

TRAJECTORY OF WOMEN EMANICIPATION IN INDIA

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Abstract: Women Emancipation is a phenomenon which aspires to secure freedom of self-actualization and personal growth for women, acquisition of identical rights for them and removal of gender bias from behavioural patterns. The need of women emancipation arose because of gender inequities and patriarchy prevailing in the Indian society since days of yore. Women have been most disregarded and misconceived creatures in Indian cultural domain. Detrimental practices against women and curtailment of their socio-political rights have been a convention since ages. To ameliorate the lot of women, several social reformers appeared on the scene in the colonial phase and launched crusades against victimization of females. In Post-independence period, India has witnessed a massive movement for equality of women with men which has borne rich dividends. The present study seeks to trace the transition in status of women in India in different historical epochs and highlight their contemporary status in society.

Keywords: Women Emancipation, Evil Practises, Liberation, Status, Reforms.

I. Introduction

The term 'women emancipation' pertains to the course, strategy and multiple endeavours to liberate women from the dominance and imperious demands of male counterparts and conventional power structures. It generally enables women and specifically disadvantaged women to gain an approach and hold over all types of assets and opportunities in a nation. The necessity for emancipation of Indian women was felt due to the fact that since ancient times they had been compelled to occupy a subsidiary position in comparison to men and were downgraded to periphery. They were being subdued in household and community for multifarious reasons. The perpetuation of evil practices in social milieu resulted in women being unable to corner a dignified position as unconfined and individualistic beings. In such a grim scenario, several organizations and crusades spearheaded by both men and women cropped up for their upliftment and pushed the issues related to women to the forefront. The contemporary status of women is a product of several transitional phases spread over a long period of time. According to Altekar, "one of the best ways to understand the spirit of the civilization and to appreciate its excellencies and realise its limitations is to study the history of the position and status of women in it." By gauging their status across various historical phases, one can comprehend the position of women in present context in a better manner. The standing of women in Indian society can be broadly studied in three main stages - Ancient Period, Medieval Period and Modern Era.

II. Status of women in Ancient Period

The deviations in status of women in Ancient Era can be analysed by splitting the ancient Indian society into four well defined stages viz the Early Vedic Period, the Epic Period, the Period of Buddhism and Jainism and the Age of Dharmashastras & Puranas.

III. The Early Vedic or Rig Vedic Period - The Indian cultural heritage commences with the Vedas. The Early Vedic Phase was the integrative period of Rig Veda which not only forms the mainstay of the Hindu philosophy and civilization but is also the first narrative to explore the role of women. In the early Vedic period, women did not occupy a secondary position vis a vis the males in social hierarchy. Rather they commanded a dignified stance and were equipped with reasonable rights in social and religious realms. The prospects to acquire scholarly and spiritual benchmarks were open to them. No differentiation was made on grounds of education and girls were entitled to same privileges as sons. The sacred thread ceremony of 'Upanayana' was bestowed on both boys and girls at the age of seven after which they were sent to Gurukuls. There were two categories of learned women – Brahnavadinis and Sadyovadhus. Brahnavadinis were women who chose the path of Vedic studies and devoted their lives to quest for knowledge. They were epitomes of intellectual expertise, natural philosophy and spiritual insight. The Rig Veda contains hymns written by twenty-seven of these women scholars. Eminent among brahnavadinis were Vak, Ambhrini, Lopamudra, Vishwara, Sikta, Ghosha, Gargi and Maitreyi. The Sadyovadhus also nurtured an elevated spiritual identity and amidst their domestic responsibilities they sought unparalleled knowledge. Women in the Vedic era were so proficient in education that even the divine representation of learning was perceived as a woman designated as Goddess Saraswati. Furthermore, women belonging to Kshatriya caste were trained in self-defence skill and handling arms. The reference to female warriors such as Shashiyasi, Vadhrimati, Vishpala, Danu and Sarama also surface in Vedas.

