



Development and empowerment of women: A historical perspective

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Abstract

The Status of Women in India is explained by Manu who is believed to be the Law Giver, according to Hindu Mythology, "Na Stree Swatatarahati" i.e. women does not deserve independence. Further, it is provided that "a woman is made from a crooked rib and if you try to bend it straight, it will break. Hence, treat the women kindly." Now that we have entered into the 21st century, women have excelled, progressed and established their status in the society equal to that of men. And gradually, the male dominated patriarchal society is changing to a society where men and women are treated at par with each other.

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.

Now, the principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Empowerment is a process where people have to assert their control over the factors that affects their day-to-day lives. By definition of Empowerment of women, we mean developing them as more aware individuals, who are politically active, economically productive and independent and are able to make intelligent discussion in matters that affect them.

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.

Keywords: empowerment, women, Indian constitution, laws

Introduction

"Woman is the builder and molder of Nation's destiny. Though delicate and soft as lily, she has a heart, for stranger and bolder than of man. She is the supreme inspiration for man's onward march. She is no doubt, her commanding personality, nevertheless is grin by solemn..." Rabindranath Tagore.

Women empowerment has always remained central to human and economic development in a country. Since women constitute an important part in the process of development, therefore their social, economic and political empowerment has tendency to spread development^[1]. They are not only an important element of society but also influence the course of change in sodality. As India is the land of seers, sages and significant rulers, Ancient India has been marked the accord for honour and higher status enjoyed by women. They were bestowed with rights and good position in the society. But the irony is that our denizens are conservatives and sticklers to blind traditions. Owing to patriarchal society and deteriorating values, the so called traditions gradually affected the position

of women turning it to be inferior and ill honored prone to harassment, assault and many other social evils^[2].

Women empowerment is critical to the process of development of the community. Empowerment of women is essential to harness the women labour in the mainstream of economic development. According to Swami Vivekanand, "... there is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of the women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing^[3]." Women have to play an important role in the building up of every economy. Women who form almost one half of the world's population constitute the visible majority of the poor. Women either solely or largely support an increasing number of families.

In India, apart from the provision in the constitution and the ratification of different international conventions, several legislative acts have also been passed to ensure women empowerment. Moreover, women empowerment has received attention of the government right from the beginning of Indian planning.

In India, we have social, political and economic injustices

¹ Jharta, Mohan, "Some Aspects of Women Empowerment in India", *Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 13, No.1, Summer 2006, p.12.

² Ibid.

³ Yojana 45, No. 8, August 2001, p. 4.

galore where the life for most women has been vulnerable for decades. The era of women empowerment in India started after 1800 A.D. during British rule which was the byproduct of various socio-cultural, religious and political movements in the country^[4]. Moreover, the process of globalization ushered dramatic change in the conditions which led to the boulevard to gender equality and women empowerment. The various conventions at both the International and the National levels took initiatives to strengthen the position of women. So, the term women empowerment became popular in Indian context due to high degree of participation of women in the developmental activities over the globe^[5].

Women empowerment can thus, be defined as the process of strengthening the hands of women who have been suffering from various disabilities, inequalities and gender discrimination.⁶ Therefore, the strengthening of women has to do away with subordination, discrimination and injustice done to them in a male dominated society^[7]. The feminist perspectives support women empowerment as an opportunity by justifying equality between men and women in society rather supremacy of women to men as well as subjugation of women to men.

Women empowerment: concept and dimensions

Women Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process occurring within sociological, psychological, economic, political and other dimensions, which helps women in gaining control over their own lives. Empowerment is the capacity of individuals, groups and/or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals, and the process by which individually and collectively, they are able to help themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives^[8]. It includes self-strength, own choice, own decision making, being awakening and capacity expanding the freedom of choice and action with the core concepts of the inclusive and participatory environment, access to the changing and emerging aspects, accountability for the crucial concepts of life and local organizing capacity^[9].

Women empowerment is a new phrase in the vocabulary of gender literature. The phrase is used in two broad senses, i.e. general and specific. In a general sense, it refers to empowering women to be self-dependent by providing them access to all those freedoms and opportunities which they were denied in the past for no other reason except their being women. Broadly speaking, such enabling measures include social legislation for their emancipation from age-old discrimination, education for their self-enhancement, economic opportunities for their self-dependence, and political and civil rights for equality with men. In a specific sense, women's empowerment refers mainly to enhancing their

position in the power structure of the society. In other words, it means increase in their access to the structures of decision making process which have otherwise been dominated by men^[10].

According to UNFPA Guidelines, "The empowerment of women comprises five components- women's sense of self-worth; their rights to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives; both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create just social and economic order on national and international levels"^[11]. Thus, the objective of women empowerment is to inculcate large scale sentience with the active involvement of women themselves. It aims at laying the foundation for women folk to utilize the existing resources without discrimination and their indulgence in all the spheres and at all the levels in a balanced way^[12].

