



RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Study on Socio-Economic Status of Indian Women from Epic Ages to Modern India

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: 17.05.2026

Revised: 12.06.2026

Accepted: 15.06.2026

Published: 30.06.2026

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KEYWORDS

Women's status;
Socio-economic development;
Gender Neutrality;
Indian Epics;
Modern India.

ABSTRACT

The role of female and their Socio-economic condition in India has undergone significant changes from the Indian epic age to modern India. In the time of ancient Indian epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, women occupied respected positions within the family and the societal structure, often depicted as wise, intelligent and influential though largely confined to the sphere of domestic roles. With the flow of time, during the medieval period, social restrictions related to women had increased, limiting women's access in various spheres of social life. The British period brought some changes in society and introduced various reforms by wiping out some social curses such as sati. After attainment of freedom, the Constitution of India has provided for equality and also granted some fundamental rights to its citizens irrespective of gender. At present, women are actively participating in all spheres of life. Despite the rapid progress, some challenges such as gender biasness, and social discrimination still exist. Continuous Policy up-gradation as per the need of time, gender neutral legislative laws and social awareness can be vital for achieving socio-economic empowerment of women in India in its truest sense.

1. INTRODUCTION

Female population is nearly 50% of the population of any society and their contribution to any society cannot be overlooked. The social status of women is the yardstick for measuring the development of society. A society cannot progress unless its women members are developed. It's only the women who pave the way for development of future generation in the role of mother, no male can play this role. They run the household, they run the society, even they run the nation. In the ancient epic ages, we got the characters of Sita, Draupadi who were unique in their personalities and they led to the

destruction of Ravana and Kauravas respectively. Also in the Vedic period and later Vedic period, we had powerful characters such as Maitreyi, Gargi, Ghosha, Apala, Lupamudra etc. In the medieval age, we got Razia Sultana who ruled the Delhi Sultanate. In the days of our Freedom struggle, we got Matangini Hazra, Pritilata Wadeddar and so like. Even at present, our Hon'ble President is Smt. Droupadi Murmu. So, in all ages, women used to leave their mark with their influential characters, but the sphere of their work is becoming wide and diverse with passage of time. Though we had many powerful ladies across the ages but during ancient time, most of them did not earn by

means of organized livelihood means, rather they used to stay at home and were accustomed to assisting their husbands in their day to day life. But at present the situation is changed. The share of working women in organized sector is increasing rapidly paving the way for gender neutral workplace.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This paper will enable us-

1. To examine the socio-economic status of women during the epic age of India.
2. To analyze the transformation in women's status during medieval and colonial periods.
3. To evaluate the condition of Women from Social and Economic perspective in Present Day India.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present paper is prepared depending on secondary data. Requisite data is compiled from historical texts, research articles, government reports, and academic articles pertaining to studies on Women.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several Scholars have examined Indian Women's Socio-economic status from very ancient times to the present day India. Ancient Indian texts such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata portray women as respected members of society, though largely confined to household roles. Scholars like Anant Sadashiv Altekar in his book "The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization" discussed the women's comparatively better condition during early vedic period and also highlighted the gradual decline of social condition of women in later periods.

Studies by Geraldine Forbes in "Women in Modern India" and Kumkum Roy highlighted how medieval social structures and patriarchal traditions restricted women's rights to education, property and public participation. Social Reform movements during the Colonial period led by figures like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Bethune emphasized on granting educational rights to women population and other legal reforms.

Modern studies also highlight the role of constitutional provisions under the Constitution of

India in promoting gender neutrality. However, contemporary research indicates that despite progress in education, employment and political participation, socio-economic disparities and gender inequality still persists in many parts of India. For example, we may cite "Towards Equality" Report (Committee on the Status of Women in India - 1974), the first comprehensive review on women's status in post-independence period. This landmark report revealed that the important goal of equality as enshrined in Indian Constitution remained largely unrealized.

Again, Crime in India Report (NCRB, 2021) show a large number of cases of crimes against women annually, suggesting serious safety concerns and the existence of gender-specific violence.

5. DISCUSSION

Status of Women during Early Epic period

Let us first consider the position of women during the time of Epic periods of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Women at that period were the symbol of dignity of a family and they were respected as mothers, wives, daughters and used to play important roles in the Society. They were involved in rituals and sometimes, they also took part in intellectual discussions.

Both the great Indian epics belong to a separate class of epics as itihasa, which is suggestive of the fact that both of these epics were written by poets who lived during the period of both stories. Hence, both these epics stood as the reflector of the then time. From this fact we can infer that the stories of both these epics are based on true events and there is probably very less exaggeration. Therefore, the characters of these epics may be considered as real-life characters and we can analyze the characters to understand the importance of women in society across the time.

