

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT: A COMPARISON OF THE VARIOUS TIME PERIODS

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Abstract: The present research paper tries to examine the state of women empowerment through the various time periods in the Indian legal, political and socio-economical regime. The main objective of this paper is to analyze the situation and status of women throughout the history and compare it to the present position. The authors make an attempt to define empowerment as a process in which women gain greater share of control over rights, knowledge, information, ideas, and financial resources as well as control over decision making at home, society and nation. Also, the importance of empowerment is discussed. Then the authors go on to highlight the variation in the status of women occurring across the timeline of India in the different periods: Ancient, where the status of women was good at first but saw a decline afterwards; British, where the stature of women in the society hit a tragic and dismal impact whereby they were considered of very low eminence; After independence when women started rising gradually to glory and the present times discussing the different aspects of the society and the need for enforcing these statutes and laws and spreading awareness among the different discriminating classes of women.

Keywords: Empowerment, Society, Status, Women

Introduction: Empowerment is said to be a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional and multi-layered concept. As such, it is not one thing, but is the action and interaction of various factors-physical, socioeconomic, political, mental, psychological, and attitudinal and so on. Power is the key word of the term empowerment. Power means having the capacity and the means to direct one's life towards desired, social, political and economic goals or status. Women empowerment could be described as a process in which women gain greater share of control over rights and resources like knowledge, information, ideas, and financial resources like money and access to money and control over decision making in the home, community, society and nation, and to gain power. The term women's empowerment has come to be associated with women's struggle for social justice and equality.

Human development encompasses elements that contribute critical issues of gender and development. The dignity and culture of a society can be detected from the status of women in that society. According to Rameshwari Pandya (2008) Empowerment has become the key solution to many social problems. Empowerment of women is empowerment of family/household and in turn development of a nation of a country. Empowerment of women leads to benefit not only to the individual woman and to women groups, but also to the families and community as a whole through collective action for development.

Ancient Period: The Ancient Indian women enjoyed a high status during the early Vedic period of 2000 B.C. to 1000 B.C., surpassing contemporary civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome. The Aryans were mostly busy fighting wars. However, they

regarded women as useful and productive members of society. The condition of Vedic Women was good. Women also enjoyed religious status like that of men, especially in Vedic initiation and studies. The Rig Veda provides ample evidence to prove the concept of equality of women with men as regards access and capacity to acquire the highest knowledge, even the knowledge of the Absolute. The Rig Veda accorded the highest social status to qualified women of those days. Women were appointed at important positions. In that period, marriage was not compulsory. It was considered a social and religious duty, and was generally undertaken at an advanced age. On the whole, during this period the position of women was high.

However, the status and position of women fell in the later Vedic and epic periods. They were not considered equal to men and did not enjoy the same rights and privileges as men. Knowledge of the Vedas became limited among women. Wives became silent partners of religious ceremonies. Manu, the celebrated ancient law-giver, stated that man should enjoy unquestioned supremacy over his wife. He declared that women had no right to study the Vedas. Infant marriages and polygamy were prevalent during this period. Three instances of "Sati" are recorded in the Ramayana and one in the Mahabharata. Despite all this, women were respected and idealized, as for instance Sita, the wife of Lord Rama, Sati Ansuya, Savitri and Damyanti. Buddhism and Jainism were at first indifferent towards women and Lord Buddha was reluctant to admit women into his faith. Later though, women were admitted to Buddhism and Jainism.

However, by the 15th century, the situation underwent a change. There was a general revival of

Indian society which led to considerable improvement in the status of women. The Bhakti movement played a helpful role. The saints preached equality of the sexes and pleaded for equal opportunities for women.

British Period: When the British came in to contact with the Indian people in the latter half of the 18th century, the position of Indian woman had deteriorated to the lowest level. Ideologically, women were considered a completely inferior species, having no significance, no personality. Socially they were kept in complete subjection, denied all rights and were suppressed and oppressed, on having been branded as “basically lacking an ethical fiber”.

A distinct change was noticeable when Indian society bore the impact of the British rule and of new ideas. In Bengal, the Brahmo Samaj movement made rapid progress, arousing a new desire among women for freedom. A few women overcame their social handicaps and achieved positions of distinction. They included Toru Datta, Ramabai, Swarana Kumari Devi and Kamini Roy. These attempts notwithstanding, women did not get the benefit of Western education. Women of upper classes suffered from the custom of enforced widowhood and a ban on divorce.

During the non-cooperation movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi, he directly appealed to the women of India that led to the awakening of thought in women. Women joined men in equal footing during the great struggle for Indian's Independence.

This participation of women in the national struggle loosened the social bondage in which they were held. Their equal participation with men in the struggle led to the breakdown of traditional conceptions and brought about a profound change in the attitude of women.

Thousands of women took part in the freedom struggle under Gandhiji's leadership fearlessly facing police lathis and guns. They gradually became conscious of their rights.

Soon after the Government of India Act of 1935 introducing provincial autonomy came into effect, many women became ministers in Congress governments. Many women took to studying economics, sociology, science, mathematics, etc. Social hindrances began to disappear gradually. Purdah almost became a thing of the past. In the social and political fields, men and women started working side by side. Educated girls began to marry by choice and some of them took to the stage. Music and dancing were assiduously cultivated and some of the women achieved world fame in the arts.

In 1914, an All-India Muslim Ladies Conference was organized. In 1924, it passed a resolution suggesting a number of social reforms. Among educated Muslim women, Purdah was greatly relaxed. The position of Muslim Women registered a marked improvement.

