

EVOLUTION OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AFTER INDEPENDENCE IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT:

It is often said that the status and position of women in society are the best way to understand a civilization, its progress and its shortcomings. In case of India, women have come a long way from women sages 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 lays stress on the evolution, status, development of women and their empowerment in India from a historical point of view.

KEY WORDS: Empowerment, Women, Indian Constitution, Laws.

INTRODUCTION

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 analysing. 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. 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'. 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. The empowerment of the woman begins when she becomes aware of the sociopsychocultural injustice that is being done to her and also how gender inequality and inequity and gender and social-cultural, economic and

political forces are affecting her adversely in every sphere of her life. It starts when she becomes fully aware of her positive self –image, self –esteem, positive rights and duties, of her capabilities and potentialities. Thus to empower women in the real sense is to enable them to flower their talents, facilities, abilities and capacities, and to realise their full potentialities, and real identity as also freedom of thought, expression and action, and strength to handle every sphere of their lives. It is not only to make them aware of their capacities, but also to provide them with the opportunities, facilities, and external and internal environment to utilize their inherent qualities and to develop in them self-confidence, self-esteem and social-psychoeconomic self-reliance and self –dignity and the ability to raise a voice and fight against injustice, exploitation and violence done to her. Thus we find that the issues of Gender Justice, Gender Equality, Women’s Rights and Women’s Empowerment are very closely interrelated, and act and interact on one another. Women are liable to achieve empowerment when there is gender justice and equality and women’s rights are recognised as human rights and these are not violated. On the other hand, gender equality and justice can be achieved in reality and in day to day life only when women are really empowered. Empowerment of women would mean equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have a positive self-esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and they should be able to participate in developmental activities. The empowered women should be able to participate in the process of decision making. Education will be the only factor which would play the most crucial role in empowering women.

Evolution of Women Empowerment in India

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 to 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. Marriages 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 Mused Quli Khan, Dardana Begum, urged him to fight against Ali Verdi Khan when he invaded Orissa. Zebunissa Begum, wife of Nawab Shaja-ud-din, 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 honour.

The nineteenth century was to be a watershed for women's history. There were both political and social movements which impacted on their situation. The change in the country's polity brought India inevitably closer to the western world particularly to Great Britain in many ways. Although social contact with the British was limited to the highest class of Rajas, Maharajas and Zamindars at one end and to the local cooks, bearers, gardeners, tailors and ayahs at the other end, a better view of gender equality was there for all to see. Similarly, western education was limited to a few in India and of those few an infinitesimally small number who went for education to England were exposed to nineteenth century liberal thought. Colonial historians would have us believe that everything good come to us through becoming a part of the British Empire. The perspective of hindsight is even now not available to fully assess the imperial factor but some influences are definitely visible. Officials of East India Company, though in general few of them were well educated, most had a natural curiosity about a culture so different from their own. Their attention went naturally to some horrific social practices relating to women with which they were not acquainted. The practice most commonly remarked upon was infanticide

and sati. Both customs shocking by them, were by no means universally practised. The first was limited to being occasionally practised in some communities in the north and the second was also more pronounced in the north than in the south, and was practised by highest castes, both the practices were exceptions rather than the rule. It is to be credit of the British administration that sati was banned by Sir William Bentinck, the Governor General of India in 1836, and infanticide in 1870. The officials also took interest in education by introducing, during Lord Dalhousie's Governor General ship (1848-1856), a system of grants to public school which also helped women's education as most institutions run by private hands could apply for grants. The Indian Panel Code, promulgated in 1861 also took a systematic view of Indian women's situation. The Government did not have any social policy or policy framework for improving women's situation. Their responses were, on the whole. They did not touch any issues concerning Muslim women and in the case of Hindu women they did not want to upset conservative leaders. 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 honour. He founded the Brahma Samaj in 1825 to reform Hindu society. He spoke against early marriage of girls and sati and spoke in favour 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 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.

Women empowerment through the constitution of India

The three articles of the Constitution of India guarantees equality of sexes. In fact, this clearly reflects that the constitution grants special favours to women.

Article 14 says that the government shall not deny to any person equality before law or equal protection of the law.

Article 15 declares that government shall not discriminate against any citizen on the ground of sex.

Article 15 (3) makes a special provision enabling the state to make affirmative discriminations in favour of women.

Article 42 directs the state to make provision for ensuring just and human conditions of work and maternity relief.

