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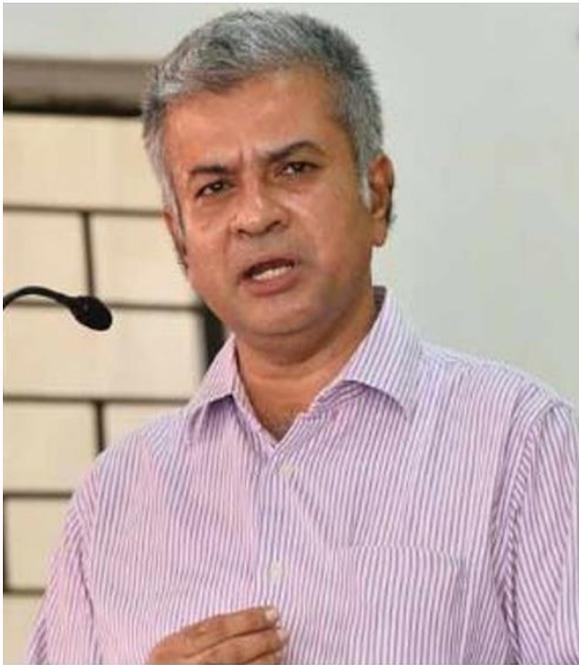
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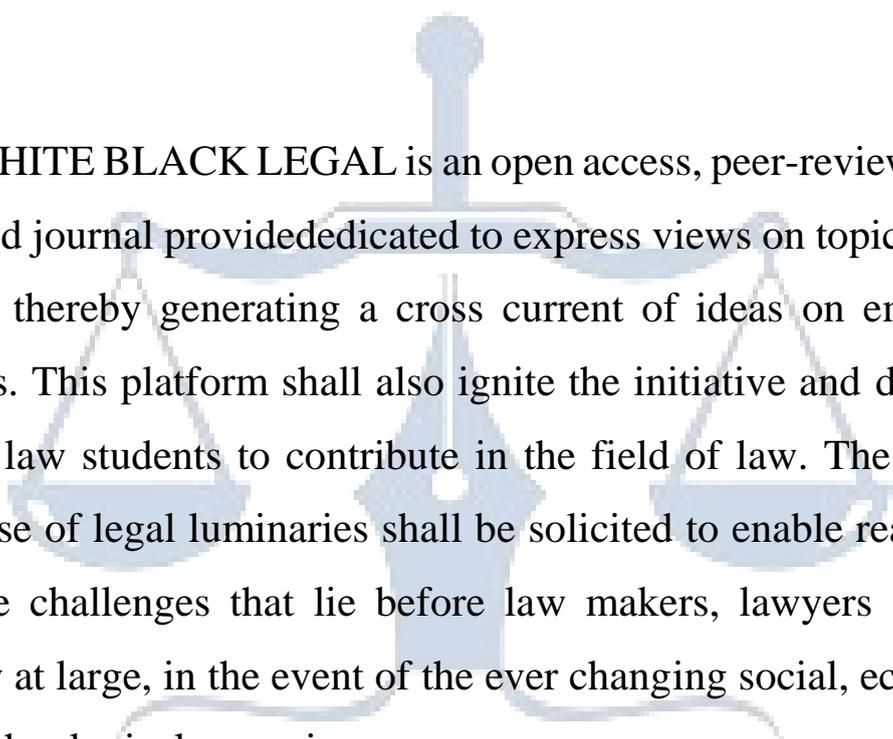


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With this thought, we hereby present to you

W H I T E B L A C K
L E G A L

**PARADOX OF PROGRESS: UNDERSTANDING
SOCIAL BARRIERS TO WOMENS LABOR FORCE
PARTICIPATION IN INDIA DESPITE RISING
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT**

AUTHORED BY - TVISHA OJHA

ABSTRACT

The position of women in a society has the potential to determine the value of a civilization. Women's history in India has been turbulent, from their early days of equality with men to the low points of the mediaeval era and the advancement of equal rights by numerous reformers. Women today are caught in an identity crisis rut. During the Vedic period, women had equal rights in all aspects of life, including teaching, warfare, and scholarship. Ironically, despite the fact that women are supposed to have more rights than ever before, they continue to face severe discrimination in all aspects of life, particularly in the labour force. Women are more likely than ever to attend school and pursue higher education. However, their labour force participation remains low due to traditional gender roles and the unavoidable. The dire circumstances lead us to consider the factors that influenced society's perception of its women. This paper employs a doctrinal research design in which the researchers aim to answer two significant questions: the social reasons for women's exclusion from the labour force, the analysis of key employment trends in India by gender, and the identification of potential determinants of female labour force participation based on literature and basic statistics. To conclude, the researchers attempt to shed light on the Indian paradox of higher education and lower representation of women in the labour force, and they propose reformatory policies to address it.

