. Similarly 35 per cent female child have been found with moderate malnutrition as against 20 per cent male child.

(ii) Significantly 58 per cent of the female child (ailing) went without any medical aid as against 31 per cent male child.

(iii) Intake of various food items by the female child (age 3-9 years) is generally significantly less than of males. Calories intake of children and adults increases with family income, but the figures for female are generally less than that of male.

(iv) Incidence (morbidity percentages) of diseases based on deficiencies and infections are generally more for female child.

(v) At the time of child birth, a large percentage of births are attended by untrained professionals.

(vi) The mortality percentage of females is always higher than that of males in both rural and urban area (Fig. III).

All the above findings confirm that the female child found less care and attention.
2.5 Educational Status

The present estimated male and female literacy percentages are 62 and 38 respectively. The enhancement of male and female literacy is 0.7 and 0.5 per cent per year (Fig. IV).

An analysis of the enrolment of girls and boys in different levels of education brings to light clearly that female child enrolment at all levels is significantly less than the male child.

The enrolment, as well as the sex ratio of girls, decreases with enhancement of educational level. The facilities for secondary and onwards levels of education are available mostly in urban areas and are utilized largely by upper castes and upper middle economic group of people. The sex ratio of women is about 450 (to every thousand males) at all levels of education beyond middle school level. At the initial two levels it is around 650 and 500 respectively. In general the number of females getting education is half of that of males.

2.6 Domestic Status

The principal familiar roles of a woman in Indian Society are, procreation, child rearing and home management, while a man is considered to be the breadwinner for the family and is supposed to manage its external affairs. This is applicable to most of the upper and middle class families in both urban and rural areas.

In rural areas, a large number of women have to walk long distances to procure water, fuel and fodder for the household. About 40% villages have severe water shortages. Often, women have to spend up to four hours a day to procure water for household consumption. Similar time and effort is compulsorily required for procurement of fuel and fodder.

Thus, the patriarchal nature of society, gender-based division of labour, discrimination in resource allocation and remuneration, meagre assistance by community development programs, the notion of women’s income only as a subsidiary contribution, the predominantly male inheritance system, etc., have perpetuated male dominance and chauvinism in Indian Society.

2.7 Occupational Status

Of all workers belonging to the informal or unorganized sector, 90% are women; 80% are engaged in agriculture and allied activities and 10% in other activities. Unskilled workers constitute 90% of rural and 70% urban women workers. All poor women, especially those below the poverty line, have to perform domestic duties and also supplement family income. Since they are unskilled, they do not have any principal occupation. They are subjected to economic exploitation with low and discriminatory wages. Legislation on wages, maternity benefits, child care, social security, etc., have not benefitted most of them. Plans, programs and legislation do not discriminate against women but their implementation mechanisms perpetuate injustice and deny them the opportunity of availing the benefits of the developmental process.

The participation of women in income generation for the family has been increasing over time.

Women members and executive members in trade unions are 7.5% and 1.0% respectively. Most of the job opportunities in the organized sector (central, provincial, local self-government and private establishments employing 10 or more individuals) are availed of mostly by the urban population,
and that too by educated and economically stronger sections of society. Some of the jobs are exclusively for men although women have started entering some male-dominated domains. Although legally there isn’t supposed to be any discrimination against women, this is not reflected in practice. It is also significant to find that the employment exchanges have rendered very meagre assistance to women, as is apparent from Fig. V.

2.8 Legal Status

With regard to inheritance and property rights, the present laws discriminate against women. Land records do not incorporate the rights of women, and property records are in the name of the husband or father. Land reform measures have not given due recognition to the interest of the woman as co-owner or co-cultivator of land. Consequently, a woman’s life is economically dependent on the will of her husband, father or other male member of the family. Successive land reforms, instead of helping women to obtain and retain ownership of land and property, have instead been to their detriment. Most women landholders have been reduced to landless labourers.

2.9 Measures for Improvement of Status

A concerted effort appears to be essential to improve the status of women. This requires a multipronged approach, particularly in areas like:

- Legislative measures for the benefit of women workers;
- Administrative machinery to control human rights violation, economic and physical exploitation, physical injury and violence etc;
- Appropriate interventions through Government/non-governmental organizations and programs;
- Efforts by print and electronic media in projecting a positive image of women, and
- International efforts and influence to address issues pertaining to women’s rights, etc.