Above all, the constitution regards a fundamental duty on every citizen through Articles 15 (A), (E) to renounce the practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

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:

- Equality before law and equal protection of law (Article 14).
- 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).
- Equality of opportunity in public employment. (Article 16).
- Equal rights for men and women to adequate means of livelihood. (Article 39(a)).
- Humane conditions of work and maternity relief for women. (Article 42).

- To secure for all citizens a uniform civil code throughout the country. (Article 44).
- It is a constitutional duty of every citizen of India to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. (Article 51 A (e)).
- 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)).
- 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)).
- 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)).
- Reservation of the offices of Chairperson in Municipalities for the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and women in such manner as the legislation of a State may by law provide (Article 243 T (4)).

Yet after half a century, considering the status of women in the Indian society, it has become necessary to emphasize the need for empowerment of women and awaken the society to the guarantees in the Constitution.

Special Laws

Consistent with Constitutional Provisions as well as their spirit, the Government has also enacted specific laws for the protection of women and for the up gradation of their status.

Marriage Related Laws

- Special Marriage Act, 1954 --- Any girl of 18 years of age or boy of 21 years can take resort to this law irrespective of caste or religious considerations.
- Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 --- Marriage is deemed to be solemnised on the performance of certain rites, especially Saptapadhi; while first marriage subsists, second marriage is forbidden;

right to judicial separation and divorce is made available on certain grounds like, for example, unsound of mind, conversion to a different religion, incurable or communicable diseases, etc.

- Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961--- Giving, abetting or taking dowry is a cognizable, non-bailable offenses against the state and is not punishable with less than five years of imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 15,000 or the amount representing the value of the dowry.
- Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1955 --- An unmarried woman, a widow or a divorcee of sound mind can also take a child in adoption.
- Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 __To overcome the shortcomings of the Child Marriage Restraint Act, the Government of India enacted the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006. Which receives the assent of the president of India on 10 January, 2007? The act came into effect from 1 November, 2007 to overcome the constraints of the former legislation in effectively dealing with the problems of child marriage in India and to put in place a comprehensive mechanism.

Property Related Laws

- The Hindu Succession Act, 1956 --- It vests women with rights in the matter of inheritance as well as the alienation of property at par with males.
- Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 --- This Act is enacted for providing equal remuneration to men and women, thereby to prevent discrimination against women on the grounds of sex.

Violence Related laws

- Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 --- This Act was adopted in India as a follow-up of the International Convention on Immoral Traffic, 1950. This Act underwent several changes and exists today as the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act 1956. This act aims at the prohibition of illegal traffic for purpose of sexual exploitation or abuse. It lays out procedure for rescue of a women or girl.
- Commission of Sati (prevention) Act, 1987. --- This Act provides for the prevention of the commission of sati and its glorification. The Act lays out extensive provisions to check attempts

to commit abet or glorify sati. The collector or District Magistrate is empowered by Act to offences relating to Sati.

- Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 --- This Act of Parliament received the assent of the President on 13th Sep., 2005. The act provided for more effective protection of the rights of women guaranteed under the Constitution who are victims of any kind occurring within the family and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto. Under the Act 2005, Domestic Violence covers any abuse or threat thereof that is physical, sexual, verbal, emotional or economic.
- The Sexual Harassment of Women at Work Place (Prevention, Provision and Redressal) Act 2013. ___It is an act to provide protection against sexual harassment of women at work place and for the prevention and redressal of complaints of sexual harassment and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.

Reasons for the empowerment of women

In spite of significant development and highest growth of Indian women in different pockets of India in various walks of life, one cannot conclude that women are totally empowered and reaching their sustainable status. Having understood clearly, still we could find disempowerment of women. Because, Many Indian women still face discrimination throughout all stages of their life, beginning at (or even before) birth, continuing as an infant, child, adolescent and adult. The stages can be divided in following sections:

- Before Birth / As an Infant
- As a Child
- After Marriage
- As a Widow

In spite of enacting various Acts and bringing out several schemes by both the state and central government to empower the women of India, women are still discriminated, subjugated and marginalized at every level of the society, be it social participation, political participation, easy access to education, economic participation and liberation, and also reproductive healthcare at times of their needs. Generally, majority of the women even in the fast changing and competitive

world are found to be economically very weak and therefore they continue to remain very poor all over the India. Significantly, a few women are voluntarily engaged in services and other activities with the consent of their partners and family members. It shows clearly that women are not given full freedom to function themselves as they wish or they could not do what they have been wanting or aspiring to do. To come out completely from this kind of situation, women should have an access to money all the time. Therefore, what they need is economic power by which they could be able to stand on their own legs on par with men. On the other hand, the educational status of women from the survey of census 2011 reveals that women are found to be less literate than men. The female literacy levels according to the Literacy Rate 2011 census are 65.46% where the male literacy rate is over 80%. Thus, not only quick access but also increasing education among women is of very important in empowering them. It is very sad to note even in the modern world that still some women are too weak to work, as they could not have healthy food. Being in this situation, women consume less food but work more not only in the work place but also at home. Normally, men have the chance to take rest at home after completing their work from their workplaces. On the other hand, women continue to work at home till every one of the family members go to bed, each and every day. Therefore, from the health point of view, women folk who are rightly said to be the weaker sex are to be made stronger. Another pertinent problem is the harassment of women at the workplace. There are so many incidences and many cases of rape, kidnapping of girl, dowry harassment and so on taking place every day in workplaces. As women are weak and voiceless, some cases are unreported. Considering the above reasons, women require empowerment. Therefore, it is the urgent need of the hour to help women to attain empowerment of all kinds in order to protect themselves and to secure their purity and dignity.

Women's Reservation Bill

Since from 1990s debates and campaigns within the women's movement in India have certainly witnessed a new focus on women in electoral politics. Demands for reservation of seats first at the local level bodies (village councils and municipalities) and beginning in 1996, through vain attempts to pass legislation for a one-third quota in state and national assemblies would be clear indication of India's own investment in the dimension of gender equality. Therefore the passing of the Women's Reservation Bill in the Rajya Sabha on 9 March, 2010 marked a historic turning

point in the story of Indian democracy. After being passed in the Rajya Sabha in 2010, the Bill, which provides for 33 per cent reservation for women in Parliament and Legislative Assemblies, was sent to the Lok Sabha for approval, but did not see the light of the day for lack of political consensus and will. Ironically it was just on 12 August 2014 that Congress president Sonia Gandhi made a pitch for the passing of the Women's (Constitution 108th Amendment) Bill. Speaking at a function in Thiruvananthapuram, Ms. Gandhi said that the UPA would mount pressure on the NDA to pass the Bill in Parliament —to honour its commitment to women. And now, under Article 107 (5) of the Constitution, it is amongst the 68 government Bills that have lapse on the dissolution of the 15th Lok Sabha. If the new government wants to give reservation to women, it will have to come up with a fresh legislation just as it did in the case of judicial appointments Bill.

CONCLUSION

Among the educated women in India, women from the middle class are continuing to improve in walk of lives cutting across their traditional boundaries. It shows that there remains a strong bias against gender equality in the societal parts of India, wherever we find the patriarchal traditions prevailing. While in the educated, urban middle class women's rights continue to improve, there remains a strong bias against gender equality in those societal parts of India, where patriarchal traditions prevail. Consequently, in these strata any inheritance of a deceased husband or father would be passed down to the oldest son, while his wife or daughters would not receive any financial benefit. There are laws in place to ensure legal protection for women's right to inheritance, but the enforcement of the law is challenging, when the woman is refused her right by the family, and when she is not confident or educated enough to claim her right. Having seen the status of women in India from strength to strength from past to present, It is worth quoting from the statement of Jawaharlal Nehru "You can tell the condition of a Nation by looking at the status of its Women." Having understood this, it is good to conclude with reasonable questions that which nation could claim to be a free and prosperous society, where half of its population is being oppressed? And which striving nation can afford to oppress half of its population? Obviously, the answer to that question is: none! Sustainable and long-term development is not possible without the participation and empowerment of women, only if they participate in the economic and societal development, the full potential of a society of India's society will be

unfolded. Article 15 of the Indian constitution states clearly that no citizen should be discriminated on the grounds of only sex, but the irony we find that still discrimination is widespread which says clearly that women are subjected to injustice in many forms. As Desai has stated, “if women get equal opportunities like men, they can work in every field like men”. Today if she lags behind a little, it is not her fault but the fault of traditions which have suppressed them for centuries , owing to this, her own thoughts like also hang around only familial life and her nearest environment also does not provide favourable conditions for her devotion in the outside work. In order to change the situation along with economic growth, social progress is also greatly required. Hence the need of the hour is to effectively combat gender disparity as to promote gender equality by sufficiently empowering the women.

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