Keywords: Discrimination, Education, Exclusion, Gender Roles, Participation, Women, Workforce.

INTRODUCTION

Shakti is a term used to refer to the divine feminine spirit or strength in Indian culture. The Sanskrit term "Shakti" literally translates as "power" or "energy". Shakti, the goddesses of Hindu mythology such as Durga, Kali, and Parvati¹, is thought to be the creative energy that created the cosmos. The masculine principle of Shiva is said to symbolise the passive, unchanging element of the divine, whereas Shakti is thought to be the active, dynamic aspect. They are viewed as complementary energies that work together to bring harmony and balance to the cosmos.

In India, Shakti is worshipped in a variety of ways and is frequently portrayed as a ferocious and strong goddess. She is linked to conception, motherhood, defence, and annihilation. Shakti is also thought to as the power that enables both men and women to overcome challenges and accomplish their objectives.

Hinduism places a lot of emphasis on the worship of Shakti, especially in the Tantric traditions where Shakti is seen as the ultimate reality or Brahman. Shakti's followers think that by worshipping her, they might achieve spiritual strength and enlightenment.

Beyond the world of spirituality, the idea of Shakti has been applied to express the strength and power of women in Indian society². Women are revered for their capacity to nurture, safeguard, and create, and are frequently referred to be the embodiment of Shakti.

According to Hindu philosophy, the cosmic energy known as Shakti is what generates, maintains, and alters the universe. Everything in the universe, including people, animals, and objects, is thought to be infused with Shakti. As a result, the idea of Shakti is central to Indian culture and is honoured throughout the year during a number of festivals and rituals.

On the other hand, In the past, a widow would immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre as part of the Sati (also spelt Suttee) custom, which was common in several regions of India. The British colonial government of India abolished the practise in 1829, but it had already

¹ Singh, Ravinder. "Understanding the Concept of Shakti: Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine in Jammu." *Understanding Culture and Society in India: A Study of Sufis, Saints and Deities in Jammu Region* (2021): 149-175.

² Morales, Frank. "The concept of Shakti: Hinduism as a liberating force for women." Retrieved on July 16th (2008).

started to wane thanks to social reformers in India.

Sati was viewed as a means for a woman to show her love and loyalty to her husband and to make sure she wouldn't burden her family when he passed away³. However, it was also a tactic used by the patriarchal culture to keep a tight grip over women's lives and stop them from getting remarried or pursuing independence.

The practise of sati was most prevalent among the upper castes and frequently carried it voluntarily, though there have been instances where women have been coerced into performing it. Additionally, it was linked to the idea that a woman's dignity and worth were directly related to her husband's position and that by sacrificing herself, she would guarantee his spiritual well-being in the hereafter.

Sati is now universally seen as a barbarous practise and is forbidden in India. However, there are still isolated cases of widows setting herself on fire, especially in rural areas where traditional beliefs and rituals are still prevalent. Although the Indian government has taken attempts to end this practise through law enforcement and education, it is still a deeply ingrained social problem that needs ongoing attention.

In ancient India, female figures were frequently depicted as representations of the holy feminine energy known as "Shakti" or "Devi." However, at the same time Women were also venerated in some ancient writings as "Sati," which refers to a virtue and faithful wife who would give her life to save her husband's honour, this conflicting depiction of women leads to an identity crisis whether women are benevolent the bestower or aggressive malevolent the destroyer.

Today, despite advances in education and more women pursuing higher education, their labour force participation remains disproportionately low. Traditional gender roles, societal expectations, and systemic barriers continue to impede women's economic participation, resulting in an ongoing identity crisis. This disparity in educational attainment and labour force participation raises serious questions about the societal structures and norms that

³ Singh, Sneha. "The Ideal Indian Woman: Defined by Hindu Nationalism and Culture." *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research* 4.9 (2021): 2369-2377.

sheepwomen's roles. This paper investigates the social reasons for women's exclusion from the labour force and analyses key employment trends by gender. Literature and basic statistical analysis are used to identify potential determinants of female labour force participation. By addressing these issues, the researchers hope to highlight the paradox of Indian women's high educational achievements but low workforce representation, eventually proposing reformatory policies to bridge this gap and promote gender equality in the workplace.