The empowerment of women include creating awareness and consciousness about situations of women, discrimination of women, rights of women, opportunities to the women and importance of gender equality; organizing a group collectively, group identity and group pressure; capacity building and skill development – ability to plan, to decide, to organize, ability to manage, ability to carry out activities, ability to deal with people and institutions in the world around them; participation in decision making at home, in the community and in the society; and access and control over resources, over means of productivity and over distribution.

Empowerment emphasizes not only increasing the power of the individual but also the quality of life for the individual, the efficiency and autonomy of the individual. Empowerment has several other dimensions like social, economic, psychological and political aspects. Social empowerment connotes formation of social capacities such as health, education, freedom and opportunities for realizing one's potentialities. Economic empowerment implies entitlement to employment, income, property, productive resources and benefits regardless of gender differences. Psychological empowerment signifies confidence building, acquisition of a sense of efficacy and ability to overcome feeling of helplessness. Political empowerment implies equal say in the decision-making process in the power structure at all levels from local to global. All these dimensions of empowerment are so intertwined with one another that over reliance on one to the neglect of the other are not likely to work.

In its simplest form, empowerment of women means reorganisation of power in favour of women. It is the manifestation of redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and the male dominance. It is a transformation of the structures or institutions that reinforces and perpetuates gender discrimination. Women empowerment means empowering women socially, economically and politically so that they can break away from male domination

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Raju, *Women Empowerment (Socio-Economic and political)*. Women Empowerment: Challenges and Strategies, Regal Publications, New Delhi, 2007.

⁷ Himachal Pradesh Development Report, Planning Commission, Government of India, New Delhi, 2007.

⁸ Adams, Robert, *Empowerment, Participation and Social Work*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008.

⁹ Chatterjee, Madhushree Dasgupta, *Political Empowerment of Women: Pathway to Inclusive Democracy*, YOJANA, 2016.

¹⁰ Sharma, S.L., "Reservations for Women's Empowerment", *Competition Affairs*, September 1998, p. 3.

¹¹ United Nations Population Fund Guidelines for Women's Empowerment. Available from <http://www.un.org/popin/unfpa/taskforce/guide/iatfwemp.gdl.html>.

¹² Ibid.

and claim equality with them^[13].

Woman Empowerment not only point towards their material development, but is oriented towards mere economic growth which generally plays an important role in the overall developmental strategy as has been conceived of in the case of other underprivileged classes. Woman Empowerment should be construed as the overall development of their faculty of self-realization, self-image and identity and the economic development which holds the keys to their real development^[14].

In the path of empowering women, the primary step is to remove gender inequality. The gender equality and women's empowerment are so mingled that they are considered one and the same thing. Many of the experts consider women empowerment and gender equality as two sides of the same coin: progress toward gender equality requires women's empowerment and women's empowerment requires increases in gender equality. Women empowerment and gender equality can only be achieved through gender justice.

Reasons for the empowerment of women

Today, we have noticed different Acts and Schemes of the central government as well as state government to empower the women of India. But in India, women are discriminated and marginalized at every level of the society whether it is social participation, political participation, economic participation, access to education, and also reproductive healthcare. Women are found to be economically very poor all over the India. A few women are engaged in services and other activities. So, they need economic power to stand on their own legs on par with men. Other hand, it has been observed that women are found to be less literate than men. According to 2001 census, rate of literacy among men in India is found to be 76% whereas it is only 54% among women. Thus, increasing education among women is of very important in empowering them. It has also noticed that some of women are too weak to work. They consume less food but work more. Therefore, from the health point of view, women folk who are to be weaker are to be made stronger. Another problem is that workplace harassment of women. There are so many cases of rape, kidnapping of girl, dowry harassment, and so on. For these reasons, they require empowerment of all kinds in order to protect themselves and to secure their purity and dignity^[15]. There is continued inequality and vulnerability of women in all sectors such as economic, social, political, education, healthcare, nutrition and legal. Moreover, women are excluded from certain crucial economic, social and political activities. Women still lack independent rights to own land, manage property and run business. Therefore, they are educationally, politically, economically and socially disadvantaged, even though their labour and reproductive

capacity are fully utilized and exploited^[16].

The pressure of traditional customs and norms of the male domination still make women subjugated to men^[17]. The patriarchal family system with religious mores and male dominant value systems are some of the main social factors which are denying the empowerment, equality and social justice to women in the real sense. Thus, women in India have many obstacles to overcome. They continue to bear the burden of poverty, illiteracy, economic marginalisation, exclusion from decision making process, lack of access to resources, social stereotyping, violence at household and societal levels. There is a persistent and institutionalised discrimination against the women and mechanisms to achieve gender equality and women empowerment still remain inadequate and these need to be streamlined.