Marriage in Vedic period was considered as a sacred duty and bonded the pair with similar rights. The Vedic literature hints that that the Kshatriya girls were allowed to marry as per their will and this was realized through the observance of 'Swayanvara'. The idea of Dan or gift was widespread in the Vedic period but the tradition of dowry was untraceable. Presence of women was acknowledged in performance of religious ceremonies and the wife was revered as 'ardhagini' and 'sahadharmini'. Performance of certain ceremonies was considered incomplete without her presence. Women engaged themselves in religious discussions and were not debarred from studying sacred literature. In royal households, women were involved in decision making and administrative tasks. Women were held in great respect as the, "very source of Purusharthas, not only Dharma, Artha and Kama, but even Moksha."

The high born indulged in polygamy but for the commoners, monogamy was the prevalent form of marriage during the Vedic age. People were oblivious of the likelihood cessation of conjugal relationship. The notion of widow remarriage was in trend and the widow could remarry with her brother-in-law.

The prerogatives of women in receiving property were constricted. The widow was devoid of the property of her dead husband and was expected to lead a life characterized by severe self-discipline and abstention from all forms of indulgence. The married daughter was forbidden from taking over her father's property but Rig Veda acknowledged the entitlement of spinster to one fourth share in patrimony. An abandoned wife could claim one third share in her husband's property. Women had an exclusive right over presents and property received by them in marriage known as 'streedhan'. The women in early Vedic period had the benefit of unrestricted economic freedom and were occupied in spinning, weaving, agricultural activities and teaching. In nutshell, Early Vedic Period offered perfect and blissful conditions for women.

IV. The Epic or Later Vedic Period - The state of being a woman was glorified and she held a respectable position within and out of the doors of the home during the Epic Period of Indian Civilization. The two classical epics of India, Ramayana and Mahabharata portrayed women as the source of dharma, bliss and abundance. According to Thakur, "the bride was designated as the queen of the house whose position was supreme above all the members of groom's family." The characters of Sita, Draupadi, Kaikeyi, Rukmani, Sabitri and Satyabhama embodied utmost importance, firmness and the valorous role and position of women in epic society. Desirable image of women was illustrated as glorifying the value of 'pativrata' depicted through characters of Savitri, Sita, Arundhati, Damyanti, Ansuya. Women were assigned enhanced roles and standing in war. The Ramayana and Mahabharata offer a personification of a Kshatriya women engaging in war to defend and protect their culture.

V. Status of Women in Period of Buddhism & Jainism - Buddhism and Jainism were the forerunners of liberal strand and were described as Non-Vedic or Shramanic religions which developed alongside Vedic Hinduism. They provided alternatives to women from living a subservient life. Buddhism in particular offered three optional roles for women. The first included the role of a wife and mother which was the most usual role for women anticipated in the texts. The depiction of a dedicated wife as presented by Buddhism is akin to the one recommended by Brahmanical texts. The second role which was offered to women was that of a courtesan. In Buddhist literature, she did not seem to endure social denunciation but was still under the domination of male. Finally, the role of bhikkhunis was made accessible open for women to adopt.

The position of Women changed marginally during this era but there was no significant upgradation. The existence of persistent gender equity was a characteristic of this era. In Tipitaka, the *Vimana Vatthu Pali* section of *Khuddaka Nikaya* chapter portrays women's freedom in education, religious and cultural activities. The stiffness and curbs imposed by caste system had been eased. Buddha preached fairness and sought to elevate the cultural, educational and religious status of women. During the well-meaning and kind rule of famous Buddhist kings such as Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka, Sri Harsha women reclaimed a part of their lost freedom and status. Women were not restrained to domestic chores but they could also pursue educational career if they so desired. In religious field, women came to occupy a readily distinguishable higher ranking. Ashoka got his daughter Sanghamitra inducted into preaching of Buddhism. From Jain texts, we decipher that the Kousambi princess, Jayanti remained a spinster to study religion and philosophy. Women were permitted to become Sanyasinis and many women took up a major role in Buddhist monastic life. Women had their Sangha called the Bhikshuni Sangha which was guided by same rules as those of monks. The Sangha offered them avenues of cultural activities and social services and abundant chances for public life. Often Buddhist nuns composed hymns. Women wrote Sanskrit plays and verses, were exceptionally good in music, painting and other fine arts. Buddha considered women competent of 'attaining Magga and Phala insight'. Their political and economic standing however remained unmodified.

