CHAPTER III:

CHANGING ROLE AND STATUS OF WOMEN THROUGH HISTORY IN INDIA
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3.1 INTRODUCTION: The history in our society is not undemanding though it has remained largely disorganized. The Earth and one’s own country is always referred to with the prefix ‘Mother’ added to it. This reflects that consciously or unconsciously women have been given a dignified status in India.

On the contrary, they are treated as second to men in all regards. Popularly, it goes that behind a successful man there is a woman; but she is never placed alongside of a man. Even in the conjugal relationship, generally it is the husband who commands power over a wife (excepting a few stray cases). Thus, the Indian society holds a strange attitude towards women full of contradiction and conflicting situation. They are abandoned, divorced, bought and sold or killed at the whims of men.

Howsoever, high the status of women might have been raised under law, in practice they continue to suffer from discrimination, harassment, humiliation and not given due respect. Therefore, the status of the Indian women could be adjudged if one takes a quick look at the position of the women through history.

3.2 STATUS OF WOMEN THROUGH HISTORY: A TEMPORAL ANALYSIS

The socio-economic the political situation of the country have a profound influence upon the livability condition of its residents in general and the women in particular. Thus, a temporal analysis would be a useful method to ascertain the position of the women in Indian society.

3.2.1 STATUS OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA (1500 B.C. - 600 B.C. – 1260 A.D.):

3.2.1.1 THE VEDIC ERA (1500 B.C. – 1000 B.C.): According to the scholars of Hindu social organizations and ideologists like Cormack, Prabhu and Altekar – Women in India during Vedic Period were accorded with equal status. They did not lead a secluded life. They enjoyed freedom
in movement and never used *purdah*. They were also free to choose their mates. Women could also remarry. Marriage was not a problem since the dread of widowhood did not bother the parents as marriage and other custom of *Niyoga* (*liverate*) were there. *Niyoga* allowed the widow to have conjugal relation with her husband’s younger brother or other near relation till she gets some children (Joshi, N. 2013: 105). The custom of ‘*Sati*’ was unknown to them.

In the household, women enjoyed complete freedom. Home was the place of production where they participated in spinning and weaving activities. They also helped their husbands in the fields. Since education was not a bar to the women folk, they usually spend the period before marriage for education and used to learn Vedic Hymns. Some of them even contributed to their composition also; for instance, learned women like Lopamudra, Visvavara, Sikata, Nivavari, Ghosha deserve special mention. Learned women took part actively in conferences along with male learned exponents. The conferences dealt with philosophical discussions: Brahmavadini Gargi Vachaknavi participated in the conference convened by the king Janaka of Videha for codifying the scientific religious doctrines and practices. References of *Vidushis* (learned women) are found in the then society. Some of the *vidushis* also engaged themselves in teaching. The great Indian epics mention the presence of women warriors. For instance, Kaikeyi in the *Ramayana* accompanied king Dasharatha in wars. Thus from the professional point of view, women also enjoyed freedom.

In social and religious functions, women used to occupy prominent position. They were treated as ‘*Ardhanginis*’ (better halves). In the social arena they were treated with fairness and justice. Women could even perform sacrifices independent of men, as men were not indispensable for the purpose.

With regard to property rights, women faced a general prejudice to hold property. As a daughter she had no share in her father’s property but the unmarried daughters were entitled to a quarter share of the patrimonies received by their brothers. Mother’s property was equally divided among sons and unmarried daughters. Married daughters received a token of respect. As a wife, a woman had no direct share in her husband’s property. A forsaken wife had no wealth; her husband had to provide everything required by her. If any person wishes to divide his property during his lifetime, his wife and his sons enjoyed equal share of his property. A childless widow never had any property right but a widowed mother had some rights (Ahuja, R. 2013: 92).
Women did not have any separate political status since the political system was based on monarchy; so presence of voting rights, legislatures, political parties etc. did not arise.

To conclude, it can be said that women by and large enjoyed a high status equal to that of men at home, in the society up to 300 B.C. i.e. reaching till the middle of Post- Vedic Period (Astige, S.B. 2006: 44). The Vedic Age was marked by the establishment of the rural settlements. Society was patriarchal in nature. In the later part of the Vedic era, the Varna system got popularized and the socio-economic classification into Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra became noticed. The Vedic life followed the ‘Chaturashrama’.

3.2.1.2 THE POST-VEDIC ERA (1000 B.C. – 600 B.C.): Post- Vedic Period may be designated from the Rig Veda Age upto the birth of Lord Buddha. This period may also be regarded as the period of second urbanization, which was marked by the rise of urban centres referred to as Nagaras like Hastinapur, Kaushal, Kausambi, Vidharva etc. Apart from the four Varnas present in the society, there stood two important classes namely Bratyas and Nishadas. The Bratyas were those who were not allowed in the Brahmanical way-of-life; while the Nishadas were non-Aryans (presently known as the Bhils). During this period, the socio-economic scenario and the politico-legal changes started bothering women’s status in the society. Men solely began to hold power and authority. Marriages became irreversible and indissoluble institution. Women were generally given lower position. They were thought to be inferior and subordinate to men. They lost property rights. They even lost eligibility for participation in political and religious matters. Child marriage, polygamy and dowry came into practice. Education was not completely denied but women were discouraged to study Vedic literature. Inspite of this, a privileged few became stalwarts like Maitrayee and Gargi.

3.2.1.3 RISE OF BUDDHISM: During the later part of the Vedic Age, the common people especially those belonging to the lower Varnas suffered a lot owing to the pressure created by the brahanical regulations imposed upon them. This somewhat created a negative repercussion for ‘Brahmanism’. Slowly, trade and commerce occupied the socio-economic arena as important activity and hence merchant communities began to flourish. The non-Brahmins (i.e. people belonging to the lower Varnas and women) became agitating as a result of the social oppression and became disinterested in Brahmanical society. They got easily attracted to the ideology of Buddhism and Jainism which preached in favour of egalitarian society. Moreover, the Aryans
used *Sanskrit* as their principal language which was difficult to follow than that of *Prakrit* and *Pali* supported by Buddhism and Jainism. Apart from this, the two religions did not lay any restrictions upon overseas trade and voyages unlike the *Brahmanas*; this attracted the *Vaisya* community the most. Since women’s status got lowered in the later Vedic period and they suffered very much from the severe restrictions imposed upon them. The women followers of Buddhism and Jainism experienced liberty and freedom. So, these two religions brought a better option for the women folk to lead a decent life.

3.2.2 STATUS OF WOMEN FROM THE INITIATION OF IMPERIALISM TO THE END OF SEN DYNASTY (600 B.C. – 1260 A.D.):

3.2.2.1 THE RISE OF SORASA MAHAJANAPADAS: The Brahmanical system thus faced a setback from the society and this had finally paved the way for rapid urbanization throughout the subcontinent around 600 B.C. Kabul in the North West till the banks of the Godavari River in the south. Sixteen big towns or ‘Sorasa Mahajanapadas’ came up based on non-agricultural activities. These centres were also the hubs of trade and commercial activities. These *Mahajanapadas* were Kashi, Kuru, Kamboj, Koshal, Gandhara, Avanti, Anga, Asmaka, Matsya, Briji, Malla, Vatsya, Chedi, Magadha, Surasena and Panchal. All these except Briji and Malla were under monarchy. Briji and Malla was republic in nature. Of all these, Magadha became very important and occupies a significant place in Indian history. Magadha was ruled by four dynasties – Haryanka, Sishunag, Nanda and Maurya under which Magadha excelled in power and prominence. During the reign of Dhanananda, the last king of Nanda dynasty Alexander of Macedonia attacked India (327 – 326 B.C.).

3.2.2.2 THE MAURYA RULE: After the termination of Nanda dynasty, Chandragupta Maurya ascended the throne and founded the Maurya dynasty (321- 185 B.C.). This period has been referred to as the ‘Golden Era’ in Indian history. *Megasthenes* came to Chandragupta Maurya’s kingdom and wrote a detailed account named ‘*Indica*’.

The decadence in the women’s status which was initiated during the early phase of the Post-Vedic period continued throughout the Maurya’s rule. Women were not given any kind of freedom and had to abide the strict rules. On one hand polygamy was in practice and on the other hand widow remarriage was highly criticized. ‘*Sati*’ came into existence and became almost mandatory. Since then the country started facing foreign attacks, hence freedom to women
totally ceased. The female ascetics who followed Buddhism and Jainism were granted freedom of movement. However, the ruling families supported military and administrative trainings to the royal ladies. Evidences of queen governors, officers and dowager queens who have successfully administered during the minority of their sons are also found. The royal families recruited women as bodyguards and spies. The Buddhist Jatakas give account of the presence of prostitution in the then society and the prostitutes commanded certain amount of respect also! Vasanta Sena and Amrapali are worthy to mention. Kautilya’s ‘Arthasashtra’ discussed about their social position, duties and liabilities. They were housed in the harem of kings or provided with separate quarters.

After the downfall of the Maurya dynasty, the Kushana dynasty in the North Western part of the country rose to power. Kanishka ascended the throne in 78 A.D. Parallel to this, the Satvahana dynasty surrounding the area of the mouth of the Krishna River rose to power. The Satvahana dynasty was established in 106 A.D. and continued up till 220 A.D. After this the Gupta dynasty (320 A.D.) came up. During the Gupta Period, there were evidences of queens who were efficient rulers. For instance, Prabhavati, the daughter of Chandragupta II deserves special mention in this regard. Education was in access to women of privileged class. They used to study History and were authors of verses. There were provisions for co-education system in some institutions. ‘Amarkosha’ written during this period provides account of lady teachers. However bright the picture might look, the actual scenario was quite different. Common women remained under full control of their counterparts. Freedom was enjoyed by only those women who were either Buddhist or Jain ascetics or actresses or even prostitutes.

After Skandagupta the Gupta Empire fell and gave way to the rise of different independent kingdoms like: Yashavarmana of Malwa (530 A.D.), Maukhari dynasty of Kanauj (initiated by Ishanavarmana around 554 A.D.), Gour of Bengal (established by Sasanka around 606 A.D.) etc.

3.2.2.3 HARSHAVARDHANA’S REIGN: Harshavardhana ascended the throne (606 A.D.) and took up the administration of Kanauj and ruled upto 647 A.D. Women’s education was in practice during Harsha’s time. Women received training in art, dance, playing instrument and music. Princess Rajyashree, sister of Harsha was a learned woman of her time. She looked after the administration along with his brother. The Chinese traveler Huen Tsung did not mentioned the prevalence of ‘Sati’ in his account, but it is popularly known that Harsha saved his sister.
from jumping into the funeral pyre of her husband. Widowhood was of hardship and a tough life. Widow re-marriage was not in practice according to Huen Tsung. Even he did not mention the use of ‘*purdah*’ but he discussed about the ‘*Devadasis*’ of the Surya Temple.

**3.2.2.4 THE RASHTRAKUTAS:** The Deccan area was ruled by the Chalukyas (of Badauni situated in Bijapur district of Karnataka) till 753 A.D. and by the Rashtrakutas till 973 A.D. After the decline of the Chalukyas, a new dynasty known as the Rashtrakuta dynasty came up which ruled over the Deccan area (i.e. covering Maharashtra and Karnataka region) and reached the epitome of power. The Rastrakuta dynasty was established in the early part of 6th Century A.D. in and around Vidharva and Hosangabad. The kings of this dynasty were tolerant to the Muslims. Evidence of co-existence with the Islam followers had been recognized by Sulaiman, a contemporary Arabian traveler (851 A.D.). According to him, the kings used to have portfolio of ‘*kazi*’ in order to give justice to the Muslims (Gangopadhyay, D. 2011: 291).

Marriages were determined by parental negotiation though ‘*Swayambara*’ was practiced amongst the royal families. Different types of competitions were held in *Swayambaras* and the victorious deserved marriage. The custom of inter-caste marriage was less frequent. According to Al Beruni, ‘*Anuloma*’ marriage did take place in which the groom belonged to the higher caste than the bride. But ‘*Pratiloma*’ marriages (brides from higher caste married to groom of lower caste) were banned. Child marriage was prevalent. Generally girls got married before 12 years of age while boys before 16 years. Polygamy was in full swing whereby husbands possessed up to four wives. *Purdah* was not in practice. In high profile societies, widow remarriage was totally absent. ‘*Sati*’ was not in practice in South India, but there were few stray cases of child less widows who did sacrifice their lives in the funeral pyre of their husbands. Widows had property rights.

