

Panchanan Barma's Role for Women Empowerment in the Society from 1890 to 1935: A Brief Historical Analysis

Abstract

Women are God's greatest gift to humanity. She has the power to create or destroy. Kalidas and Tulsidas became great poets because of their wives. There is a saying that behind every successful man there is a woman. In all civilised countries under the sun, ancient or modern, women formed and still form the life and soul of society. It is a matter of history. We need not rummage the history of a foreign country to verify this fact. The history of Ancient India throws ample light on this subject. But alas! modern India degenerated India-ignores that glorious history-ignores that we had intellectual heroines like Lilavati and Khana, ignores that Sabitri and Domointi breathed the air of freedom in their days-ignores the truism of the ancient shastras which these two angels of womanhood carried out in practice, viz, that a wife should follow her husband like his shadow, whether he goes, even to the wilderness-ignores that our women once used to take part in the deliberations of State-Councils, rode on horse-back, moved about with perfect freedom and ease, aye, even led armies to the field of battle and delivered up their lives in defence of their country. Look at that dazzling picture of the freedom of our women and then look at their present degraded position in society.¹

Keywords Pachanan Barma and Rajbanshi Community, Rajbanshi Women and society, to excess women empowerment and education, Society and Culture of the Community.

Introduction

Scholars believe that in ancient India, the women enjoyed equal status with men in all fields of life. The women in the Indus Valley civilization were relatively equal to men. It was a matriarchal society.² 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. According to studies, women enjoyed equal status and rights during the early Vedic period. The status of the early Indian women was supposed to be equivalent to men and gradually their position was deteriorated due to Aryanization and even the position of women became worst in the post Vedic period.³

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 purdah 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 practised especially among the Hindu Kshatriya rulers in north-eastern India. 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 worth of a civilization can be judged by the place given to women in the society. One of several factors that justify the greatness of India's ancient culture is the honorable place granted to women. The Muslim influence on India caused considerable deterioration in the status of women. They were deprived of their rights of equality with men. Raja Ram Mohan Roy started a movement against this inequality and subjugation. The contact of Indian culture with that of the British also brought improvement in the status of women by their imperial policy.⁴ The third factor in the revival of women's position was the influence of Mahatma Gandhi who induced women to participate in the Freedom Movement. But in the contemporary of North-eastern India Panchanan Barma actively exhorted the empower among the women through "The Naari Raksha Committee". As a result of this retrieval of freedom, women in Indian have distinguished themselves as teachers, nurses, air-hostesses, booking



Kartick Chandra Barman

Asstt. Professor and Head
Department of History
Krishna Chandra College
Hetampur, Birbhum

clerks, receptionists, and doctors. They are also participating in politics and administration. But in spite of this amelioration in the status of women, the evils of illiteracy, dowry, ignorance, and economic slavery would have to be fully removed in order to give them their rightful place in Indian society.

Women in the present day society—wives and mothers and working women—are ready to accept an inferior position in the family, society and polity. They were in the forefront and actively participant in the social and economic life of the country. Their status was reduced to a lower level and were treated inferior to men. Due to this, the social and economic situation of the nation also deteriorated. But Social reformation in the nineteenth century by the light of renaissance women's society of Bengal had been benefited.⁵ By the nineteenth century, Rammohan and Vidyasagar had showed their interest to grow the empower among women through women-education and activities of social reforms, like them Panchanan Barma played the same role for the women in the first half of 20th century Bengal. The main stream of social reforms movement in the 19th century was to develop the social statue of women.⁶

Empowerment is the phenomena of nineties and is defined as 'giving power to', creating power within and enabling'. Power is a relative concept, which describes a relationship between people; a powerful person has power over others. Empowerment entails power sharing, a change in the balancing of power between people. An increase in power of one party necessarily implies reduction in power of the other or others. Therefore, empowerment involves negotiation of the balance of power between the more and less powerful (through reformist or revolutionary means).⁷

