

Women in India through Different Eras

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Abstract

Feminism refers to any ideology that seeks total equality in rights for women and people who self-identify as women, usually through improving the status of females. Feminism is rooted in ending men's historical power over women. Feminism particularly focuses on issues that disproportionately hurt females.

Feminist activism in India gained momentum in the late 1970s. One of the first national-level issues that brought women's groups together was the Mathura rape case. The acquittal of policemen accused of raping a young girl Mathura in a police station led to country-wide protests in 1979-1980. The protests, widely covered by the national media, forced the Government to amend the Evidence Act, the Criminal Procedure Code, and the Indian Penal Code; and created a new offence, custodial rape. Female activists also united over issues such as female infanticide, gender bias, women's health, women's safety, and women's literacy.

The status of women India is strongly connected to family relations. In India, the family is seen as crucially important, and in most of the country the family unit is patrilineal. Families are usually multi-generational, with the bride moving to live with the in-laws. Families are usually hierarchical, with the elders having authority over the younger generations, and the males over females.

KEYWORDS: Ahilyabai Holkar, Arthashastra, Bhakti Movement, Constitution, Dalit, Women, Iniquitous, Muktabai, Law, Polyandry, Polygamy, Prestigious Universities, Rani Lakshmibai, Razia Sultana, Sabha

Introduction:

The status of **women in India** has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. With a decline in their status from the ancient to medieval times, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. In modern India, women have held high offices including that of the President, Prime Minister, and Speaker of the Lok Sabha, leader of the opposition, union ministers, chief ministers and governors.

Women's rights are secured under the Constitution of India — mainly, equality, dignity, and freedom from discrimination; further, India has various statutes governing the rights of women.

As of 2011, the President of India, the Speaker of the Lok Sabha and the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha¹ were women. However, women in India continue to face numerous problems, including violent victimisation through rape, acid throwing, dowry killings, marital rape, and the forced prostitution of young girls. In 2012, the Thomson Reuters Foundation ranked India as the worst G20 country in which to be a woman.

¹ Lower House of the parliament

Women have been treated as ‘objects’ by the male-dominated society in India and elsewhere. Women are treated as inferior in their own families. They are usually at the receiving end. This is generally true of families belonging to all castes and classes, but it is more often found among those groups who are still under the influence of feudalism or have feudalistic lifestyles and values. Even the neo-rich in the countryside have put restrictions on women’s higher education, migration and jobs. The fact is that women have been made dependent by men and by the social milieu they have created for them.

RIGVEDIC CIVILISATION

The position of women in India has not always been so iniquitous². In the rigvedic civilisation, women enjoyed equal status with men. Vedic period in general was a very advanced period. Women received education, had jobs, had the freedom to choose one’s partner, widows had the right to remarry; to say the least women lived their lives at par with men. Women and men both shared equal status. Political rights were shared between husband and wife in a couple. This policy was followed even in larger bodies like the sabha³ and the samiti⁴.

Many women of the upper class would host swayamwars to choose the husband of their choice. Marriage remained a huge affair though it happened with the consent of both the parties.

The most overlooked fact was the sheer number of women scholars. Some names include Gargi, Matreiyi, Ahilya, Kripa devi, Ambika Devi, Lilavati and others. They were also allowed to study and teach in prestigious universities like Nalanda, Takshashila, Vikramshila among others. They weren’t treated like Goddesses but certainly guaranteed equality

LATER-VEDIC CIVILISATION

But all this changed with time. In later-Vedic period the position of women degraded and evil practices such as dowry came into practice. The Later Vedic Society and Civilization witnessed far-reaching changes in the sphere of caste system. The traditional four classes such as Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra, still existed during this period. However, various sub-castes sprang up in addition to the traditional four castes. The high position occupied by women in the Age of the Rig-Veda was no longer prevalent in this age. They lost their right of Upanayana and the right to perform religious rites and the right to join in political affairs. Though we hear the names of Gargi and Maitreyi, whose scholarship was recognized by the society as whole women lost their earlier status.

The marriage rules became discriminating towards the bride. The women lost their earlier freedom and equality which they enjoyed in domestic life. Polygamy became more general. Polyandry also appeared in a restricted way. People wanted to have a male child. Birth of a female child was unwelcome. Dowry system became popular. Women during the Later Vedic Period were looked as inferior in status. Women were treated as objects for fulfilment of passion and not as partners of men. In the Later

² mean highly reprehensible or offensive in character, nature, or conduct; bad; deplorable.