**3.2.2.5 THE GUJJARS:** After the period of Harshavardhana, some of the early Gujjars – Pratihara dynasties ruled considerable areas in Northern India. Though their rise had been earmarked during the middle of 6th Century A.D. in Jodhpur of Rajasthan by the founder king Hari Chandra, yet there was another dynasty of the Gujjars which came up at the end of the 6th Century A.D. at Broach region of Gujarat. Later, during 8th Century and 11th Century A.D. the Gujjars of Jalor (Rajasthan) and Ujjaini (Madhya Pradesh) resulted as the dominant group. Birth of a girl child was not welcomed by any family. The parents were apprehensive of their
daughters getting married to unsuitable grooms. Moreover, if the daughters became widowed, they used to return to their parent’s home, which created familial problems. So, parents remained very careful while selecting groom for their daughters. Marriage took place between same ‘Varna’ but with other ‘Gotras’. Generally, monogamy was the usual custom but polygamy was not uncommon. ‘Sati’ was in practice; those who opted for widowhood led a very arduous life. Widow re-marriage took place in Sudra family but never within the upper Varnas. The widowed women either returned to their parent’s place or joined a religious cult.

There were few learned women in the then society; mention may be made of Avanti Sundari, wife of Rajsekhar. She was the author of many literary works but due to lack of documentation and proper preservation, they are lost forever (Gangopadhyay, 2011: 333). In Rajsekhar’s books women have been portrayed as artists, poetesses, dancers and vocalists. He admired their creative nature. Some of Rajsekhar’s works are ‘Kavyamanjari’, ‘Biddhyasalbhanjika’, ‘Kavyamimansa’ etc. ‘Jowhar’ was initiated during this time and got enormous popularity. The custom of ‘Jowhar’ was like that – when the forts became fully under invader’s control, then men used to attack the enemy with full force while their wives used to jump into fires and committed suicide.

3.2.2.6 THE PALAS AND THE SENS OF BENGAL: After Sasanka’s rule, Bengal under the Pala Dynasty and the Sen Dynasty is worthy to mention. The Pala dynasty was established in the mid 8th Century A.D. They originated in some places of North Bengal but established their capital at Bakharganj in present Bangladesh. Their rule brought success to political, literature, religious and cultural arena.

Women did not possess any significant position during this time. They were expected only to become wives. The kings and the affluent people maintained polygamous life. ‘Sati’ was in full swing. The widows led a miserable life. Besides all these hardships, women had access to education during the Pala rule. As per the periodic writings, women used to write love letters to their beloved. They had sound knowledge of Music, Dance and Art. Use of ‘Veena’ among women as musical instrument was very popular. Womenfolk used to participate in dance-dramas and entertained people. Women used to dress up nicely with accessories and ornaments. With the death of Ramapala (1130 A.D.), the last significant ruler of the Pala dynasty, the Pala period came to an end by the second half of 12th Century A.D.
The rise of the Sens was responsible for the decline of the Pala rule in Bengal. Samanta Sen the founder king of the Sen Dynasty came from the Deccan area and settled in Bengal within a small territory. The next rulers expanded the Sen’s territory and invaded North Bengal, Kamrupa, Kalinga and Mithila. Lakshman Sen deserve special mention among all the Sen Kings and was well known for his military activities. By 1201, the Muslim invader Bhaktiar Khalji intruded into Nadia (penetrating the thick forests of Jharkhand) all of a sudden and old Lakshman Sen fled to his second capital situated at present Bangladesh. He died in 1205. The Sen’s rule ended in 1260 A.D. ‘Devadasi’ system became prevalent during the Sen’s rule.

3.2.2.7 THE CHOLAS OF SOUTHERN INDIA: South India was on the other hand ruled by the Pallabs (upto 891 A.D.) and the Cholas (upto 1120 A.D.). The Cholas founded their independent kingdom during mid 9th Century A.D. under Vijayalaya (850 - 871 A.D.) in and around Thanjavur of Cauvery River basin area.

The social scenario almost corroborated with that of the Northern India besides few exceptions. In general, women were expected to remain submissive and sometimes referred to as ‘Pativrata’ i.e. worshipper of their husbands. Common people had a monogamous marital status, but affluent and royal families were polygamous. Women labour engaged themselves in less strenuous jobs and they were paid less compared to their counterparts. Women used to hold property and had the rights of buying and selling them. Some areas of South India had matrilineal society where women earned some respect. After the termination of the Gupta Dynasty, the kingdom of Orissa, Canara and Andhra were ruled by queens.

Though ‘Sati’ was in practice, yet it was not a popular custom. Instead of ‘Sati’, Southern India depicted the prevalence of ‘Devadasis’ as a form of women oppression. Devadasis were women who remained in the temple premises to serve Gods. These devadasis learnt special training of music and dance particularly Bharatnatyam - a traditional dance form of India. Ideologically, they were treated as the daughters of the deity in the temple. They could marry and lead a social life also. Many devadasis engaged themselves in social works too. Slowly, with passage of time, the Devadasi system became a symbol of satisfaction of lust and greed of the priests, kings and even aristocrats. The devadasis used to serve the kings. Some of them were granted freedom by the rulers also. The instance of Kulatunga I deserve mention in this regard, who in 1088 A.D.
returned back some of the *devadasis* from the palace to the temple again. Those *devadasis* had been marked ‘Trishula’ (a holy emblem) on their bodies.

Therefore, on the whole, women during the entire Post- Vedic period generally experienced a low status (with few exceptions). Apart from the royal families, the privilege of education was not granted to common women. Property rights were limited to a handful, especially in matrilineal societies (that remained in small proportion). Widowhood was of atrocious experience. ‘Sati’ was more popular in North India. *Devadasi* was another form of women oppression. The only way to escape oppression was either to become a Buddhist or Jain ascetic or even to become a prostitute (since they earned some kind of respect). Nevertheless, there were few learned women whose wisdom and intelligentsia has brightened up the cultural heritage of India.

### 3.2.3 WOMEN IN INDIA DURING THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD:

Sultan Mahmud the king of Ghazni, conquered India in 9th Century A.D. For seventeen times Mahmud attacked India and finally succeeded in 1008-’09 whereby Ananda Pala, son of Jaipala of Punjab got defeated by him and lost Punjab. The basic motive behind Mahmud’s attack was to spread Islam and to rob the enormous wealth of India. According to the English historian Smith, ‘Mahmud was simply a bandit operating on a large scale’. His rampant activity not only obliterated the temples and sacred places which were significant historical artifacts, but also generated fear among the Hindus. From this period till mid 19th Century with the establishment of the British authority in India, i.e. for about 700 years, there was a break down in the socio-cultural and economic arena. In this backdrop, women’s life also experienced a depression.

The Pre-Modern Indian society was undoubtedly oppressive to women. The nature of oppression varied depending on the nature of communities in different spatio- temporal contexts. Right of inheritance was not similar throughout the country. Even for lower classes where legally allowed, inheritance were often disregarded. In Bengal, particularly widows and daughters without sons could be forcibly taken as chattel by the *zamindars* and *jagirdars* of the area. The Muslim women could claim the dower settled at marriage and inherit property. With regard to marriages, women were often married in infancy i.e. before the attainment of puberty; but child marriages were absent in Muslim families. Payment of bride price was in practice among the poor and also in Muslim families. On the contrary, higher castes received dowry from bride’s
parents. Widow re-marriage was absolutely prohibited within the upper castes, while it was prevalent in the pastoral and peasant classes like the Jats, Ahirs and Mewatis (Habib, I. 2007: 162). Muslim widows could re-marry. The socio-economically middle and upper class Muslim families used to have upto four wives and any number of concubines to a man but there are instances of resentment also. As an evidence, a marriage contract can be cited which was reproduced in an administrative manual negotiated at Surat in the first half of 17th Century, which obliged the husband not to marry a second time or maintain any concubine. The contract further sought to prevent the husband from badly beating up the wife and to ensure to the wife a minimum amount of subsistence (Ibid: 164). The fearful practice of ‘Sati’ was prevalent amongst the Rajput warriors and Rajput royal families. Ibn Batutah mentioned with horror the scene of a woman burning herself to attain ‘Sati’. Though permission of the Sultan was mandatory for the performance of the ‘Sati’, yet the Mughal administration discouraged the act. According to Ain-i-Akbari by Abul Fazl, Akbar criticized ‘Sati’ strongly on ethical grounds.

During the Muslim Rule, female literacy went down rapidly. Female education was confined to the cultural elite. At the initial phase of the Muslim Rule, Purdah was unknown in the country. For example, mention may be made of women and queens in Ahom kingdom (Assam) who could appear in public without covering their faces and heads. After the Muslim conquest, Purdah became popularized especially among higher and richer classes in North India to provide protection to beautiful ladies against abduction and kidnapping by the Muslim rulers, nobles and officials. During the conquests, thousands of Hindu women were forcibly taken and either married after religion conversion or kept as concubines. What so ever be the reason, this insecurity affected women adversely and made them more dependent on men. In South India however, the impact of the Muslims remained limited, Purdah was not so much popularized. A matrilineal social system prevailed among certain communities in Kerala and in far South and also among the Garos and Khasis of Meghalaya in the North East.

With regard to the occupational categories, women during this period used to carry water, spun yarn, mill corn and help in agricultural operations too. In the Himalayan communities, they even did agriculture to the strict sense of the term. Women of certain castes even went out to sell milk, ghee etc by hawkery. In ‘Akbarnama’, paintings show that women were engaged in masonry construction (Ibid, p163, Figure 3.1). On the contrary, in Bengal the picture was grim as women had to bear a large burden of work. Thus, it is evident that women’s position more or less
remained less impressive in terms of education, occupation as well as in social life. They did not get enough scope to upgrade themselves and prove their importance in the society. Commonly, people treated them as their property and could do whatever they liked at their whims. A remarkable collection of documents from Gujarat in ‘Lekhapaddhati’ dated 1230-’31, shows that those women who were sold as slaves lost their family ties, caste status and could be forced to do all kinds of works in the household as well as in the fields under constant threat of physical violence and torture (Ibid, p. 8). Even in the Royal Household during the Sultanate period, the evidence of male control could be traced. The most important officer concerned with the Royal Household was the ‘Wakil-i-dar’. He controlled the entire household and supervised the payment of allowance and salaries to staffs of Royal Kitchen, Wine Department, Royal Stable etc. Even he remained responsible for the education of the Princes. The Sultan’s private servants, Princes and Queens had to approach him for various favours. Other important officials at the Royal Household premises were ‘Amir Hajib’ (who used to look after the ceremonies at the court) and ‘Barid-i-khas’ i.e. the head of the intelligence department (Chandra, Satish. 2003: 139-140).

Contrary to this picture of male dominancy, there were exceptional cases like that of Gulbadan Begum, who was Humayun’s sister who remained highly educated while her husband was illiterate. Mention may also be made of ‘Jayamati’ in ‘Rajtarangini’ written by Kashmiri historian Kalhana (1151), who has been mentioned to have opportunistically changed her male partners, ultimately became the Queen of Uchcha Kashmir and earned repute for her benevolence and wisdom.

3.2.3.1 BHAKTI MOVEMENT AND SUFISM: The genesis of Bhakti cult took place most appropriately at the time of sheer necessity, especially when rigid Hinduism was losing its popularity. Bhakti movement was able to generate a new spark in Hinduism. It bridged Hinduism with Islam during the later part of the Sultanate Period about 14th - 15th Century A.D.

The Bhakti movement spoke against the strictness of caste differentiation, untouchability and adopted a more humanistic approach which helped in the social progress. The pioneers were Ramananda, Kabir, Sri Chaitanya, Guru Nanak, Guru Namdeva, Meera Bai, Dadu so on and so forth. The main ideology was concerned with the spread of love for everyone irrespective of caste, creed and religion. It also taught religious tolerance and believed that different religions lead different paths to reach the same goal i.e. the Almighty.
During the Bhakti movement, another cult developed in medieval India which deserves special mention to have influenced the cultural arena, which is known as Sufism. Sufism brought important changes to the realm of Islamic ideas and beliefs. Sufism propagated the belief of equality, love and co-existence among people and also inculcated the feeling of togetherness (unification) with the ‘Almighty’. Sufism was popularized by Kwaja Moinuddin Chisti towards the end of 12th Century A.D. By the dawn of the 13th Century, the Sufi cult became divided into two sects: the Chisti and the Suhrawardy. Nevertheless, during the 15th and the early part of the 16th Century, the Sufi and the Bhakti saints had worked out remarkably in the common social platform on which people belonging to different caste, creed and sect could meet and tried to understand each other.

