



## WOMEN EMPOWERMENT BEFORE INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE: A HISTORICAL STUDY

Dr. Lattan sarkar

And

Pampa Chowdhury,  
B-2/401, Kalyani, Nadia, W.B

### ABSTRACT

*The whole world is the collection of various countries. Each country has its own women empower political, religious and socio-economic history. India is a vast country; so, naturally it has the history of some women powers..The women empowerment history of India begins with the Indus Valley civilization. Empowerment is a term widely used in the context of 'development' particularly women's development. Empowerment is a nutshell, is a way of defining challenging and overcoming barriers in one's life through which the individual increases her ability to shape her life and environment. For a proper assessment of status of women in India, a brief resume and background of women through the ages is essential. The present study made an attempt to examine how far the position of women reflects the cultural attainment of society and National development. If we observe the position of women in ancient India, there are variations in the status of women in different periods of history.The image of women was high. Women enjoyed property rights and freedom. In pre-Vedic age the status of woman was high and matriarchal system was prevalent.*

**Key word:** Empowerment, Development, ability, challenge, society.

## **Introduction**

For centuries together Indian women has played the secondary role to man. She was never held in esteem, only a mention about her pathetic status was mentioned here and there. But the advent of science and technology, growth of democratic ideas and impact of modern industrialization and general awareness and conscience among the mass has paved way for the emancipation of women.

According to Dr. Amartya Sen, Burden of hardship falls disproportionately on women due to seven types of inequality-mortality (due to gender bias in health care and nutrition), nasality (sex selective abortion and female infanticide), basic facility (education and skill development), special opportunity (high education and professional training), employment (promotion) and ownership (home, land and property).

As a general perception, Indian women are considered a weaker sex in every walk of life. For ages now, the Indian society has not reconciled to the factor of liberation of women. The position of Indian women in the society has established the fact that they are the disadvantaged gender, being dominated on by their male-counterparts.

In the original Sanskrit text the creation of women by Tyashtri the Vulcon of Hindu mythology is described thus: He took the lightness of leaf and the glance of fawn, the gaiety of the sun's rays and the tears of the mist; the inconsistency of the wind, and the timidity of hare, the vanity of the peacock and the softness of the dove on the throat of the swallow. He added the harshness of diamond, the sweet flavor of honey, the cruelty of tiger, the warmth of the fire and the turtle dove, the chill of snow and the chatter of joy. He melted all these and formed a woman. Then he made a present of her to man. And she lived unhappily even after to be honored with smiling condescension by the enlightened maltreated by the boorish deified as a religious figure but walloped with regularity if as a wife she cannot bring a whooping dowry. The Indian woman's tale is an endless one of woe. They are abandoned, divorced, bought and sold or killed at the men whim of men.

## **Women in Vedic Period**

In the Vedic Period (4000-1000 BC) matriarchy was replaced by patriarchy. Within limits and limitations of a Patriarchal System, it is said that women in vedic period enjoyed a high status. In that society widow remarriages were allowed. Being grown up and educated, the vedic women were married at a mature age and had a voice in the selection of their life partners. The women were free to attend and visit public places and social gatherings. Marriage was not compulsory for every girl. Those women who remained unmarried and

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grew old in the house of her parents were called 'Amaju.' In the Rig-Vedic period, women enjoyed full freedom for their spiritual progress and intellectual development. The examples of Maitreya and Gargi, the two women scholars in Vedanta, are well known. References are available in the vedic literature of a ritual that ensures the birth of a scholarly daughter.. Daughters like sons were initiated into vedic studies and had to lead a life of studentship (Brahmacharya) devoted to learning, self control and discipline. Many women rose to become philosophers well-versed in the sacred texts, poetesses, and teachers and participated in scholarly debates. Some of them composed the hymns of the Rig-Veda.

### **Women in Upanishad Period**

During these period only women of the royal families enjoyed respect. The status of women in general continued to be the same as in the vedic period. Like men, women also enjoyed social privileges and played honourable roles in social development. Husband and wife were performing the social and religious rights together. They maintained high moral standards. There were prayers requesting the birth of female child according to 'Bruhadaryakopanishat.'

As per Upadhyay Neelam, "Some remained unmarried for a life-long pursuit of knowledge and were known as 'Brahma Vadinis'. This reflects women's better social position, the height of intellectual attainment and pursuance of the academic career in early Vedic period.