There are a variety of understandings of the term 'empowerment' due to its widespread usage. Although the term is often used in development work, but it is rarely defined.⁸ Empowerment is process, which helps people to gain control of their lives through raising awareness, taking action and working in order to exercise greater control. Empowerment is the feeling that activates the psychological energy to accomplish one's goals.⁹ In other words, 'Empower' means to authorize, so 'Empowerment' is a process, which gives women power or authority to challenge some situation. In the case of women's development issue Empowerment of women is a process nourished by development policies and programs that could enable women to get enough strength to challenge their submissive social condition or status. Empowerment refers broadly to the expansion of freedom of choice and action.¹⁰ In this context, empowerment would mean increasing one's capacity to define, analyze and act upon one's own problem.¹¹ The definition of empowerment according to the concept of UNDP¹² include the expansion of choices for women and an increase of ability to exercise those choices when women are empowered.¹³

Role of women is important both in economic and non-economic. Empowerment is an active and multidimensional process,¹⁴ which enables women to realize their identity and power in all aspects of life.¹⁵ The dependency makes them as a burden of a family and lowers their value of life in some of the developing society. Development practitioners are

concerned to raise their empowerment level, which make women capable to challenge their dependency or oppressive situation in the family and society.¹⁶ Women, in Indian society, are traditionally expected to confine themselves to domestic environs and play a passive role as daughters, daughters-in-law, wives and mothers. Women's empowerment is thought to be one of the main issues when talking about gender equality, economic growth and poverty in the academic world today.¹⁷

According to Panchanan Barma both men and women are of equal rank, but they are not identical. They are peerless pair, being supplementary to one another, each helping the other so that without the one the existence of the other cannot be conceived. The concept of self is the most important factor affecting the behavior of women. Self-realization of the potential of women was severely restricted in the pre-independence period due to various socio-cultural conditions and conditioning.

Political empowerment among the women inspired Mahatma Gandhi in the second decade of the twentieth century. Panchanan Barma in north-eastern India understood the necessity for political participation of women like Mahatma Gandhi. He realized, women's Political participation is the basic ingredient of every political system and to promote the development of any country at the same time. At the same time, Mahatma Gandhi had played a great role to protect the women right with equal to men.

Needless to say, modernity and progress had come among the women by the active help of them.¹⁸ He wrote in 'Young India', "I should treat the daughters and sons on footing of perfect equality".¹⁹ He believed 'women is the companion of an gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest details of the activities of man, and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he...'.²⁰

Panchanan Barma realized that the Political Participation of women helps the individual to be effective and associates him with the political system of India. He envisaged and advocated towards the equal political rights among men and in the Indian Constitution. He thought that it is vital to the proper functioning of a democratic polity. It signifies such proceedings like voting,²¹ seeking information, discussing and proselytising, attending meetings, contributing financially and communicating with representatives.²² In the later period, women in India raised the issue of representation in politics first in 1917. During that period, about fourteen women from provinces of India, under the leadership of Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, appealed that the Indian women should be treated as human beings and be granted all the rights enjoyed the male.²³ At the same time it was basically a demand for universal adult franchise and political participation, which Panchanan Barma advocated continuously through his strong writing and speeches from the first decade of the century. By 1930 women had gained the Right to vote, which initially benefited women from elite families and most of women from economically lower family remained exempted.²⁴ It is notable that women from lower caste had participated in the women empowerment movement but the success of the movement received most of the upper class women.²⁵

Second decade of the twentieth century feminist movement had been development led by Mahatma Gandhi through various issues like 'Nari Raksha Uposamity' of Panchanan Barma. As a result, the Indian constitution has enacted various legislative measures intended to ensure equal rights, to counter social discrimination and various forms of violation of human rights, and to provide support service to women. In fact, the status of women in the society is the indicator of a nation's overall progress. Panchanan Barma realised that without the participation of women folk in national activity, its social, economical or political, the country's progress will be stagnated.

