

ISSN 2278 – 859X

Asian Academic Research Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities

Volume 1

Issue 9

March 2013



Journal By:-

Asian Academic Research Associates

ISSN 2278 – 859X (Online)

Asian Academic Research Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities
&
ISSN 2319-2801 (Online)

Asian Academic Research Journal of Multidisciplinary
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Asian Academic Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
Year 2013, Volume-1, Issue-9 (March 2013)
Online ISSN : 2278 – 859X

INDEX PAGE

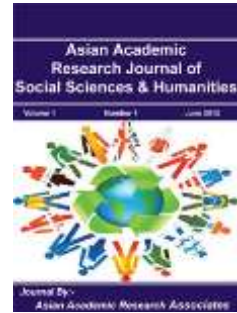
SNO	ARTICLE TITLE	PAGE NO
1	DETERMINANTS OF BOTTLE FEEDING PRACTICES IN SOLIGA TRIBE OF MYSORE DISTRICT, KARNATAKA, INDIA DR RENUKA M; DR K JAGADISH KUMAR; DR PRAVEEN KULKARNI; DR KHYRUNISSA BEGUM; DR M R GANGADHAR	1 – 11
2	HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMAN VALUES IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY DR. K. VENKATESAN	12 – 16
3	PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF SSI'S - A STUDY IN DAVANAGERE CITY H. VENKATESHA; DR. S. N. YOGISH	17 – 39
4.	KHAP PANCHAYATS: CONTINUITY, CONFRONTATION AND CONTRADICTION NAVNEET KAUR	40 – 45
5.	HEALTH DETERMINANTS OF BAIGA: A PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE TRIBAL GROUP IN CENTRAL INDIA DR. FARHAD MOLLICK; SHAILENDRA KUMAR VERMA	46 – 55
6.	DYNAMICS OF CROPPING PATTERN IN GUJARAT STATE: A MARKOV CHAIN APPROACH DR.N.J.ARDESHNA; DR.R.L.SHIYNAI	56 – 66
7.	TEACHING AND LEARNING CHALLENGES & STRATEGIES TOPIC- STRATEGIES & CHALLENGES OF E-LEARNING SAMRIT MONA	67 – 74
8.	MODERATING EFFECT OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTING (EMA) ON QUALITY AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE SAYEDEH PARASTOO SAEIDI; DR. SAUDAH SOFIAN; PARVANEH SAEIDI; SAYYEDAH PARISA SAEIDI	75 – 85
9.	EMERGING ISSUES AND RECENT TRENDS IN INDIAN FDI DR. P. SIVA KUMAR	86 – 103
10.	DOMESTIC WATER DEMAND FORECASTING UNDER DIFFERENT SOCIO-ECONOMIC SCENARIOS FOR A CENTRAL HIMALAYAN WATERSHED, INDIA KIREET KUMAR; SNEH JOSHI; HIMANSHI SHARMA; TANUJA PANDEY	104 – 120
11.	WOMEN AND HUMAN RIGHTS DR. T.M. RAJENDRA PRASAD	121 – 127
12.	STATUS OF WEFARE PROGRAMMES IN INDIA DR. C VENKATESWARLU; B VIJAJA LAKSHMI; DR. MORUSU SIVA SANKAR	128 – 137
13.	IMPACT OF POVERTY DR. C VENKATESWARLU; B VIJAJA LAKSHMI; DR. MORUSU SIVA SANKAR	138 – 146
14.	VARIATION STUDIES IN TREE MORPHOLOGICAL PARAMETERS IN ANOGEISSUS LATIFOLIA WALL IN HIMACHAL PRADESH H.P SANKHYAN; R. BAWA; TANVI GUPTA; N.B SINGH	147 – 157
15.	VALUE CRISIS IN INDIAN EDUCATION DR.K.JAYARAMAIAH; DR.G.THULASIRAM	158 – 165
16.	CHANGING POPULATION STRUCTURE OF GUWAHATI CITY INDIA A GEOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS ZONA BHUYAN	166 – 176
17.	ANTECEDENTS OF CUSTOMER SATISFACTION-A STUDY ON THE INDIAN DOMESTIC LOW COST AIR CARRIERS RICHARD REMEDIOS	177 – 195
18.	STUDY ON EDUCATION OF CHILD LABOURERS DR. S. S. PATIL; MS. VANI. E.J	196 – 201