### **Women in Epic Period**

The high standard of women's education set up during the Vedic age was fortunately continued to a large extent during the Epic age as well. The Ramayana and Mahabharata, (500BC- 200 AD) the epics of India, are resplendent with acts and achievements of a good many learned and qualified women. The Mahabharata a literary creation gave sanction to many new social customs of inter - racial and inter- caste marriages. The Mahabharata viewed the nature of women as inherently base and exhorted them to observe piety and obedience to their men.

According to Upadhyay Neelam, under the impact of images created and sustained in Hinduism, women are regarded on the one hand as the embodiment of purity and spiritual power: on the other they are viewed as essentially weak and dependent creatures requiring constant guardianship of men.

## **Women in Sutra Period**

After the epic period (600-300 BC) the sutra period started. There were several writers and among them Asvalayana Apastamena Asankhayana and Bharadwaja” were outstanding. Although they lived in different times of places, they held similar views about some fundamental aspects of the status of women in the society. Asvalayana prohibited the performance of rituals by married women. A woman was not allowed to inherit wealth and was denied the right to the property of her husband.

By the time of Manu Smriti (200BC to 100), many laws governing freedom to women got extinct and what remained thereafter was the ascetic rigidity. Manu Smriti is full of paradoxes of respect and neglect of women. Manu keeps women in high esteem when he says that “women must always be honored and respected by father, brother, husband and brother-in- law” and “where women are honored there the Gods are pleased (Naryastu yatra pujyante, ramante tatra devata), but when they are not honored, no sacred rite even could yield rewards.

But underneath such rhetoric, there was a different motif. According to Manu “In childhood a woman must be subjected to her father, in youth, to her husband and when her Lord is dead, to her son”. A woman must never be independent. She is viewed solely as the mother and the wife and those roles are idealized. A virtuous Hindu woman was supposed to possess the following six virtues: she should act like a maid servant while doing manual work, a minister while volunteering counsel, goddess of wealth in charm and beauty, goddess of earth in forbearance, mother in love and tenderness, and a public women in giving sexual pleasure.

## **Women in Buddha Period**

The position of women was different in Buddhism. Buddhism did act as a temporary check on the declining status of women but could not have lasting impact. The Buddhists reacted against caste, and the sacrificial ritual of Brahmanism. In this period, women are admitted to Buddhist order, which offered women, an alternative to subjugation to husbands and patriarchy.

In Buddhism marriage rules and divorces are liberal. Women had right to property, but evils like polygamy existed. Even then women enjoyed freedom in religious affairs and there were some great women scholars like the sister of Asoka, Sanga Mitra, who went to Ceylone to spread Buddhism.

## **Women in Mughal Period**

Ladies of royal families during Mughal period enjoyed an exalted position. They enjoyed titles also. Some of the royal ladies were given glamorous surnames. They were given jagirs. They received presentations and dresses of honour. The ladies of royal society, some times, enjoyed the privilege of coming into contact with the royal ladies of foreign countries.

According to Sarala, The Mughals treated their ladies with utmost regard. Some of the ladies devoted themselves in offering prayers to God (Namaz) and reading Quran. As regards the education of girls of the palaces they received it up to primary standard. Educated ladies were employed as lady tutors for the children of the royal family. Some ladies founded colleges and gave stipends for encouraging women education. The royal ladies were interested in painting, decoration, dancing, cooking and music. They participated in fairs and festivals. They enjoyed hunting. They traveled in palanquins. Thus ladies of royal families in Mughal period enjoyed greater status of respect.

## **Women in Bhakti Period**

As per Jain, The Bhakti movement placed God with in reach of all irrespective of caste or gender. Mira Bai, Mukta Bai, Jana Bai and Vishnu Priya are well-known names in Bhakti literature whose compositions are popular even to this day. However, the status of women received a serious set back due to saints' attitude towards women. Some saints came to regard women as an object of material pleasure, maya, while others thought them as a barrier in the path of liberation. Whatever achievement was there, it was within the traditional fold. So there could be no redemption of women.

## **Women in British Period**

At the time of the British rule, the position of woman was miserable. The freedom she enjoyed during the Vedic times was long forgotten. It was Raja Ram Mohan Roy who came forward and took a very bold step to abolish the custom of 'Sati Sahagamana' which was very cruel ritual imposed on women. The status of women reached its lowest ebb in India during the British period that is 18<sup>th</sup> century. But in due course of time, many new forces came into existence slowly, but steadily helped to upgrade her status. According to Encyclopedia of women, "the British rule, no doubt tried to check all these evil practices and to put an end to them.