VI. Period of Dharmashastras and Puranas - The role of women consistently worsened and underwent substantial changes all through this period. Under the spell of Dharmashastras and Puranas, gender-based injustice had started inching in the society. Girls were divested of education and were precluded from studying Vedas, they were unable to recite Vedic mantras or execute Vedic rites as per injunctions of Manusmriti. A rigid constraint was inflicted on their becoming Brahmacharinis. Freedom of women was abridged as Manu, the Indian lawgiver said, "by a girl, by a young woman or even an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house." These laws also stated that, "in childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband and to her sons in old age." The fundamental norms for women's conduct as illustrated in laws of Manu insisted that, "a woman should constantly worship her husband as God, even though he is destitute of virtue or a womanizer. Women should be kept in the dependency by her husband because they are by nature passionate and disloyal. The ideal women are those who do not strive to break these bonds of control. The happiness and salvation of women revolves around their virtue and chastity as daughters, wives and widows." In economic sphere, women were dispossessed of the right to share in the property of her husband. It was contended that a wife and a slave are incapable of possessing property. In religious arena, she was prevented from making offerings and prayers, performing penance and pilgrimages.

Due to the enhanced limitations foisted on independence of women, complications started sneaking in in social ambit. Pre-puberty marriages came to be solemnized and curbs were imposed on widow remarriage. The custom of Sati or *Sahagamana* gained prominence. Purdah system led to seclusion of women and the practise of polygamy acquired acceptance. In Arthashastras, while explaining the commitment of marriage, the property rights of women and compensations for remarriage, Kautilya stated that, "men having given his wives the proportionate compensation and adequate subsistence (vriti) may remarry any number of times as women are created for the sake of sons." Besides this, motherhood had been "glorified as compensation for an imposed reality in which women merely gratified society's preference for male progeny." During this age, the efforts of women towards society were always surpassed by that of men. Self-denial and the adherence to social customs for the well-being of the male members of the family was contemplated to be the responsibility of women.

Manu's categorization of societal ethos disregarded women to be impure as well as substandard citizens. The dignified role and exalted position which women held in Early Vedic Period, Epic Period and under Jainism & Buddhism was degraded to that of apparent servility during the age of Dharmashastras.

VII. Status of women in Medieval Period (500 A.D to 1500 A.D) - The Medieval period proved to be highly dismaying for Indian women, for their status further degenerated during this period. It is labelled as a 'dark age' for women. The inflow of Muslim intruders and Brahminical inexorable laws were the defining sources for such debasement. The freedom of women was curbed and her status was cut down to an adjunct of man. When Muslims aggressors set foot in India, they carried with them their own culture and lifestyle. As they were accustomed to the usual practice of polygamy, they would lift up any woman they desired and retain her in their 'harems'. So, to safeguard their women from ruthless Mughals the indigenous Indians started shielding them which inhibited their liberty. Women got entangled in a predicament out of which many problems like Child marriage, Purdah system, Practise of Sati, Jauhar and Denial of education and Disallowance of widow remarriage sprung up. Social sins like female infanticide cropped up among the Rajputs and higher castes as they were convinced that the birth of son gives deliverance to their parents. The custom of Devdasi started taking roots in Medieval period in Southern India in which the girls were given up to temples in name of Gods and Goddesses. They were construed as servants of God and were intended to embrace celibacy. The common Hindu women had negligible rights of inheritance. Prabhati Mukherjee, a renowned sociologist has identified certain reasons for the low status of women in post Vedic period: "These reasons are imposition of Brahmanical austerities on the entire society, rigid restrictions imposed by caste system and joint family system, lack of educational facilities for women. Introduction of non-Aryan into Aryan household and foreign invasions."

