

# Challenges of Women Empowerment in India from Ancient to Modern Times

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper attempts to analyse the status of Women Empowerment in India from Ancient times to Modern times and highlights the issues and challenges of Women Empowerment. In early Vedic period women enjoyed equal status with men. But later, the status of women began to deteriorate. Today the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Practically Women Empowerment is still an illusion of reality. We observe in our everyday life how women become victimized by various social evils. Empowerment of women is essentially developing as it aware individuals. Empowerment makes women politically active, economically productive and independent. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. The study is based on purely from secondary sources. The study reveals that women of India are relatively disempowered and they somewhat lower status than that of men in spite of many efforts undertaken by Government. It is found that acceptance of unequal gender norms by women are still prevailing in the society. The study concludes by an observation that access to Education, Employment and change in social structure are only the enabling factors to Women Empowerment.*

**Key words:** Empowerment, Education, Health, Historical Background.

## Introduction:

The Best thermometer to the progress of nation is its treatment of Women

- Swami Vivekananda

Women constitute almost 50% of the World's population but India has shown disproportionate sex ratio whereby female's population has been comparatively lower than males. As far as their social status is concerned, they are not treated as equal to men in all the places. Women are treated equally in the Western culture but on the contrary the Indian women are not treated equally in the Indian society, because of gender biasness. Unless women are empowered, issues like health, literacy and population will remain unsolved. Empowerment of women is attempted to address two important issues –(a) reducing gender inequalities (discrimination) and (b) building equality in nation's development (enhancing women's participation).

## Ancient times:

In India's ancient culture women was very much honoured. At that time women was recognized by the term 'JANANI' (The Mother). Manu, the great law-maker, said long ago, "where women are honoured, there resides the Gods." In the Hindu scriptures, women are considered as DEVI and SHAKTI, the most cherished symbol of love and creation. The Vedic age is specially credited with the freedom it had granted to women. Women enjoyed the privilege of receiving education.

Wives of *rishis* were partners with their husbands in spiritual activities, Wives are thus befittingly called 'Ardhangini' (better half). They are not only given an important role but an equal position too along with men. But unfortunately in the later vedic period and Buddhist period also women had not been considered as equal to men. They were rather shunned.

## Medieval times:

Medieval India saw many foreign conquests, which resulted in the decline of women's status. In the later period the position of women went on deteriorating due to the influence of the Muslim culture. During the Muslim Period women were deprived of their rights of equality with men. They were compelled to stay inside the house, within the four walls. This was due to Islamic influence. In fact, today also in some Islamic countries, women have lots of restrictions.

In order to protect them, Indian women started using '*Pardah*' (a veil), which covers the body. In the way their freedom was affected. All this gave rise to some new social evils such as child marriage, *sati*, *Jauhar* and restriction on girl's education.

**Sati** : The ritual of sitting on the funeral pyre of the husband and getting burnt to death is known as "Sati". According to some Hindu scriptures, women dying as "Sati" go straight to heaven. Sati

was considered to be a better option than living as a widow. Some of the scriptures like 'Medhatiti' had different views. It says that Sati is like committing suicide, so one should avoid this.

**Jauhar:** Jauhar was such a custom in Rajput societies where mass suicide occurred. In this custom Rajput women immolated themselves while their husbands were still alive. When a Rajput Sainik sure that they were going to die at the hands of their enemy, then all the women arrange a large pyre and set themselves afire, while their husbands used to fight the last decisive battle known as "Shaka", with the enemy, thus protecting the sanctity of the women and the whole clan.

**Child Marriage:** Girls were married off at the age of 8-10 in Medieval India. They were not allowed access to education and were treated as the material being. Thus, women were compared with animals and were married off at an early age. Child marriage also brought some more problems such as-increased birth rate, poor health of women, high mortality rate of women and children.

**Restriction on Widow Remarriage:** The condition of widows in medieval India was very poor. They were treated as a material and for them a lot of restrictions were there. Their presence in any good work was strictly prohibited. They were not allowed to remarry. In medieval India, living as a Hindu widow was a sort of a curse.

**Purdah System:** The veil or 'Purdah' system was widely prevalent in medieval Indian society. It was used to protect them from the eyes of foreign rulers who invaded India in that period. But this system curtailed women's freedom.