Panchanan Barma was not only a great Kshatriya leader but a passionate lover of humanity. An implacable enemy of all injustice and inequalities, he was a friend of the lowly and the down trodden. The Rajbangshis with other backward communities, women and the poor commanded his most tender attention. He had almost an instinctive understanding of women and their problems and had a deep abiding sympathy for them. The indicators of social empowerment of women include the base of gender inequality, sex ratios, life expectancy rates and fertility rates which shows the general status of women in terms literacy, economic growth, availability of health care and birth control facilities, educational status of women, age at marriage, literacy rates and participation of women outside the home. The position of women in the society then very doleful, but the said condition did not conceal the eyes of Panchanan Barma.

Panchanan Barma stressed women's participation in political, socio-cultural and economic sphere through his various political and social activities. He argued that the cultural empowerment of women can be a reality only when women are treated on par with men, through all the differences that are part and parcel of being a different gender. There should be a change in the mindset of society on a fundamental level. Above all, women's economic participation and empowerment are fundamental to strengthening women's rights and enabling women to have control over their lives and exert influence in society. It is about creating just and equitable societies. It is true that women often face discrimination and persistent gender inequalities, with some women experiencing multiple discrimination and exclusion because of factors such as ethnicity or caste.²⁶

On the Contemporary, Panchanan Barma and other national leader like Rammohan, Vidyasagar, Annie Besant, Sarojini, Kamala Devi and Muthu Lakshi Reddy were taken vital role to grow the social consciousness among women.²⁷ As a result mass women's movement and mass organization grew among women in various parts of India along with Bengal. Women had been proceed to protect their fundamental rights and to dedicate their social equality. During the period, some women organisation were setting up in different corner of undivided Bengal and India. The most important among the organizations were the Mahila Atma Raksha Samithi of Bengal, Andhra Mahila Sanghaid and Mahila Sangham of Kerala.²⁸ Some noted leftist women-leaders like Manikuntala Sen, Kanak Mukherjee and

Renu Chakraborty, unhesitatingly pointed out that the Mahila Atma-Raksha Samity in Bengal or Women Self-defence League at the national level had totally changed the idea of hitherto existing women's organizations in colonial India.²⁹ During that period, Panchanan Barma had taken initiative to organize the deprived women by many social activities but unfortunate north-eastern illiterate and rural Indian women were did not understand the essence of his future view. So, in the Indian women's movement, the first organization was 'Women's India Association' formed by Annie Besant and then Sarojini Naidu, Muthu Lakshmi Reddy, Margaret Cousins, and Kamala Devi Chotopadhyaya in 1917.³⁰ Though Panchanan Barma a few years later had founded a women organisation, named "Naari Raksha Uposamity" in 1923. During that period women movement had raised in high level and most of the women from 18 to 70 years were participated unhesitatingly.³¹ About two thousand women including girls, expecting mothers and mothers with babies in their arms went to prison during the period...³² These women organisations laid the real foundation for the women's movement in India and tried to promote women's political participation by giving prime importance to women's suffrage and the next objective was to secure nomination in the legislature.³³

In 1927, Queen of Cooch-behar independent state, Maharani Suniti Devi herself participated in the 'Sarojinalini Samity' in London to do ensure the women right in socio-political sphere.³⁴ Two years later, the report about 'Sarojini Samity' revealed on the London Times in 1929, as follows "The Samitis have made the lives of the women of Bengal happier, more hopeful and more useful than it was three years ago. A new social life has made its appearance and meetings, lectures, classes, study-groups, domestic and cottage industries have come to form so important a part of every Mahila Samiti that a Mahila Samiti can be truly described as a real educational centre for the rebuilding of national life."³⁵ After the first world war, the women's movement through the women organisation, had reached to the last stage. In the 1920's and 1930's women's organizations demanded separate educational Institute and to deliver these services for females sex-segregation norms prevented women from using institutions designed for men.³⁶ That's why, the legislative provisions included in the study with Hindu marriage Act, Widow Remarriage Act, Divorce Act, Child Marriage (Restraint) Act, Act for violence Against Women, Dowry Prohibition Act, Hindu Succession Act, Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, Hindu Maintenance Act and Maternity Benefit Act etc.³⁷ The role of Panchanan Barma to grow empowerment among women did not fail.³⁸

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