3.2.3.2 TOWARDS THE END OF MEDIEVAL PERIOD: The Mughal Empire which had captured all attention owing to its extensiveness with regard to its territory, military might and cultural achievements showed signs of decay towards the beginning of 18th Century. The decadence geared up with the quick succession of nine Mughal Emperors one after another within fifty years following the death of Aurangzeb. Mughal governors of Awadh, Bengal and Deccan freed themselves from the control of the central government and the Hindu powers rose. ‘Baji Rao I’s raid of Delhi in 1737 and Nadir Shah’s invasion in 1739 exposed the hollowness of the Mughal Empire and by 1740, the fall of the empire was an accomplished fact’ (Grover, B.L. & Grover, S. 2002: 1).

Satish Chandra (2003) remarks that the reason for the decline of the Mughal Empire might be attributed to the: a) Medieval Indian economy; b) The stagnation of trade, industry and scientific development in the economic arena; c) the lacuna in the finance sector that took the shape of crises (as an outcome of the jagirdari system) which affected all the corners of state activities; d) The disability of the ambitious nobles to realize the circumstantial matters and their eagerness in the attainment of an independent dominion; e) The failure of the Mughals to accommodate the Marathas to adjust their claims within the framework of Mughal Empire; f) The insecurity of the North-Western mountain passes.

3.2.4 THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SCENARIO IN THE 18TH CENTURY: Though political upheavals and instability affected the society and there was failure in the social progress in terms of economy and culture, yet in general it retained the traditional features. The increasing
demands of the state; the oppression of the officials; the greed and rapacity of the nobles, revenue farmers and zamindars; and the depredations of the numerous adventurers roaming the land made the life of the people quite wretched (Chandra, Bipan. 2011: 41).

Even the then India was the land of contrasts. Extreme poverty existed amidst utmost luxury. There was the Emperor at the apex of the social order followed by the nobility who led an extravagant and luxuriant life with weaknesses for wine, women and entertainment. The contrast was upheld by the presence of poor agriculturalists and the artisans in the rural environment living at the bare subsistence level who bore all injustices and inequities. In between these two extremes, the ‘middle class’ occupied the middle position in the social order comprising of the small merchants, shop keepers, lower cadre of employees, town artisans etc.

Inland communications were backward but overseas trade during the Mughal Period was extensive. India imported pearls, raw silk, wool, dates, dried fruits and rose water from Persian Gulf; coffee, gold, drugs and honey from Arabia; tea, sugar, porcelain and silk from China; gold, musk and woollen cloth from Tibet; tin from Singapore; spices, perfumes, arrack and sugar from Indonesian Islands; ivory and drugs from Africa; woollen cloth, metals like copper, iron, lead and paper from Europe. India’s chief item of export was its cotton textiles which were famous worldwide. India also exported raw silk and silk fabrics, hardware, indigo, salt petre, opium, rice, sugar, pepper, and other spices, precious stones and drugs (Ibid: 42). Owing to the political convulsions, constant warfare and disruption in law and order, the internal trade suffered a lot. Many trading centres were looted and many caravans were robbed regularly. Moreover, the autonomous provincial regimes imposed heavy custom duties on goods entering their territories (for their extra income). Political unrest affected the urban industries adversely. Many prosperous cities along with their trading centres were plundered and devastated. For instance, Delhi was plundered by Nadir Shah; Lahore, Delhi and Mathura by Ahmad Shah; Agra by the Jats; Surat and other cities of Gujarat and Deccan by the Marathas; Sarhind by the Sikhs so on and so forth.

Despite the deplorable situation, India remained a land of extensive manufacturer of handicrafts also whereby the artisans enjoyed worldwide fame. Cotton fabrics from Dacca and Bengal; Silk fabrics from Murshidabad (in present Bengal) and Agra; woollen shawls and carpets from Kashmir; jute articles; sugar; metallic works like arms, utensils, vases, shields etc deserve special
mention. Friendly relation between the Hindus and the Muslims was a very healthy feature in the 18th Century India. Even though nobles and chiefs fought with one another incessantly, their fights and alliances were seldom based on religious biasness. Common people shared one another’s joy and sorrow irrespective of religious affiliations. The development of Urdu language and literature provided a new base for religious blending.

Though many historians agree with the restless situation during the aftermath of the Mughal Empire, yet many of them still opine while comparing with that of the British Era that Indian Economy was quite resilient and there was certain continuity in economic life in this pre-British 18th Century India. It somewhat led to the preconditions for a rapid growth of capitalism. The only thing that the country lacked was the technical approach especially in the fields of agriculture and transportation which have resulted in a different standing with that of the occident.

3.2.4.1 PLACE OF WOMEN IN THE SOCIETY IN THE 18TH CENTURY INDIA: Social and cultural life in 18th Century were marked by stagnation and dependence on the past. People got divided by religion, region, tribe, language and caste (Ibid: 45). Caste system played a vital role in the society. The Brahmins were the highest of all Varnas who monopolized all social prestige and privileges. Society was patriarchal (except certain areas of Kerala and Malabar region) in nature. The will of the male head of the family usually prevailed. Inter-caste marriages were forbidden. The menace of untouchability crept into the society. Child marriages were common among boys and girls. Dowry system was prevalent among the upper classes of Bengal and Rajputanas. Polygamy was common to ruling princes, big zamindars and better offs.

Commonly, women were denied her social position. They were expected to live as mothers and wives only. But these two roles were adorned and honoured in general; especially during wars and anarchy, women were seldom molested. Purdah was common to both Hindus and the Muslim women. Women belonging to lower socio-economic strata could not observe purdah, as they went out to earn their living. Women of the upper classes were not allowed to work outside.

Peasant women usually worked in the fields and the women of the poorer classes often worked outside their homes to supplement their family income.

Apart from all these, some of the social evils which affected the women most are as follows:
• Custom of ‘Sati’
• Forced celibacy of the widows
• Slavery and slave trade among women
• Seclusion of women
• Child marriage
• Female infanticide

3.2.4.1.a THE CUSTOM OF ‘SATI’: With regard to ‘Sati’, the most horrible, inhuman, barbarous act (sacrifice one’s life in the funeral pyre of her husband) which became a blind faith during this period had least possibility of eradication. The origin of ‘Sati’ remains in mystery. Probably, it resulted from a misinterpretation of the Vedas. Once it gained social recognition, the priestly class took advantage of it. Perhaps this was the method by which property and inheritance could be denied to the beneficiary (widow) and the family could retain its wealth. It was the hope of attaining the heaven which originally led the widows to experience the supreme ordeal. The family members near and dear ones, society and the leaders also did not objected in the performance of the ‘Sati’ out of similar belief.

It was the Europeans who revolted against this custom. The Danes at Serampore, the Dutches at Chinsurah and the French at Chandernagore did not allowed ‘Sati’ in their jurisdiction. The East India Company at Bombay tried to stop it during 1770-’80. The real opposition campaign against Sati began in the British occupied territories in the last quarter of the 18th Century. The Christian Missionaries along with some English officers raised their voices against it, but the Company’s Government was unprepared to offend the Hindu sentiment by their interference, so it continued.

3.2.4.1.b FORCED CELIBACY OF THE WIDOWS: Widow re-marriage which prevailed in the ancient times was abandoned and came to be regarded as a sin. A widow could either become a ‘Sati’ or had to lead a life full of restrictions and harsh rules which few could defy. Following ‘Manusamhita’, Chopra et al (1974) writes about the strict duties of the widows, which were defined as ‘Let her emaciate her body by living voluntarily on pure flowers, roots and fruits but let her not when her lord is deceased, even pronounce the name of another man; let her continue till death forgiving all injuries, performing harsh duties, avoiding every sensual pleasure and
cheerfully practicing the incomparable rules of virtue which have been followed by such women as were devoted to only one husband’. Thus the life of a widow was colourless, adjusted to the routine of fasting, devotion, prayer and pious works.

So far as the austere celibacy of the widows was not a social evil. But things became real problem with the spread of ‘Kulinism’ leading to child marriages with the consequent increase of child widows. Kulins were those Brahmins who were honoured by the king of Bengal (as early as 11th Century) who possessed excellent qualities of head and heart. Their families became known as ‘Kulin Families’. In due course of time, the descendants of these Kulin Families had nothing to do with the past virtues of Kulinism yet occupied superior position in the social ladder. So, to achieve Kulinism, inferior Brahmins had temptation of giving their daughters to them along with a handsome dowry amount. Thus, the Kulin groom fell into material lust and married a host of brides. As Chopra et al (1974: 86) writes “By the 18th Century, such an observed system of polygamy assumed monstrous proportions. On a single day a Kulin could marry two, three or four wives. In his life time he could marry dozens of wives, even a hundred….there was no upper limit for Kulin; he could be of any age. Similarly, the brides of the same man could be as tender in age as possible.” Little girls did not even know about their husbands during marriages, became widows on death of those unknown or even unseen persons. For them the laws of widowhood constituted a code of tyranny. Although, virgin widows were allowed to re-marry earlier, but with the passage of time, this practice was abandoned. Old widows commanded some kind of respect in the Hindu joint family. But the younger widows received ill treatment. They were thought to be in auspicious. Bengal and Bombay Presidency showed most unbearable conditions of the widows.

3.2.4.1.c SLAVERY AND SLAVE TRADE AMONG WOMEN: Another social evil which had its prevalence during this period was ‘Slavery’. Slaves were of two categories – the domestic and bonded labours (those who were tied to the lands). The latter could be sold along with the sale of the land from one owner to another. It was due to utmost poverty, natural calamities, economic distress, famines etc. people sold their children in lieu of money. But these slaves remained in a better position than their counterparts in Europe and America. Slaves were treated as hereditary servants. They were allowed to marry among themselves but their children were considered as free citizens. The Rajput Kayasthas and Khatris usually kept female domestic slaves.
Grover and Grover (2002: 27) opine that slavery and slave trade got a new dimension with the entry of the Europeans in India, particularly the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English. The prices of slaves varied with age. Adult slaves were high priced (@ Rs. 15 - Rs. 20), Rs. 12 – Rs. 20 for a boy of 16 years, Rs. 5 – Rs. 10 for a girl of 10 years. Slaves were purchased from Bengal, Assam and Bihar and were sent to European and American markets for sale. Trafficking of slaves got abolished by a proclamation issued on 1789.

3.2.4.1.d SECLUSION OF WOMEN: The position of women during 18th Century was far from being satisfactory. Total seclusion resulted in their physical and mental degeneration. Purdah system was common to both the Hindus and the Muslim women. The freedom and status which the Indian women enjoyed in ancient times were beyond the range of imagination (Chopra, Puri and Das, 1974: 82).

Apart from the Rajputana elites, girls were not allowed to go to the educational institutions. Generally, in the richer Rajputana families girls received some kind of elementary education. Among the Vaishnavas of Bengal, girls were imparted some education so that they could read religious texts. Women belonging to lower socio-economic strata could not maintain seclusion since they had to go out to earn. Women in towns and cities were more confined to their homes. Complete dependence upon men was encouraged in order to have the control over paternal property. So, in congruence goes the famous saying – ‘protection of women by their father in the childhood; by their husbands in their youth and by their sons at the old age’ – dwelled in the minds of people through centuries. The system of denial of rights and property to women made them economically weak and dependent on men. Thus, their low economic status in the society remained responsible for their misery and suffering.

3.2.4.1.e CHILD MARRIAGE: In ancient India, girls used to select their husbands and exercise their discretion. Child marriages were not the general rule. But as the society started following ‘Manusamhita’, wherein the prescribed age of marriage for girls was 8 -12 years, the child marriages became an established custom. Parents felt assured and comfortable with the custom of early marriage so far the moral purity of the society was maintained. Moreover, the grand parents or even great grandparents remained keen to see the marriage of the younger ones, also acted as a strong factor in favour of child marriages.
Emperor Akbar disliked the custom and tried to abolish it but was not successful as it got deep rooted. As a result of the custom, the growth of the population and physical degeneration of women proceeded simultaneously. As Chopra et al (1974: 85) writes, ‘Motherhood at the tender age, with numerous sickly children around her, made the Indian woman the epitome of misery and distress…..there was no concept of a proper match as is understood in modern times. The difference of age between the bride and the groom was of no account’.

Child marriages also remained responsible for generation of another social evil i.e. a large number of child widows in the society. These widows received scant attention and had to abide by harsh rules of forced celibacy. Some of them could escape the misery by becoming ‘Sati’ or self immolation while majority had to toil their miserable life.

3.2.4.1.f FEMALE INFANTICIDE: Killing of girl child at their birth was not a common custom but the most worst aspect was that it was practiced secretly. It prevailed among the wealthier section of the society in certain areas of India. It was common to the Royal family of Benares; the Jadejas of Kathiawar and Kutchchh; Kuchwah Rajputs who resided near Allahabad; the Chauhan Rajputs and the Pathak Ahirs of Mainpuri. The Bedis of Jalandhar were so accustomed to it that anybody who kept daughter was excommunicated (Chopra et al, 1974: 83-84).The chief reason behind female infanticide was primarily economic. Parents killed their girl child as it was imperative to spend large amount of money for the marriage of a daughter. To some it was of great disgrace to have a female child in the family. The menace of dowry/bride price was also a driving force for crime. To some, it became a method to maintain the racial purity also.