³ senate

⁴ cabinet

Vedic Civilization, they lost political and economic rights and were deprived from inheritance to properties.

In Later Vedic period, the position that the women folk enjoyed in the early Vedic society, was not retained. Although women could select their husband in an assembly called 'sayambhar'. But in most cases the women had to lead an unhappy married life. This was simply because their husbands were allowed to have more than one wives and this was especially quite common among the upper classes of the ancient Indian society. Characteristics of the status of upper-caste women in later centuries were that early marriages were advocated, often even pre-puberty marriages. A widow was expected to live in austerity, but in case of the Kshatriya caste a women was supposed to become a 'sati'⁵. The earliest historical evidence for this practice dates from A.D. 510⁶.

Manu assigns to the Women of Vedic age, a position of dependence, if not of subordination. The Arthasastra attests to considerable restraints placed on their movements.

POST-VEDIC PERIOD

In the post Vedic period, women started being discriminated against education and other rights. Even Buddha did little to uplift their position. Child marriage had extreme emphasis on physical chastity of women and unquestioned obedience to husband led to progressive deterioration of her position. Widow Remarriage was permissible up to the times of Kautilya. Megasthenes has stated that Brahmanas did not communicate knowledge of philosophy to their wives. The spirit of the time was to relegate women to inferior status. In the Smriti Sastras as well, as in Manu and Yajnavalkya, it has been mentioned in strongest terms that women should be honoured. But then again Manu has given absolute rights to men to inflict corporal punishment on her and discard her if she said anything disagreeable to him. Thus, a contradiction in the rules of treatment to women was there. Manu's system continued for long after the Mauryan period in the Indian society. Vatsyayana's Kamasutra depicted the daily life of the rich and aristocrats. Women participated in poetic recitations and compositions were heard in gatherings. The courtesan was a very normal feature of urban life. Kalidasa has mentioned the presence of many Devdasis in Ujjain and Hiuen Tsang also spoke about their presence. They were common in the Chola temples. Devdasis were dedicated to-the-temple at birth or when quite young, some of them attained training in dance and music and some retained the status of ordinary slaves for the service of the gods. Later on, the system degenerated. However, the courtesan and upper class women enjoyed freedom and were respected in society. Besides these women, a vast majority toiled in the fields and homes. Their condition worsened in the tenth century.

PRE-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

When British came to India around 1700s the women were a subjugated lot. In the beginning they remained aloof from personal lives of Indians. But with time when people like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Vivekananda urged them to do

⁵ A ritual among kshatriyas where women would immolate herself on the funeral pyre of her husband especially if he had died a hero's death

⁶ commemorated in an inscription at Fran

something for the protection of women, they passed certain laws against the practice of “sati” and widow remarriage. Although they never bothered about its implementation, so it only remained on paper. If these laws helped it was so small a number that it did not matter a lot but yes it did make people especially women aware about one’s worth which in the future played a very important role.

The women’s movement in India began as a social reform movement in the nineteenth century. The Western ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity were being imbibed by the educated elite through the study of English. Western liberalism was to extend to the women’s question and translate into awareness on the status of women.

In India, the tradition of women’s struggles and movements against patriarchal institutions of gender injustice, have been weak when compared to the women’s movements in the Western and European societies. In fact, women’s fight against the oppression of patriarchy has been rather slow in emerging.

Most of the women’s writings of the eighteenth century reveal disenchantment⁷ with the prevalence of patriarchy and gender injustices rather than any kind of active resistance or revolt against them. Women did try to go against the male-dominated world (for example, by joining the Bhakti Movement).

The nineteenth century women found themselves totally suppressed and subjugated by the male patriarchal ideologies and attitudes of those times, though there was a feminist identity consciousness and awareness of their plight. However, this awareness did not get translated into an open and organized struggle for selfhood and survival.

Though there were feelings of deprivation and anger against the injustices women were facing, these remained mostly latent⁸, and at the most, sometimes mildly open.

Readings of texts, religious, political, cultural, social—oral stories, mythology, folklore, fables, songs, jokes, proverbs, and sayings reveal that women’s subordination has existed in different forms since time immemorial. Of course, there have been acts of resistance at different times throughout the Indian history, though these have been sporadic⁹.

There are numerous stories of how women questioned and went against the establishment, personified in the deeds of Razia Sultana, Rani Lakshmbai of Jhansi, Ahilyabai Holkar, Muktabai, and so on. Women throughout history made efforts to break free from the bonds of oppression they had to face by virtue of their birth.