With the advent of 14th and 15th century the social settings altered slightly under the impact of Bhakti movement. This generous trend to some extent broadened the perspective towards women as the Bhaktas like Chaitanya, Nanak and Kabir emphatically attacked excessive ritualism and supremacy of Brahmins, struggled for the rights of women to religious worship and unleashed religious freedom for them. The Bhakti movement generated women saints like Meerabai and Lalla in North, Andal and Akka Mahadevi in South and Bahanabai in the west. The women would accompany their families to participate in pravachans, kirtans and bhajans. The scheme of Grihaashram of Bhakti movement forbade the saints from taking 'sanyas' without the assent of their spouse. The saints of Bhakti movement urged women to devour religious books and enlighten themselves. Thus, Bhakti movement gave a revived hope to women.

VII. Position of women in Pre-independence era - The history of the first cultural interaction of Indian society with the western world dates back to 1498 when Vasco De Gama reached the shores of India, but a more enduring influence was cast by the British rule. The arrival of Britishers in India led to the inflow of western thoughts and ideals. Under the impact of Western contact, thought process of India visionaries also underwent a revolutionary change. This period marked the beginning of consciousness regarding sufferings of women due to repressive social conventions. In the course of this period, there were two crucial movements which impacted the position of women- the Social Reform Movement and the Nationalist Movement of twentieth Century. The concerns associated with women like Sati, abuse of widows, the forbiddance of widow remarriage, polygamy, child marriage, repudiation of property and education of women captured the attention of social reformers. These reformers sensed that these social evils should be expunged by uplifting the awareness and reactivity of people towards inequity inflicted on women. Their conviction was that by opening the avenues of education for women and by laying down progressive legislation, social transformation could be ushered in. Raja Ram Mohan Roy pioneered the cause of women centric reforms and upliftment. He fought for the abolition of Sati in 1829 and his Brahmo Samaj preached absolute parity of men and women. He was followed by many like Dayanand Saraswati, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, D.K Kharve, Veerasingaligam Panthulu, Sir Hari singh Gour, Har Bilas Sardha and Subramania Bharathi, Pandita Ramabai, Savitri Bai Phule, Mahadev Govind Ranade, Mahatma Gandhi, B.R Ambedkar who strove hard for liberating women from the shackles of customs and conventions that hampered their physical and intellectual advancement. Christian missionaries also rendered valuable service to the cause of women's education and reform in India.

An alternative current which helped to remodel the position and attitude towards women was the nationalist movement specifically during the Gandhian Phase. Although in the liberal and militant phase of the freedom movement, the Indian women were gradually stepping into the political arena, their considerable mobilization took place after 1920's. In the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1921 and Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930, newly discovered methods of struggle like picketing and boycott of foreign goods and liquor shops and non-cooperation in various governmental activities opened the doors for mass participation to women. Gandhi bolstered the cause of women emancipation by denouncing certain anachronous social institutions like child marriage, purdah and prohibition of widow remarriage. He had extreme trust in women's inner strength and her emotional appeal. In various Satyagrahas launched by him, not only the women hailing from urban upper class but also the simple ruralites donned leadership roles. Aparna Basu summarizes the contribution of women in nationalist movement: "Women organized themselves into groups and were willing to join processions, face police firing and go to prison. They broke the salt law, picketed shops selling liquor and foreign manufactured cloth. There were women who joined terrorist groups and helped in editing and distributing banned newspapers and in manufacturing bombs."

During this phase, a conducive environment was generated to ameliorate the lot of women through legal reforms. Several laws were enacted to uproot social evils like the Abolition of Sati Act 1829, The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act 1856, Female Infanticide Act, 1870, The Married Women Property Act, 1874, The Age of Consent Act, 1891, The Indian Succession Act, 1925, The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 and The Hindu Women Right to Property Act, 1937. In addition to social legislation, other laws were passed which were instrumental in improving the working conditions of women such as limiting their hours of work in organized industries, prohibiting night work, restricting work in mines and so on.

The Indian National Congress also voiced its concern for political rights of women. In 1917, Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu instituted the Women's Indian Association with multicultural aggregate of women activists to secure right to franchise for women. Sarojini Naidu piloted a women's voting right delegation to London to solicit equal rights for women. Her appointment as first female President of Congress in 1925 was a signal of woman enroute to empowerment. The establishment of All India Women's Conference in 1927 was a climacteric event which led to furtherance of social reform agenda for heightening the status of women in societal scheme.