Historical perspective

Woman was related with life symbols as 'goddess of motherhood' in ancient civilisations of the world. This was the beginning (genesis) of the concept of mother earth in the 'Atharvaveda'^[18]. The condition and the position of women in society is the best way to understand the progress and shortcomings of a civilisation. Woman's status has been a subject of concern over the years, which in one or the other aspects has always inter-wined with the history of a country. 'The status of Indian women has undergone a drastic change from era to era. It has been degenerated from that of a deity to 'devdasi', from the pious to the impious and from virtue to vice'^[19]. The status pattern, concerning the role of a woman has undergone a visible change with variations in social and ideological structure from time to time. This paradoxical situation must be understood and seen in its historical perspective in order to study it in detail. Therefore, the status of women and their role in the society can be divided into three main historical periods - the ancient, the medieval and the modern.

Women in ancient India

Now, the women in India enjoy a unique status of equality with the men as per constitutional and legal provision. But the Indian women have come a long way to achieve the present positions. First, gender inequality in India can be traced back to the historic days of Mahabharata when Draupadi was put on the dice by her husband as a commodity^[20]. History is a witness that women were made to dance both in private and public places to please the man. Secondly, in Indian society, a female was always dependent on male members of the family even last few years ago. Thirdly, a female was not allowed to speak with loud voice in the presence of elder members of her in-laws. In the family, every faults had gone to her and

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Tapan, Neeta, *Need for Women Empowerment*, Rawat Publications, New Delhi, 2000.

¹⁸ Singh Shashi Shyam (ed.), *Encyclopedia Indica: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh (Vedic Language and Literature)*, Vol. 11, Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 1997.

¹⁹ Devi Uma K., *Women's equality in India - a myth or reality?*, Discovering Publishing House, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 3-4.

²⁰ Sutherland, SJM, "Sītā and Draupadi: Aggressive Behavior and Female Role-Models in the Sanskrit Epics," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 109, 1989, pp.63-79

¹³ Avasthi, Abha and Srivastava, A.K. (ed.), *Modernity, Feminism and Women Empowerment*, Rawat Publications, New Delhi, 2001.

¹⁴ Lalita Dhar Parihar, *WOMAN AND LAW, From Impoverishment to Empowerment - A Critique*, First Edition, Eastern Book Publication, Lucknow, 2011, p.411.

¹⁵ Nagaraja B., "Empowerment of Women in India: A Critical Analysis", *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol.9, No. 2, March-April 2013, p.201.

responsible. Fourth, as a widow her dependence on a male member of the family still more increase. In many social activities, she is not permitted to mix with other members of the family. Other hand, she has very little share in political, social and economic life of the society.

The status of Women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millenniums. In early Vedic period Women enjoyed equal status with men. Rigveda and Upanishads mention several names of women sages and seers notably Gargi and Maitrey [21].

Historical studies and the scriptures indicate that Indian woman enjoyed a comparatively high status during the early Vedic period (2000 B.C. to 1000 B.C.), surpassing contemporary civilizations in ancient Greece and Rome [22]. The Aryans, who were mostly busy fighting wars, regarded woman as useful and productive members of society. The condition of Vedic Woman was good. Woman also enjoyed religious status like that of men, especially in Vedic initiation and studies. The Rig Veda provides ample evidence to prove the concept of equality of woman with men as regards access and capacity to acquire the highest knowledge, even the absolute knowledge. The Rig Veda had rendered the highest social status to qualified woman of those days. But status of woman fell in the later Vedic and Epic period. They were not at all treated equally with men or we can say that they were not enjoying equal rights and privileges as compared to men [23].

In ancient India, though patriarchal system was highly prevalent - all male domination -- women enjoyed a position of respect and reverence. Several inscriptions make references to the status of women in that they enjoyed the freedom to make liberal gifts to religious institutions like temples, Dharmasalas not merely for the welfare of heads of the families but for their parents as well. Women were allowed to have multiple husbands [24]. They could leave their husbands. In the Vedic society women participated in religious ceremonies and tribal assemblies. There is no seclusion of women from domestic and social affairs but they were dependent on their male relatives throughout their lives.

Women often enjoyed prominent roles in politics. Megasthenes mentioned the Pandya women running the administration [25]. The Satavahana queen, "Nayanika ruled the kingdom on behalf of her minor son. So did Pravabati, daughter of Chandragupta II, on behalf of the minor Vakataka prince. A little after the Gupta period, queens used to rule in Kashmir, Orissa and Andhra. In ancient India, women occupied a very important position with, in fact a superior position to, man. Valmiki's Ramayana teaches us that Ravana and his entire clan was wiped out because he abducted Sita [26].