VEDIC AGE

Approximately 1500 BCE to 500 BCE is referred to be the Vedic period in Indian history. The Vedas, the earliest sacred books of Hinduism and the main source of knowledge about this era, are the inspiration for the name of this time period.

The Indo-Aryans entered the Indian subcontinent during this time and settled in the northwest, bringing with them the Vedic culture and religion. The earliest of the four Vedas, the Rigveda, was written during this time and includes hymns, prayers, and rituals dedicated to numerous deities.

In the Vedic society, which was predominantly pastoral and agricultural, polytheism was practised. Four varnas, or castes, made up society: the Brahmins (priests and scholars), the Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), the Vaishyas (merchants and dealers), and the Shudras (servants and labourers). During this time, the caste system was not rigid and people might climb or descend the social ladder according to their aptitudes and skills.

Early Hinduism also emerged throughout the Vedic era, with a number of religious practises and doctrines emerging that would eventually serve as the foundation for contemporary Hinduism.

Shakti and Sati are two separate ideas in Vedic literature.

In Vedic philosophy, the term "Shakti" refers to the cosmic energy or power that propels the cosmos. It is frequently represented as the goddess Shakti, who is Lord Shiva's wife and one of the main Hindu deities. Shakti is thought to be the driving force underlying all cosmological creation, maintenance, and destruction. She is also linked to many types of heavenly energy, including Kundalini Shakti, the spiritual force that resides dormant in the base of every person's

spine.

Contrarily, sati refers to the custom of a wife self-immolating on her husband's funeral pyre. This custom, which was common in ancient India, is referenced in a number of Hindu literature, including the Ramayana and the Mahabharata⁴.

It is crucial to understand that Shakti and Sati are separate ideas that shouldn't be confused. While Sati is a ceremony that is now viewed as antiquated and was extensively denounced in the modern day, Shakti is a good and life-affirming force.

In comparison to other times in Indian history, this was a comparatively progressive age for women's status and rights.

Women were encouraged to take part in religious and social activities as well as education in Vedic society. In the Vedic Age, there are instances of women who were well-respected and occupied positions of authority, including female intellectuals and seers. One of the earliest Vedic books, the Rigveda⁵, has songs written by women, demonstrating their literary and poetic skills.

Vedic culture placed a high value on marriage and granted women the freedom to select their own husbands. If they were widowed or their spouses left them, they also had the option of being married again. The Vedic Age's inheritance laws were also quite egalitarian, allowing girls as well as brothers to inherit property⁶.

Other Vedic writings, however, portray women as subservient to men and under their control. A legislative document from the Vedic era known as the Manusmriti created regulations for the caste system and outlined rigid gender roles for women, including limitations on their access to education, land ownership, and social life.

⁴ Majhi, Laxman. "Status of Woman Reflected in Vedic Literature." Partners Universal International Innovation Journal 1.1 (2023): 46-52.

⁵ Kashyap, Tapan Kumar. "Rights of Women in the Vedic Age with Special Reference to the Rgvedasamhitā." EFFLATOUNIA-Multidisciplinary Journal 5.1 (2021).

⁶ Goswami, Maitreyee. "Roles and Rights of Women during Vedic and Post-Vedic Age." PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology 18.08 (2021): 589-594.

Despite these restrictions, certain women were able to rise to positions of enormous social and political prominence during the Vedic era. For instance, the Mahabharata mentions Queen Sudeshna of the Matsya Kingdom as a skillful diplomat and strategist, while scholar Gargi Vachaknavi is renowned for her contributions to Vedic philosophy.. The status and rights of women shifted as Indian civilization changed, with some eras being more progressive than others.

MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Depending on the area, religion, and social class, women's standing varied greatly in mediaeval India. In contrast to other periods in Indian history, women's position generally fell throughout this time⁷.

The Muslim invasions in the 12th century, which resulted in the establishment of Muslim control in numerous regions of the nation, are generally regarded as the beginning of the mediaeval period in India. Women's rights and liberties were restricted under Muslim rule, especially for those who did not belong to the ruling class. The status of women was significantly impacted by the spread of Islamic rule. Women's behaviour and attire were constrained by Islamic law and culture, and they were frequently confined to their homes and prohibited from engaging in public life. This was especially true in areas like northern India⁸ where Islamic control predominated.

