

History of Women Empowerment : Indian Perspective

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Abstract

The status and position of women in society is the best way to understand a civilization, its progress and its shortcomings. Women came a long way to achieve full equality and rights from women sages and scholars in the Rig Vedic period to women in the armed forces and this journey towards modernization has not been easy. Women have had to struggle the traditional male-dominated Indian society to emerge as powerful and self-reliant entities. Empowerment of women has become a burning issue all over the world since last few decades. The women in India enjoy a unique status of equality with the men as per constitutional and legal provisions, which enables her to realize their identity and power in all aspects of life, provides her more access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making, greater ability to plan their time for self-development

Key Words : Empowerment, Constitution, National Movement, Legal Status, Power, Rights.

Introduction

Women not only form a major section of the society but also hold greater responsibilities than men towards many facets of life. They are directly related with those factors of population change, which affect the quality of life. Marital status, child bearing and child rearing, gender discrimination, health and nutrition, fertility and mortality (infant and female), economic profile, housing, education, religion, sexual behavior, migration, employment, politics, social and cultural life, environmental consciousness and several other facets of life directly involve women.

Women empowerment is not a new concept. It is quite a well-known concept in India and around the world. Women all over the world have been challenging and changing gender inequalities since beginning of history. In order to describe the status of women, the word 'empowerment' came during the mid 1980's and became popular in the field of development, especially in reference to women. Today empowerment has effectively replaced terms such as upliftment, welfare, community participation and poverty alleviation to describe the development of women. In spite of the preponderance of the term, however, many people are distracted as for what the empowerment of women implies in economic, social and political terms.

A salient feature of the term empowerment is that it contains within it the word 'POWER'. Empowerment is a process through which change in power in favour of women balance can be achieved. Empowerment is thus both a process and then result of that process. Empowerment is expressed in terms of redistribution of power, whether between races, genders or individuals, nations, classes or castes. Empowerment means equal status to women. Empowerment provides greater access to enhance knowledge base and resources for significant autonomy in decision making, considerable ability to plan and free from the shackles imposed on them by custom belief and practice.

Objective of the Study

This paper lays stress on the evolution, status and their empowerment in Indian perspective.

Historical View

It is commonly understood that empowerment of women means giving them power to dominate others or to use such powers to establish their superiority over others. Akhtar has rightly observed, "We would not like women's empowerment to result in women's taking over men's power within the same exploitative and corrupt society." When women attains power, then it does not mean that she is going to use power to ill – treat and exploit men in the society. Actually, women's empowerment in society is to empower herself and not to overcome men.

The women in the Vedic period had the identity of her own and enjoyed equal status with men and independence in action. She was adored, respected and



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recognized. They possess not only the place of honour in society, but were also entitled to participate in all social functions. They were also allowed to seek academic attainments as per her desires and enjoyed the family life with full vigour.

Since women were not deprived of the advantage of education, hence they were also not considered incompetent to study the Vedas or participate in philosophical discussions. Apala, Ghosa, Ramsha, Lopmudra, etc are some renowned examples. Young men and women marry after brahmacharya (a life of celibacy till the age of 25 years). Child marriages seem to have been unknown in early Vedic society and women were not married before puberty. The women were free to select their conjugal partner and exercised free will in entering into the matrimonial bondage. Swayamvar was in vogue and the Aryan girls were free to choose husband of their likings.

According to Indian writers, the position of women was deteriorated in the post-Vedic period. A very important influence on the status of the hindu women has been the Manusmriti, a granth composed by Manu. In the Manusmriti, the injunctions of Manu merged the wife's individually with that of her husband and recommended strict seclusion for women and rigorous discipline for widows. A women is not entitled to independence, her father protects her in her maiden-hood, her husband in her youth and her son in old age.

Women were not allowed any kind of independent activity throughout her life, since during her childhood; she was subjected to the guardianship of the father. A female child, a young or even an old wife (women) could not perform anything independently even in their own homes.

During eleventh century onwards when women from Islamic countries started coming, the Islamic concept of women began to influence Indian muslims as well as Hindus. In Islam, men and women are equal in the eyes of Allah and both have equal religious rights, but in social sphere it stressed on women being chaste, modest and exclusive which led to the practice of seclusion and later purdah. During this period, the position of women in general was subordinate to men. The girls were considered a liability right from the time of their birth.

During the Muslim period evil practices started creeping in the society Thus, to protect the girl child from the wickedness of Muslim invaders child marriage, and sati system, purdah system started in the society. Women were confined to the kitchens, they were not allowed to roam in public without the support of male members.

The position of women was not satisfactory in the early period of British rule. It was obvious as Britishers being totally ignorant of their plight in the early stage and further felt disinterested in interfering with the Personal Laws of the Hindus. But many social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Eswara Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyothiba Phule, Veerasalingam, Gurajada Apparao started agitation for the empowerment of women. The efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy led to the abolition of Sati. By the efforts of Vidyasagar and Veeresalingam and Gurajada Apparao widow remarriage act was passed.

It was Mahatma Gandhi who believed that the freedom movement to be successful had to be a movement of the masses and felt that 'Swaraj' would be meaningless without reform of the social structure and upliftment of the weaker sections, namely, women and the lower social strata to a position of equality with others.