Though the woman participated in each family ceremony with men but they only played a role as a silent observer not an

active participant. As per Manu, men always enjoy unchallenged authority over their wives. Child marriages, Polygamy and Sati were prevalent at that time. Still out of these entire things woman at that time were respected by the society. However, changes into the status of woman introduced in 15th century. Saints and supporters of bhakti movement were expounded and spoken about equality of woman with men [27].

To understand the status of women and the changes it underwent with due course of time, it is very important to know the status of women during various eras and the role played by them and their male counter parts. As said earlier, women enjoyed equal status with men and enjoyed all rights in the Vedic period as depicted in the works of Katayana and Patanjali. There's reference of female education and mature marriages as well.

Women in medieval India

The position of women, it is said, started deteriorating in the medieval period. Though In the vedic period, women lost their political rights of attending assemblies. Child marriages and a ban on remarriage by widows became part of social life in some communities in India. The position of women gradually deteriorated as the Vedic ideals of unity and equality began to fade off through the passage of time, yet upto the medieval period, the status of women went down considerably. She was considered to be inferior to man. The Muslim conquest brought the veil to women in the Indian society; Sati system became prevalent and even in some parts of India polygamy was practised among rulers [28].

The purdah system and Jauhar are attributable to the Muslim rules that existed from 10th century onwards. The Rajputs of Rajasthan started the practice of Jauhar after a century of Islamic invasions in the 10th century [29]. The early Islamic invasions in Sindh did not result in Jauhar, as is evident from the history of Raja Dahir or Sindh. After the attack by Mohammed-Bin-Qasim in 10th century, and the killing of Raja Dahir, his wife and daughters were sent off as sex slaves to Damascus. This type of slavery prevalent in 10th century may have resulted in the evolution of Jauhar in Western India, which were the first parts of India exposed to invasions from the Persian and Turkish empires [30].

Polygamy was practised among Hindu Kshatriya rulers.³¹ However, this practice may not be considered a uniform social behavior, as at the same time, there were kingdoms which practised polyandry also. Nair warrior communities in Kerala practised polyandry for centuries, during the medieval period up to the British 18th century.

According to ancient Hindu texts and tradition, until about 500 B.C. women in India enjoyed considerable freedom i.e.

²¹ Jain, Simmi, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Women Through Ages: Ancient India*, Gyan Publishing House, 2003, pp.25-28.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Gupta, Gayatri, *Status of Women in Ancient India*, Shree Niwas Publications, 2012, pp.34-36.

²⁷ Nelasco, Shobana, *Status of Women in India*, Deep & Deep Publications, New Delhi, 2010, p. 11.

²⁸ Mishra, R. C., *Women in India: towards gender equality*, Authorspress, New Delhi, 2006.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Kamat, Jyotsana, "Status of women in medieval Karnataka (blog)". *kamat.com*. Kamat's Potpourri, January, 2006.

till Vedic period ^[32]. But during the next thousand years, women's position gradually deteriorated. Educational and religious parity was denied to them and widow remarriage was forbidden.

In many Muslim families, women were restricted to particular areas of the house. Despite these conditions, some women gained prominence in the fields of politics, literature, education and religion ^[33]. For example, Razia Sultan became the only woman monarch to have ever ruled Delhi. Chand Biwi of Ahmedabad fought with the Mughals. Nurjahan is still considered as the most effective ruler by the society. Notwithstanding these exceptions substantive equality remained elusive to women in India.

Development of women empowerment in modern India

The principle of gender equality has been basic to Indian thinking for centuries. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw a succession of women's movements, first focussing on burning social issues like women's education and widow remarriage and then secondly related to the freedom struggle itself. The era of empowerment of women in India, in the real sense, started after 1800 during the British rule. Various socio-cultural, religious and political movements and the reformist leaders, brought about some empowerment to the women. There was, consequently, some improvements in the status of women through education, western influence, socio-economic and legislative measures.

Women empowerment movement is a major part of human civilization and it has been of the significant social and political development of the closing decades of the 20th century ^[34]. Some radical changes had taken place in the sphere of education, life, etc. of the women during British regime. During the British rule in India, new systems were established based on principles of liberty and equality and in turn generated a new climate to bring changes in the old, traditional feudal, un-egalitarian social structure and norms based on equality. They favoured and encouraged education for women by establishing schools and colleges and by introducing English education in India. The European missionaries may be said to be torchbearers of modern education in India.

During the colonial rule, social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chand Vidhyasgar and Jyotirao Phule fought for the betterment of women. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's efforts led to the abolition of Sati. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's efforts for improvement in the situation of widows led to the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. The valiant Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, fought against the British demonstrating her prowess in warfare ^[35].

