



## HISTORY AND POLICY OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

*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 begging of history. It is frequently said that the status and position of women in society are the best way to understand a civilization, it's a progress and its shortcomings. In case of India, women have come a long way from women advisors and scholars in the Rig Vedic period to women in the armed forces, IT sector, politics, industry and other significant areas while balancing their role as a daughter, wife and mother. This journey towards modernization has not been easy. Women have had to fight the traditional Indian male-dominated society to emerge as stronger and independent entities. While all these are positive developments, cases of rape, harassment at workplace and dowry deaths are rampant. Illiteracy and ignorance about their rights are still prevalent among a majority of the women. It is in this background this paper has focused on the history, status, development of women and their empowerment in India from a historical point of view. As well as this paper attempts to analyses the status of Women Empowerment in India from Ancient times to Modern times and highlights the issues and challenges of Women Empowerment*

**Key words:** Empowerment, Women, Indian Constitution, History, Policy etc.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

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From the eighteenth century onwards, we have, besides Indian sources, western evidence on the condition of women. This century, in political terms, was a major break from the past with the decline of the Mughal Empire after the death of Aurangzeb in AD 1707. Powerful political forces were released with the emergence of the Sikhs in Punjab, strong Rajput states in Rajasthan, Muslim independent states in Oudh and in Bengal, but most importantly with the rise of the Marathas. The Marathas were to become the flavour of the eighteenth century until they were overshadowed by East India Company in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

In the nineteenth century the position of women suffered in a big way with the share of education declining too almost nothing. The existence of widespread network of elementary schools and higher educational institutions is commented upon the foreign observers but girls' attendance in them is not mentioned. It is possible that due to constant internecine warfare, it was not safe to send girls to schools. Contemporary European writers have commented upon the piety, chastity and modesty of Indian women and also mentioned the absence of insecurity in their movement. Purdah was observed in the north, very widely among Hindus and Muslim of the higher classes, though it was not prevalent among the poor. Maratha women moved freely and so did women in south except for the landed classes in Andhra Pradesh and Moplah women in Malabar. Marriage for women were almost universal. Polygamy was confined to princes and men of high rank and among Kulin Brahmans in Bengal. Remarriage of widows was not common among the higher classes. Non-Brahman women in Maharashtra could remarry.

sati and selling into slavery of girl children and young women in times of distress was prevalent though they were, in general, treated kindly. Exceptional women, both among the Hindu and the Muslims, asserted themselves politically. Ahalya Bai of Indore was an exemplary ruler. The wife of Mushed Quli Khan, Dardanah Begum, urged him to fight against Ali Verdi Khan when he invaded Orissa. Zebunissa Begum, wife of Nawab Shaja-uddin, assisted her husband in administration. significant reform movements for improving the status of women were not there except for the Sikhs who 's Gurus insisted that women should occupy apposition of honor.

The main social reform movements benefiting Indians were initiated by Indian men, followed closely by their women and liberal English women. Raja Ram Mohan Roy of Bengal stands first in the roll of honor. He founded the Brahma Samaj in 1825 to reform Hindu society. He spoke against early marriage of girls and sati and spoke in favor of monogamy and widow remarriage. Keshab Chandra Sen, also of Brahma Samaj, carried this cause further and spearheaded a movement in Bengal against child marriage, stating that girls should not be

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married before fourteen and boys before eighteen years of age. He also promoted simple marriage; spoke against heavy marriage expenses and polygamy. He promoted widow remarriage and it was largely due to his initiative that the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 was passed. He wanted women to participate in the prayer meetings of the Brahma Samaj and allowed them to perform divine services.

The movement for changing women's status was to accelerate in the twentieth century on every front. During British rule, this was 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 able support extended to them by Indian men in positions of leadership, both has reformers and political leaders. The British administration itself was not unsympathetic. The extraordinary leadership of Mahatma Gandhi was to unite thousands of women in the National Movement. Women started to organize themselves in groups.