During this time, women's place in Hindu culture also declined, particularly as the caste system expanded and patriarchal norms came to be emphasised more and more. Women were subjected to stringent societal norms surrounding their conduct and attire, and their access to school and job prospects limited.

In addition, sati (the burning of widows) grew more common during this period, especially among the Rajput community in northern India. To demonstrate their devotion and commitment to their husbands, women were required to commit suicide by jumping onto the funeral pyres of their husbands.

⁷ Gopi, Mr M. "WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL INDIA." International Journal of Economic, Business, Accounting, Agriculture Management and Sharia Administration (IJEAS) 1.2 (2021): 471-476.

⁸ Thakur, Renu. "WOMEN IN EARLY MEDIEVAL NORTH INDIA." Proceedings of the Indian History Congress. Vol. 78. Indian History Congress, 2017.

Furthermore, at this time men were increasingly perceived as the dominant gender, which contributed to the rise of patriarchal attitudes. As wives, daughters, or mothers, women's social status was frequently exclusively determined by their relationships with men. Women's autonomy, agency, and opportunities in society and the economy were all impacted by this.

Overall, the status of women declined during the mediaeval era in India, as they were subjected to severe limitations on their responsibilities, opportunities, and autonomy.

THE 21ST CENTURY

The position of Indian women in society today is complicated and multifaceted, with some areas showing development and others still facing significant obstacles.

On the one hand, there have been notable advancements in sectors including political representation, employment, and education. Women are more likely than ever to go to school, obtain higher education, and find employment, and they also hold more influential roles in politics and industry than ever before⁹. In terms of education, more women than ever before are seeking higher education and professional professions. Girls are now attending school and college in greater numbers than ever before. Women are also breaking down barriers and succeeding in professions that have traditionally been dominated by men, such as politics, athletics, and the STEM disciplines.

However, there are still substantial social, economic, and political obstacles for women in India. Domestic abuse, rape, and other forms of sexual harassment are all too common and frequently go unpunished. Women are also subject to discrimination in relation to things like inheritance laws, property rights, and healthcare. There remains a sizable salary difference between men and women, and many women are still working in low-status, low-paying positions. Sex-selective abortion, female infanticide, and child marriage are also significant problems in various regions of the nation¹⁰.

The Indian government has responded to these issues by enacting legislation to safeguard

⁹ Mathes, Valerie Shirer. "A new look at the role of women in Indian society." *American Indian Quarterly* (1975): 131-139.

¹⁰ Nagrath, Dolly. "In India, More Needs to be Done in Terms of Women's Empowerment." *Journal of Women Empowerment and Studies (JWES)* ISSN: 2799-1253 2.04 (2022): 1-10.

women's rights and fostering women's empowerment through programmes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter) and the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (Prime Minister's Motherhood Honour Scheme). To ensure that Indian women may live without facing violence or prejudice and have equal access to opportunity to pursue their goals and realise their full potential, however, there is still much work to be done.

BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

Even if a woman in India has attained a little more education and skills, many related factors do not allow her to participate fully in the labour market. Social presumptions about women working are basically traditional gender roles. Cultural conventions often dictate that for women to primarily take care of the family, to provide household chores, and to look after the children. It creates a serious sort of tension between the responsibilities of domestic life and career goals in the case of women as this expectation is often upheld by communities and families alike. Because of this reason, many of the working women work on a part-time or informal basis, which earns them their freedom but remains unpaid and hence insecure.

In addition to these systemic obstacles, which get furthered within the formal employment sector, it is the workplace discrimination, uneven compensation, lacking maternity benefits, and inadequate childcare facilities. Most businesses, especially those falling in the private sector, still view women as "secondary" workers, limiting their ability to ascend up the career ladder and keeping salaries low. The mobility limitations and restricted access toward resources such as safe working surroundings and transportation due to women's stay in remote locations further limit their career opportunities.

In the formal employment sector, there are more systemic issues too, such as discrimination in the workplace, discriminatory compensation, no maternity benefits, or inadequate facilities for childcare. Many of the private sector companies also consider women "secondary" workers, which limits their career advancement and offers a salary difference that reflects the concept. More narrowed are their career choices: mobility restrictions and access to limited resources such as safety working conditions and transport that other women not in the remote location face.

More to this, institutional racism is practiced in many organizations due to the fact that

recruitment and promotion processes rely on sexually discriminatory and different applications. Further, societal norms may influence the recruiting strategies adopted by various businesses. Employers, for instance, might prefer to hire males since they believe the females will quit working to care for their children, get married, or conceive. Present barriers-the social and perhaps related education-based ones-will continue to exist as deterrents toward full female participation in the Indian job market, regardless of what one may think their potential or qualifications are.

