

## STATUS OF WOMEN IN CHANGING URBAN HINDU FAMILY

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The present research paper is about the status of women in changing urban Hindu family a micro empirical sociological study based on 200 families of Mathura City of U.P. (India). The main hunch of the study is that the various factors, processes and legislations responsible for the family change are also responsible in enhancing the status of women in families and society. The facts revealed by our sampled families permit us to formulate certain generalizations. Some of these generalizations support the findings of the other sociologists on the subject whereas a few conclusions; which are not supported by other studies have furnished some hypotheses for further researchers.

In Indian society even today; family means a joint family or at least an extended family. In our society generally find patriarchal family system; the matriarchal type families

are rare. In Mathura district of Uttar Pradesh (India) the nature of family set up is patriarchal. In such families everything is supposed to be decided by males only. Right to property of women as provided in the Hindu Succession Act 1956 is still not in practice. Males take almost all family decisions. In these families females are supposed to live and work inside their homes; outside socio-economic activities are still not allowed or encouraged. The status of women has been affected by regressive or reactionary trend which prevailed in the society. In Hinduism, a multitude of derogatory attributes have been ascribed to women. According to manu, "In childhood a woman must be subjected to her father, in youth age to her husband and when her husband is dead, to her son". A woman must never be independent. She is viewed solely as the mother, the wife and these roles are idealized. The Ideal wife is faithful and uncomplaining, and her virtue lies in the services she renders to her husband. Practices like giving away of girls in marriage and the importance attached to son for maintaining continuity of the line

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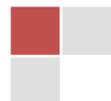
have strengthened the matrilineal social structure of Hinduism. Since marriage and motherhood are considered essential, a Hindu woman is expected to perform special rituals (Vratas) to obtain long life and special protection for her husband and sons. A widow, on the other hand, is associated with misfortune and is regarded as inauspicious. She is not allowed to participate in the socio-religious activities because she may bring misfortune to other members of the family. Tradition does not permit widow re-marriage for high caste widow's inspite of the legal sanction for remarriage provided since the passing of Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. Various social reform movements failed to rectify in any significant manner the subordinate status attributed to Hindu women by both the great and little traditions in Indian society.

While at present a few enlightened families take pride in not discriminating between boys and girls in educational opportunities the emphasis on feminine tasks and feminine abilities remains, and there is distinct difference in the degree of protection considered necessary for boys and girls. Studies and career motivation are emphasized for boys; only very few parents even today visualize a career for their daughters. Marriage remains as the goal and education as only a security against unforeseen eventualities. Excellence in studies or any other field does not provide a

justification for a girls' lack of interest in household work. This emphasis on feminine roles has an inevitable effect on girls' personalities and identities.

It is rightly said that woman is the mother of the race and is the liaison between generations. The exemplary qualities of Indian women, viz. patience, endurance, love, affection, sympathy and tolerance have always been recognized. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru once said, "to awaken the people it is the women who must be awakened. Once she is on the move the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves."<sup>1</sup> Status refers to the position of individual in an organization. It is a relative term and is deeply conditioned by the demands of a community in regard to women's place and function in the family and in wider society.<sup>2</sup>

To assess the status of women we have examined the role performances of women in the context of wider changes that are taking place at home and in society. Her behaviour pattern and the extent of participation in decision making in important family matters is a clear indicator of the changes that are taking place in her status. The economic independence i.e. controls over bank accounts, property, business and personal income is another indicator of changes in the status of women.



## METHODOLOGY

For this micro empirical sociological study 200 families and from each family two respondents one male and one female preferably heads of the family; are selected. We have adopted purposive stratified sampling method. While selecting the families care has been taken to include all types of families i.e. families of all castes, all income groups (i.e. lower, middle and higher) and all occupations (i.e. trade, service, private work, social work and politics). This has facilitated to provide overall picture of changes in the status of women and attitudes of the people towards the changes. For collecting the data; observation & questionnaire techniques are used. After the completion of the field work; the collected data were classified and tabulated. The classification and tabulation helped us in presenting the real situation.

