

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract: Scholars believe that in ancient India, the women enjoyed equal status with men in all fields of life. However, some others hold contrasting views. Works by ancient Indian grammarians such as Patanjali and Katyayana suggest that women were educated in the early Vedic period. Rigvedic verses suggest that the woman married at a mature age and was probably free to select her husband. Scriptures such as Rigveda and Upanishads mention several women sages and seers, notably Gargi and Maitreyi. Some kingdoms in the ancient India had traditions such as Nagarvadhu 'bride of the city'. Women competed to win the coveted title of the Nagarvadhu. Amrapali is the most famous example of a Nagarvadhu.

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According to studies, women enjoyed equal status and rights during the early Vedic period. However, later (approximately 500 B.C.), the status of women began to decline with the Smritis (Manusmriti) and with the Islamic invasion of Babur and the Mughal empire and later Christianity curtailing women's freedom and rights. Although reformatory movements such as Jainism allowed women to be admitted to the religious order. The women in India faced confinement and restrictions. The practice of child marriages is believed to have started from around sixth century.

The Indian woman's position in the society further deteriorated during the medieval period when Sati, child marriages and a ban on widow remarriages became part of social life in India. The Muslim conquest in the Indian subcontinent brought the pardah practice in the Indian society. Among the Rajputs of Rajasthan, the Jauhar was practised. In some parts of India, the Devadasis or the temple women were sexually exploited. Polygamy was widely practiced especially among Hindu Kshatriya rulers. In many Muslim families, women were restricted to Zenana areas. In spite of these conditions, some women excelled in the fields of politics, literature, education and religion. Razia Sultana became the only woman monarch to have ever ruled Delhi. The Gond queen Durgavati ruled for fifteen years, before she lost her life

in a battle with Mughal emperor Akbar's general Asaf Khan in 1564. Chand Bibi defended Ahmednagar against the mighty Mughal forces of Akbar in 1590s. Jehangir's wife Nurjehan effectively wielded imperial power and was recognized as the real force behind the Mughal throne. The Mughal princesses Jahanara and Zebunnissa were well-known poets and also influenced the ruling administration Shivaji's mother, Jijabai was deputed as queen regent because of her ability as a warrior and an administrator. In South India, many women administered villages, towns, divisions and heralded social and religious institutions.

The Bhakti movements tried to restore women's status and questioned some of the forms of oppression. Mirabai, a saint-poet, was one of the most important Bhakti movement figures. Some other female saint-poets from this period include Akka Mahadevi, Janabai and Lal Ded. Bhakti sects within Hinduism such as the Mahanubhav, Varkari and many others were principle movements within the Hindu fold to openly advocate social justice and equality between men and women. Shortly after the Bhakti movement, Guru Nanak, the first Guru of Sikhs also preached the message of equality between men and women. He advocated that women be allowed to lead religious assemblies; to perform and lead congregational hymn singing called Kirtan or Bhajan; become members of religious

management committees; to lead armies on the battlefield; have equality in marriage, and equality in Amrit (Baptism). Other Sikh Gurus also preached against the discrimination against women. The traditions such as Sati, Jauhar and Devadasi have been banned and are largely defunct in modern India. However, some cases of these practices are still found in remote parts of India. The pardah is still practiced by many Indian women and child marriage remains prevalent despite it being an illegal practice especially under current Indian laws.

European scholars observed in the 19th century Hindu women are 'naturally chaste' and 'more virtuous' than other women. During the British Raj, many reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotirao Phule etc. fought for the upliftment of women. While this list might suggest that there was no positive British contribution during the era, that is not entirely so, since missionaries' wives like Martha Mault née Mead and her daughter Eliza Caldwell Mault are rightly remembered for pioneering the education and training of girls in south India - a practice that initially met with local resistance, as it flew in the face of tradition. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's efforts led to the abolition of the Sati practice under Governor-General William Cavendish-Bentinck in 1829. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's crusade for the improvement in condition of widows led to the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. Many women reformers such as Pandita Ramabai also helped the cause of women upliftment.

Kittur Chennamma, the queen of the princely state Kittur in Karnataka, led an armed rebellion against the British in response to the Doctrine of lapse. Abbakka Rani the queen of coastal Karnataka led the defense against invading European armies notably the Portuguese in 16th century. Rani Lakshmi Bai, the Queen of Jhansi, led the Indian Rebellion of 1857 against the British. She is now widely considered as a nationalist hero. Begum Hazrat Mahal, the co-ruler of Awadh, was another ruler who led the revolt of 1857. She refused the deals with the British and later retreated to Nepal. The Begums of Bhopal were also few of the notable female rulers during this period. They did not observe pardah and were trained in martial arts. Chandramukhi Basu, Kadambini Ganguly and Anandi

Gopal Joshi were few of the earliest Indian women to obtain educational degrees.

In 1917, the first women's delegation met the Secretary of State to demand women's political rights, supported by the Indian National Congress. The All India Women's Education Conference was held in Pune in 1927. In 1929, the Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed, stipulating fourteen as the minimum age of marriage for a girl through the efforts of Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Though Mahatma Gandhi himself married at the age of thirteen, he later urged people to boycott child marriages and called upon the young men to marry the child widows.

