PREFACE

The Indian Women Through the Ages is a dictionary and not a social study. The book identifies women who matter in the variegated and chequered history of this country.

In India, women have been held in high esteem at all times. Of women Manu, the ancient law-giver, spoke in the most eloquent and reverential tones:

A father excels ten Upadhyayas in glory
But a mother excels a thousand fathers.

Some women were known for their knowledge and learning, some for their dialectical skill and yet others for the purity of their thought, extraordinary moral and spiritual power or patriotic deeds. They came from all parts of the country, different communities and social strata and include seers and saints, administrators and warriors, poets and musicians, scientists and great mothers. Their living thoughts and ideas have gone into the creation of India’s ethos and community and have proved a great integrating factor. Saunaka in Brahmadevata mentions 27 Brahmavadinis—great scholars—who contributed Suktas in the Rigveda and later seven women figured as Seven Mothers (Saptamatrikas) and five as Five Virgins (Panchakanyas). Even telling their names was deemed sufficient to destroy sins.¹

Though families, in the Vedic Age, prayed for the birth of a son, a daughter, whenever born, was treated with kindness. She was afforded facilities for the development of her personality. Her education was not neglected and she learnt music and dance and on attaining maturity could marry a person of

¹. See facing page
her own choice. Monogamy was the rule. Of course, stray cases of polygamy were noticed, but none of polyandry. Widows could remarry and intercaste marriages were not a taboo. In her house, the woman held a place of honour, though in the eye of the law she was dependent for aid and support on her male relations.

The teachings of Buddha and Mahavira retrieved for woman her status which had been gradually eroded. In the Mauryan times some women accompanied their husbands to the battlefield and fought side by side their men. Married women took a prominent part in religious activities, but the privilege of sharing the knowledge of sacred lore with their husbands was no more theirs. Polygamy had come to be practised by rulers and noblemen. Widow marriage and levirate had, however, not fallen into disuse.

The so-called Golden Period of India's history—the Gupta Period—was not so golden for women. Though girls of the upper classes received liberal education, participated in cultural activities and swayamvara continued to be in vogue, the practice of sati had gained ground and women in general were not allowed to contract a second marriage. Yet it is a fact that in some regions women shared in administration.

In succeeding ages, queen reignants are known to have governed and particularly their rule in Kashmir, Orissa and Andhra was noteworthy. There were also women governors and women heads of villages. Foreign invasions, however, curtailed women's freedom and they were forced to live in the seclusion of their home. With the passage of time the purdah became more and more elaborate.

Under the Turko-Afghan rule women depended on their husbands or male relatives for social life and observed strict fidelity in their conjugal life. Their culture varied according to the class to which they belonged. Many evil practices had, however, permeated into society in relation to women, like sati, child marriage, polygamy, enforced widowhood, and dowry which made daughter a liability. Ordinary women were absorbed in domestic chores. However, some women perfected themselves in art, literature, science and philosophy.

In Moghul times quite a few ladies showed a keen interest
in learning and writing and some emerged as scholars and poets. On the other hand, it would not be irrelevant to quote Todd on Rajput women of the times, "The annals of no nation on earth record a more ennobling or more magnanimous instance of female loyalty than exemplified by the Rajput women."

And, later in the war of freedom of their country, Indian women stood by their men. In 1857 they fought together. Quite a few women were hanged. In the twentieth century Kasturba Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Nehru and many others were in the forefront. Terrorist women of Bengal and Punjab gave strong support to the revolutionary movement and many of them faced torture and sacrificed their lives to the Swadeshi movement. Indian women made no small contribution. Some even worked as director of a war council. In 1942 some women directed the movement from underground and when arrested suffered cruelties.

Of late, in the social sphere, women have tried to fight many evils. Pandita Ramabai, Ramabai Ranade and others did pioneering work. As far back as 1882, Ramabai had started the Arya Mahila Samaj. In 1919 the All India Muslim Ladies Conference pronounced against polygamy. Women had all the while been trying to get their proper place in the socio-political life of the country and in this they gradually succeeded. A woman was nominated to the Kochin State Legislative Council in 1920 and sometime later in Travancore a lady was entrusted with the portfolio of Public Health, and in Madras a lady was unanimously elected Deputy President of the Legislative Council. In 1923 a Women's India Association was started in Madras which pressed for women's demands for better facilities of education and for abolition of social abuses. Two years later, Sarojini Naidu was elected as the President of the Indian National Congress. In 1926 an All-India Women's Educational Conference was held. This was presided over by the Maharani of Baroda.

It may be mentioned that women had been consistently making efforts to do away with the practice of early marriage. Their efforts finally succeeded in 1930 when the Sarda Child Marriage Act was passed. A widow remarriage movement was also started. The Government of India Act 1935 gave
women more political rights. They were allotted seats in the Federal Council of States as also in the Federal and Provincial Assemblies. The franchise qualifications for women were also liberalised. Smt. Radhabai Subbarayan was the first Indian woman to be a member of the Council of States in 1938, and Smt. Renuka Ray was the first woman to sit in the Central Legislative Assembly.

The advent of Independence gave a great impetus to social reforms. The Constitution gave women equality of status. New constitutional provisions protect them from exploitation. Legal disabilities in regard to marriage, inheritance, guardianship, adoption etc. have been removed. It was a tribute to womanhood that Sarojini Naidu was appointed as Governor of U.P., Vijayalakshmi Pandit an ambassador and Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur a Minister. Mrs. Pandit did commendable work in the U.N.