The methods of killing the female infants were extremely barbaric and brutal. Sometimes the child was killed immediately after birth by filling her mouth with cowdung or by immersing the head in cow’s milk or even by coiling the umbilical chord around her neck. Several other methods like administration of a pill of opium or a juice made from poisonous plant extract or by causing a naval injury were employed.

3.2.4.2 THE SCENARIO OF EDUCATION IN INDIA DURING 18TH CENTURY:

Education was not completely neglected in the 18th Century India, but it was on the whole defective (Chandra, Bipan. 2011: 44). It was vocational and based on Varna system. Education revolved round the ideology of culture not literacy and remained far away from the rapid
development of the occident. Knowledge was confined to Literature, Law, Religion, Philosophy and Logic. There were no scope to study the Physical and Natural Sciences, Technology and Geography. Ancient learning was encouraged. Among the Hindus, higher education was based on Sanskrit learning which was imparted through ‘tols’ in Bengal, Kasi and Benares area. Persian education was popularized since it was the official language. Elementary learning was imparted through town or village schools known as ‘Pathsalas’. Among the Muslims, the ‘Maktabs’ were situated in mosques. The school level learning included three fold training of reading, writing and arithmetic. Even Warren Hastings appreciated the educational scenario in general; he remarked in 1813 that ‘Indians had in general superior endowments in reading, writing and arithmetic than the common people of any nation in Europe’. Thus education though inadequate by the modern standards yet sufficed the way of the then social living. But the darker side of this was that the girls were given scant attention regarding education. Only those of the higher classes were rarely given education.

Vernacular languages like Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Assamese, Punjabi, Marathi, Telugu and Tamil greatly flourished. The Christian Missionaries set up the printing press in India and brought vernacular editions of the Bible in the 18th Century.

3.2.5 PENETRATION OF THE EUROPEANS TO INDIA AND THE BRITISH CONQUEST: As the old overseas trade routes between Orient and Occident came under Turkish control after the Ottoman conquest of Asia Minor and the capture of Constantinople in 1453, the merchants of Venice and Genoa monopolized the trade between Europe and Asia and refused to let new nation states of Western Europe (particularly Spain and Portugal) to have any trade share through these routes. Therefore, in order to bypass the Turkish hostility, they wanted to open new trade relations with the east. The new advances of the ship building and the science of navigation generated the spirit of adventure and it was followed by an era of geographical discoveries. In 1492 Columbus (of Spain) reached America and in 1498 Vasco da Gama (of Portugal) discovered new route to India. This led the doors open for the western traders who carried on with the trade for the next two centuries. The Portuguese occupied Goa and established trade centres at Cochin, Daman and Diu in India. They established their dominion over the entire Asian coast from Hormuz in Persian Gulf to Malacca in Malaysia and Indonesia. The Portuguese control over the seas in India survived for a century because their establishment was outside the dominion of the Mughal Empire and hence was out of Mughal influence.
During the latter half of 16th Century, England, Holland and France waged fierce struggle against Portuguese and Spanish monopoly of the world trade. The English and the Dutch managed to use the ‘Cape of Good Hope’ route to India. The Dutch paid much attention to spice producing lands of Indonesia (Java, Sumatra etc.) while the British were interested in India, Sri Lanka and Malaya. The English merchants were swayed by the lucrative trade in spices, silk, gold, pearls, drugs, porcelain and ebony and wanted to participate in the trade. Thus, this led to the formation of the East India Company by Queen Elizabeth on 31st December 1600. In 1608, Captain Hawkins was sent to Jahangir’s court to obtain royal favours in establishing a trading depot at Surat. The Company was granted permission to open factories at several places on the West Coast. The English were not satisfied with the concession and Sir Thomas Roe reached the Mughal court (1615) and succeeded to get an ‘Imperial Farmaan’ to trade and establish factories in all parts of the Mughal Empire. By 1623, the East India Company had established factories and trading posts at Surat, Broach, Ahmadabad, Agra and Masulipattam. From the very beginning, it tried to combine trade and diplomacy with war and control over the territory where their factories were situated. Hostilities between the English and the Mughal Emperor broke out in 1686 as the English sacked Hugli (Bengal) and declared war against the latter. The English misjudged the Mughal strength and got disastrously defeated. Once again they appealed for trade concessions and expressed their willingness to trade under the protection of the Indian rulers. Aurangzeb permitted them to resume trade on payment of 150,000 rupees as compensation. In 1698, the East India Company acquired the zamindari of the three villages of Sutanuti, Gobindapur and Kolkata; Fort William was built and the three villages grew up into a city which came to be known as Calcutta. In 1717, the privileges in favour of the Company were extended to Deccan and Gujarat by the Mughal Emperor Farukh Shiyyar. In Bengal, the Company was neither allowed to rule Calcutta independently nor were they granted to strengthen fortifications at the city. Here, the East India Company remained a mere zamindar. Meanwhile, the trade excelled beyond their imagination. Entrepreneurs, merchants and bankers were attracted to the cities of Madras, Bombay and Calcutta. The population over these places also grew rapidly.

The decay of the central authority (after the downfall of the Mughals) was revealed by the invasion of Nadir Shah. But the powerful Marathas did not let foreign penetration to the western India. In Bengal, the strict rule of Alivardi Khan restricted the foreigners either. Only it was in the Southern India situations were becoming favourable. After the Dutch and the Portuguese
were eliminated, the contest regarding trade became polarized between the French and the British. Though there was initial success under Dupleix, the French Governor General at Pondicherry, but later on the British excelled and took over the former. During their struggle with the French and their Indian allies, the British learnt a few lessons:

- Owing to the absence of nationalism in the country, the internal quarrels among the native rulers could make them advantageous to materialize their political schemes.
- The western trained infantry could easily defeat the Indian army who lacked the skill of handling modern artillery.
- Since the Indians lacked nationalism, their men could be employed or hired by any one paying well.

With this experience, the Britishers set out to create a powerful army consisting of Indian Sepoys (soldiers) officered by Englishmen. With this army and the vast resources of Indian trade and territories under command, the East India Company embarked on an era of wars and territorial expansion.

### 3.2.6 THE ERA OF SOCIAL AWAKENING AND SPREAD OF MODERN EDUCATION:

For the first sixty years of the British Era, the chief aim of the East India Company was to excel in trade and to pocket off the profit. They took little interest in administration. Thus, their efforts were also very meager for bringing reformation to the Indian society.

The British were more successful in introducing modern education aided by the Christian Missionaries and a large number of enlightened Indians. Modern schools, colleges and hospitals were opened in the country. Warren Hastings set up Calcutta Madrassa in 1781 for the study and teaching of Muslim Law and related subjects. In 1791, Jonathan Duncan started a Sanskrit College at Varanasi to study the Hindu Law and Philosophy. Both of these institutions were designed to provide a regular supply of qualified Indians to help in the administration in the Company’s Rule (because cheap supplies of clerks to the Company helped in the expansion of the markets for the British manufacturers in India). The Missionaries believed that modern education would destroy the faith of the people in their own religions and would lead them to adopt Christianity. The British wanted to use modern education to strengthen the foundation of
their political authority in the country. On the contrary, the enlightened Indians believed that modern education would be the best remedy for social, economic and political ills of the prevalent Indian society. In 1835, the government of India made English as the medium of instruction in schools and colleges particularly in Bengal (following the ‘Macaulay’s Minute’). A few schools and colleges were opened thereby. Wood’s Dispatch of 1854 was another important step in the development of education in India. The Dispatch directed into the establishment of the departments of Education in all provinces and affiliating Universities were set up in 1857 at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras.

The Indian traditional system of education gradually withered away for lack of official support and a particular official announcement (in 1844) which defined the eligibility criteria for government employment that the applicants should possess the knowledge of English. The then literacy level was hardly better. Moreover, the emphasis on English language as medium of instruction in place of Indian Languages also prevented the spread of education to the masses. Furthermore, the students had to pay fees in the schools and colleges, so education was costly and became a virtual monopoly of the richer classes and city dwellers. Apart from this the total neglect of women’s education was the lacuna in early education policy. The Government probably did not wanted to hurt the orthodoxies of the Indians regarding female education and also because of the fact that they could not be employed as clerks in the Government jobs; they took least interest in educating the girls.

3.2.6.1 THE BENGAL SCENARIO: In 1928 Raja Rammohan Roy founded a new religious society, the ‘Brahma Sabha’, later came to be known as the ‘Brahma Samaj’, whose purpose was to purify Hinduism and preach Monotheism (i.e. belief in one God). The Brahma Samaj laid emphasis on human dignity, opposed idolatry and criticized the practice of Sati. The principles of Brahma Samaj were based on ‘reason’, the Vedas and the Upanishads. Rammohan Roy also condemned the subjugation of women and opposed the prevalent idea that women were inferior to men. He also rebelled against polygamy and the miserable life of the widows. To raise the status of women he demanded that they be given the right of inheritance and property. It was only after Rammohan Roy and other enlightened Indians and Missionaries who agitated against the pathetic and monstrous custom of ‘Sati’. William Bentinck deserves praise for outlawing ‘Sati’ in 1829. Regulations prohibiting infanticide had been passed in 1795 and in 1802 but they
were sternly enforced only by Bentinck and Hardinge. In the field of education Rammohan was helped by David Hare, Alexander Duff, Dwarkanath Tagore and many more.

A radical trend arose among the Bengali intellectuals during the late 1820s – 1830s. Its leader and inspirer was an Anglo-Indian fellow named Henry Vivian Derozio, who taught at the Hindu College from 1826 – 1831. Though he was young, yet he attached to himself a host of bright adoring students. He inspired the students to think rationally and freely; praise the quality of truth, liberty and freedom. His followers were known as the Derozians and Young Bengal. The Young Bengal was passionate advocates of women’s rights and demanded education in favour of them. The Brahma Samaj included the followers of Rammohan and Derozio and other independent thinkers like Debendranath Tagore, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Akshay Kumar Dutta. The Brahma Samaj actively supported the movement for widow remarriage, abolition of polygamy, women’s education, improvement of the ryot’s (peasants) condition and so on.

Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the great scholar and reformer dedicated his entire life to the cause of social reform. He was a great humanist who possessed sympathy for the poor, unfortunate and oppressed. He evolved a new methodology of teaching Sanskrit. He wrote a Bengali Primer which is followed till date. As a principal, he opened the gates of the Sanskrit College to the non-Brahmin students. He introduced western thought in Sanskrit to make it modern and contemporary. He contributed a lot to uplift women in the social arena. He waged a long struggle in favour of widow re-marriage as he was moved by the sufferings of the Hindu widows. In 1856 the government of India passed the Widow Re-marriage Act enabling Hindu widows to re-marry. As Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and other reformers carried a prolonged agitation in favour of this measure, under his supervision, the first widow remarriage took place in Calcutta on 7th December 1856, after the enactment of the Widow Re-marriage Act. Vidyasagar also protested against child marriage and polygamy. He was in favour of women’s education. As a secretary to the Bethune School, he was one of the pioneers of higher education for women.

3.2.6.2 THE REFORM MOVEMENT IN THE WESTERN INDIA: Bal Shastri Jambekar was one of the first reformers in Bombay who attacked the bramhanical orthodoxy and tried to reform Hinduism. The ‘Paramhansa Mandali’ founded in 1849 believed in Monotheism and was opposed to the caste system. They were in favour of widow re-marriage and women’s education.
In this regard, Jotiba Phule, Vishnu Shastri Pundit, Jagannath Sarkar Seth, Bhau Daji and Karsondas Mulji deserve special mention. Dadabhai Naoroji was another leading social reformer Bombay. His association with the reformist activities related to the Zoroastrian religion and Parsi Law Association was significant. He raised voice for women’s status and for uniform laws of inheritance and marriage for the Parsis.

The significance of the 19th Century reformers lay not in their numbers but in the fact that they were the trendsetters with a vision of making a new India.

3.2.7 THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE 19TH CENTURY INDIA: So far as the status of women in India was concerned James Mill observed that the degraded condition of Indian women was taken as an indicator of India’s inferior status in the hierarchy of Indian civilizations (Bandyopadhyay, S. 2015: 381). Thus the degraded condition of the women in Indian society became the major focus for social progress and modernity. The movement for female education was started by three groups of people (according to Geraldine Forbes): the British rulers, Indian male reformers and the educated Indian women (Ibid: 383). The initiative was taken in Calcutta by men like Radhakanta Deb and the School Book Society, later on by Keshab Chandra Sen and Brahma Samaj; in Western India by Mahadev Govind Ranade and Prarthana Samaj; in the North by Swami Dayanand Saraswati and Arya Samaj and in Madras by Annie Besant and the Theosophical Society.

