

Women's Empowerment in India, from Ancient Period to Modern Period

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ABSTRACT

Naturally when we talk about women's empowerment in India what we refer that women must need to be aware of their rights like the right to vote, property rights, freedom of movement, their legal rights and many more, which means, empowering women is making women realize their self-worth, their abilities to determine their own choice and shaping the society where women can enjoy their respect and rights just like other humans. Women's empowerment is an essential factor that works for the betterment and development of society, community and country.

The present paper try to focus on women's empowerment in India from ancient period to modern one.

Key Words: empowerment, betterment, self-worth etc.

When it is to specifying women's population in the world we get the result of around 50% But when we focus on the people of India, it happens to be a disproportionate sex ratio which means the female population is comparatively lower than the male. comparatively the western part of the world is very liberal about women's empowerment in India is the least concern of society because of gender biasness. It is believed that the problem with literacy, population and health issues won't solve until there's any solution for the gender biasness so that women can take a free part in building a society and a community where everyone's rights and demands will be paid attention to.

If we pay more attention to how women's empowerment in India got momentum throughout the years, from the ancient to the modern period. Over time, Indian society has witnessed many uprisings and downfalls when it comes to empowering women.

What is Women's empowerment ?

Ill treatment for women has been a ritual for men, for centuries this unjustified treatment is going on, and women are not allowed to have property, they will have no share in their own parents' properties, and they never enjoyed their rights to vote and there was absolutely no freedom to choose their own way of lifestyle or job and so on.

Now women's empowerment means exercising their power and their own actions. Which means having control over your own material assets, intellectual resources and your own ideologies.

Ancient Indian Period and Women's Empowerment

In ancient Indian culture, women were treated as equal to men, and there was no discrimination on the basis of gender, instead of that women were honored by society, and society at the time considered women as Janani which means mother, even in Hindu scriptures women are considered as Devi. They used to enjoy their full basic rights where they were free to receive education, at that time the wives of the rishis could willingly take part in spiritual activities with their husbands, they were also known as the Ardhgini (better half) too. During that period, women got to live equal lives just like men used to live. Women in Indian history have gone through two things in their lives: one is subjection and deliverance. With the passage of time, their positions might have changed but in the Vedic era, they were a complete symbol of protector and caretaker of mortality and ideals.

The accomplishment of Gargi, Maitreyi, Sita, Drupadi and Alapa turns out to be the most ideal role for women of this era. These women were competitive with men in many fields and also received and enjoyed their rights and equality, there were no restrictions on them, and they possessed great wealth and property. Along with that they even had a very strong say when it comes to guiding their offspring.

Women's empowerment in India in the medieval period

The integrity among the genders had room in the early Vedic period but somehow in the later Vedic period there was a decline in the integrity and equality among them,

especially the position of the women which was equal in the early Vedic period, later had a downward trend in later Vedic period. It is believed that foreign conquest is the main reason for the decline of women's status in that era. There was an erosion in the Rig-Vedic ideals of fairness and harmony, which deprives women to enjoy their right to study the Vedas, recite Vedic mantras and practice Vedic rituals. Women were forced to get married and or involve in domestic life and have an indisposable devotion to their husbands. At that time parents were ashamed of the born of a girl child.

There came a time when women have to adopt the 'Pardah' a veil that covers the body in a way it affects their freedom. This is the reason it gave birth to many other evils in society which made women's life more difficult to live. There were many restrictions like Sati, Jauhar and no education for girls, widow remarriage child marriage and many more.

What is Sati ?

The concept of sati is when a woman's husband dies then the woman had to sit on the burning fire with her husband and burn herself to death. It is said it was her solemn duty toward her husband. In old Hindu scripts, it was believed that when a women dies as a sati, the doors of heaven open-up for her straight.

What is Jauhar ?

In today's world, if we try to understand what Jauhar is, we get to know that it is just a mass suicide, but in the medieval period, this was a Rajput custom, where the Rajput women sacrificed their lives for their husbands when they were about to lose a battle.

What is child marriage ?

Medieval India is well-remembered because of many factors but one of them is child marriage.

At that time birth of a girl child was a matter of shame for the parents, they were considered a burden for the family, so parents used to marry them off as soon as possible. Another reason for child marriage is, it was a belief that grown-up girls were more tend to do scandals, which is why their parents tie the knot at a very tender age and the girls stay at their parent's home and move out when they hit puberty. At that time men used to think that a woman is nothing more than marriage material, they were

treated like material. This is the reason why there was an increasing birth rate, women suffered from very poor health which is also a reason for the increase in high mortality rate in women and babies too.