A Peer Reviewed International Journal of Asian
Academic Research Associates

AARJSH

**ASIAN ACADEMIC RESEARCH
JOURNAL OF SOCIAL
SCIENCE & HUMANITIES**



WOMEN AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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ABSTRACT

Eminent Indian Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru expressed the hope that with the dawn of independence in the country, position of women in India will definitely improve for the better. Both these leaders also acknowledged that without the whole-hearted support extended by women to the Indian freedom movement the long spell of British rule could not have been smashed and they would not have quitted India so easily and so soon. Therefore, under the direction of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, India launched massive plans to improve the pitiable conditions of women in India. The Prime Minister who had come into close contact with the women at urban and rural areas during freedom movement wanted to empower them through education and by conferring on them more political powers. He also ensured that women were given equal status with men in the Indian constitution.

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Therefore, under the direction of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, India launched massive plans to improve the pitiable conditions of women in India. The Prime Minister who had come into close contact with the women at urban and rural areas during freedom movement wanted to empower them through education and by conferring on them more political powers. He also ensured that women were given equal status with men in the Indian constitution.

To empower women politically, they were given equal rights to cast vote along with men in elected bodies right from the village level to the Parliament. Many Acts were passed by Parliament and state Legislatures to improve social, economic and political status of women in India.

It is a harsh reality that women have been ill-treated in every society for ages, and are considered as handmaiden of men-in our male dominated society. A woman is deprived of her independent identity and is always considered as the property of man-father, husband or son. She is being looked down upon as a commodity or a slave and therefore has to face various atrocities perpetrated on her by her male counterpart. It may be physical violence, psychological violence or combination of both. A woman may be tortured for various reasons. She may not be robbed of her dignity and pride by men outside her home, a woman may become a victim of cruelty within the four walls of her own house. Her trauma does not end here. At times, a woman is forced to commit suicide or she may be burned to death for various reasons.

It needs hardly any emphasis that women must have certain rights to improve their position; these rights have been provided in conventions, constitution, international covenants including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration provides the following rights:

- a. Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women made on the basis of sex, which has purpose or effect of denying equal exercise of human rights and fundamental freedom in all fields of human endeavours.
- b. Basic human rights and fundamental freedom should be guaranteed to women and this on an equal basis with men.
- c. All practices based on inferiority or superiority of either sex shall be eliminated.
- d. Assurance of Family Education which teaches that both men and women share a common role in raising child.
- e. Social and cultural patterns must be modified to eliminate sex role, stereotypes and notion of inferiority or superiority of either sex.
- f. Measures should be taken to suppress all form of exploitation of women including sexual and physical harassment.
- g. Right to vote, elect, to be elected and hold offices at all levels of government along with the right to participate in formulation of government policy.
- h. The opportunity to represent their country at international level and to participate in international organizations.
- i. Equal right to acquire, change or retain nationality.
- j. Equal access to educational opportunity and elimination of stereotyping in education and textbooks.
- k. Equal right to employment, choice of profession, remuneration, and social security.
- l. Guarantee of same legal capacity as men to contract, administer property, and appear in courts of before tribunals.
- m. Freedom of movement, right to choose residence and domicile should be granted to women.

- n. Contractual and other private restriction on legal capacity of women shall be declared null and void.
- o. Equal rights and responsibilities with men in marriage and family relationship.
- p. Equality during marriage and its dissolution.
- q. Equal rights to choose family name, profession or occupation.
- r. Equal rights to guardianship and adaptation of children.
- s. Equal rights and responsibilities and adoption of children.
- t. Abolish all existing laws, customs and regulations that discriminate against women and establish institution to protect against discrimination.