Meanwhile the first spark of the National Movement was kindled by the ‘Sepoy Mutiny’ in 1857. As a response to that Rani Laxmi Bai, the queen of Jhansi rebelled against the ‘Doctrine of Lapse’. Another resentful step was put forward by Begum Hazrat Mahal, the queen of Awadh and the first wife of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. She took the charge of Awadh, seized Lucknow and rebelled against the East India Company. Later she retreated to Nepal. The Begums of Bhopal were notable female rulers of this period who did not use Purdah and were trained in martial arts. Chandramukhi Basu, Kadambini Ganguly, Anandi Gopal Joshi, Pandita Ramabai, Sister Subbalaksmi, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain were most prominent women of this period.

3.2.8 WOMEN IN THE 20TH CENTURY INDIA IN THE BACKDROP OF NATIONALIST MOVEMENT: By the turn of the century, a number of middle class women became educated though their existence in the social milieu did not improve. As Sekhar Bandyopadyay (2015: 384-385) writes ‘The colonial government wanted female education as it
wanted the Indian civil servants to be married to educated wives, so that they did not have to face
the psychological trauma of split household. Also English educated mothers were expected to
breed royal subjects…..this new concept of womanhood was a fine blending of self sacrificing
Hindu wife and the Victorian helpmate. Education thus far from being emancipatory, further
confined women to idealized domestic roles as good wives and better mothers…..the colonial
state too wanted to confine women to domesticity.’ In the lower-middle class ‘Sanskritization’
did have an adverse effect. Purity of women became an index of caste status. Purity was attained
through seclusion of women, forced celibacy and ascetic widowhood especially evidenced in
Bengal and Maharashtra. In the cultural sphere, women were marginalized and they gradually
lost their autonomy. In the early 20th Century, the migration trail had a rural to urban trend.
Males migrated to the cities in search of industrial employment. Their families remained at
home. When the rural resources failed to support them, the females migrated. In utmost poverty
they took up jobs at the cotton and jute mills, in tea plantations and even in coal mines. In the
service sector also their domestic role had been figured as most vital – their work was considered
as ‘supplementary’ to the family income and less important. This had a reflection in the wage
rate – eventually women were paid less than their counterparts. Vehement protests against the
deprivation of rights and inequality yielded no result. Motherhood and domesticity were valued
more than their economic autonomy.

In 1875 Bankim Chandra Chatterjee wrote the song ‘Bande Mataram’ which was later on
incorporated in his novel ‘Anandamath’ (1882) which invoked the feeling of ‘Motherland’
among the nationalist devotees. Later on the potentiality in this phrase was perceived and was
used by the leaders including Jawaharlal Nehru to signify the country and the nation.
Abanindranath’s painting of the ‘Bharat Mata’ (1904-'05) symbolized the cultural essence of
Indian spiritualism. The Mother Goddess has been figured as more serene and gentle, offering
prosperity and protection.

The Swadeshi Movement gradually involved women in its purview. The boycott of foreign made
articles and goods for example nylon sarees, clothes, glass bangles etc and observation of non-
cooking days as a ritual of protest revealed the hidden power of the women in this arena.
Reference of Smt. Basanti Devi, wife of Chittaranjan Das would be very appropriate regarding
this issue. As she went along the streets of Calcutta convening people to participate in the
‘foreign goods boycott’ movement, thousands of people responded to her call. After World War
I, two ladies made prominent appearance in Indian politics. Annie Besant who was the president of the Theosophical Society and the founder of the Home Rule League was elected as the President of the Congress in 1917. Sarojini Naidu, the England educated poet in the same year led a delegation to London to meet secretary of state Montagu, to demand female franchise. In 1925, she was too elected as the President of the National Congress. M.K. Gandhi realized women’s power of self less sacrifice and tried to harness it in the service of the nation. When non-cooperation movement started in 1921, Gandhiji prescribed a limited role to the women, but they claimed for a better active role. In December 1921, Basanti Devi, Urmila Devi and Sunity Devi participated in open demonstration on the streets of Calcutta and were arrested there upon. Till then the ladies from respectable middle-class families got themselves associated with the national movement. Now, Gandhiji tried to entail the marginalized down trodden Devadasis and prostitutes in the freedom struggle. During his Dandi March, it was noticed that his meetings were attended by thousands of women. Particularly in Allahabad, Lucknow, Delhi and Lahore hundreds of women got involved in the nationalist demonstrations. Women movement was most organized in Bombay, most militant in Bengal and limited in Madras. Among the women, some of the prominent figures were Bhikhaji Cama, Pritilata Waddedar and Kalpana Dutta under Surya Sen; Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kriplani, Kasturba Gandhi, Capt. Latika Ghosh, Lakshmi Sahgal, the entire regiment of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose deserve special mention. Women’s active participation in the nationalist movement (i.e. in public space) became accepted by 1930s and 1940s. Women successfully earned a change in the mindset and attitude of the people as they were now being accepted socially without any stigma even after they were released from imprisonment during the course of freedom struggle. Bandyopadhyay (2015) has rightly explained that ‘Men felt confident that their women would be safe in Gandhi’s hands….women participated because their male guardians wanted them to. In most cases women came from families where men were already involved in Gandhian movement. So, in their case, their public role was an extension of their domestic roles as wives, mothers, sisters or daughters…. ’. He further has observed that though the nationalist movement has touched the entire nation in all the spheres but women’s participation remained largely as urban phenomenon. Many women organizations starting from educational institutions, local organizations to a number of political bodies for example Des Sevika Sangha, Rastriya Stree Sangha etc came up. In 1917, Women’s Indian Association
(Madras) was initiated by enlightened English ladies. In 1925 National Council of Women in India was formed as a branch of the International Council of Women. In 1927, All India Women’s Conference took place as a non-political body addressing women education. In Bengal, the Bangiya Nari Samaj raised voice in favour of women franchise, Bengal Women’s Education League demanded compulsory elementary and secondary education against illicit trafficking of women (Bandyopadyay, 2015: 393). By the turn of the 1940s, the nature and role of Indian women in the nationalist movement shifted from the mythic ‘Sita’ as portrayed by Gandhiji to the more heroic ‘Rani of Jhansi’ fighting as comrade-in-arms with male soldiers.

Among the Muslims, women too participated in the ongoing trend. Feminist Urdu literature contested traditional boundaries. The Muslim women also got a new political space and claimed for their rights like female suffrage. As the Pakistan movement gained momentum in 1940s, more and more Muslim women were sucked into it as election candidates. To many of them it was a liberating experience. Though it did not emancipate the women, nevertheless, it brought an acceptance of a public role for women in the Muslim society.

During the partition, worst moment for the sub-continental womanhood was brought in. Women both Hindus and Muslims entered into the ‘continuum of violence’, where they could either be conquered or destroyed. They were ruthlessly raped, mutilated and humiliated by men of ‘Other’ community. To prevent the honour of their community, the stigmatized women either committed suicide instigated by their own family members or lived with a permanent memory of shame which they endured in silence.

Thus, it seems that women’s question in colonial India hardly received any priority that it deserved. Although a handful were able to attain education, got into the freedom struggle and were successful to attain a position in the public arena, yet emancipation in the true sense of the term was not reached. Nevertheless, towards the end of the Colonial Period many women got into higher professions like Medicine, Law, Education etc earning lucrative salaries and enjoying social respect. They oscillated between their public and private lives (chiefly oriented towards the household chores and child care). For the rest of the Indian womanhood, changes were even less perceptible and voices less audible.

3.2.9 THE WOMEN OF THE ROYAL FAMILY OF KOCH BIHAR (STUDY AREA): Far away from the rest of Bengal, Koch Bihar holds a unique and a diversified culture which owes its
origin to the long historical antecedence. Many scholars opine that Bengali Literature received royal patronage especially from the Narayani Dynasty which ruled ‘Koch Bihar’ for about 450 years (approx). The royal support had helped in the development of a strong literary culture with its own identity.

The rule at Koch Bihar did not remain interference free. Too much of Bhutiya and Mughal interference had been evidenced. The Bhutiya interference reached its height during the rule of Maharaja Dhairyendranarayan as he was made captive and sent to Punakha via Buxa (mentioned in Chapter II). After some years, the young king Dharendranarayan (son of Dhairyendranarayan) and the Nazir Khagendranarayan met Charles Purling (the then collector of Rangpore) and sought help for the recovery of the fort at Koch Bihar and the release of Dhairyendranarayan. A pact was signed between Dharendranarayan and the East India Company in April 5, 1773 for this purpose. This treaty was a stepping stone towards the English influence in Koch Bihar. This had opened the door of British interference to administration and modern education for the youngsters of the royal family. Although the British influence had ushered in the process of ‘Westernization’ yet this cannot be designated to bring total goodness to the royal household.

The wave of Social Revivalism during the 19th Century swayed Koch Bihar. As a result, women in Koch Bihar like the rest of the country started coming out of their confinement. In this connection mention must be made of the Queens and the Princesses who have contributed both in the field of Education as well as Administration. The womenfolk were good administrators; out of interest and sometimes out of compulsion, since many of the kings were minor. The queens were the real guardians to the minor kings looking after their education as well as the state affairs. Mention may be made of Bhanumati who kept her prominence by becoming the political advisor to king Nararayana. Other women proficient in administrative works and politics were Kameshwari Devi and Gayatri Devi.

Their activities have mostly remained behind the ‘purdah’ which might be the manifestation of patriarchy. Though the age old traditional ‘purdah’ system was in practice yet there was a wonder world behind it where the ladies lived. Many restrictions were imposed on women and they required abiding by them in order to maintain their stature.

After mid 19th Century, the social progress and development touched their world. They started to denounce their confinement of the concrete walls of the Palace. Education became important for
all irrespective of gender. The royal family was fortunate enough to become enlightened with the power of education as the youngsters were given equal opportunity to pursue education outside Koch Bihar especially at Shantiniketan (for the girls) or even outside India (popularly in London and occasionally at Paris). The ladies now became efficient enough to write biographies and auto biographies portraying the innate picture of their family as well as the then social scenario at large. Brindeshwari Devi deserves special mention since her ‘Beharodanta’ laid the path. Sunity Devi, Nirupama Devi and Gayatri Devi were the luminaries representing the perfect combination of education, chaste and royal dignity.

Initially it could be seen that the marriages were usually fixed by the mother figures of the royal house hold but gradually there came up instances (of Indira Devi and that of Gayatri Devi) which reveals that decision making ability with regard to marriages were slowly creeping into the royal courtyard. Gayatri Devi writes in her autobiography about the free environment within the Palace where the princesses could learn outdoor sports like polo, horse riding, elephant riding apart from the training of home management. Occasionally, they even went out for hunting. The ladies often visited foreign countries too. They also travelled all over India.

The internal scenario of the royal palace of Koch Bihar may be parted into two phases: (1) upto Brindeshwari Devi (i.e. till 1876) and (2) After Brindeshwari Devi till the termination of the Narayani dynasty and the merger of the state of Koch Bihar with the Dominion Government of India (The Cooch Behar Merger Agreement dated 28th August 1949 by Maharaja Jagaddipendranarayan).

### 3.2.9.1 THE ROYAL HOUSEHOLD UPTO THE TIME OF BRINDESHWARI DEVI (1876):

**HIRA DEVI & JIRA DEVI:** Hira Devi and Jira Devi were married to Haridas Mondal, who resided at Chikangram (Goalpara district of present Assam). Thus polygamy was in practice in the then society. Both the sisters gave birth to two sons each. Jira gave birth to Chandan and Madan while Hira became the mother of Bishu and Sishu. Hira was a pious lady and worshipped Lord Shiva. A popular belief also says that ‘Bishu’ was born out of Lord Shiva’s grace. Bishu became known as ‘Biswaingha’ and was proclaimed king after Chandan’s rule. Though Chandan was the king prior to Biswasingha, yet he has been regarded as the founder king of the
Narayani Dynasty, Biswasingha did married to many women from kingdom far and near like Nepal, Kamrup, Kashmir, Kashi, Shanitpur, Mithila etc.

**Bhanumati:** He had three sons of whom Naranarayan got married to Bhanumati of Pandu near Gauhati in Assam. Bhanumati was very beautiful and intelligent at the same time. Narasingha, the eldest son of Maharaja Biswasingha was about to ascend the throne after his father’s death, but Bhanumati reminded him about the promise that Narasingha had made during her marriage. Narasingha thus abdicated the throne and Naranarayan became the king with Bhanumati the queen consort. Bhanumati took interest in administration and warfare. Even she acted as the political advisor to the king Naranarayan. Her assistance to the king resulted in the expansion of a very large empire which extended till the Chittagong sea board on one hand and up to Gauda on the other. She was a caring mother too. She gave special attention in the matters related to the education of her sons.

