

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA - A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF STATUS AND EDUCATION

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Abstract: The women issues have received tremendous attention in the planning circle and in wide intellectual discussions and forums at national and global platforms. However the existing lacuna in the formulation and execution of the policies has not changed the grass root situation to a great extent. On the encouraging front, in the South Asian countries there have been relatively increasing economic participation in past one decade. Statistically the rate of literacy among women has also increased. The educational and occupational patterns have also changed and widened with women entering the domains, which till decade back was considered to be dominated by men. Further there has been encouraging rise in the percentage of the women joining service sector especially banking and Information Technology. In the background of the gigantic transformation, the core issue, which still remains unanswered, is that of women's right and empowerment. The paper focuses the situation of women from the ancient through medieval to the modern ages addressing the problems faced by women and the ways by which they had overcome the obstacles.

Keywords: Educational reforms for women, Position of women during ruling ages, Status of Women, Strength to Overcome, Women's Responsibilities.

Introduction: Women bear almost all responsibility for meeting basic needs of the family, yet are systematically denied the resources, information and freedom of action they need to fulfill this responsibility. Two-thirds of the world's illiterates are female. Of the millions of school age children not in school, the majority are girls. Studies show that when women are supported and empowered, all of society benefits. Their families are healthier, more children go to school, agricultural productivity improves and incomes increase. In short, communities become more resilient.

Women's rights and issues have always been a subject of serious concern of academicians, intelligentsia and policy makers. From pastoral society to contemporary information and global society, the role of women has changed drastically. The continuity of changes in socio-economic and psycho-cultural aspects of human living has influenced the role of women. With the process of Industrialization, Modernization and Globalization showing its deep impact on the human society all over the world, the role and responsibilities of women has attained new definition and perspective. Further this has also led to addition of responsibilities and widened the role of women who also shares the financial responsibilities.

Status of Women through the Ages: The status of women from the Rig Vedic period underwent a lot of changes. Education was given equally to women during the early times. Women handled different professions like medicine, business, defense and administration [1]. Due to number of changes slowly a patriarchal system emerged in which the women were relegated to the background. The position and status of women is not uniform over the periods of history. Rekha Roy argues that they

face different types of problems due to their different socio-cultural settings [2]. In the sangam society women was actually placed in a secondary position. They were not permitted to fight in the battle field and education given to them was different from that of men. In general the women are to look after her husband, children and family affairs. The sangam literature also reveals the higher status enjoyed by men folk. In the case of Kovalan, his wife Kannagi dedicated her life for the happiness of her husband Kovalan, even though he had an affair with Mathavi [3]. In course of time, in accordance with the changing needs of time, women experienced different problems. They contributed for economic prosperity and were working with men in agricultural production, weaving and in other professions that economically supports the family system.

Secondary Status of Women: One side of history shows the faith among the Indians about "Shakti" or the "Women Power" to be the strongest energy. The other side of history is colored in black, grey shades of dowry, child marriage, sati and other related issues that affect them. Hinduism defines woman to be an equal partner. The Ardhanariswara concept gives equality to women. The concept of "Shiv-Shakti" indicates that a man is incomplete without a woman. Holy Marriage is security for a woman and it might be an easier way of accumulating wealth for a man. Parents of a girl child educate their daughter and accumulate wealth for finding a "better groom" for her. If she qualifies in terms of property, education, income only then she has a chance to get a suitable match. Child marriage and sati are still prevalent in states like Rajasthan. Denying a girl her right to live and to live happily are heinous crimes. But sadly, even in the 21st century India, women struggle to find

their right place. Dowry deaths have not become a talk of past nor has woman's secondary status elevated to equal [4].

Practice of Sati: Sati was a social practice which was prevalent in many parts of our country. According to this practice a woman who lost her husband has to jump into the funeral pyre of her husband. The Sangam literature reveals the existence of this practice, especially among the royal women. She who follows her husband in death dwells in heaven for as many years as there is hair in the human body" was the belief people had [5]. After about this time, instances of *sati* began to be marked by inscribed memorial stones. The earliest of these are found in Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, though the largest collections date from several centuries later, and are found in Rajasthan. These stones, called *devli*, or sati-stones, became shrines to the dead woman, who was treated as an object of reverence and worship. The only choice before a widow was to suffer throughout her life due to social disrespect or to commit sati [6]. The ritual has prehistoric roots, and many parallels from other cultures are known. Voluntary death at funerals has been described in northern India before the Gupta Empire. During the British this practice continued and social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy experienced this inhuman practice in their own home fought against it. Later acts were passed to prevent it. When in independent India this practice continued in some places but government banned it. The practice of sati reveals how much of atrocities were committed against the women and it explains the secondary status of women.

Position of Women During The Bhakti Movement: The Bhakti movement tried to restore women's status and questioned some of the existing forms of oppression. Mirabai, a female saint-poet, was one of the most important Bhakti movement figures. Some other female saint-poets from this period include Akka Mahadevi, Rani Janabai. Bhakti sects within Hinduism such as the Mahanubhav, Varkari 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. Other Sikh Gurus also preached against discrimination on women. But generally speaking, despite such good guidelines women neither had any property rights nor were allowed any religious studies [7]. The Bhakti Movement played an important role in eliminating the dominance against the women. It always insisted on equality of women with men.