The Stri Bharat Mahamandal was set up in 1901 by Sarla Devi Chowdharani. Mahilla Samajas were 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 in 1925 and the All-India Women 's Conference was founded in 1927. All the All-India Associations had branches in most of the states. Their leadership came mostly from the rich, upper or middle classes. Their first endeavor was to work for female education. They also considered it necessary to fight against child marriage, purdah, polygamy and women's status in family. These associations started fighting for women s right to inheritance and ownership of property and against immoral traffic in women.

At the beginning of the 20th century itself, Women started taking part in all aspects of the National Movement for independence. It is interesting that this movement threw up some remarkable women during every stage of the struggle with several women of lower stature working both at national level and in the states. It is extraordinary that common women in the villages and in urban areas also had a high degree of awareness about the cause and selflessly gave their service whenever the leaders asked them to do so.

## 2. Literature of review

Empowerment is a multi-faced, multi-dimensional and multi-layered concept. As such, it is not this or that, but is the action and interaction of various factors-physical, socioeconomic, political, mental, psychological, and attitudinal and so on. Women 's empowerment could be described as a process in which women gain greater share of control over resources-material, human and intellectual like knowledge, information, ideas, and financial resources like



money and access to money and control over decision making in the home, community, society and nation, and to gain “power”.

The term women’s empowerment ‘has come to be associated with women ‘s struggle for social justice and equality. Sharma points out that. The term empowerment refers to a range of activities from individual self-assertion to collective resistance, protest and mobilization that challenge basic power relations. In order to understand what is “power” one has to understand its partner “Ideology”. As Nath and Chatterjee stated that for true “empowerment”, what is most significant is the control of ideology, i.e., control over thoughts and perceptions that shapes individual beliefs, values and attitudes-ways of perceiving, thinking, feeling and analyzing. This control in turn confers decision making power which increases access to and control over resources.

According to the country report of the government of India empowerment means moving from a position of enforced powerlessness to one of power. It would promote women ‘s inherent strength and positive self-image. To empower women does not mean to give them power to dominate others or to use power to establish their superiority over others, as it may be commonly understood. Akthar 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.

Women ‘s moving to a position of power does not mean that she is going to abuse power to ill-treat and exploit men. Women ‘s empowerment in reality is to empower herself, and not to overpower men. Speaking at a workshop, Griffen spoke about what empowerment meant to her. She said that to her the word simply meant adding to women ‘s power, and power to her meant having control, being listened to, being recognized and respected as equal citizens and human beings with a contribution to make. Power for her meant. Being able to make contribution at all levels of society and not just in the home. Power also means having women ‘s contribution recognized and valued.

To be empowered is to become aware of the magnificent potential that lies in each one of us but scarcely known to us. In the words of Swami Rama as quoted by Nuernberger, by being aware of one ‘s own potential and abilities, one can become a perfect citizen, help the nation and serve humanity.

### 3.Objectives

Following are the main objectives of this study.

1. To know about the history of women empowerment in India.

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2. To study the Empowerment of Women after Independence.
3. To understand the status of women in the post-Independence.
4. To understand the challenges faced by women in ancient time

#### **4. Research methodology**

The methodology followed in this examination isn't uni-dimensional. It is fairly a mix of the verifiable, hypothetical and viable parts of human rights. A chronicled approach has been followed for the investigation of the birthplace and development of human rights in Ancient India. In breaking down the legal procedure and rights followed by the lords is logical. This investigation tries to understand and assess the jobs, powers, and the functioning of Human Rights in antiquated India.

#### **5. Data Collection**

The data will be collected through various sources which are as follow:

- Vedas
- Buddhist literature
- Jain canonical works,
- The Astadhyayi of Panini,
- Mahabhasya of Patanjali
- Kalidasa.
- Ramayaṇa and Mahabharata
- Puraṇas
- Books
- Journals
- Government Publications

#### **6. History of Women empowerment In India**

In the ancient period of Indian History, birth of a daughter was not unwelcomed. Gradually preference for a male child led to the unwelcoming of a girl-child, it brought sorrow to the family. On the contrary, birth of a son was always desire, looked forward to and celebrated. Marked preference for sons led to the neglect of female children. Marriage is an important institution, in India, and a woman 's child bearing potential is valuable, but she is more respected if she bears a son. So, in the Medieval and Modern periods, a general societal prejudice was prevalent against women and that is why coming into the world of a female infant meant disappointment to the parents/family.