And, now women in India hold important positions. Indira Gandhi is the Prime Minister of the largest democracy, and she is the 'most outstanding woman of the world' as stated by Freda Braun, president of the Women's International Democratic Federation. There are Indian women ambassadors, vice chancellors of universities, scientists, artists, managers and executives. Only two years ago Asima Chatterjee presided over the annual session of the Science Congress. Sumati Morarjee is the first woman in the world to lead a shipowners' organization. In the immediate past, Smt. Padma Rama-chandran, Officer on Special Duty in the Department of Social Welfare, and Smt. S. Katoch, Secretary, Indian Council for Cultural Relations, have done commendable work and proved that women do not lag behind men in organising capacity and skill.

It would not be out of place to name other women who made a mark in their respective fields. Apala, Ghosha, Gargi and Maitreyi were acknowledged scholars. Avanti Sundari and Bharati Misra were known for their learning. Prabhavati Gupta and Balasri Gautami ably administered kingdoms. (Surprisingly, no libber has coined the term 'queendom'.) Cleophas braved Alexander's army. Suryadevi was a first grade patriot who sacrificed her life at the captor's hands. Amrapali, Sanghamitra and Rajyashri were known for their
piety and social service. Lalleshwari, Akka Mahadevi, Muktabai, Mirabai, Ahilyabai and Sharda Devi were women of God. Mollatai, Haba Khatun, Gulbadan Begum and Rupamati gave expression to their emotions in creative works. Some women skilled in languages adorned courts. (A Jesuit letter of 1625 mentions a female neophyte who astonished Vico by her knowledge.) Naikidevi, Raziya Begum, Kotavati, Chandbibi, Rani Durgavati, Rudradeva, Mastani, Rani Channamma, Rani Lakshmibai and Hazrat Mahal are known for their valour. Anupama and Lakshmimati were renowned builders of temples. Lilavati and Khana were scientists of no mean order. Jijabai proved an excellent counsellor. Sada Kaur, Rani Jindan and Begum Samroo were great adventurers and diplomats. It was unfortunate that Samogita, Kamala Devi and Devaladevi proved the cause of great battles.

Since Independence literacy among women has improved. The female population is 264 million or 48.1% of the total population (figures of 1971) and in a sizable number (though the percentage is small), they have received the highest degrees. There are 16,000 qualified women doctors, 3,500 women engineers, 82,000 women science graduates, 400 women agriculture graduates, over 300,000 women graduates in arts and the humanities and 4,000 commerce graduates. Yet it is true that this number is very insignificant, and in literacy as in other fields much more remains to be done to improve the women's lot. Economically her condition should improve. But as the late Dr. Radhakrishnan felt, it should be done in a way that she retains her tenderness and feminine touch.

This book identifies—there is no effort whatsoever at presenting brief biographical sketches—3,000 women and their names have been arranged alphabetically, the proper name coming first. But in case a woman was popularly known by her marital status e.g. Begum, Rani, Lady, the latter has been given priority. For instance, Begum Abbas Tyabji figures under 'B'; not under 'A' or 'T'. In spelling names, classical and general spellings, without the diacritical marks, have been given.

Since dates were not known in most cases, the period has been indicated, 'Purana' given at the end of an entry would
indicate that the woman had flourished in the Puranic age. In some cases the period has been indicated in brackets but in some cases it has not been indicated at all as nothing definite could be said. But we feel for a student of Indian history it should not be difficult to make out the years by association with the names of kings or events etc.

Some women have been referred to in the Puranas as having given birth to trees, birds or animals which is probably a figurative expression. Even though such expressions were illogical, the information has been reproduced. Similarly birth from mind may sound odd but then there are innumerable such references in the Puranas. The book has referred to such women as mind-born on the pattern of scholarly works on sacred literature. A class of beautiful women who perhaps liked an uninhibited life was treated as heavenly women or apsaras and these too have been mentioned. As a matter of fact the Puranic women were more mod than the mod of today.

The Indian Women Through The Ages was conceived during 1975, the International Women’s Year. The provocation for the work had come from two friends—Shri Shadilal Pradhan and Shri S. Dixit of the Chetana Prakashan to whom we are grateful. The former persuaded us not to leave the work on Indian women to others after our ‘100 Great Indians Through The Ages’ had brought us tremendous appreciation. Shri Dixit, on the other hand, put it to us that the voluminous unused material of the first book could be judiciously utilized and supplemented to shape another volume. In an unguarded moment, without realizing the enormity of the project, we admit, we succumbed to their pressure.

In a supplementary volume “101 Famous Indian Women Through The Ages,” which is in the press and we hope it will be out within a couple of months, we have presented biographical sketches of 101 women who stand out amongst the thousands of well known women for their contributions. This will be of interest to those who want to know more about India’s greatest half.

We must also express our gratitude to Dr. S.D. Sharma, Union Minister of Communications, for the Foreword.
Our thanks are also due to Shri Onkar Mehra, Kumari Vidyut Maneklal (our god-daughter), Shri R.N. Raja and Shri S.M. Dass. And, not the least we are indebted to our publishers who took a keen interest in the work and to the printers who finally managed to see the book through the press in the extended period of IWY.

—H.N. VERMA
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