The Socio-cultural settings of the respondents play an important role in providing internal and external stimuli to change. The most important internal stimuli for change is the desire and vitality to grow and advance. Any assessment of the status has to start from the social framework. Social structures, cultural norms and value systems influence social expectations regarding the behaviour of both men and women and determine a women's role and her position in society to a great extent. The most important of these

institutions are the systems of descent, family and kinship, marriage and religious traditions. They provide the ideology and moral basis for men's and women's notions about their rights and duties. The normative standards do not change at the same pace as changes in other forms of social organization brought about by such factors as technological & educational advance, Urbanization & modernization increasing population and changing costs and standards of living. This gap explains the failure of law & educational policy to produce the desired impact on social attitudes. The social status of women in India is a typical example of gap between the position and roles accorded to them by the constitution and the laws and these imposed on them by social traditions. What is possible for women in theory, is seldom within their reach in fact.<sup>3</sup>

The religious traditions have a deep bearing on the role and status of women. Out of 400 respondents 30.66 percent are Brahmin; 28 percent respondents are Khastriya; 29.33 percent respondents are Vaishya and the rest 12 percent respondents are Shudras. In one of the studies it was observed that 'Varna' and castes have not totally forbidden the mobility of the individuals. Group mobility, shifts in the status of castes has always been possible in the operation of the caste system.<sup>4</sup> Our facts reveal that caste differentiation has not given any significant

deviation regarding the status of women. In one of the studies it was noticed that many middle class fathers in salaried positions have little to give to their children except a good education and motivation to obtain a high status position. While enlightened families take pride in not discriminating between boy's and girl's in educational opportunities, the emphasis on feminine tasks and feminine abilities remains and there is distinct difference in the degree of protection considered necessary for boy's and girl's.

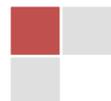
Highest order of education helps in it and hence girls must be encouraged to have the highest education both general and technical. Our finding coincides with an earlier study that literacy is the important phase of modernization. When most people become literate they tend to generate all kinds of new desires, inventions etc. and develop the means for achieving them.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding equal opportunities for boys and girls in achieving education the opinion of males and females differ significantly proving our initial hypothesis that in Indian families both male and female do not enjoy similar position and importance even today. Education forms the base of entire social system. It is observed in a study that education is not concerned with any classes or groups but has to deal with the entire population of the country.<sup>6</sup>

Our study reveals that female respondents are more in favour of co-education because they feel that this alone can remove the inequalities between the sexes (males and females). It is observed that the most severe handicap of the new nations as they emerged from colonial rule was the ignorance of the masses of their population. The entire system of education must be revolutionized.<sup>7</sup>

Sociologist Margraet Cormack (1956:225) opined that "education has been one of the most influential instruments of modernization in India. It has led to the mobilization of people's aspiration for nationalism, liberalism and freedom. It alone has been responsible for growth of an enlightened intelligential which carried forward not only a movement for independence but also a relentless struggle for social and cultural reforms. It has created a sub-culture of students in India which though a not fully modern, contains elements of transition from tradition to modernity."<sup>8</sup>

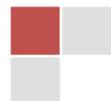
The constitution of India recognizes equality of rights between men and women, society implicitly accepts a sharp distinction in their role and spheres of activity. A women is primarily associated with the home, is expected to look after domestic chores and her typical roles are those of a housewife and mother. Their role in the outside world has not yet been



accepted in the same manner as men's. Decision making of the community and the exercise of political power is still regarded as an exclusive male preserve, although in recent years, one third i.e. 33% seats have been reserved for the women in the Panchayats. What is important; is that the tasks assigned to men are considered more prestigious in most of the communities and regions. Women's contribution is not to be acknowledged, with the result that they are not regarded economically productive. This traditional outlook is changing to some extent as the women are taking up white collar jobs; and status & autonomy within the family for the women depends, to a great extent, on the status of her earning activity. Our facts reveal that even today majority of the women are engaged in household works. It is observed that in this micro-empirical study that "on the whole the result from this group of questions indicate a definite tendency on the part of educated women to become independent economically and thus trying to improve their economic conditions. Marriage and family are the two important institutions which affect the life of women. Any change in them will reveal the change in the status of women and their outlook."<sup>9</sup>

Our facts indicate that the urban Hindu joint family is changing from joint to either extended or nuclear type of family. Some of our respondents who live in extended families narrated that they need some

family members to look after their children and house when they go outside to attend their job duties. When asked whether all these relative belong to father side. The answers were in negative. They said that wife's sisters, mother and relatives are more helpful and co-operative; and hence they live with us. The women respondents are more in the favour of keeping their relatives with them. This situation is changing the nature of the patriarchal joint families and bringing in them some of the characteristics of the matriarchal families. This also indicates the increasing importance of female members (wives) in making family decisions. This is an indication of elevation of women's position in families in particular and in society in general. The women are now not confined to household works only. They are performing much more important roles outside their homes which have helped to improve their position and status in the family and society. In general, Social status is a function of economic opportunities and amenities. Though theoretically women are recognized as socially equal to man, the old institutions like caste, patriarchal family, religious beliefs and dominant social value systems still govern with considerable vigour. All these institutions and ideologies are surcharged with the spirit of male dominance. The findings of sociologists like Ghurye, Kapadia, Srinivas, Desai and other eminent scholars have very clearly