GENDER AND EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

Female work participation in India dropped by 3.5 percentage points, while female education improved: Statistical estimates show that female participation in the labor force has declined from about 31 percent in 2004 to less than 21 percent in 2018-18, according to National Sample Survey Office and World Bank estimates. This decline is notably observable in the rural areas, specially those with women's departure from agriculture once a major source of employment. Based on sector-specific data, women are overrepresented in informal and low-paid jobs like domestic service, small-scale manufacturing, and agriculture but underrepresented in high-paid, formal sectors such as banking, engineering, and technology. These sectors provide awful working conditions with few benefits and minimal job security most of the time. In turn, there are noted gender differences in income and quality of employment since males account for the majority of representative sections such as manufacturing, IT, and construction.

In addition, access to the formal sector is not even for women; therefore, about 85% of Indian work in informal jobs, and only 15% are working in the formal sector, reports International Labor Organization. Some of the challenges faced by women working in formal sectors include those of equal pay with men, fewer leadership roles, and hard promotion cases. These trends point out all the structural barriers involved in India's labor force against equal gender representation.

DETERMINENTS OF PARTICIPATION

In India, the decision of a female to join the workforce is influenced by many factors. One such factor is education. Increased school attendance significantly increases female labour force participation. Systemic and societal obstacles thus cannot be easily overcome by education even among educated women since participation in the labour force remains much below

expectations. Reasons for Indian women to not join the labour force: a) marriage b) child bearing/child rearing c) family expectations d) no available, suitable jobs 814 Women with secondary schooling or more may also be hesitant to enter the workforce due to marriage, childbearing, child-rearing, family expectations, and an absence of suitable jobs.

Another key variable is household income. Social mores that frequently associate female work with necessity mean that women from more affluent backgrounds often avoid working in large numbers. Conversely, in part because of having fewer choices for formal employment or university training, women from poor backgrounds may feel obliged to enter the labor market- at least for low wage, informal jobs.

Geographical location and urbanization also plays a big role. Since they are much closer to professional networks, education, and employment opportunities, the urban women are more likely to be found in the formal economy. In contrast, rural women often end up either in agriculture or the informal sectors due to limited exposure to job markets, poor educational background, and restricted mobility.

REFORMS AND POLICY SUGGESTIONS

Some changes in policies are a must to fill the gap between women's educational attainment and their involvement with labour markets. Improvement of workplace support for women can be used as a tool to encourage more women to stay in or return to the workforce by introducing better maternity benefits, paid leave, and access to reasonably priced daycare. This requires gender-sensitive policies by businesses, such as, offering choices of remote work, flexibility in work schedules, and mentorship initiatives to help women climb the corporate ladder.

Again, the other aspect is better linkage between training in education and skill development programs and the job market's demand. This also includes pushing women towards pursuing technical education and vocational training mainly in fields that are in high demand such as engineering, technology, and finance. Transmogrification of deeply-seated gender biases would require supporting awareness campaigns that aimed at influencing society beliefs about what women owe them in the workforce.

Legislative and policy enforcement will also have to become stronger so that present

safeguards, including the Maternity Benefit Act and anti-harassment regulations, may better be enforced. This will ensure that women work in a more secure and encouraging environment, which in turn would raise participation in the formal economy.

Finally, appropriate programs in other countries that work well could be implemented in an Indian context, such as tax incentives for firms to hire more women, or gender quotas in leadership. Government, business, and civil society should collaborate to get an environment that empowers women to contribute more to the labour force.

CONCLUSION

Indian women have registered significant progress in education but remain severely barred by the system, societal, and cultural impediments in the workforce. Therefore, their low workforce participation is seriously threatened by the disconnect between their rising educational qualifications and their continued low presence in the workforce. The outcomes of the paper reflect the complicated nature by which interaction between sociocultural norms, institutional frameworks, and economic factors explain why women are underrepresented in the labour force.

This paradox needs across-the-board changes, including gender-sensitive employment policies, high-handed law implementation, and public awareness campaigns against stereotypical thinking. Besides that, through international best practices observation, India may formulate more effective policies to bridge the gap in the workforce due to gender gaps. At the very end of the day, attaining gender parity in the labour force is not only an issue of justice but also a critical element of optimizing India's economic potential and general advancement of society.