Many women belonging to the various castes joined the Bhakti Movement. The saints stood up for equal rights of men and women. It resulted in some amount of social freedom for women. This helped in freeing women from the drudgery¹⁰ and restrictions of domestic life.

The Bhakti Movement was an egalitarian movement that cut across gender and caste discriminations. Some women such as Mira Bai, Akkamahadevi, and Janaki became leading poetesses.

⁷ Disappointment; dissatisfaction

⁸ inactive

⁹ Occasional; infrequent; irregular

¹⁰ Hard work ;chores

Indian culture became accessible to women also: Saints also encouraged the worship of the feminine counterparts of male Gods (Narayan-Lakshmi, Krishna-Radha, Vishnu-Lakshmi), which indirectly helped to elevate the status of women.

POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

There is a distinction between pre-independence and post-Independence women's movements in India. The pre-independence movements were essentially about social reforms and initiated by men. In comparison, the post-independence movement demanded gender equality, questioned gender-based division of labour and highlighted the oppressive nature of the existing patriarchal structure.

In the euphoria¹¹ of post-independence, it was believed that women's status would dramatically improve along with other marginalized groups because they were now the masters of their destiny.

However, when this was not achieved there was an upsurge¹² of various movements which raised a number of issues around diverse subjects such as land rights, wages, security of employment, equality, etc. Some of the issues on which women got together were work, population policies, atrocities on women, including rape and liquor.

After India gained independence from British rule in 1947, it was the Congress party that came to power and formed the Government. The government made certain attempts to fulfil the promises it had made to women during the pre-independence period, and also in the initial period after independence.

While framing the Constitution of India, it included the very important aspect of equality of men and women in all spheres of life. The Constitution of India states that, "The State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India"¹³.

The Constitution of India also states that, "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, sex, place of birth or any of them"¹⁴. Article 15(3) states that "Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children".

Further it states that "There shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State"¹⁵.

In this regard Veena Majumdar ecstatically¹⁶ says that, "The Constitutions radical departure from inherited social values represented to women of that generation its greatest intrinsic¹⁷ quality. For the women ... with definite memories of pre-

¹¹ Happiness; delight

¹² An upward surge in the strength or quantity of something; an increase.

¹³ Article-14 of Constitution of India

¹⁴ Article-15 of Constitution of India

¹⁵ Article-16 of Constitution of India

¹⁶ feeling or expressing overwhelming happiness or joyful excitement

¹⁷ Ingrained; deep-rooted

independence society and of the freedom struggle, the acceptance of gender equality in the constitution was the fulfilment of a dream of women's entitlement to an independent identity.”

A number of administrative bodies were set up for the creation of opportunities for women. A number of women were inducted into the government.

In the two decades that followed, 1950s and 1960s, there was a lull in the activities of feminists and in the women's movements in India. Women, however, started realizing that the constitutional promise of equality did not by itself resolve the equality questions, especially in a country as diverse as India, which comprises different religions and cultures.

The challenge of addressing inequality within women remains till this day. The women's movement has not been able to “decommunalise” the issue. Women's organizations and feminists did not know how to deal with the problems of women belonging to different religious groups. By the time the feminist movement stepped into the 1970s, minority identities had begun to harden. This divisive environment affected Muslim women.

Religious fundamentalists tried to place the onus of preserving religio-cultural identity on women. This identity syndrome, with women in the centre, diverted attention away from Muslim women's grim realities and the deviations from the actual Islamic position.

Having been a secular movement, the women's movement found itself facing a difficult challenge that it did not know how to handle. On the conceptual level, Indian feminists were in a dilemma: how to assimilate Muslim women's issues into broader feminist issues and, at the same time, safeguard their religious and cultural identity. This has been most obvious in the case of Muslim Personal Law.

A few streams of feminist movements developed, such as the Shahada movement, which was a Bhil tribal landless laborer's movement against the exploitation of the tribal landless laborers by non-tribal landowners. It began as a folk protest, and became militant with the involvement of the New Left party, they demanded direct action on issues specific to them as women, such as physical violence and abuse as a result of alcoholism.

Groups of women would go from village to village, enter liquor dens and destroy liquor pots and containers. If any woman reported physical abuse by her husband, all other women would surround him, beat him up and force him to apologize to his wife in public.