Human right of a woman means her liberation from the traditional oppressive bonds and discrimination, improvement in the concept of self and her in relation to the environment and the people around her. Social justice is an essential component of sustainable development of a nation. Women are often denied social justice, and hence, are not allowed to enjoy human rights.

Woman is the mother of Earth. She plays the role of mother, sister and daughter. She started human and social life.

Women represent half the population of mankind. They are part of the development of the country without which the development is not possible. They give birth to human beings facing many problems and educate them. They are the first teacher of the children in the beginning of life. Without them the household could not be properly managed and adorned. They can bring love, peace and affection among the human beings. Without women the real human development is not possible. The importance of women's role in the development process and to improve the status of women was recognized internationally by the United Nations.

In the June 1946, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) established the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) to ensure the empowerment of women and gender equality. Over the years, the CSW has organized different Conferences in order to assert and improve the Rights of women. So far, Four World Conference on Women have take place.

First World Conference - Mexico City, 1975

Second World Conference - Copenhagen, 1980

Third World Conference - Nairobi, 1985

Fourth World Conference - Beijing, 1995

Indian Context

India is a patriarchal society. In fact, the preference for the male child is strongly rooted in economics, particularly scarcity of agricultural resources such as land, since women have been largely left out of the agricultural process; land and its use has become a typically male domain. Women were thus discouraged from claiming any rights to land or assets of value.

Women are given equal rights and status with men by the Indian Constitution and various provisions had been made to protect the interests of the female population. Series of legislations have been enacted from time to time to provide protection to women against social discrimination, violence, etc. The Five Year Plans have been playing special attention to women's welfare emphasizing female education, access to resources and their political empowerment.

Article 14 – guarantees equality before the law and equal protection by it.

Article 15 – prohibits discrimination against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.

Article 15 (3) – empowers the state to make any special provision for women and children.

Article 16 (1) – guarantees equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment in any office under the state.

Like any other civilized country, a number of laws have been enacted in order to provide protection to women. For instance, the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, the Hindu Women's Right to Property Act, 1937, the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, Sati Prevention Act, 1987, etc. In order to provide effective protection of the rights of women who are victims of violence the Domestic Violence Act, 2005 was passed. The National Commission for Women was also set up.

The Government of India has also set up women specific administrative and economic structures, such as Women and Child Development Department at the Union and State Government levels. The National Commission for Women has been formed in several states. Additional special schemes like Rastriya Mahila Kosh, Mahila Samridhi Yojna, etc. have been launched to uplift women.

But unfortunately, these laws are hardly implemented in their letter and spirit, consequently crimes against women are increasing. Rape, dowry and domestic violence are there crimes that have increased greatly in recent years.

Rape is committed not only by the breakers of law, but also by the protectors of law. The minimum punishment for rape according to section 376 of the Indian Penal Code is seven years which may extend to life and may also be with fine.

Regarding dowry, it is unfortunate that today even among the educated, the system of dowry reigns supreme and is deep rooted in our society. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 was enacted with the objective of prohibiting the evil practice of giving and taking dowry, if a woman is dead due to dowry related crimes, within seven years of marriage and it is shown that she was subjected to cruelty and harassment by her husband or in laws such a death shall be punished with imprisonment for a term not less than seven years and may extend to the imprisonment for life.

Domestic violence is one of the most gravest and most of the violence against women erupt from inside the family. It is said that half of the number of women in India are killed in their bedrooms. In order to provide effective protection of the rights of women who are

victims of violence the Domestic Violence Act, 2005 was passed by the Indian Parliament. It came into force by the Indian Government from October, 2006.

Domestic Violence under the Act includes actual abuse or the threat of abuse whether physical, sexual, verbal, emotional or economic. The Act provides for women's right to secure Residence Order, Protection Order, Compensation Order, etc.,

In nutshell, social justice to a woman should create an atmosphere which should enable her to get out of the sense of being wronged, a situation where her dignity, self-worth and human rights could be asserted with a belief of self-preservation. It should help her to overcome the feeling of powerlessness, so that she emerges from the comforts of dependency and faces and challenges the dependency and faces and challenges the autonomy by enjoying her human rights.

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