After Naranarayan’s death Lakshminarayan ascended the throne. He had 18 sons, therefore this indicate that he also had many wives.

After Lakshminarayan, Birnarayan became the king. Then Prannarayan, Modnarayan, Vasudevanarayan, Mahindranarayan, Rupnarayan, Upendranarayan, Devendranarayan ascended the throne successively. The detail of their family life especially about the queens has remained obscured.

**Kamteshwari Devi:** Kamteshwari Devi the wife of Dhairyendranarayan deserves special mention since she was known to have looked after the administrative matters as Dhairyendranarayan was a weak ruler. She was helped by Sarvananda Goswami. When Harendranarayan, the son of Dhairyendranarayan was made the king at a tender age, she produced documents of being the guardian to the minor king. She faced many problems regarding administration as Dhairyendranarayan was regarded as the ‘mad king’ but she was able to bring composedness and stability. The pact signed between the young king Dharendranarayan and the East India Company in April 5, 1773 (mentioned above) for their support to drive out the Bhutiya interference as well as the release of Dhairyendranarayan, was completed by Kamteshwari Devi’s suggestions. After Dharendranarayan’s death, Dhairyendranarayan was placed on the throne for the second time, but he was least interested in administrative matters. So, Kamteshwari Devi had to look into state affairs. When Dhairyendranarayan died, and his son
Harendranarayan was made the king at about 3 years of age, she took the responsibility of the child king’s education and administration simultaneously. She opposed Nazir Khagendranarayan in different matters as a result she and the boy king Harendranarayan were made captive and were imprisoned. During the imprisonment Harendranarayan caught hold of Chicken pox and with the help of Britishers they were freed. Kamteshwari Devi continued the administrative activities till Harendranarayan attained adulthood.

**KAMESHWARI DEVI AND BRINDESWARI DEVI:** Maharaja Harendranarayan was succeeded by Sivendranarayan. Among his queens, Kameshwari Devi and Brindeshwari Devi had remained worth mentioning. Brindeshwari Devi was moderately structured dark complexioned lady while Kameshwari Devi was more beautiful. Both of them got married to the king on the same date. Kameshwari Devi was known as ‘Dangar Aye’ and Brindeshwari Devi was called ‘Bara Aye’ in the palace. Both the queen enjoyed very good relation with each other. Both of them played significant role during the childhood period of Narendranarayan as custodians and also as administrators after the death of Maharaja Sivendranarayan.

Brindeshwari Devi was fond of reading of the two great Indian Epics – the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*; besides this, she used to read the *Puranas* and the ancient scriptures. The literary works at the then Koch Bihar was translational in character and this provided a congenial environment to Brindeshwari Devi to practice literary culture. She wrote ‘*Beharodanta’* in poetic verses which may be treated as an autobiography and also a historical account as well. She gave a vivid description of the royal family, the rites and rituals, marriages, use of ornaments, health condition of the Maharaja, condition of the state, Maharaja’s death and funeral rites, the ascent of Narendranarayan to the throne, education and administration. She also referred to her immense grief after her husband’s death and also portrayed her loneliness as her adoptive son went to Krishnanagar for education.

Kameshwari Devi took interest in administration on the other hand. Since Narendranarayan was a minor king, she used to look after all the state affairs. She recommended Nistarini Devi as the bride and later on the queen consort to Narendranarayan. In those days, the elderly women in the royal family used to search brides at their own choice for the growing princes; they were brought to the palace at early age and were trained in the royal culture so that they attain eligibility of becoming the queen in the future. Among the girls, the Maharaja used to get married to the most
eligible one (by following the rituals in detail) who was regarded as the queen consort; the rest of
the eligible girls would exchange the garlands (*Gandharva* form of Marriage) with the Maharaja
and would remain as queen of a lower status than the queen consort.

3.2.9.2 SUNITY DEVI AND THE BEGINNING OF THE MODERN ERA:  After
Narendranarayan’s death, his son Nripendranarayan was placed on the throne as the king at a
very tender age. After the attainment of adulthood he was formally installed to the throne in
1883. He got married to Sunity Devi, the daughter of Keshab Ch. Sen, the renown social
reformer and the founder of the Brahma Samaj. Sunity Devi was a learned person and well
versed in English, Bengali and Sanskrit at the same time. She also learnt ethics, religious
scriptures and developed the skill of judgment. She was married to Nripendranarayan when she
was only 13 years of age, but soon after the marriage the king went abroad for higher education
while she returned to her parents for the time being. Since 1880 the couple started to stay in the
Koch Bihar Palace. Nripendranaryan’s reign can be earmarked to have entered into the modern
period. Sunity Devi remained responsible for the developmental activities carried on in Koch
Bihar. Some of them included: the establishment of the railways, improvement of the road links,
spread of education in general and female education in particular, provision for drinking water,
renovation works of old temples and buildings, development of the town area, facilities for
higher education etc. Sunity Devi also remained connected with the eminent personalities of the
then Bengal which contributed to the cultural environment of the Palace as well as that of the
state. Among the luminaries, mention may be made of Rabindranath Tagore, Devendranath
Tagore, Swarnakumari devi, Haraprasad Shashtri, Asit Halder, Acharya Brojendra Nath Seal,
Gurusaday Dutta, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Suadamini Dhar, Lilabati Mitra, Sarat Kumari Devi,
Bipin Ch. Paul, Syed Amir Ali, Upendra Kishore Ray Chaudhuri and so on. ‘Bharat Mahila
Samaj’ was established which took interest in the development of the women folk. Sunity Devi
was very humble and a pious lady. At the same time, she held modern view to life. She had to
accept many customs prevalent in the palace (like the *purdah*), but she was able to introduce
modern way of life. She stopped the ‘Rudali’ custom in the palace. She also accompanied the
king to the foreign tours. Sunity Devi was an eminent person of Literature also. She wrote many
plays and acts based on the stories of the great epics. Rati Babu’s School was renamed as ‘Sunity
College’ after she became the patron of the institution in 1890. This was again named as ‘Sunity
Academy’ in August 22, 1916. She wrote 9 Bengali books some of them are: ‘Amrita
etc. Among the English writings, the important works are- ‘The Rajput Princess’, ‘Nine Ideal Women’, ‘Bengal Dacoits and Tigers’, ‘Autobiography of an Indian Princess’, ‘Prayers’ etc. In her autobiography, she presented her life story to the readers. She also mentioned about her personal life, marriage, life in Koch Bihar Palace vividly.

**NIRUPAMA DEVI:** Nirupama Devi was a gem in the world of Literature and contributed with most prominence. She was married to the third son of Sunity Devi – Kumar Victor Nityendranarayan at 16 years of age. She wrote her first poetry at 11 years. Many of her verses were based on patriotic theme and her matured expressions reflected her competence. She also got engaged in the developmental activities for the people of Koch Bihar. The Koch Bihar Sahitya Sabha was established in 1895 to boost up literary activities in Bengali. Victor Nityendranarayan became the president of Sahitya Sabha and it was decided that the organization would start the re-publication of the magazine named 'Paricharika' which used to get published in Keshab Ch. Sen’s Nababidhan Sabha. Nirupama Devi was given the responsibility of the editorial work. It was all because of Nirupama Devi, the society at large got to know about ‘Koch Bihar’ which had remained as a pocket area so far. Through ‘Paricharika’ the literary activities pertaining to Koch Bihar got spread to the rest of Bengal as well as to the whole world. The contributors to ‘Paricharika’ included Tagore, Akshay Kumar Maitra, Kabi Sekhar Kalidas Ray, Sabitriprasanna Chattopadhyay, Sarat Ch. Chattopadhyay, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Kumud Ranjan Mallik, Krishna Bihari Gupta, Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Roy, Banda Ali Miah, Banaphul, Krishna Dayal Basu, Mahim Ch. Thakur, Ramananda Chattopadhyay, Pramatha Chowdhury, Annadasankar Ray so on and so forth. Among the women authors Priyangbada Devi, Hemnalini Devi, Prasannamayee Devi, Shailabala Ghosh, Indira Devi Chaudhurani, Mrinalini Devi, Niharbala Devi, Mohini Sengupta, Prafullamayee Devi, Amiyabala Devi deserve special mention. This magazine became regularly published for the next eight years till Nirupama Devi got divorced in 1925 and she started living at Shantiniketan.

**INDIRA DEVI:** Indira Devi was the princess of Gaekwar. She fell in love with Maharaja Jitendranarayan and got married to him in 1913 in London. Her parents disliked her choice as she was chosen for the prince of Gwalior who held a much raised stature. But she was not happy of becoming the queen of Gwalior, as he was much older than her and also he had many queens. Later her parents accepted her marriage. Afterwards she came to India and learnt Bangali language and used to read books in Bengali, mostly those written by Bankim Chandra and Sarat Chandra. She also read many books and magazines in English. She used to ride horses and
enjoyed going hunting with her children. She also listened to the lectures and held discussions with the learned *Pundits*. She also looked into the matters of education of her children. Individual tutors and governesses were appointed for the daughters. She also started the system of pocket money to the daughters. Indira Devi had three daughters: Illa, Ayesha and Maneka and two sons.

**ILLA DEVI:** Illa Devi was the eldest daughter of Indira Devi and was born in 1914. She went abroad for education. In Paris she mastered Art and Home Management. She further studied in Shantiniketan. She was a versatile and could play Piano, Flute, Violin and Spanish. She loved riding horses and elephants. Even she learnt cycling and driving. She used to play table tennis and polo. Her hand works especially knitting, tailoring and embroidering deserve special mention. She was fluent in English as well as in the local dialect of Koch Bihar. She had a modern outlook to life.

**GAYATRI DEVI:** Gayatri Devi was born in 1919 in London. She was given the name ‘Ayesha’ by her mother Indira Devi. Later on she was renamed as Gayatri. Since childhood she got the essence of both the Indian and Western cultures and developed a strong affinity towards education for women. She learnt about the household activities and studied Home Science, got training in Music and Sports. She got admitted in Shantiniketan in 1934 and learned typing, shorthand and Home Science. She qualified matriculation and went for higher education. Gayatri Devi fell in love with Sawai Jay Singh, the Prince of Jaipur who was already married for twice. Indira Devi initially did not give her consent for their marriage but later she agreed. They got married in May 9, 1940.

After her marriage, she took interest in the developmental works at Jaipur. She planned for education, health services, trade – commerce, sculpture and overall cultural upliftment. She started a girls’ school in 1943 and also established Red Cross Society. Gayatri Devi also pursued politics in later part of her life. She was elected as the Member of Parliament. She took on to the renovation works of the heritage buildings in Rajasthan. In 1972, she was imprisoned by the Cofepose Law. By this time, she lost her husband. She was released from the imprisonment later. She did much for the development of Cooch Behar also. She donated large amounts of money for the renovation works of the temples in Cooch Behar. She wrote her autobiography titled ‘The Princess Remembers’ with proficiency.
**MENAKA DEVI:** Menaka Devi was youngest of all three sisters. She was very beautiful and quiet natured. She was a pious lady also.

After the death of Jagaddipendranarayan, Virajendranarayan (son of Jagaddipendranarayan’s brother Indrajitendranarayan) became the crownless and kingdom less king in 1970. He died in 1992. With his death the *Narayani* dynasty reached its termination.

Thus it may be concluded that the women folk at the ‘Koch Bihar Palace’ got metamorphosed with time. Westernization had touched their spirits and they had assimilated western culture having ethical roots planted in the Indian value system. From the period of Sunity Devi, more freedom crept into the interior of the Palace. The Maharajas came into contact with the princesses of different states and also married them. Marriages out of own selection replaced the former method of bride selection. The women folk contributed much to the field of Literature and showed competence as authoress of diversified fields. Therefore as women in the then society can be regarded as the symbol of progress not only for the period they belonged but also for the years to come.

**3.3 INDIAN WOMEN IN THE POST-MODERN ERA:** The low status of women in India upto late 1940s was the outcome of illiteracy, economic dependence, religious prohibitions, caste restrictions, lack of female leadership and above all the attitude of the males. Once Gandhiji questioned that ‘…if you make half the population of a country a mere play thing of the other half, an encumbrance on others, how will you ever make progress?’ (a speech at the foundation stone laying of the Mahila Vidyapitha, Allahabad, 31st March 1928; Menon, 2008:246). Thus social progress would never be achieved if both the constituent population of any country is equally equipped on equal standing. The relationship between the two should be complementary.