Among the Vaishnavites there were twelve Alvars of whom Pey, Bhudam and Poygai called Mudal Alvars lived in the 6th century and are supposed to have been contemporaries. Nammalvar considered by Vaishnavas, as the greatest among the Alvars was a great and true mystic and the author of a thousand verses collectively called Tiruwaymozhi; His hymns are treated as equal in spiritual merit to the Vedic hymns. Women have shown their willingness to dedicate their lives to the task of raising consciousness [8]. Women and *shudras*, both at the bottom of the traditional hierarchy ordering society, became the examples of true humility and devotion.

Views of Siddhars on Women: Thayumanavaer vividly described the powers of siddhars in detail. It is believed that they were experts in medicine and alchemy, which convert any base metal into gold. Even though a number of references is available on lot of siddhars only 18 of them are regarded as most important. One important factor on siddha was they are mostly against idol worship. They believed that lord Shiva is enshrined in their heart. Pattinathar spent his youth in inappropriate ways. He ruined his wealth and health by his liason with lot of women. And at the verge of committing suicide he was believed to be saved by Lord Muruga. While praising the Lord in his poetic works one can come across his hatred for women folk. He advised men from the temptation of indulgence with women that is ruinous in nature. Several siddhars used strong words against women and their destructive power over men through their physical charm. Their outlook on women represented their strong opinion against women folk. They even suspected the chastity of women.

Position of Women Under Imperial Cholas And Vijayanagar Dynasties: The practice of Sati was common, though voluntary, and mostly practiced among the upper classes. Over fifty inscriptions attesting to this have been discovered in the Vijayanagara principality alone. These inscriptions are called *Satikal* or *Sati-virakal*. *Satikals* commemorated the death of a woman by entering into fire after the death of her husband while *Sati-virakals* were made for a woman who performed *Sati* after her husband's heroic death. Some times the woman was raised to the level of a demi-god. It was known to have occurred in the south from the 9th century through the period of the Vijayanagara Empire. In one instance more than fifty women committed Sati in Hampi after the battle of Talikota. In the North-Western Karnataka about fifteen sati stones brought from Vijayanagara can be found. The performance of sati considered to be a strict practice which was later commemorated by their relatives through the ages. The relatives of Sati when they migrated took Sati stones along with them and

resurrected at their new abodes. It shows the importance attached to the act of Sati. The socio-religious movements of the previous centuries, such as Lingayatism, provided momentum for flexible social norms to which women were expected to abide. By this time South Indian women had crossed most barriers and were actively involved in administration, business and trade, and involvement in the fine arts. Tirumalamba Devi who wrote *Varadambika Parinayam* and Gangadevi who wrote *Madhuravijayam* were among the notable women poets of the era. Early Telugu women poets like Tallapaka Timmakka and Atukuri Molla became popular during this period. The court of the Nayaks of Tanjore is known to have patronised several women poets. The Devadasi system as well as legalised prostitution existed in a few streets in each city. The popularity of harems amongst men of the royalty is well known from records. From the available information on the status of women during the vijayanagar period, one can come to the conclusion that generally they were placed in a secondary position despite achievement of some individual women. Women were dominated and always kept under the control of men. They were forced to be for pleasure and hard work. Marriage was compulsory for all the girls except for those opted for asceticism. Brahman girls were married between ages 8 and 10 from sixth century onwards up to the modern times. Polygamy was permitted to all who could afford and it was especially popular among Kshatriyas for political reasons.

Position of Women Under The British Rule: Following the advent of Europeans some changes were felt in the field of education. Despite social opposition, education slowly penetrated into the rural areas. Schools and colleges were started exclusively for women. With remarkable ability women like Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy proved that education can change the fate of women. Her zeal and enthusiasm brought many changes in the avenue of education and upliftment of women. Mahatma Pule, Gandhiji, E.V.R.Periar and other great souls worked for the emancipation of women. They fought against the age old system in which the women were secluded from important decision making process.

India's independence heralded a new era in which women's education, awareness and their popular participation in all walks of the life changed their fortune. Even though equal opportunity and the process of empowerment were denied to millions of women, the progress achieved in this direction in six decades is remarkable. Empowerment is a complex process in which education plays an important role. The education gives opportunities for the women to understand things in proper perspective. It also facilitates their upward mobility due to economic

independence that was denied to them earlier. Even though there are other variables that contribute for their empowerment, the role of education as a catalyst is very important.

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 Raj era, that is not entirely so, since missionaries' wives like Martha Mault née Mead and her daughter Eliza Caldwell née Mault are rightly remembered for pioneering the education and training of girls in South India - a practice that initially met with local resistance. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's [9] 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. 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 [10]. In 1929, the Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed, stipulating fourteen as the minimum age of marriage for a girl through the efforts of Mahomed Ali Jinnah [11]. 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.