Though the East India Company broadly adhered to its declared policy of non-interference with the social custom of the people, yet early Governor General like Cornwallis, Minto

and Lord Hasting had taken some step to restrict the practice of Sati by discouraging compulsion forbidding administration of intoxicating drugs to the sorrow stricken widows, putting a ban of the sati of pregnant women out widows below the age of 16 years and above-all making compulsory the presence of police official at the time of sacrifice who were to see that no compulsion proved inadequate and achieved limited success ^[36].

Mr. Loushington, a Magistrate in Madras Presidency wrote to the Colonial Government in 1813 that a legal abolition of Sati would provide a "Universal Satisfaction" except a few conventional Purohit who earned a lot of presiding over the rites of Sati. The Father of Indian Renaissance Raja Ram Mohan Roy had already taken up the issue of Sati and he consistently made effort to convince the Hindu that the custom had no sanction of religion. In 1822, the Raja Ram Mohan widely circulated his "bring remark regarding modern encroachment on the ancient rights of female according to Hindu Law of Inheritance." The Court of the Director encouraged William Bentick to enact legislation to suppress sati ^[37].

Regulation XVII of the Colonial Government of 4th December, 1820 declared the practice of Sati, on burning or burying alive of widow illegal and punishable by criminal court as culpable homicide. Bentinck sought the help of Ram Mohan Roy and asked him to publicize the good point of new act. Raja Roy popularized the act of 1829 and created a mighty public opinion in its favour through his writing and speeches. He removed the misconceptions of the people about the act of 1829 ^[38].

In 1848, India got its first woman educator in the form of "Savitribai Phule". This year marks the rise of women's empowerment in India as Savitribai Phule busted the social norm that a woman cannot be educated. She emphasized the values of women's education and improving women's rights in India during British rule ^[39].

In 1917, the first women's delegation met the Secretary of State to demand women's political rights, supported by the Indian National Congress. The All India Women's Education Conference held in Pune in 1927 became a major organisation in the movement for social change ^[40].

Women even played an important part in India's independence struggle. Some of the famous crusaders for freedom were Dr. Annie Besant, Vijay Laxmi Pandit, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kriplani and Kasturba Gandhi. The Rani of Jhansi Regiment of Subhash Chandra Bose's Indian National Army consisted entirely of women, including Captain Lakshmi Sehgal. Sarojini Naidu was the first Indian woman to become President of the Indian National Congress and the first woman to become the governor of a state in India ^[41].

It is noteworthy, that women movement in India aimed at

³² Gupta, Gayatri, *Status of Women in Ancient India*, Shree Niwas Publications, 2012, pp.34-36.

³³ Raman, Sita Anantha. *Women in India: A Social and Cultural History*, Praeger, 2009, p.236.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Majumdar, R.C. and Pusalker, A.D. *The history and culture of the Indian people, volume I, the Vedic age*. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1951, p. 394.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ "Women in history", National Resource Center for Women, 19th June, 2009. Accessed on 30th April, 2018.

³⁸ Sharma, R.K, *Nationalism, Social Reform and Indian Women*, New Delhi, 1981, p. 215.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Jayapalan, N., *Indian Society and Social Institutions*, Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2001, p. 145.

⁴¹ Ibid.

defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights and equal opportunities for Indian women. It focussed on the pursuit of women's right within the society [42]. Historical circumstances and values in India have caused feminists to develop a feminism that differs from Western feminism. For example, the idea of women as "powerful" is accommodated into patriarchal culture through religion which has retained visibility in all sections of society. This has provided women with traditional "cultural spaces". Furthermore, in the West the notion of "self" rests in competitive individualism where people are described as "born free yet everywhere in chains". In India, the individual is usually considered to be just one part of the larger social collective. Survival of the individual is dependent upon cooperation, and self-denial for the greater good is valued [43]. Unlike the Western feminist movement, India's movement was initiated by men, and later joined by women. The male and female dichotomy of polar opposites with the former oppressing the latter at all times is refuted in the Indian context because it was men who initiated social reform movements against various social evils. As mentioned earlier, the efforts of these men included abolishing sati, abolishing the custom of child marriage, Widow Remarriage, promoting women's education, obtaining legal rights for women to own property, and requiring the law to acknowledge women's status by granting them basic rights in matters such as adoption [44].