During the freedom struggle, the woman folk stepped out from their household confinement and participated in the same with prominence. As Nehru remarked ‘the call of freedom had always a double meaning for them, and the enthusiasm and energy with which they threw themselves into the struggle had no doubt their springs in the vague and hardly conscious, but nevertheless, intense desire to get rid themselves of domestic slavery also’ (from ‘An Autobiography’ by Jawaharlal Nehru in Menon, 2008: 245). The performance and participation of the womenfolk in the Nationalist Movement was an unexpected phenomenon to the men folk. Nehru again writes ‘Most of us men folk were in prison. And then a remarkable thing happened. Our women came
to the forefront and took charge of the struggle. Women had always been there of course, but there was an avalanche of them, which took not only the British Government but their own men folk by surprise’ (Nehru, ‘The Freedom Struggle’, The Discovery of India in Menon, 2008: 245).

3.3.1 WOMEN’S EDUCATION: After independence women’s education was given due attention. The planners looked upon education as a tool to achieve modernization and a source to achieve economic and political transformation. Literacy, the ability to read, write and comprehend was stressed upon. Elementary education helps women both in the rural and the urban set ups; it facilitates daily living by enabling the housewives to read newspapers, signboards, prices mentioned in packets of consumer goods such as soaps, salt, oil etc; also helps the day-to-day monetary exchange. The literacy scenario improved gradually. At the beginning in 1951, female literacy was 8.86% only which almost doubled (15.35%) during the next census year i.e. 1961. During 1991, the total literacy crossed 50% limit while by the turn of the century i.e. in 2001 the female literacy figure reached 53.67%. In 2011 Census, the figure rose to 65.46%.

Table 3.1: Literacy Scenario in India through Different Census Years (1951-2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Years</th>
<th>Persons (%)</th>
<th>Literacy Rate (%)</th>
<th>Male-Female Gap in Literacy Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>18.33</td>
<td>27.16</td>
<td>8.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>15.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>34.45</td>
<td>45.96</td>
<td>29.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981*</td>
<td>43.57</td>
<td>56.38</td>
<td>29.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991**</td>
<td>52.21</td>
<td>64.13</td>
<td>39.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>64.84</td>
<td>75.26</td>
<td>53.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>74.04</td>
<td>82.14</td>
<td>65.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census Reports (1951-2011)

Note: Literacy rate represents the number of literate persons as a percentage of the total population. 1951 – 1971: Age of population considered 5 years and more 1981 – 2011: Age of population considered 7 years and more *Excludes Assam **Excludes Jammu & Kashmir
Thus the table shows a gradual rise in the female literacy keeping pace with the national level throughout the Census years. However, the diminishing gap between male and female literacy is also perceptible especially during 2001 – 2011. Thus women are increasingly becoming literate since independence, which boosted their educational status to a great extent. Although when compared to their counterparts they lag behind, nevertheless, there has been a definite improvement among the women in the field of literacy and it depicts that they are on the path of progress and development.

Table 3.2 displays a similar kind of picture at the state level. In West Bengal as a whole, progress through years has been discernible from the figures. Just after the independence in 1951, the total literacy of the state recorded to 25% whereby the female literacy remained about 13.2%; turning to the urban areas, which were exposed to modernization and urbanization processes showed high literacy figures 45.7% for total and 37.1% for the urban females. At the district level Koch Bihar had recorded appreciably low literacy figures of 17.1% for the total population and only 6.1% for the females (in Table 3.3) in 1951; but the urban areas had higher literacy rates i.e. 61.2% for the total population and 57.6% for the urban females. The total literacy at the state level took as many as 40 long years to reach about a little more than 50% (i.e. 57.7%); while the female literacy for the state reached to 59.6% in 2001. Women literacy condition particularly for the urbanites reached 50% level within 1961. It escalated to 81% as of now (2011). The literacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Years</th>
<th>Literates</th>
<th>Persons (%)</th>
<th>Male (%)</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>51.0</td>
<td>37.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>49.6</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>62.3</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>54.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>34.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2: Literacy Scenario of West Bengal Through different Census Years (1951-2011)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Years</th>
<th>Literates</th>
<th>Persons (%)</th>
<th>Male (%)</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td>75.2</td>
<td>60.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td>67.8</td>
<td>46.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>75.3</td>
<td>81.2</td>
<td>68.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>68.6</td>
<td>77.0</td>
<td>59.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>63.4</td>
<td>73.1</td>
<td>53.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>81.3</td>
<td>86.1</td>
<td>75.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>76.3</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>70.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>72.1</td>
<td>78.4</td>
<td>65.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>84.8</td>
<td>88.4</td>
<td>81.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census Reports (1951-2011)

Table 3.3: Literacy Scenario of Koch Bihar Through different Census Years (1951-2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Years</th>
<th>Literates</th>
<th>Persons (%)</th>
<th>Male (%)</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
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<td>Urban</td>
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<td>57.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>46.1</td>
<td>22.6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
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<td>73.5</td>
<td>80.6</td>
<td>65.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>Urban</td>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>75.9</td>
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<td>2011</td>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>79.4</td>
<td>66.5</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
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<td>91.6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>88.7</td>
<td>91.8</td>
<td>85.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census Reports (1951-2011)
condition for Koch Bihar also showed progress through time. Between 1991 and 2001, the total literacy crossed the 50% mark and reached from 45.8% in 1991 to 66.3% in 2001. Finally it reached to 73.2% in 2001. Female literacy among the urbanites have remained consistently high than the total female literacy level throughout. At the initial stage i.e. in 1951, it was about 57.6%. The figure leaped from 68.5% in 2001 to 85.5% in 2011. Thus, keeping pace with time literacy condition showed progress. The district level figure of 2011 does not remain far behind that of the 2011 figure at the state level. The total literacy figures at the National, State and the Regional level almost remain congruent to one another.

3.3.2 WOMEN’S MOVEMENT AND ORGANIZATION: The Constitution of India drafted in 1950 granted equal rights to men and women. A slew of rights such as the female franchise, right to education, right to entry into public service and political offices brought in satisfaction among women’s groups. Scores of women took part in Sharecroppers’ Movement in Telengana in Andhra Pradesh in 1948-50 and in anti-alcohol movements in Uttarakhand in the 1960s.

Post-independent India saw women’s movement in divided and sporadic forms – as the common enemy – the foreign rule was no longer there, many Muslim members went over to Pakistan. Some of the women leaders joined the Indian National Congress formally and held positions there in as Ministers, Governors and Ambassadors. By mid 1950s, India had fairly liberal laws concerning women. Most of the demands of the women’s movement had been met. Women dissatisfied with the status-quo joined struggles for the rural poor and industrial working class as the Tebhaga Movement in Bengal, the Telengana Movement in Andhra Pradesh or the Naxalite Movement. ‘Sahada’ was a tribal landless labourers’ movement against landlords (area in Dhulia of Maharashtra) saw active participation of women, who led demonstrations, shouted militant slogans and mobilized the masses. In Ahmadabad, the first attempt for a women’s trade union was made with the foundation of Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) at the initiative of Ela Bhat in 1972. It was aimed at improving the conditions of the poor women who worked in the unorganized sector by providing training, technical aids and collective bargaining. It saw remarkable success. The Anti Price Rise in 1973 – an agitation launched by Mrinal Gore and Ahalya Rangnekar in Bombay mobilized several women of the city against inflation. The Nav Nirmaan Movement originally a students’ movement in Gujarat against soaring prices, black marketing and corruption in 1974 involved thousands of middle class women. Their methods of
protest ranged from mass hunger strike, mock funerals and *prabhat pheris*. The *Chipko* Movement to save the trees by clinging on to it began in 1973 (in Gopeshwar in Chamoli district) and took a shape of a movement in 1974. The united strength prevented the contractor from cutting the trees. It was the women of the *Chipko* movement who brought public attention towards the importance of the trees and environmental protection. Meanwhile the UN declared 1975 as the international year of Women beginning with the First World Conference on Women in Mexico. It granted new interest in women issues and it was found that large masses of Indian women have remained unaffected by the rights granted to them more than 25 years ago.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed the growth of numerous women’s groups that took up issues such as dowry deaths, bride burning, rape, *Sati* and violence against women. The stress was given on sexual oppression against women which was not yet been addressed. It further questioned on patriarchal control on the women, humiliation, torture and role of women (which always thought to be secondary in all family matters). The autonomous organizations like Progressive Organization of Women (POW, Hyderabad), the Forum Against Rape (now defined as Forum Against Oppression of Women), Stree Sangharsh Samata (Delhi) etc made their appearance. In 1987, Roop Kanwar (of Rajasthan), a young widow was forcibly put on the funeral pyre of her husband and was burnt to death. This act shocked the nation. Women’s organizations demanded a new Sati Prevention Bill. Another case is worth mentioning that of a divorce in favour of a Muslim woman named Shah Bano (in 1985) who petitioned in the Supreme Court; the Government introduced the Muslim Women’s Bill (Protection of Rights in Divorce).

The Indian Association of Women’s Studies established in 1981 is an institution of women academics and activists involved in research and teaching. The National Commission for Women (NCW) was set up in 31st January 1992 to look into the women – related issues, to probe into the status of women, to study the different legislations and point out the loop holes and gaps, to look into the causes of discrimination and violence against women and analyze possible remedies. A number of Colleges and Universities now have Women’s Study Centres. A new women’s group declare themselves as the Feminists have formed informal network to raise voice against anomaly in the social arena. Women in India are one of the most backward even today in terms
of literacy, longevity, maternal mortality, female work participation and sex ratio. So, all these areas deserve due attention in order to maintain a balanced social ecology.

3.3.3 Women’s Employment: Both men and women have always worked. The differences lie in the areas of work, the location of work, execution and performance, tools and technical usage and motivating factors for work. It is no denying the fact that women always have contributed to the nation’s economy. After meeting their domestic responsibilities they were allowed to earn. Tara Singhal (2003: 21 - 22) identifies three kinds of productive works to which women are traditionally attached to. These are:

(a) Home based production activities which have exchange value in the market;
(b) Home based production for family consumption and
(c) Paid employment outside the home.

It has been observed that the impact of Globalization, Urbanization and Liberalization have ushered in a sharp rise in the field of paid employment outside the home. Women are seen to have engaged themselves in gainful employment involving diverse professions. In the rural sector, women help their husbands in the fields and get occupied in the household activities. They also get into household/ handicraft industry. In the urban areas on the contrary, their participation remains restricted (mainly to the tertiary activities) when compared to the women workers in the rural sectors. This may be accounted for the fact that women’s work has always thought to be ‘supplementary’ to their husband’s income. Even the educated women were prevented from taking up jobs outside the family setting. After industrialization and modernization have crept in, new invention in the household devices have reduced the work load and the educated housewives have found some scope to take up gainful employment. Moreover, they can now afford to employ domestic help to do the daily chores of cleaning, washing etc. Furthermore, parents have become more ambitious of giving better education to their children in order to raise the standard of living. Thus, in urban areas, now-a-days majority of women are seen trying to get gainful employment immediately after completion of their education. After independence with the aid of modern education, industrialization, science and technology revolutionized the occupational structure. ‘Equal work and equal pay’ have been stressed. A large number of educated women have been seen taking up white collar jobs. The earlier trend during 1960s showed popularity of administrative, executive and managerial jobs. By 1970s, women were found concentrating in the fields of medical, teaching and clerical services.
### Table 3.4 Work Participation Rate by Sex in India Since 1951

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Workers</th>
<th>Persons (%)</th>
<th>Male (%)</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>39.09</td>
<td>53.93</td>
<td>23.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>43.07</td>
<td>57.29</td>
<td>27.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>33.08</td>
<td>52.61</td>
<td>12.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>34.03</td>
<td>53.62</td>
<td>13.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>29.34</td>
<td>48.82</td>
<td>6.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981*</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>36.70</td>
<td>52.62</td>
<td>19.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>38.79</td>
<td>53.77</td>
<td>23.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>29.99</td>
<td>49.06</td>
<td>8.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991**</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>37.50</td>
<td>51.61</td>
<td>22.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>40.09</td>
<td>52.58</td>
<td>26.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>30.16</td>
<td>48.52</td>
<td>9.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001***</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>39.10</td>
<td>51.68</td>
<td>25.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>41.75</td>
<td>52.11</td>
<td>30.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>32.35</td>
<td>50.60</td>
<td>11.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>39.80</td>
<td>53.30</td>
<td>25.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>41.80</td>
<td>53.00</td>
<td>30.00</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>35.30</td>
<td>53.80</td>
<td>15.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census Reports (1951-2011)

**Note:**
*Excludes Assam  
**Excludes Jammu & Kashmir  
*** Excludes three districts of Manipur due to administrative and technical reasons

In a predominantly agricultural country like India, women play a distinctive role in economic activities especially in the rural sectors in earning a livelihood for the family. In 2011, though the Female Work Participation Rate (FWPR) i.e. 25.51% depicted an overall increase over time, yet it is far less than the Male WPR (53.3%). The total workers constituted 25.51% of the female population comprising of 30.01% in the rural areas and 15.44% in the urban areas. Tracing back, the 1951 census data shows that FWPR amounted to 23.43% which increased to 26.96% in 1961. But during 1971, a drop in the FWPR has been recorded and it was about 12.11%. According to a Report explaining the Trends and Determinants of Female Labour Participation (www.shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in Chapter IV, pp 110 -113, accessed on 07.10.15 at 7:50 a.m.); there has been some difficulty in the assessment of the number of female workers especially in the primary sector because the census concept of ‘workers’ changed from decade to decade.
‘Earners’ and ‘Earners dependants’ have been classified differently in census reports. The changing concepts and definitions of ‘workers’ in the rural areas for an instance of 1971 (referred to those who spent major part of their time in economic activities) may be cited. But there has been a genuine decline in the FWPR in 1971 from 1961 figures. Some opines that the drastic reduction in the FWP in the rural sectors was due to the exclusion of housewives who helped in the economic activity largely in the household industry or primary activities largely in household industry or agriculture. However, one reasonable explanation to this might be attributed to the technological changes, use of HYV technology, use of mechanical devices which might have released the marginal workers (i.e. women, children, elderly men) from agriculture and thus female workers might have devoted more time to their household activities, child rearing etc.