Development Of Schools And Institutions Of Higher Learning: Although education in India started receiving some attention under British rule with the Charter Act of 1813 and obtained full recognition in the famous Macaulay's Minute of 1835, education of women in India still remained absent from the Indian society. It is only when the "Wood's Dispatch", containing Educational development programme was passed in 1854 by the East India Company that a special reference was made of education and employment of women and the Government assumed direct responsibility for making women literate. Some progress of women's education particularly at first stage of education that is primary level, was reported only in respect of a separate school for girls. Some women were also imparted training for appointment as teachers in girls' schools. But it is only from the year 1882, when systematized educational data began to be collected, the progress of women's education came to be assessed.

From 1882-1947, the progress of girls education was reported to be slow but steady, confined as it was to

the affluent sections of the society or those families which were in the favour of foreign rulers. Nevertheless, starting from no education at the advent of British rule that is 0 per cent of the total enrolment of educational institutions under formal system, the enrolment of women increased to nearly 25 per cent of the total enrolment by the end of the British regime (1947) and this, is in no way a mean achievement. Due credit should be given to the foreign rulers at least for initiating the process of educational development of women as a part of the formal system of education in India. The enrolment of girls in secondary schools during these two decades increased five times [12]. Primary education enrolment, of course, expanded from 1.24 lakhs to 3.45 lakhs, during this period. While in 1882, only one girl out of 3 was studying in mixed school, the ratio went up, to one out of two in 1902.

The two decades from 1902-22 witnessed a more active role of the Government in the field of women's education on the one hand and impact of Freedom Movement on women's education on the other. It is during this period that Lord Curzon supported the cause of Women's education and the similar policy was enunciated by a Government Resolution on Education Policy (1913). Women's University in 1916 in Bombay which is now known as Shrimati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Women's University, catering to the needs of higher education of nearly 10 thousand girls and women every year. This University was established with the following objectives: (a) To make provision for the higher education of women through modern Indian Languages (mother tongue) as the media of instruction; (b) To regulate pre-university education; to start, aid, maintain and affiliate institutions for such education and to formulate courses of studies specially suited to the needs and requirements of women; (c) To make provision for the training of teachers for primary and secondary schools; (d) To institute and confer such degrees and diplomas, titles, certificates and marks of honour in respect of degrees and examinations as may be prescribed by the regulation; and (e) Such other objects, not inconsistent with these as may be added from time to time by the senate.

During 1922-1947 periods, women's education got a further fillip, as a result of the rise in the marriage age of women, and the awakening among women injected by Social Reformers and Mahatma Gandhi's Movement and also by the establishment of the All India Women's Conference (1926). The significant event of the period was the emphasis laid on women's education in the Report of the Hartog Committee which stated that education should not be the privilege of one sex only, but equally the right of both the sexes and that women's education would be expanded further for the advancement of education

in India. It is during this period that a visible progress of women's education was witnessed. The enrolment of girls in primary schools moved up from nearly 12 lakhs in 1922 to nearly 35 lakhs in 1946-47 and enrolment in secondary schools increased from about 37 thousands in 1921-22 to a record of 281 thousands. But the significant progress occurred in higher education where the enrolment of girls increased from merely 1529.

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) [13]. 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 [14]. Many Indian Muslim women have questioned the fundamental leaders' interpretation of women's rights.

Under the British, secular education was introduced and slowly women started learning in schools. At first there was opposition to sending girls to schools due to the conservative outlook of the society. In course of time the opposition slowly changed to encourage women's education. From the statistics given above one can understand how the education of girl students is gaining momentum even though still it is not available to all girl children.

Conclusion: All through the ages women were considered to be subordinate and secondary in the society. In the sangam society women were actually placed in the secondary position, but in course of time, according to the changing needs women contributed for economic prosperity and were working with men shouldering their responsibilities. They have proved that they too have the strength and potentialities to equal men of their times.

Following the Sangam age the status of women underwent various stages. During the Bhakti cult and under the impact of siddhars one can see the gradual change in women's status. Before the advent of British, the conservative Hindu society restricted the movement of women. Their status indicates how they are playing only secondary role and ill-treated by men. In continuation to the empowerment process the Bhakti movement also tried to restore the women status and challenged some of the existing forms of oppression and played an important role in eliminating the dominance against women. The most

notable remark during the Bhakti movement was the entry of female poetesses. Through the demonstrations of their devotion to God they composed poetry related to existence of norms against women.

Following the advent of Europeans some changes were felt in the empowerment of women. Education was considered to be the major area where empowerment was thought to be achievable. The schemes and policies uplifted women in all the aspects and also paved the way for eliminating evil practices against the women. The technological

advancement is also resulting in the enhancement of women status in their social atmosphere. The tremendous changes in education of women in the 21st century and their social status is an eye opener to development. With grit and determination women overcome several obstacles that kept them in bondage. Though several other variables like social change and support system of the government and the change of attitude of the society play a significant role, we cannot deny the great role of education in the empowerment of Indian women.

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