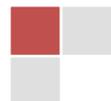
indicated the strengthening of these tendencies in India after independence.<sup>10</sup>

Political awakening among the women is essential for their betterment and improvement in their status.<sup>11</sup> 69.3 percent women respondents favour to take active part in political activities. They want to share the policy making decisions along with men. The sickness of Indian economy is mainly due to our excessive population growth. Our facts reveal that more than 80% i.e. the majority of the respondents have faith in family planning 90% respondents express their firm faith in family planning programme. Women respondents have the opinion that this programme is beneficial to them because women are the direct sufferer of more births. It saves the women folk from poor health and many diseases. This is essential for the betterment of the life and living conditions of the women. They agree that family size should be limited according to the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual resources of the parents.<sup>12</sup> Our study reveals that people now want less children because they want to provide better facilities and education to their children. Increasing general education, lowering of the infant mortality rate, growth of the democratic idea that each individual is responsible for the welfare of himself and his family as well as of the society in which he lives, are the important factors in achieving the goal of lower birth rates. This

situation has definitely improved the life and conditions of the women in our society. It is found that, "not only that a very large majority of youth is awakened to the necessity of restricting the birth of the children due to the economic stress but there is a growing opinion emphasizing the right of the unborn to be wellborn. A sense of social responsibility seems to be gaining ground among them."<sup>13</sup>

Legislation is a means to direct and influence the people to behave according to the social behavior pattern. The various social legislations have changed the behavior, beliefs and values to some extent. 96.6 percent male and 90 percent females respondents have the knowledge about the various important social legislations. i.e. Hindu Marriage Act 1955, Hindu Succession Act 1956, Dowry Prohibition Act 1961, Domestic Violence Act 2005. The position of women in society has improved due to various social legislations yet all these are not enough. There is still discrimination between the two sexes. Forced compliance of the legislations will not achieve the good unless public behaviour and belief are changed. So long as behaviour involves forced compliances, there is no internalization of the new values and so there will be dis-obedience of the law.

Our facts reveal that decision making in family has changed considerably. Regarding



education of children and their marriage only males used to take decisions but now the situation has changed and both males and females jointly take decisions. In 59.6 percent families both men and women jointly take the decisions. Which is a positive sign for the better status of women. This shows that the traditional pattern is not in practice in most of the families. Now women are not ignored in family decision making. This is also a positive sign in the direction of changing position of women in our society. Our facts reveal that the involvement of women in making family budget, nature of property and recreation etc. has considerably increased. In 64.3 percent families both men and women take such decisions with mutual consent. All these facts reveal that in patriarchal families where women had practically no say in decisions making earlier, now they are involved in decisions making and they carry weight in deciding certain important family matters.

The foregoing discussions and facts reveal that positive changes are taking place in the attitudes of women. Husbands and even their relatives may not oppose the women taking up a job. The consciousness of change in status and role is not only applicable to the employed and emancipated women, but is also true of some other women who are not working. The women are now becoming conscious of their status as individuals. Now women

members participate directly in making decisions affiliations. The inter-personal relation in the family are changing in positive direction. All members in the family irrespective of sex discrimination freely exchange their views on various subjects; and thus short out problems which earlier led to family disintegration.

Our study thus reveals that majority of women now want change and progress; only a few women and of course majority of males want to preserve status quo. Our study indicates that the old reactionary conceptions of the role, position and function of women are slowly giving way to a new higher and more democratic conception. Our findings show that varieties of patterns of life are opening for women today. In a society where the birth of a daughter itself was regarded as a calamity, where her only activity was domestic work and child bearing, where she was married at a tender age of ten or twelve, where she was married to a stranger in whose selection she had not voice, where she, many a time, became a widow before she had outgrown childhood and where her personality was tied to the apron string of somebody she could naturally have no aim except that of marriage. But with the spread of education, with the increasing opportunities opened up for economic independence and with the spread of new ideas of quality and self respect, women for the first time is acquiring the freedom to

choose her aim in life. However, this advance is not visible in all sections of the society. The modern women is slowly breaking through the shell of a narrow domestic existence; and is beginning to participate in the larger life of the nation and even humanity.

Our findings thus support our initial hypotheses that in Indian families both male and female do not enjoy similar position and importance even today; that in traditional patriarchal family the status of women had been inferior to men; that various factors, processes, legislations responsible for the family change are responsible in changing the position of women in the family and society; That at present the role performance of women, their decision making in important family matters and participation in various activities have changed significantly.

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