**Women Education:** The girls of Medieval India, specially Hindu society were not given formal education. They were given education related to household chores. On the other hand, in Muslim society, some of the monarchs established separate schools for girls, as Akbar had done. Tutors were appointed for exercises in the fine arts. Some of the learned women were themselves patrons of learning, as -Sultana Raziya, Gulbadan Begum(Babur's daughter), Salima Sultana(another daughter of Babur), Mohan Anaga(Akbar's foster mother), Nurjahan, Mumtaz mahal etc.

#### **Modern Times:**

We now enter into our discussion on the development of Women Empowerment in the modern period. We can count on certain names from the British India where women set examples

of extraordinary bravery which many men might not have been able to show. Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi was the one such woman. She was in a true sense, the leader of uprising of 1857.

There are certain men who took the cause of women in India. There have been social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Dayananda Saraswati who have helped women gain their previous status in society.

**Present Status of Women in Indian Society:** The status of women in modern India is a sort of a paradox. Compared to the past, women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality, they have to still travel a long way. Their path is full of roadblocks. They face various problems like-

- (i) Malnutrition
- (ii) Poor Health
- (iii) Maternal Mortality
- (iv) Lack of Education
- (v) Mistreatment
- (vi) Overworked
- (vii) Lack of Power
- (viii) Child Marriage
- (ix) Dowry
- (x) Female Infanticide
- (xi) Divorce

#### **Ways to Empower Women:**

1. Changes in women's mobility and social interaction.
2. Changes in women's labour patterns
3. changes women's access to and control over resources
4. Changes in women's control over Decision making
5. Providing education
6. Self-employment and self-help group
7. Providing minimum needs like Nutrition, Health, Sanitation, Housing
8. Other than this society should change the mentality towards the word Women
9. Encouraging women to develop in their fields they are good at and make a career.

#### **Government Schemes for Women Empowerment:**

In India Government schemes for women development began in 1994, but the actual participation began only in 1974. Some of these schemes are as follows-

1. Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) 1992-93
2. Mahila Samridhi Yojana(MSY) october ,1993
3. Indira Mahila Yojana(IMY) 1995
4. Women Entrepreneur Development Programme given top priority in 1997-98

5. Mahila Samakhya being implemented in about 9000 villages
6. Swayasjdha
7. Swa Shakti Group
8. Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women(STEP)
9. Swalamban
10. Creches/Day care centre for the children of working and ailing mother
11. Hostels for working Women
12. Swadhar
13. National Mission for Empowerment of Women
14. Integrated Child Development Services(ICDS)1975
15. Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescence Girls (2010)
16. Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) 2009-2010
17. Dhanalakahmi (2008)
18. Short Stay Homes
19. Vjjawala (2007)
20. Scheme for Gender Budgeting (xi plan)
21. Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP)
22. Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSEM)
23. Prime Minister's Rojgar Yojana (PMRY)
24. Women's Development Corporation Scheme (WDCS)
25. Working Women's Forum
26. Indira Mahila Kendra
27. Mahila Samiti Yojana
28. Khadi and village Industries Commission
29. Indira Priyadarahini Yojana
30. SBI's Sree Shakti Scheme
31. SIDBI's Mahila Udyan Nidhi Mahila Vikas Nidhi
32. NGO's Credit Schemes
33. National Banks for Agriculture and Rural Development's Schemes
34. Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana

It is not only the Government but also various non-governmental organizations playing an equal important role in facilitating women empowerment.

#### **Conclusion :**

So, with reference to my paper, if we analyse the role of women from ancient times to the present,

the status of woman in the Indian society was controversial. The situation of woman in India was always on the stake and needs lots of improvement in all spheres of life. Empowerment of Women would become more relevant if women are educated , well informed and can take decisions. Women's equality in power sharing , decision making at all levels will have to be ensured for the achievement of the goals of empowerment. In the modern democratic society, women should be accepted as equal with equal rights and privileges. She must be given genuine respect for her individuality. Women must realize that life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage. The positive side of the picture is that the new Indian woman is emerging to claim traditional male space, to excel at a level that would have been perceived as impossible a generation ago. Finally, society must take initiative to create a climate in which there is no gender discrimination and women have full opportunities of self decision making and participating in social, political, and economic life of the country with a sense of equality.

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