Introduction:

Women in History

The Constitution of the Republic of India ensures equality for women and men in every sphere of life and activity. The fundamental rights of the Indian Constitution specifically mentions: "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them". Women in India have been given equality of opportunity in all matters relating to education, employment, and legal status, and they can aspire to grace the highest office of the State. However, this is truly not indicative of the existing position of women in general in the country, as yet. Though, legally and constitutionally, all women have equal access to and right to venture in every walk of life, a vast majority of them are still illiterate and uneducated. This is a paradoxical situation, which must be understood and seen in its historical perspective. The status of women and their activities can be divided into three main historical periods, the ancient, the medieval and the modern.

Ancient period

From the available documentation, it is revealed that women enjoyed a fair amount of freedom and equality with men in the fields of education and religion during the Vedic period. According to A.S. Altekar, in his well known book "Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation", wrote that in the Vedic period, women from higher sections of society were given equal rights in the field of religion, and they attained distinction in the realm of theological studies and philosophy. Distinguished women such as Gargi and Maitrayee are well known names of this period, who excelled as scholars in their own right. During the ancient period, there were icons such as Sita, Damayanti, Draupadi and three of the Panchkanyas, Ahilya, Tara, Mandodari, who are still
remembered with great reverence in Indian society. It was in the later period, approximately 500 BC, that the status of women gradually declined with the Smritis and other religious texts giving diktats which adversely affected women's freedom and rights. With the rise of Brahmaminism and due to conflicting religious and social thoughts, the place of women remained subordinate and unsatisfactory. Buddhism and Jainism, however, continued to give a place of honour to women. Women were eligible for admission to the religious order in both Buddhism and Jainism. Bhikshuni Sanghamitra was one of the main proponents of Buddhism of her time.

**Medieval Period**

The medieval period saw further deterioration in women's position in society and their subjugation in the religious and legal spheres. This was a period when important scriptures propagated the idea that women were unfit for freedom and deserved no Independence. They should be kept under the authority of men in all stages of life. During the early ADs due to foreign invasions and later in the early years of British rule in India there was further set back in the position of Indian women. The purdah system, which was not practiced as a rule in the Indian society, became prevalent due to uncertain socio-political reasons. The growing incidence of female infanticide, the custom of child marriage, and the inhuman practice of sati became a part of the social culture, along with the religious ban on widow remarriage.

**Modern Period**

In the modern period, the status of Indian women can be divided into two distinct periods, the British Rule, i.e. Pre-Independence India and Post-Independence India. The British Rule in the
18th Century brought in some degree of political orderliness, but the social structure, customs and practices remained unchanged. It was mainly during the 19th Century that the reform movement undertaken by enlightened thinkers and leaders of Indian society understood the importance of women's participation that the status of Indian women started changing for the better. Though initially all the leaders were men, women gradually came into the scene and played their role not only in changing history but also the society as a whole, through their efforts in different areas of work such as education, politics and freedom movement, women's movement and social welfare.

1.2 Review of Working Women In India

Workforce participation

Contrary to the common perception, a large percent of women in India work. The National data collection agencies accept the fact that there is a serious under-estimation of women's contribution as workers. However, there are far fewer women in the paid workforce than there are men. In urban India Women have impressive number in the workforce. As an example at software industry 30% of the workforce is female. They are at par with their male counter parts in terms of wages, position at the work place.

In rural India, agriculture and allied industrial sectors employ as much as 89.5% of the total female labour. In overall farm production, women's average contribution is estimated at 55% to 66% of the total labour. According to a 1991 World Bank report, women accounted for 94% of total employment in dairy production in India. Women constitute 51% of the total employed in forest-based small-scale enterprises.