No access to widow re-marriage

Treating women as the material was common in the medieval period. In the medieval period widows were considered cursed, it was believed that when a woman becomes a widow she inflicts depredation and brings ill luck, after being a widow, that woman have to pronounce every comfort of home which was promised by her husband at the marriage, there is no place for widows in any holy or sacred rituals or place. They were not allowed to remarry. There will be no choice given to her so that can live a peaceful life, she always wears faded white clothes and had to eat very specific food which was only eaten by widows.

No education for women

They is evidence available that in the past women had access to education, but the scenario totally changed in the later Vedic period, the dimension of their education changed and they were taught all the domestic tasks, on the other hand in the Muslim religion they were given classes on fine art. Yet the suffering of women never gets easier in this period of time.

The fight for women's empowerment in India in the modern Period

Then as time passed society evolved with changes and somehow women got their chance to enjoy their, rights and powers but this was not available for every woman in society. At the very beginning of this modern period of women's empowerment in India, there are many names that come-up during the East India Company. They were extraordinarily brave women at that time like Begum Hazrat Mahal, Uda Devi and Azizun Baral, also one of them is Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi.

Gradually this fight for women's empowerment in India grew strong. There have been social reforms and many men and took participated in them like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda and Swami Dayananda Saraswati. All of them had helped women to receive back their previous status in society.

The origin of this empowerment and its concept of it had come up in the civil rights movements of the USA in 1960. To be more specific about the definition of empowerment it is widely defined as a large individual process of taking control over and responsibility for one's life and situation also granting them their human rights and social justice.

The status of women in India, through the past few millennia, has changed a lot. The whole 19th century is in one sense said to be the women's century all over the world. All over the world women's education became a moot question, which was not a topic of discussion lately but somehow the western world had some influence on women's empowerment in India.

The activities of the British ruler and missionaries who came from England and other parts of Europe made some changes in the social and cultural life of Indians. The missionaries were in the favor of women's education and they set up several schools for girls in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. The government's initiatives were remarkable. The education of girls in India in the 19th century took great hype and opposed against the patriarchal norms which were against their education.

Post-Independence Women's empowerment in India

After 30 years of Independence and the implementation of the constitution, there was nothing much done for the improvement of women's empowerment in India. There was negligence in the field of their healthcare, education, employment and more on. The political and economical participation of women was very low.

It is not easy to highlight the global effort of the women's rights movements. Women's right does not only mean a reformation and reconstruction and recovery of women's status and their natural life.

Women's human rights can be explained in two ways one is the general instruments of human rights, which has a principle of no discrimination that is applicable to all which includes women too, the second one refers to the gender specific provisions in international human rights law. The experience of all forms of violence and discrimination by women arose from the locality it was easy because women never had their basic education so that they can save themselves from discrimination and violence.

The National Education Movement was another factor that was against women's education. It was a humanist movement too. The humanist outlook led to the abolition of religion, class, caste and other dogma. With the development of the bramho movement, there was a rapid development in girls education. After the independence a lot of measures were taken to improve the qualitative and quantitative aspects of women's empowerment in India.

The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDW) is one of the most important initiatives of the United Nations Organization (UNO). It resists the violence and discrimination against women. it promised to restore the human rights of women and legal and political equality between men and women. This prolonged effort of empowering women started in the 1940s.

Women's role in politics and economy

The role of women in politics and the economy is the most effective and significant phase of women's empowerment in India. After so many reforms, acts and the implementation of laws finally gave women a chance to represent themselves politically. It was a very difficult task to transform women's political empowerment into their real social empowerment. The social attitude toward women's political roles never changed anything but particularly still remains deviously active in creating obstacles for women in the political world. Moreover, women deserve more representatives in the legislature along with local bodies along with all classes, castes, ethnicity etc.

Women make hugh contribution to the political, economical and social lives of countries, generations and many more. So economic development can show a positive impact on women's control over resources and their participation in the decision. making process, but the reality is that women are subject to economic pressure.

But now in modern times, the way women exercise their empowerment in India has changed the scenario a lot that the previous one. They have initiated their self-help groups, work in factories and had their own business. One good example of Shri Mahila Griha Udyog Lijjat Papad.

Along with this many laws and acts were executed by the Indian Government to boost women's empowerment in India.

The demands 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 won 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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