Through the process of Swayamvara, women were given the right to choose their husband. The male participants of the Swayamvara were supposed to prove their worth by showing their skills in Swayamvara to be the groom of the bride for whom the occasion was arranged. From the incident of Haradhanu breaking episode in Sita's Swayamvara and the episode of hitting of eye of a fish in Draupadi's Swayamvara suggest the fact clearly. Polygamy was

prevalent at the time of both epics. Raja Dasharatha had three wives in Ramayana and Pandu had two wives in Mahabharata. Another incident shows that Ravana could not touch Sita after abducting her due to a curse on him. Though the effectiveness of the curse was not tested, but it can be guessed that Ravana, the powerful demon king was frightened of Sita on account of her raw power due to her chastity and purity. This can be compared to today's #Me Too Movement, where the Character Sita portrayed importance of consent and consensual relationship.

On the contrary, Women often took important decisions in explicit or implicit ways. Kaikeyi, one of the queens of Raja Dasharatha had compelled Raja Dasharatha to declare to send Rama to forest so that the Raj Singhasana can be given to her son Bharata. This episode shows us even the queens had the ability to influence the decisions of inheritance of power of Kings and other important political decisions.

Women were seen as the symbol of honor, prestige, purity and sanctity. The birth of offspring was allowed only after marriage. Hence, Kunti had to leave Karna after his birth since the birth of Karna took place due to a divine blessing before the marriage of Kunti. Though not in common but still Polyandry was allowed. Hence, Draupadi had married to five Pandavas. Again, widow marriage was prevalent during the period of the Ramayana. Therefore, Tara was married to Sugriva after the death of Vali and Mandodari was married to Bibhisana after the death of Ravana.

Despite their high status in society, burdens of social stigma and societal stereotypes were put on the women. They need to prove their chastity and moral character whereas there was no hard and fast rule to prove moral character in case of Males. For example, the Agnipariksha episode of Sita can be mentioned. It is also learnt that women were supposed to follow the limits, the abduction of Sita by crossing the Laxman Rekha gives us this lesson. Again, the humiliation of Draupadi in the royal court highlights the vulnerability of women within patriarchal structures during the epic period.

Status and Role of Women during Medieval and Colonial periods

The position of women in Society declines in medieval period. During Medieval period due to the enforcement of stricter patriarchal system, the

autonomy of women and their participation in public life had reduced. Early marriage becomes a common culture then. Social evil Practices such as Sati, Purdah, etc. gained prominence in certain regions. Despite such challenges, few women were bright due to their outstanding caliber and achievements. Razia Sultana (1236-1240) was the only Female Ruler who ruled Delhi Sultanate with her outstanding administrative skills and bravery.

Rani Rudrama Devi (1262-1289), a prominent ruler of the Kakatiya Dynasty fought against neighbouring kingdoms bravely. Rani Durgavati (1524-1564), the queen of Gondwana fought showing her valor and defended her kingdom against the Mughal Emperor Akbar. Nur Jahan (1577-1645), a powerful Mughal Empress used to influence politics, held courts and had struck coins in her name. However, the colonial period brought some significant transformations which favored the Socio-economic position of women. Social reform movements led by the then Social reformers worked as important factors in improving women's fate.

Important reforms include:

1. Abolition of Sati,
2. Promotion of widow re-marriage,
3. Expansion of educational rights for women/girls.

Again, the bravery of Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi to protect her kingdom against powerful British rulers is known to all. Besides, there were numerous women leaders and freedom fighters such as Sarojini Naidu, Pritilata Waddadar, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Captain Laxmi Sehgal who lead the freedom fight against Colonial rulers.

Present Socio-Economic Status of Women in India

Indian Constitution guaranteed equality before law and equal opportunity for women. Special provisions were also kept to uplift women. Various legislative laws were also passed to safeguard the rights of the women. Even, reservations were made for women in political representation, employment opportunities, etc. The representation level, has, therefore increased in respect of women in every spheres of life. The corporate world and the government employment avenues have also been made gender -neutral to upgrade the economic autonomy of women.

Important Provisions enshrined in Indian Constitution for upgrading position of Females, include:

1. Equality Before Law and equal protection of laws(Article 14),
2. Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth(Article 15),
3. Equality of Opportunity in matters of public employment (Article 16) etc.

Various laws/acts have also been enacted for ensuring safety of women, such as:

1. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961;
2. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005;
3. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013, etc.

Also specific sections are there in BNS, 2023 (erstwhile IPC) to deal with crimes committed against Women.

Present Women's contribution in Economic Sector:

Economic autonomy is one of the most important factors for achieving the goal of Women Empowerment in its true spirit. Without Economic independence the female population of Our Country cannot attain their development. The matter of hope is that the Government of India has taken the issue seriously and working in the direction of inclusive growth and development which has resulted into more participation from women in Economic Sectors of India.