IX. Contemporary Position of Indian Women

The dawn of Independence in India in 1947 engendered a perception of hopefulness and liveliness among women. Genuine and efficacious strides in the direction of women empowerment and gender equality were taken in post-independence era. Exposure to new values professed by UNO accelerated the process of undoing the biased attitude towards the females. Equal rights for men and women were thoroughly ingrained in the constitutional framework of India. An exceptional slot was accorded to women in it and the State was authorized to espouse a specific course of action for positive discrimination in support of women to offset the accumulative socio-economic, educational and political prejudices faced by them. Ever since the initiation of Constitution in 1950, Indian women were granted universal suffrage even though several western countries had not granted women the right to vote at that time.

To vindicate the constitutional mandate and ascertain safety and security of women and their rights, various legal provisions were also put together in form of Indian Penal Code and Special Laws. Some Acts which have special provisions to safeguard the interests of women are Special Marriage Act, 1954, Hindu Marriage Act 1955, Hindu Adoption & Maintenance Act 1955, Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act 1956, The Hindu Succession Act 1956, Dowry Prohibition Act 1961, Maternity Benefit Act 1961, The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act 1971, Equal Remuneration Act 1976, Indecent Representation of Women (Prevention) Act 1986, Commission of Sati Prevention Act 1987, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006, The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal Act) 2013.

The Indian Judiciary has also essayed a noteworthy role in interpreting law to uphold women's rights and dignity in India culminating in several landmark judgements. The forceful judgements communicated by these courts since independence have made the legislature delineate laws for advancing the rights of women. Besides this, various Five-Year Plans have also over the years echoed the emerging trend towards gender matters.

Radical transformation has taken place in the position commanded by Indian women in Modern era. Cultural and systemic modifications have profoundly curtailed the abuse of women and equipped them with equality of opportunity in diverse areas of activity. The women have crossed the protected territory of their home and have demonstrated their presence socially, politically and economically in virtually every sphere. The forward-looking women in contemporary society are intensely backed by the patronage provided by government. To achieve the objective of women emancipation, several initiatives have been adopted by Government of India like setting up of National Commission for Women 1992, National Plan of Action for Girl Child (1991-2000), National Policy for Empowerment of Women, 2001 and National Policy for Women 2016. The Government of India has cornered conspicuous benefits by giving formal consent to international conventions and documents concerning human rights to end gender inequality. These include CEDAW (1993), The Mexico Plan of Action (1975), The Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), The Beijing Declaration as well as Platform for Action (1995). For the well-being of women, the government has built up an enabling environment for international agencies to collaborate with state governments, non-government organizations and private corporations in implementation of a multifarious projects to uplift women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

The Federal and State Governments of India zealously aspire for constructing a society which is progressive, unprejudiced and reformist by nature. They have launched new schemes and policies for both urban and rural women which not only upgrades the social standing of female population but also presents a remedy for different social predicaments like maternal mortality, female infanticide, female foeticide. Flagship schemes which are in vogue to promote gender equality, empower women, improve the health of women and access to sanitation and education include Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojna, Mahila-E- Haat, One Stop Centre Scheme, Scheme for Working Women Hostel, Universalization of Women Helpline, STEP, Swadhar Greh Scheme, Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojna, Bank Business Loan scheme, Mudra Yojna, Dena Shakti Scheme, Udyogini Scheme, Cent Kalyani scheme, Mahila Udyam Nidhi Scheme, Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Mahila Police Volunteers Scheme, She Box, Mahila Shakti Kendras, Sabla, Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojna, Sukanya Samridhi Yojna, Stree Swabhiman and so no. Women emancipation has captured the essential concentration of Non-Governmental Organizations in India as well. Leading among them are SEWA, Snehalya, NEN, Azad Foundation, CREA, Hindrise.

X. Conclusion- It is obvious that the status of women in India has been a saga of ebb and flow in various historical epochs. Presently women in India are making a headway and gender issues are being grappled with more aggressively than afore time. The government is taking initiatives intended to bolster women force and make them an influential power of our development trajectory. The blueprint of women emancipation already exists but still we have a long way to go on this pathway.

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