Some of the legislative acts passed by the Britishers helped to improve the status of women. Christian missionaries and Indian social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Dayananda Saraswathi, Annie Besant, Rama Bai Ranade, Pandit Rama Bai Saraswathi, D.K. Karve pleading the cause of female life-ratio from several inhuman customs such as infanticide, infant marriage, an enforced widowhood, illiteracy, purdah etc. As a result of such literacy endeavors, the cruelties against women were recognised by law. It is note worthy that from the nineteenth century along with men, women also began to work for the elevation of the status of women in the society.

### **Women in the Period of Freedom Struggle**

The struggle for Indian independence opened up a new chapter in the role of women to boost their status. Maharanis like Rani Chennamma of Kittur, Jhansi Lakshmi Bai, Begum Hajrat Mahal of Avadh fought against the British, col. Lakshmi Sahagal organized a women's corps under Subhash Chandra Bose. When Pandit Rama Bai thundered against child marriages of young girls. She also strongly advocated women's education. She started women's homes in India. Rani Harnam Singh of Punjab confined for women's emancipation at the same time, she advocated education and enlightenment of women.

In the last decade of 19th century the revolutionary ideology had developed into terrorist activities especially in Punjab and Bengal. Numerous conspiracies and acts of terrorism were worked out. A few brave women rendered great services in these activities. There was, for example, Kumudin, who was an active revolutionary in Bengal. She organized a group of educated brahmin ladies for maintaining secret liaison between different revolutionary groups and leaders. She also tried to organize wider circulation of revolutionary leaflets and other literature. The organization also published a Bengal Magazine called "Suprabhat". This magazine preached the cause of national freedom through the cult of violence and terror. In eastern Bengal, there was another revolutionary women called Bhag Bati, who wrote a song describing distressed and wretched conditions of Indian people due to foreign domination.

Similarly Sarala Devi, the niece of the famous poet Rabindranath Tagore, was a link between revolutionaries of Bengal and Punjab. In 1897, she took over the editorship of the magazine called "Barti" and exerted powerful influence on revolutionary activities. She opened "Lakshmi Bhandar", a store for popularizing swadeshi goods. Sarala Devi toured extensively in Punjab and opened branches of Arya Samaj for women. While Sarala Devi was working in India Madam Bhikhajji Rustum Cama conducted revolutionary activities in

foreign countries. She helped in U.K., and later in France. These women were fearless soldiers and they dedicated their lives to the cause of India's freedom in very dangerous circumstances. However their names did not come into lime light or received wide publicity in history of freedom movement of India. While working for such dangerous activities, they proved that in spite of centuries of slavery and ignorance, they did not lose their innate courage and abilities to work for India's freedom.

They also inspired other Indian women to come out in the open and take part in freedom struggle. Vijayalakshmi Pandit was the first woman to become a minister in the United Provinces. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy was the first woman M.L.C. in Madras. Many great leaders inspired women to participate in the freedom struggle. Matangini and Kanakalata Baruva, the women leaders, were shot dead in Quit India movement. Great leaders like Durga Bai Deshmukh, Maganti Annapurna Devi, Kasturba Gandhi, Violet Alva, Sushila Nayyar played a leading role in the freedom struggle. Down through the ages, women of India gave themselves to the building of our nation so nobly and so silently. Social reformers worked for the betterment of the status of women. "Sati" was vehemently opposed.

Child marriages were strongly discouraged, widow marriages were encouraged. Sister Nivedita, and Annie Besant dedicated their lives to the cause of women's progress.

In the beginning of the 20th century, a number of women's colleges came into existence through out the country. Women became enlightened and came to the conclusion that freedom alone can solve their problems. They started convincing the common people by going round the villages, preaching the importance of freedom and turning every citizen against the British. Durga Bai is one among such great people.

Many a mother became Jijibais in inspiring their children to plunge into the freedom struggle. Many young men were given "Veerakhadga", by their wives of valor to instigate them like "Manchala" to dare the freedom fight. The little child "Indira Gandhi" did her might to lead children of her age in favour of freedom.

However the involvement of women in nationalist politics has not changed the image of the ideal Hindu women. The structure of traditional society in reference to the roles available to women has remained largely the same. The nationalist movement enabled women to combine their life within the family with a career outside the home. A woman's sphere of activity was broadened and enlarged. Its essential core, however, remained unchanged.

## Conclusion

Yesterday Today and Tomorrow Indian women empowerment is a key resource for the economic, socio-cultural and political development of a society. It is proving useful in all spheres of the past and present day of Indian civilization. Today we have attained Swaraj, the long cherished dream of thousands and thousands of women freedom fighters irrespective of age. Women were highly inspired by the ideas of Indian freedom and futur.

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