In the 19th century, due to the male social reformers devoted ample time and resources to interact with the power-structures [45]. It resulted in legal reforms and establishment of educational institutions, shelter homes, and training centres for women from where the first generation of teachers, nurses, skilled workers emerged. The first generation of English educated empowered women became pioneers of the women's movement in the pre-independence period. Most of them channelized their energies in building pioneer women's organisations such as All India Women's Conference (AIWC), Young Women Christian Association (YWCA) and Anjuman-e-Islam [46]. The political agenda of AIWC was to fight against child marriage, mobilise public opinion in favour of voting rights for women, and impart basic skills to women. YWCA was multi religious in terms of its areas of activities and beneficiaries, though its decision-makers happened to be the Christian wives of politicians, bureaucrats and professionals who provided vocational training courses. Anjuman Trust was committed to the cause of women's education. Women leaders from Anjuman Trust interacted only within the Muslim community. The major contribution of women's organisations in the pre-independence times was to raise and articulate issues related to women's rights, dignity

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Nelasco, Shobana, *Status of Women in India*, Deep and Deep Publications, 2010, p.11

⁴⁴ Singh, S., "Examining the Dharma Driven Identity of Women: Mahabharata Kunti" – As part of an Anthology titled *The Woman Question in the Contemporary Indian English Women Writings*, Ed. Indu Swami Publishers Sarup, Delhi, 2010.

⁴⁵ Forbes, Geraldine, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, 28th April, 1999, pp.23-26.

⁴⁶ Chaudhuri, Maitrayee, *Feminism in India (Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism)*, Zed, New York, 2005.

and equality [47].

The inception of Mahatma Gandhi in the National freedom movement ushered a new concept of mass mobilization. Mahatma Gandhi was a champion of women's cause [48]. His call during the freedom movement brought in women from all walks of life and helped them in attaining some kind of equality. Gandhi used to say that "most of our movements stopped half-way because of the condition of our women and that it was only by harnessing the power of women that any great social, economic and political goals could be attained" [49].

Women leaders participated in public functions, rallies, demonstrations and experienced prison-life. Some of the highly educated women joined educational institutions, diplomatic crew, public service boards and even in public and private sector industries. The rest became enlightened homemakers with a strong commitment for their daughters' education. AIWC under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi worked within the nationalist and anti-colonialist freedom movements [50]. This made the mass mobilisation of women an integral part of Indian nationalism. Women therefore were a very important part of various nationalist and anticolonial efforts, including the civil disobedience movements of 1930s. Gandhi utilised traditional symbols and ideals as source of inspiration for women who responded to his clarion call enthusiastically. They came out of their homes and organised meetings, processions and rallies, spreading the message of 'Swadeshi'. They promoted the sale of Khadi, picketing the liquor and foreign cloth shops. They also willingly gave away their jewellery to support the national cause of gaining freedom from colonial rule. Gandhi's incorporation of women's movements into the Quit India Movement fostered the emergence of independent women's organisations [51].

Women constituted about 50% of the country's total population, which is why Gandhi involved women in the nation's liberation movement. The mass participation of women directly in the freedom struggle was the great divide in the history of (Feminist movement) empowerment of women [52]. They shed age-old disabilities and shared the responsibility of liberation of their motherland with their counter parts. The freedom of India thus became synonymous with the empowerment of women. In this context, the date of India's political freedom (15th August, 1947) is a landmark in the history of women empowerment in India. It brought in its wake a great consciousness in our society for human dignity. It was realized that every citizen of independent India be accorded equal treatment under the law [53].

Women-only organizations like All India Women's

⁴⁷ Forbes, Geraldine, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, 28th April, 1999, pp.23-26.

⁴⁸ Kamat, Jyotsana, "Gandhi and status of women (blog)". *kamat.com*. 19th December, 2006.

⁴⁹ Narayanan, Usha, "Poverty Eradication and Women's Empowerment", *Mainstream*, Vol. 36, No. 12, 14th March, 1998, p. 19.

⁵⁰ Forbes, Geraldine, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, 28th April, 1999, pp.23-26.

⁵¹ Bjorkert, Suruchi Thapar, *Women in the Indian National Movement: Unseen Movies and Unheard Voices, 1930-42*, Sage Publications, 9th March, 2006, pp.33-36.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

Conference (AIWC) and the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) emerged. Women were grappling with the issues relating to the scope of women's political participation, women's franchise, communal awards, and leadership roles in political parties^[54].

The Indian National Army (INA), which was set up by Subhash Chandra Bose, was one of the most genuine and fearless movements undertaken by Indian men and women under the able and remarkable leadership of this great patriot. Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose recruited around 1000 women for the Rani of Jhansi Regiment from different South East Asian countries. Dr. Lakshmi Swaminathan, who was a medical practitioner by profession, led this regiment^[55]. The women in the regiment were given the same training as that was given to men. Even their uniform was similar to the men soldiers. The real impact of the INA may not have been in military terms, but it had a deep psychological impact on the women of India.