Gandhi emerged on Indian political scene in 1918. He appreciated qualities of Indian women and created a new myth of Indian womanhood, i.e., to call women the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to women. If by strength is meant moral power, then women are immeasurably man's superior. Has she not – greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her, man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women. Gandhi opposed child marriage, deplored the treatment meted out to Hindu widows, wanted widows to remarry, condemn purdah system, dowry, etc.

This was also due to the efforts of the women themselves to organize themselves for improvement, as well as to participate in the National Struggle for freedom

from colonial rule. This was aided by the support extended to them by Indian leaders in both as reformers and political leaders. Help came from an unexpected quarter in the shape of British women who settled in India to work for both social and political issues. The British administration itself was not unsympathetic.

The Stri Bharat Mahamandal was set-up in 1901 by Sarla Devi Chaudharani. Mahila Samaj was set-up in Ahmedabad in 1908 and in Mysore in 1913. The Women's Indian Association was founded in 1917. The National Council for Women was established in 1925 and All India Women's conference was founded in 1927. These All-India Associations had branches in most of the states. Their first endeavour was to work for female education. They also considered it necessary to fight against child marriage, purdah system, polygamy and women's status in the family.

At the beginning of the 20th century itself, women started taking part in all aspects of the National Movement for Independence. During the early period of struggle Sarala Devi and Kumudini Mitter in Bengal, Sushila Devi and Hardevi in Punjab, Mrs. Annie Besant during the Home Rule Movement, Mrs Sarojini Naidu, the leading light of the Civil Disobedience Movement, and Women Revolutionaries like Kalpana Dutta and Preetilata Wadekar, etc took active part in National Movement.

These associations started fighting for women's right to inheritance and ownership of property and against immoral traffic in women. In 1934, they asked the government to appoint a commission to go into all the legal disabilities from which women suffer. This was ultimately done by the government in 1941, when it set up a committee under B. N. Roy. The credit for getting women a limited franchise also goes to women. They represented this issue to the National Congress and the British government as well as mobilized public opinion, both in England and in India.

After attaining independence in 1947, in recognition of the contribution made by women to the freedom struggle and also due to the demands of social reformists, our founding fathers made concerted efforts to accord women social and political equality. The Constitution of India designed to secure equality of sexes and non-discrimination are :

1. Equality before law and equal protection of law (Article 14).
2. State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. And the state is permitted to make any provision for women and children. (Article 15).
3. Equality of opportunity in public employment. (Article 16).
4. Equal rights for men and women to adequate means of livelihood. (Article 39(a)).
5. Humane conditions of work and maternity relief for women. (Article 42).
6. To secure for all citizens a uniform civil code throughout the country. (Article 44).
7. It is a constitutional duty of every citizen of India to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. (Article 51 A (e)).
8. Not less than one-third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct elections in every Panchayat to be reserved for women and such seats to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat (Article 243 D (3)).
9. Not less than one-third of the total number of offices of chairpersons in the Panchayats at each level to be reserved for women (Article 243 D (4)).
10. Not less than one-third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct elections in every municipality to be reserved for women and such seats to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies of a municipality (Article 243 T (4)).

Efforts were also made to correct the imbalances existing in our society by initiating various legal reforms. Some notable legal measures which reached the statute book were the Special Marriage Act, Hindu Marriage Act, Hindu Succession Act, Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, Dowry Prohibition Act, Maternity Benefit Act, Suppression of Immoral traffic Act, Women's and Children's Institution (Licensing) Act, Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act and Anti-Rape Laws.

Following the year 1975, during the Women's Decade, to further strengthen the legal status of women some important laws were enacted : the Equal

Remuneration Act, Marriage Law Amendment Act, the Child Marriage Restraint Amendment Act, Amendment to Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act, Amendments to the Criminal Law, which made punishment more stringent for crimes committed against women, Family Courts Act and Amendment to Dowry Prohibition Act.

Year 2001 was observed as year of women's empowerment all over the world. In this particular year, a document that said to be a milestone has been adopted, "The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women". As a follow-up of this, the government has been adopted different schemes and programmes. The most positive development last few years has been the growing involvement of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Today we have seen women Chief Ministers, Women President, Advocates, Bureaucrats, different political party leaders, good athletes, etc.

Conclusion

In this way we can say that despite many welcome changes in the status of women, women still have to carry an additional burden of raising the family and rearing the children. In spite of her excellence in economic, social and political arena, a woman has still to rock the cradle of her child. She has to see her children's homework and has to be a master chief in her house. The additional burden of job or business which she looks after apart from caring of her family does take its toll. There is, no doubt that women have made tremendous advancement and have today many achievements to their credit, they still remain the main victims of social exploitation. In rural areas particularly superstitions, fundamentalism and wrong religious beliefs have placed women at a disadvantageous position. Astonishingly with so much of modernization around us, once in a while, we still find that a woman has to burn in their funeral pyre of her husband to bring glory and fame to her family.

Although the constitution guarantees equal rights and there are laws which have accorded equality of status to women, it is really difficult, rather, impossible for women to enjoy these rights and equality of opportunity unless they are educated and made fully conscious of their rights. Education, in fact, is the key factor in the progress of women and it is perhaps the single most effective instrument for the smooth social transformation.

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