Women played an important part in India's independence struggle. Some of the famous freedom fighters include Bhikaji Cama, Dr. Annie Besant, Pritilata Waddedar, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Anjali Ammal, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kriplani and Kasturba Gandhi. Other notable names include Muthulakshmi Reddy, Durgabai Deshmukh etc. The Rani of Jhansi Regiment of Subhash Chandra Bose's Indian National Army consisted entirely of women including Captain Lakshmi Sahgal. Sarojini Naidu, a poet and a freedom fighter, was the first Indian woman to become the President of the Indian National Congress and the first woman to become the governor of a state in India.

Women in India now participate in all activities such as education, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology etc. The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity (Article 16), and equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)). In addition, it allows special provisions to be made by the State in favour of women and children (Article 15(3)), renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51(A) (e)) and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief. (Article 42).

The feminist activism in India picked up momentum during later 1970s. One of the first national level issues that brought the women's groups together was the Mathura rape case. The acquittal of policemen accused of raping a young girl Mathura in a police

station, led to a wide-scale protests in 1979–1980. The protests were widely covered in the national media, and forced the Government to amend the Evidence Act, the Criminal Procedure Code and the Indian Penal Code and introduce the category of custodial rape. Female activists united over issues such as female infanticide, gender bias, women health and female literacy. Since alcoholism is often associated with violence against women in India. Many women groups launched anti-liquor campaigns in Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and other states. Many Indian Muslim women have questioned the fundamental leaders' interpretation of women's rights under the *Shariat* law and have criticized the triple *Talaq* system.

In 1990s, grants from foreign donor agencies enabled the formation of new women-oriented NGOs. Self-help groups and NGOs such as Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) have played a major role in women's rights in India. Many women have emerged as leaders of local movements. For example, Medha Patkar of the Narmada Bachao Andolan. The Government of India declared 2001 as the Year of Women's Empowerment (*Swashakti*). The National Policy for The Empowerment of Women Case was passed in 2001.

Jawaharlal Nehru had said “You can tell the condition of the nation by looking at the status of women.” The following phrase of Manusmriti, “*Na Stree Swathantryam Arhati*” (woman is undeserving for independence), reflects our attitude towards women in our country. Woman suffers discrimination and injustice in all stages of her life. Declining sex ratio portrays our discrimination shown towards her even at the stage of birth. Gender wise abortions are on the rise. In economically developed states such as Haryana and Punjab the tendency is found to be more. Abortion though legal in our country, gender based abortion is a crime here. Strict measures should be taken for the implementation of Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation & Prevention of Misuse) Act 1994, which prohibits any prenatal diagnostic techniques and sex selective abortions. A shocking study reveals that half of the world's malnourished children live in India owing primarily to the lack of nutritious food available to the mother. In all the critical stages, be it infancy, childhood, adolescence or the reproductive phase many

women suffer malnutrition purely due to the discrimination and the narrow mindsets of the society.

According to Mahatma Gandhi, “If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate an entire family.” Our predominant patriarchal system doesn't provide enough chances for women to have higher education even if they wish. Girls should be motivated to take up higher education. Universal education for all below 14 years should be strictly implemented. There is an urgent necessity of framing gender sensitive curricula at all stages of primary education to address sex-stereotyping menace. Women should be allowed to work and should be provided enough safety and support to work. Legislatures such as Equal Remuneration Act, Factories Act: Constitutional safeguards such as maternity relief, and other provisions should be strictly followed. Poverty eradication policies need to be implemented. Macro economic policies would help in this drive. Through economic empowerment women's emancipation could be realized.

Dowry still remains the major reason for all the discrimination and injustice shown to women. Although dowry was legally prohibited in 1961 (Dowry Prohibition Act), it continues to be highly institutionalized. It is ridiculous to see that even among highly educated sections, the articles of dowry are proudly exhibited in the marriage as a status symbol. The practice of dowry abuse is rising in India. The most severe is ‘bride burning’, the burning of women whose dowries were not considered sufficient by their husband or in-laws. Most of these incidents are reported as accidental burns in the kitchen or are disguised as suicide. It is evident that there exist deep-rooted prejudices against women in India. Cultural practices such as these tend to subordinate women in our society. Dowry is one of those social evils that no educated woman will own up with pride; still many are adhering to it. Women should be more economically empowered and should be educated properly regarding the various legal provisions, protection from domestic violence etc. only then only this evil menace could possibly be eradicated from Indian social system.

True empowerment will only be reached when women take part actively in the decision making process of our country. Women Reservation Bill that

entitles to provide 33 per cent reservation in Parliament is a bill of utmost importance. The success of 73rd and 74th amendment which reserves certain number of seats for women in the local bodies. Mainstreaming and women's empowerment is central to human development. Empowerment of women could only be achieved if their economic and social status is improved. This could be possible only by adopting definite social and economic policies with a view of total development of women and to make them realize that they have the potential to be strong human beings.

The various articles of our constitution enshrine principle of gender equality. For considering the grievances and preventing the atrocities against women a National Commission for Women (NCW) was set up in 1990. But despite all these measures there should be a strong determination among every man that every woman in this country should be honoured. Only then empowerment in its true meaning will be realized. Swami Vivekananda had said "That country and that nation which doesn't respect women will never become great now and nor will ever in future" and in pursuit of making India a great nation, let us work towards giving women their much deserved status.

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