While there was significant number of women patriots who stood by Gandhiji and the Congress in the non-violent movement, women of Bengal and from other parts of India also participated in a vital role in various armed revolutions^[56]. Women played a major role in the Lahore Students Union of Bhagat Singh and the Kakori case. The Mahila Rashtriya Sangha was established by Latika Ghosh in the year 1928. Veena Das who shot at the Governor of Bengal, and Kamla Das Gupta and Kalyani Das were all active within the respective revolutionary groups. Women courageously participated in violent and non-violent movements of Indian independence.

The women in freedom struggle of India excelled as speakers, marchers, campaigners and tireless volunteers. They actively participated in the processions and rallies conducted by the Indian political parties. They always fought for Hindu-Muslim unity. The contribution of women in freedom struggle of India is truly remarkable and is difficult to define in words^[57].

Women's participation in the freedom struggle developed their critical consciousness about their role and rights in independent India. This resulted in the introduction of the franchise and civic rights of women in the Indian constitution. There was provision for women's upliftment through affirmative action, maternal health and child care provision (crèches), equal pay for equal work etc. The state adopted a patronizing role towards women. Women in India did not have to struggle for basic rights as did women in the West. The utopia ended soon when the social and cultural ideologies and structures failed to honour the newly acquired concepts of fundamental rights and democracy.

Post-India's independence

Women became autonomous in their opinions and endeavours only after India got political freedom. During the framing of the Constitution of India there were merely 13 women

members in the Constitution Assembly^[58]. Indian Constitution framed on November 1947 gave women all the rights and privileges which are paramount articulated in its constitution.

After Independence, women could participate fully in areas such as education, sports, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology, etc.^[59]. Indira Gandhi, who served as Prime Minister of India for an aggregate period of fifteen years, is the world's longest serving woman Prime Minister^[60].

The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14)^[61], no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1))^[62], equality of opportunity (Article 16)^[63], equal pay for equal work (Article 39 (d)) and Article 42.^[64] In addition, it allows special provisions to be made by the State in favour of women and children (Article 15(3)), renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51(A) (e)), and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief. (Article 42)

Series of legal reforms and Acts have been passed to raise the status of women. These include:

1. Hindu and Widows Remarriage Act, 1856
2. Abolition of Sati Act, 1929
3. Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929
4. Hindu Women's Right to Property Act, 1937
5. Hindu Women's Right of Separate Residence and Maintenance Act, 1946
6. Hindu Marriage Act, 1955
7. Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956
8. Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961
9. Family Courts Act, of Women's Act, 1986
10. Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1986
11. Juvenile Justice Act, 1986
12. Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005

The concept of empowerment is emerged in the eighties of twentieth century; it has its grounding in the changes in the development thinking of the mid-1970s. The Department of Women and Child Development was setup in 1985. Two new schemes for Support to Training and Employment Programmes (STEP) and Awareness Generation Program for Rural and Poor women were introduced in the year 1986^[65]. Shram Shakti Report was prepared in 1988. In early nineties emphasis was given on organization and strengthening of women group at grass root level. Two new schemes were introduced during this period, which were Mahila Samridhi

⁵⁸ Devi Uma K., *Women's equality in India - a myth or reality?*, Discovering Publishing House, New Delhi, 2000.

⁵⁹ "Women in history", National Resource Center for Women, 19th June, 2009. Accessed on 30th April, 2018.

⁶⁰ "Oxford University's famous south Asian graduates (Indira Gandhi)", *BBC News*, 5th May, 2010.

⁶¹ "Women related law:- All compiled - Into Legal World", *Into Legal World*. Accessed on 31st, April, 2018.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Panda, Dhyanaaditya, "Women Empowerment in India: Rationale and Present State", *International Journal of Emerging Research in Management and Technology*, Volume 6, Issue 9, September, 2017.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Chaudhuri, Maitrayee, *Feminism in India (Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism)*, Zed, New York, 2005.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Yojana and Indira Mahila Yojana through Self Help Groups. The other major achievements were setting up of National Commission and Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (1993) for women. During the 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India provided for reservation of seats (at least one-third) in the local bodies of Panchayati Raj Institutions and Municipalities for women. Another Constitutional Amendment (84th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1998) reserving 33 per cent seats in Parliament and State Legislatures is in the pipeline [66].

In India, the efforts have also been made through five year plans to attain women advancement in all walks of life [67]. But its initial journey was not specifically directed towards women empowerment. The approach in the first and the second five year plan was developmental, concentrating on women's need of education, health and welfare etc. But the government approach till the 5th Five Year Plan was condemned in the report of the Committee on the status of women in India for having failure in addressing the major problems of poverty, illiteracy, non-enrollment and drop-out rates of women [68].