Significant Surge in Female Workforce Participation:

Our Country has seen a significant boost up in the rate of Female workforce Participation. Available data shows that the women's employment rate increased from 22% in 2017-18 to 40.3% in 2023-24, while the unemployment rate (UR) decreased from 5.6% in 2017-18 to 3.2% in 2023-24, showing positive signs in creation of employment opportunities for its Female population though there is some inconsistency in steady growth and decline rate between consecutive years in between. This change is even more evident in rural India as compared to Urban Areas during the same period.

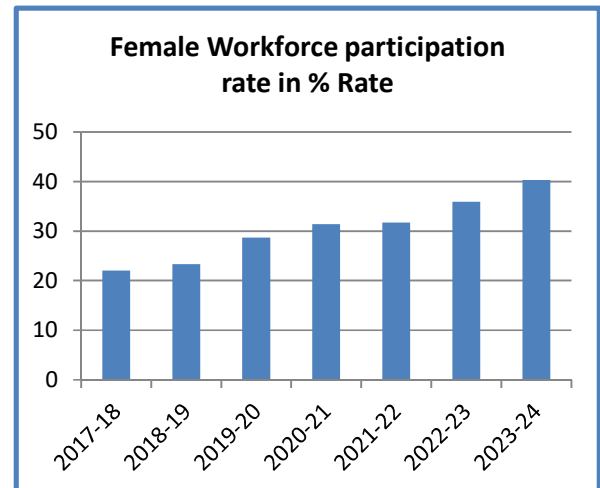
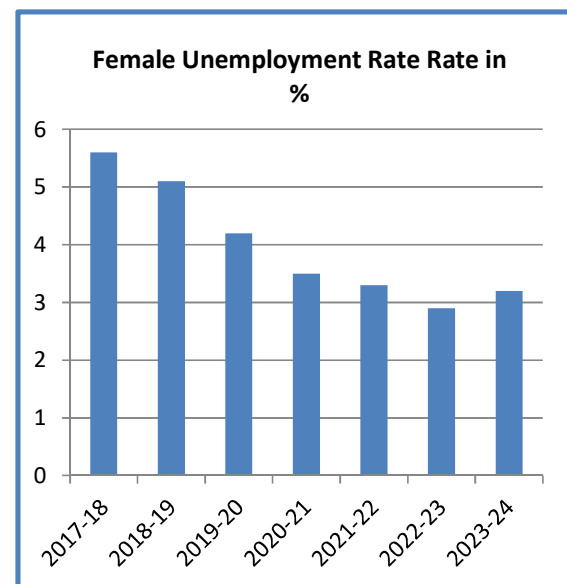


Figure 1.



Again, data further shows the rising trend of inclusion of females in the formal economic sectors. India is also moving towards Women-Led Development from only Women Development with the positive initiatives from both Government and private sectors.

Position of Women in Education Sector

The impact of education cannot be overlooked while discussing the condition of women in present time. It is the primary tool that makes people enlightened helps in removing social stereotypes and fake superstitions and also paves the way for real development of our society. As per 1991 Census data, female literacy rate of India stood at 39.29%, in 2001 data female literacy rate improved at 53.67% and in

as per 2011 census data, female literacy rate further improved at 65.46%.

There is a notable gender disparity in the literacy rate in India. Overall Male Literacy rate is higher than female literacy rate in India. However, the census of 2011 provided a positive sign that growth in female literacy rates (11.8%) was faster than in male literacy rates (6.9%) in the 2001–2011 decadal period, which suggests the narrowing tendency of gender gap.

Sustainable Development Goal-5

This goal aims at achieving gender equality and empowered to all women and girls. It has fixed target of achieving its mission by 2030. In India, progress is measured using NITI Aayog SDG India Index, where the national score stands at 49 out of 100, hinting notable hurdles but gradual development from the 2018 baseline score of 36. The government has also launched various initiatives like Beti Padhao Beti Bachao, Mahila Shakti Kendra, Sukanya Samridhi Yojana etc. to empower women.

6. CONCLUSION

The socio-economic status of women in India has evolved through a long process. Women enjoyed significant respect and participation in the early age but faced restrictions and challenges during later periods due to enforcement of patriarchal rules and structures. The modern era has brought various positive changes in favor of women in form of various legislative changes, expansion of education and employment opportunities and social reforms. However, true gender equality has not been achieved till now due to patriarchal dominance in specific sectors. It requires intensive continuous efforts in education, policy implementation, social awareness etc. to empower women to head towards a more inclusive and developed society.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author B. Dey is thankful to Ramkrishna Mahavidyalaya (A General Degree College, Govt. of Trirura), Kailashahar, Unakoti, and P. Roy is grateful to Govt. of Tripura, for providing the necessary support to conduct this research work.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declared that there is no conflict of interest.

FUNDING STATEMENT

No funding has been received to conduct this research work.

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Cite this article: Roy, P., & Dey, B. (2026). A Study on Socio-Economic Status of Indian Women from Epic Ages to Modern India. *Vidyapattan: A Journal of Social and Scientific Research*. Vol. 1, Issue 1, pp. 75-79.