The girls are also facing severe discrimination in nutrition, health care and education. Girls are gradually becoming wage earners. Parents have more control over the income of the daughters than that of the sons. The rural girl child is disadvantaged because she is deprived of all the advantages of the urban girl child. The most important factor is the inadequate exposure of her parents/family to modern amenities and facilities: transportation, electricity, media, hygiene, health care and access to education.

The number of girls in rural India is much more than those in urban areas and hence the need to improve their status. Status of girl child is related to her mother 's status which has been low in rural India. The birth of a daughter is unwelcome. Marked preference for sons has led to the neglect of the girl child. Nonetheless, a woman 's child bearing potential is valuable. The only time when a woman received respect and care from her family is when she becomes the mother of a son (Devendra: 1993).

The CSWI Report in 1974 had warned us about the declining sex-ratio. The 1991 Census had done the same. When we talk about the position /status of the Girl Child and the empowerment of women in 2001 we get shocked because the decline in sex-ratio is alarming for girls and women. The provisional figures based on the decennial census for 2001 report the decline in the sex-ratio among children in Zero to six age group. It is an unfortunate coincidence that this is being reported in 2001 which is also the year of Women 's Empowerment. If the nation does not wake up now then where will we find women whose empowerment, we have talking about for more than two decades?

## **7. Challenges faced by Women in Pre-Independence Era**

Women before independence faced many challenges that existed in the society such as Sati Pratha, Child Marriage, Prohibition of widow remarriage, Purdah system, dowry system, no education to girls, polygamy, female infanticide, domestic violence, sexual harassment and so on. Though some got vanished but some are still existing in our society like female infanticide, domestic violence, women abuse etc. In spite of all these issues, we are not in a position of saying this is a big achievement but the condition of women has improved at a relatively faster rate. We hope that with the passage of time, India will be a safer place for women.

## **8. Empowerment of Women after Independence**

The status of women in the family, their illiteracy, early marriage, widowhood was major issues on which the Social Reforms Movement in India agitated for over two centuries in India. The patriarchal society in India had pushed down the status of women, from the high

positions they were said to occupy in the Vedic period. Having achieved freedom from foreign domination, and been exposed to new values that emerged through the United Nations, the constitution of India emerged with all these values firmly enriched in its framework. There was a special space for women who had proved themselves no less patriotic or less energetic in the freedom struggle. Right from the inception of the Indian Republic in January 1950, the right of women to vote was recognized, and women have exercised that right since then. The constitution of India provided for Women's equality with men.

The Special Provisions in 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)).

## **9. The status of women in the post-Independence**

The status of women in the post-independence period underwent transformations. In India the status of women empowerment within the society, are two main aspects that need to be taken into consideration, first to what extent women can control their own living conditions and the extent to which they possess the decision-making authority and perform their tasks and activities without minimum restrictions. Women constituted half of the population within Indian society. They have been rendering a significant contribution to the development of



human resources. Hence, it is vital to encourage them in participating in the decision-making processes, acquiring educational opportunities, getting engaged in employment and sustaining their livelihoods in an enhanced manner. The National Policy on the Empowerment of Women in India, 2001, is regarded as one of the important strategies in the development process and led to changes within the socio-economic environment. With these changes, transformations also came about in the status of women.

## 10. Conclusion

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 begging of history. The demand for women's empowerment makes clear that every human being must need to be treated in a way where their dignity and rights are not getting violated. For a long millennium of time women are suffering from this harassment where their very existence is just nothing more than material, but as the world has evolved and women can now fight for their own rights, there are few sections of women to whom the light has not been yet ventured. To live in a civilized World, it is our duty as a human to help people to enlighten and take them out of any dogmatic state of mentality where it harms society in moving forward. We must educate our women and children so that they can carry on the legacy to the upcoming generations and take a part in building a nation.

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