At the time of the 6th Five Year Plan (1980-85), women organizations began to make impact on the planning process. A memorandum submitted by seven women members of Parliament persuaded the Planning Commission to incorporate for the first time in Indian planning history a chapter on women and development [69]. In the 7th Five Year Plan the strategy of organising women around socio-economic activities was reiterated. The landmarks in the history of women empowerment in India are the establishment of Department of Women and Child Development (1986) and National Policy on Education (1986). This policy for the first time indicated government system to shoulder a major responsibility for genuine empowerment of women by changing the social construction of gender [70]. The 8th Plan (1992-99) indicates the gradual shift from development to empowerment of women. It has been said in this plan that women must be enabled to function as equal partners and participants in the development process. The 8th Five Year Plan focussed on violence against women and "Situational Analysis" highlighting the problems of higher mortality, lower education and increasing unemployment of women. The most drastic development in this plan is the passing of the 73rd and 74th (Constitutional) amendment in 1993. It has given opportunity for women to come into decision making position in governance by being elected to one-third of the membership reserved for women in Panchayat Raj and Municipalities [71].

But even after 66 years of our independence, women are still one of the most powerless and marginalized sections of Indian society. It is really a matter of concern that in independent India the women are not given their due credit and their participation in all the walks of life is not as remarkable as

during those days of struggle [72]. Although women in India did not have to struggle for basic rights but many problems still remain which inhibit these new rights and opportunities from being fully taken advantage of. For example, India's constitution also states that women are a "weaker section" of the population, and therefore need assistance to function as said equals [73].

There are also many traditions and customs that have been a huge part of India and its people for hundreds of years [74]. Religious laws and expectations, or "personal laws" enumerated by each specific religion, often conflict with the Indian Constitution, eliminating rights and powers women legally should have. Despite these crossovers in legality, the Indian government does not interfere with religion and the personal laws they hold. Indian society is highly composed of hierarchical systems within families and communities. These hierarchies can be broken down into age, sex, ordinal position, kinship relationships (within families), and caste, lineage, wealth, occupations, and relationship to ruling power (within the community) [75]. When hierarchies emerge within the family based on social convention and economic need, girls in poorer families suffer twice the impact of vulnerability and stability. From birth, girls are automatically entitled to less; from playtime, to food, to education, girls can expect to always be entitled to less than their brothers. Girls also have less access to their family's income and assets, which is exacerbated among poor, rural Indian families. From the start, it is understood that females will be burdened with strenuous work and exhausting responsibilities for the rest of their lives, always with little to no compensation or recognition [76].

These traditions and ways of Indian life have been in effect for so long, that this type of lifestyle is what women expect and are accustomed to. Indian women do not take full advantage of their constitutional rights because they are not properly aware or informed of them. Women also have poor utilization of voting rights because they possess low levels of political awareness and sense of political efficacy [77]. Women are not informed about issues, nor are they encouraged to become informed. Political parties do not invest much time in women candidates because they don't see much potential or promise in them, and see them as a wasted investment.

The specific schemes to provide incentives to promote education, especially amongst girl children and reduce the school dropout rates is being implemented by the government. Two important schemes viz. "Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan" and "Mahila Samakhya" are being implemented by Department of Education as a special effort to stretch the reach of education especially to the girl child. In addition, the Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD) implements the schemes of 'condensed courses for education and vocational training' and 'Distance Education Programme for Women'

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Sen, Amartya, *Development as Freedom*, Alfred A. Knof, New York, 1999, p.109.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Government of India, First Report on, "Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women", Department of Women and Child Development, March 1999.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Friedmann, J, *Empowerment: The Politics of Alternative Development*, Blackwell, Cambridge, 1992.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Batliwala, Srilatha, *Women's Empowerment in South Asia: Concepts and Practices*, FAO/ASPBAE, New Delhi, 1994, pp.43-45.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Gurumurthi, Amila, "Women's Rights & Status: Question of Analysis & Measurement", UNDP, 1998.

supplementing the efforts of the Department of Education.

No doubt, even after more than 50 years of independence, gender disparity in literacy continues in India and the situation varies from state to state and even within a state from district to district and from one community to another. Despite intensive efforts of the government to improve the literacy levels of females, the achievement has not been very satisfactory in this regard. The sex differentials in literacy however, have been throughout consistent and pronounced. It is hoped that in order to fulfil the goal of Universal Elementary Education, 86th Constitutional Amendment Act of 2002 would be a milestone in the country's march towards it. This will go a long way in reducing the gender gap in literacy.

Conclusion

India has enacted many legislative and constitutional provisions and many progressive plans to improve position of women. Government activities alone would not be sufficient to accomplish this objective. Society must take up activity to make a domain in which there is no sexual orientation inclination and ladies have full chances of self-choice making and taking an interest in political, social and financial existence with a feeling of equity.

Women's Empowerment could only be accomplished if their social, educational and economic status is improved. The top preference should be given to the education which is the real issue. Development plans should be constructed to remove female illiteracy and creating skills & capability among women for empowering them to remain all alone on their feet.

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