The formation of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) was probably the first attempt made to form a Trade Union attached to the Textile Labour Union in Ahmedabad. It was formed in 1972 at the initiative of Ela Bhatt, and was an organization of women who were involved in different trades, but shared a number of common features and work experiences—low earnings, extremely poor working conditions (some worked at home, and others toiled on streets as vendors or hawkers),

harassment from those in authority (contractors, police, and so on), and lack of recognition of their efforts as socially useful work.

SEWA aimed at improving the working conditions of women through a process of training, technical aid, legal literacy, collective bargaining, and to teach values of honesty, dignity and simplicity, the Gandhian goals to which SEWA subscribes.

The anti-price rise agitations in Maharashtra were the direct result of the drought and famine conditions that affected rural Maharashtra in the early 1970s. These led to a sharp price rise in urban Maharashtra. In 1973, the United Women's Anti-Price Rise Front was formed to mobilize women against inflation.

Huge groups of women, between 10,000 and 20,000, would hold demonstrations at government offices, houses of Members of Parliament and merchants, and those who could not get out of their homes would express their support by beating thalis¹⁸ with lathis or belans¹⁹. This movement spread to Gujarat, where it was called the Nav Nirman movement. In Gujarat, the movement started as a student's movement against spiralling costs, corruption and black marketeering. Soon, it became a massive middle-class movement and thousands of women joined it.

With the dawn of a new era different strands of thought and activism came together to create the contemporary women's movement in India. These movements were initiated by the Declaration of the UN Year of Women in 1975. This year also witnessed the release of the Status of Women Committee Report. The report was a voluminous one of compiled data on the various indices indicating the status of women in India.

This report directly attacked the myth that women in post-Independence India were "progressing". It revealed that a majority of Indian women suffered from poverty, illiteracy and ill-health, as well as discrimination in both the domestic and public spheres. This resulted in agitations and campaigns against the worst manifestations of sexism and patriarchy by middle-class women.

The report of the Committee on the status of women proved to be a turning point in the path of contemporary women's movements in India.

The year 1975 saw the development of a number of feminist activities in various parts of the country, especially in Maharashtra, Hyderabad, Pune and Bombay with the formation of various organisations such as Progressive Organization of Women (POW), Purogami Stree Sangathana (Progressive Women's Organization), Stree Mukti Sangathana (Women's Liberation Organization). This is seen as an indirect result of the United Nations declaration of 1975 as the International Women's Year.

The Dalits had been agitating for social acceptance, and for women's rights to education, widow remarriage and against Purdah. Women from the Dalit movement formed the Mahila Sarnta Sainik Dalam (League of Women Soldiers for Equality). It

¹⁸ metal plates

¹⁹ rolling pins

stressed on equality, and highlighted women's oppression, especially the oppressive character of religion and the caste system.

Due to imposition of Emergency in 1975 by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi interrupted the development of the women's movement. Many political organizations were forced to go underground. Many activists were persecuted and arrested. In 1977, Emergency was lifted. This led to the revival of some of the women's movement that had been brought to a standstill by the declaration of Emergency. Women's groups were formed in most parts of the country. The 1980s witnessed a transformation of the women's movement. Organizations increased their focus from one or two issues to deal with holistic issues.

From then on feminist movement in India saw an increase in participation of both men and women to enlighten people about the issues and problems of women through agitations, filing of petitions, marches and various other means. All these efforts bore fruit in the sense that various laws were made and enforced like Protection of women from domestic violence Act(2005),Sexual Harassment of women at workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act (2013) and many more to fulfil the demands of the oppressed class.

Conclusions:

Empowerment of women is an international concern .Women everywhere has suffered from inadequacies mostly due social constraints which at the end commemorated in the rising of an ideology called "feminism". Feminist movements started in western countries found their way into India during rule. Although earlier also there were concerns regarding deteriorating condition of women but an amalgamated action was missing at the national level.

No doubt with these movements and enlightened thoughts the position of women has seen an upgradation but in today's scenario ,where everything becomes a news we hear about so many cases of rape, dowry deaths ,molestations at home as well as at workplace makes us realise that the rigid mindset of people; lack of understanding by both the genders; and the hypocrisy of the masses had made the efforts for women empowerment futile²⁰.we wonder if we have really achieved the goal of "WOMEN EMPOWERMENT".

I would like to end my article with a question that:

"Are we anywhere near the goal of achieving WOMEN EMPOWERMENT?"

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²⁰ Incapable of producing any useful result; pointless.