After Independence: The change in women position and status turned out to be further obvious immediately after the freedom. Indian women made their imprint by getting to be Governors, Cabinet ministers, and ambassadors. Several measures were taken by the Government of India to allocate equal status to women in the financial, political and social fields. More avenues were opened to them to demonstrate their natural talents and participation in the national exercises.

Indian women, like men, have the right to vote and the right to be elected. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the first women Prime Minister of India served for fifteen years and remained the acknowledged leader of the most powerful political party in India. She was considered to be the most powerful woman in the contemporary world. Women can serve on juries, and there are many women doctors, lawyers and even justices.

The Present: After the British left, India modernized along various dimensions vastly and greatly. Still, the sex ratio in the country saw a lacking trend in all these years. Many of the factors continued to cause this decline in the sex ratio including and not limited to:

- Females are under-enumerated in the Indian census.
- Indian families prefer sons, and female infants are consequently neglected.
- Frequent and excessive child-bearing has an adverse effect on the health of women.
- Certain diseases have a high incidence in women in India.

All these indicate the worsening condition of women as a whole. Its social manifestations may be seen in the increasing incidence of dowry and the declining position of women due to erosion of their economic and social roles. The process of development itself has generated changes, which have widened and increased socio-economic inequalities, in general, and between men and women in particular.

The Politico-legal Aspect: Though the situation is improving much and even though women are considered to be epitomes of self-sacrifice and self-denial, yet they have been made the victims of all inequalities, indignities, inequities and discriminations, from time immemorial.

These are some of the factors that prompted the legislature to make various laws to give the women their due share. The Constitution of India prohibits discrimination on the ground of sex. This prohibition of gender-based discrimination has been given the status of a fundamental right. Various other laws have been enacted to deal with the personal matters like marriage, divorce, succession etc. with regard to the women.

The criminal law also contains numerous provisions to deal with the crimes committed against women; enactments like the Dowry Prohibition Act supplement the existing criminal laws to combat the evil of dowry. A number of Labour and industrial laws provide for the protection and welfare of the women, which include maternity benefit, prohibition of employment of women in dangerous activities and crèche facility for the children of working women. In order to curb the immoral and anti- social practice of prostitution, the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act has been enacted. The female feticide and infanticide have assumed dangerous proportions and the determination of sex of the fetus which became possible due to the advanced scientific inventions, abetted the commission of these inhuman acts. The Parliament has passed the Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation & Prevention of misuse) Act, 1994 to arrest this undesirable trend. These legislative measures aforementioned are only illustrative in nature and not at all exhaustive.

The Parliament of India has realized the importance of a monitoring institution to examine and investigate all the matters relating to the safe guards provided for woman under the Constitution and other Laws. The activeness of the Parliament and the Government can be seen from the following table (Table 1) showing the significant features of the different five year plans in India.

Table 1:

5 Year Plan	Year	Objectives related to Women Empowerment
1 st	1951-1956	Envisaged a number of welfare measures for women.
2 nd	1956-1961	Empowerment of women was closely linked with overall approach of intensive agricultural development programmes
3 rd	1961-1966	Female education, a major welfare measure.
4 th	1969-1974	Continuing efforts for development in education
5 th	1974-1979	Training of women, who need income and protection, women's welfare and development bureau, was set up for social welfare.
6 th	1980-1985	Shift from welfare to development, recognition of restriction to access to resource.
7 th	1985-	Emphasized Need for gender

	1990	equality and empowerment
8 th	1992-1997	Empowering women at grassroots level through panchayat raj institutions.
9 th	1997-2002	Adopted a strategy of women's component plan.
10 th	2002-2007	Empowering through declaration of policy for empowerment of women.
11 th	2007-2012	Reduce birth inequality.

The Change: The portrayal of woman as a wife has enjoyed ideally a status almost equally to that of her husband and performed both social as well as biological functions. Even today, the Indian girls are still brought up on models portraying selflessness, self-denial, and sacrifice. The desire for mutual affection and love is beginning to appear in their conception of their relationship with their husbands. The husband-wife relationship has become more equal in character and much more companionable. More freedom of choice in marriage is thus an accompaniment to the change in form of the family. Women's equality in terms of education, employment, and power is still an individual rather than a universal achievement. The majority of our women are still content to accept an inferior status. This is by and large due to the fact that, although legally women have equal rights with men, there are not enough jobs for women and working women are not adequately protected from exploitation.

Conclusion: What can be drawn from this research paper is the variation in the timeline of India for the emancipation and empowerment of the female gender. The study provides with the result apt to the objective with which it started. As we saw in the different parts of this paper, the role of women as well as the importance, protection and the degree of empowerment of them kept on changing through different time periods. The fundamental principal behind this change, though seems to be legal, political, or hugely social, but, this principal leading to the appreciation or deterioration of the status of women in the society is a result of ideology.

The ideology of the society or the so called societal trends are the root cause to these variations in the status of women. For example, illegality of dowry is a fact known by many but still it prevails because of the societal trends and societal pressures on the families. Also, what contributes further to the worsening of the situation is the ideology of people and the society which leads people to believe and consider boys as assets and girls as liabilities. That's the evil accounting of the present orthodox and small minded

societal thinking. Thus, for a better world, first we have to wash the insides of ourselves and our ideologies, thinkings and philosophies.

If today, some women are being provided with better services, protection and support, it is because of the variations in the societal classes. The lower class women don't get much protection, awareness or even information about the rights and securities available

to them. The lack of awareness and education about the rights of women among the lower class of women must be tackled. Though the government and the legislature have enforced and continue to act towards making statutes and laws, what lacks is the enforcement and awareness about these.

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