In the urban sector, the proportion of the female workers was generally low from the beginning (06.68% in 1971) when compared to the rural sector (13.42% in 1971) as well as that of the male WPRs (53.62% in the rural and 48.82% in the urban sectors) in the same time period. Nevertheless, a gradual increase is discernible till date. Discrepancy in the MWPR and the FWPR remains in the present scenario also.

Another trend is revealed following 2001 and 2011 data. The urban FWPR has shown an increase from 11.88% in 2001 to 15.44% in 2011, while the FWPR for the rural areas declined from 2001 (30.79%) to 2011 (30.02%). Thus, a shift in the occupational structure from the primary to tertiary activities is on the go. However, the proportion of the female workers has remained almost same overtime (i.e. 25.63% in 2001 to 25.51% in 2011).

### Table 3.5 Work Participation Rate By Sex of West Bengal from 1951-2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Years</th>
<th>Workers</th>
<th>Persons (%)</th>
<th>Male (%)</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34.68</td>
<td>54.77</td>
<td>11.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>33.16</td>
<td>53.98</td>
<td>9.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>27.91</td>
<td>48.83</td>
<td>4.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>27.19</td>
<td>48.48</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>30.12</td>
<td>49.80</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Census Years</td>
<td>Workers</td>
<td>Persons (%)</td>
<td>Male (%)</td>
<td>Female (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30.17</td>
<td>50.30</td>
<td>8.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>30.30</td>
<td>50.56</td>
<td>8.89</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>29.80</td>
<td>49.62</td>
<td>5.59</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>32.19</td>
<td>51.40</td>
<td>11.25</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>33.18</td>
<td>52.09</td>
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<td>29.59</td>
<td>49.64</td>
<td>6.21</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>36.78</td>
<td>54.23</td>
<td>18.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>37.93</td>
<td>54.30</td>
<td>20.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>33.82</td>
<td>54.07</td>
<td>11.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>38.08</td>
<td>57.07</td>
<td>18.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Rural</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>57.2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>36.89</td>
<td>56.84</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census Reports (1951-2011)

The table 3.5 and 3.6 displays the proportion of the Workers of West Bengal and that of Koch Bihar district respectively by their sex and their place of residences from 1951 to 2011 censuses. The workers at the state level have increased overtime but the change is not remarkable as it has increased from 34.68% in 1951 to 38.08% in 2011. An increase in the proportion of the male workers has also been viewed with the progress of time. A striking fluctuation for the proportion of the female workers has been observed during the whole period under consideration. With a figure of 11.29% of the female workers at the initial phase (1951) a gradual decline is observed through 1961 (9.43%) and 1971(4.43%) data. Then again it was seen to rise to 8.07% in 1981 and to 11.25% in 1991 finally reaching upto 18.08% in 2011. The urban female workers have depicted a very slow rate of progression. According to the expectation, they have remained far behind the workers of the rural areas considering both males and females. The proportion increased from 3.93% in 1971 to 15.4% in 2011. A notable change is worthy to mention while analyzing the above data especially concerning the rural and urban female workers for 2001 and 2011. This period has witnessed a rising trend for the urban female (11.33% in 2001 to 15.4% in 2011) workers with a simultaneous decline in the rural female working population (20.86% in 2001 to 19.4% in 2011). The shift of female working population from rural to urban is indicative of the increasing scope for service sector in the urban environment.
### Table 3.6 Work Participation Rate By Sex of Koch Bihar from 1951-2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Years</th>
<th>Workers</th>
<th>Persons (%)</th>
<th>Male (%)</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>33.1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>27.61</td>
<td>51.37</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>27.65</td>
<td>51.79</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>27.08</td>
<td>45.87</td>
<td>4.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29.80</td>
<td>53.63</td>
<td>4.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>30.04</td>
<td>54.29</td>
<td>4.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>26.62</td>
<td>44.73</td>
<td>7.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32.14</td>
<td>53.58</td>
<td>9.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>32.46</td>
<td>54.11</td>
<td>9.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>28.41</td>
<td>47.24</td>
<td>8.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>39.00</td>
<td>54.91</td>
<td>22.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>39.64</td>
<td>55.14</td>
<td>23.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>32.53</td>
<td>52.67</td>
<td>11.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40.01</td>
<td>58.24</td>
<td>20.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>40.51</td>
<td>58.42</td>
<td>21.43</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Urban</td>
<td>35.68</td>
<td>56.61</td>
<td>14.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census Reports (1951-2011)

At the district level, an increasing trend of working population is discernible from the data in the adjacent table (Table: 3.6). The total workers during 1951 (29.6%) pertaining to the district of Koch Bihar steadily increased to 40.01% in 2011. With regard to female workers it has corroborated with that of the state level trend. A fluctuating trend is noticeable from 5.2% 1951 to 3.7% in 1961 and 1.69% in 1971. A rising trend followed next with 4.32% in 1981 upto 20.70% in 2011. Female urban workers of Koch Bihar district has also increased considerably from 4.62% in 1971 to 14.17% in 2011. But it remains low when compared to the rural female workers as well as the male working force at the rural and urban areas. Following the state level tendency, it is seen that the female workers at the rural areas have dropped from 23.28% in 2001.
to 21.43% in 2011; this again portrays greater scope of female employment in the service sectors currently.

With the census data pertaining to the national, state and district levels regarding female literacy (%) and female workers (%) from 1951 to 2011, regression analyses have been prepared which are displayed in fig. no. 3a, 3b and 3c respectively. All the three graphs show a positive linear trend indicating proportional increase in the female literacy with a simultaneous increase in the proportion of the female workers. Fig. no. 3a represents the said relationship at the national level
Which shows a low positive trend with $Y_c = 21.13 + 0.035x$ and $r = 0.13416$. The trend at the next level i.e. at the state level, the relationship between the same variables have resulted in a more positive note with $Y_c = 4.375 + 0.185x$ and $r = 0.76551$.

The positive trend becomes more conspicuous for the variables at the district level. The female literacy and the female workers of Koch Bihar display a strongly positive relation with the $Y_c = 0.746 + 0.343x$ and $r = 0.94287$.

Therefore, the main objective of the inquiry become fulfilled here as it is found from the analysis of the data that with the increased literacy among women through time, it has paved the way for increased employment among women. So, a positive change has been observed regarding the association of social status to working women.

**3.3.4 WOMEN DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PLAN PERIODS:** There has been a progressive increase in the plan outlays over the last nine decades of planned development to meet the needs of women and children. The outlay of Rs. 4 crores in the First Plan (1951-56) has increased to Rs. 13,780 crores in the Tenth Five Year Plan and about Rs.117,707 crores in the Twelfth Five Year Plan. There has been a shift from ‘welfare’ oriented approach in the First Five Year Plan to ‘development’ and ‘empowerment’ of women in the consecutive Five Year Plans.
The First Five Year Plan (1951-56) was mainly welfare oriented as far as women’s issues were concerned. The Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) undertook a number of welfare measures. The programmes for women were implemented through the National Extension Service Programmes through Community Development Blocks.

The Second Five Year Plan (1956-61) was geared to organize ‘Mahila Mandals’ (women’s groups) at the grass-root levels to ensure better implementation of the welfare schemes.

Third, Fourth, Fifth and other Interim Plans (1961-74) accorded high priority to women’s education. Measures to improve maternal and child health services, and supplementary feeding for children, nursing and expectant mothers were also introduced. Thus three broad areas of development such as Education, Social Welfare and Health related to the women folk were stressed upon.

The Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85) is regarded as a landmark in women’s development. The Plan adopted a multidisciplinary approach with a triple thrust on health, education and employment of women.

In the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90), development programmes for women were continued, with the objective of raising their economic and social status and bring them into the mainstream of national development. A very significant step therein was to identify and promote ‘beneficiary-oriented programmes’ which extended direct benefits to women.

The Eighth Five Year Plan (1992-97) attempted to ensure that the benefits of development from different sectors did not bypass women. Special programmes were implemented to complement the general development programmes. The flow of benefits to women in the three core sectors of education, health and employment were monitored attentively. Women were enabled to function as equal partners and participants in the developmental process with reservation in the membership of local bodies. This approach of the Eighth Plan marks a definite shift from ‘development’ to empowerment’ of women.

The Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002) envisaged: a) Empowerment of women and socially disadvantaged groups such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes and Minorities as agents of socio-economic change and development.
b) Promoting and developing people’s participatory institutions like Panchayati Raj institutions, cooperatives and self-help groups.

c) Strengthening efforts to build self-reliance.

d) The convergence of services from different sectors.

e) A women’s component plan at the Central and State levels.

The Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-2007) was formulated to ensure requisite access of women to information, resources and services, and advance gender equality goals.

The Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-2012) proposed to undertake special measures for gender empowerment and equity. The Ministry of Women and Child Development also targeted for synergistic use of gender budget and gender mainstreaming process. This plan made suggestions for giving women rights over land, credit, common property resources, equitable wages and also enhancing their access to technology, education and skill training.

The Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012-2017) focuses on women’s access to and control over resources with the view to increase the WPRs especially in secondary and tertiary sectors so as to ensure their upward movement in the economic ladder. This plan would accord high priority to the issues like women’s property rights, equitable wages, education, use of technology and skill training. This plan also encourages self employment opportunities among women through skill, up gradation, improved access to credit and markets. Keeping micro-finance in mind, efforts for financial inclusion of women in the mainstream credit system would be thrusted upon. Exploitation of the collective power of women to achieve economies of scale leading to the growth of the Self Help Groups (SHGs) is also another goal (www.planningcommission.nic.in accessed on 10.11.2015).

3.4 CONCLUSION: Though women remain as the nuclei of a society, she has always been presented with a derogatory status. Following Hobhouse, an eminent sociologist, the position of women of any society determines the ‘sure index of the development’ of the country concerned (Singhal, T. 2003: 1). So, a lot of emphasis should be given on imparting proper education to the women folk so that they can identify their problems and existing deficiencies and discrepancies in varied aspects; they can develop self identity and a sound financial foundation that would help
them to lead a decent and dignified life. Thus, Pt. Nehru (1958) once aptly pointed out ‘In order to awaken people, it is the woman who has to be awakened. Once she is on the move, the household moves, the country moves and thus, we can build the India of tomorrow’.

Of recent a new trend has been noticed in the Indian scenario regarding education and employment related to women. Now-a-days girls are given higher education with a view that they would get better life partners. The social set up has been modified to nuclear families where girls/ women should get equipped financially in order to supplement the family income and to create buffer finance in the backdrop of inflation. Furthermore, girls are also encouraged for higher education and employment so as to ensure financial security even after her husband’s death or desertion. Thus some changes in the general psyche of a common man have already taken place. The view that only widow or a single woman without any support should seek a job has changed. The absorption of women in the labour force has silently revolutionized the socio-economic arena with reference to the status of women in India. As a consequence, the outlook of an Indian woman is slowly broadening, her opinion is finding perspective, her creativity is unfolding, her personality is developing and her position is getting redefined and re-oriented in the silhouette of patriarchy. The clutches of dowry is getting weakened and the decision making ability is getting increased. For instance, a woman can even go for a live-in relation (staying together with her partner without getting married), she can adopt a child singly, can become a surrogate mother and also go for Planned Parenthood.

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