

Women Empowerment in India from Prehistoric to Present

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Abstract—Women empowerment is hot talk discussed everywhere but not achieved fully. Oppression of women and violence against women still exist in this patriarchal society. Women status was equal to men during Vedic period but deteriorated during post Vedic period. Women were denied of education, property rights, feminization of poverty and health especially maternity health. Women empowerment will take place if gender gap in education is reduced, poverty is tackled, and feminization of poverty is removed. There are international and national organization working on it but goal is not achieved completely. Whole society should undergo change may be revolution should take place in order to change the situation. Oppression of women is not biological but social problem and should be tackled accordingly.

Keywords—Women Empowerment, Oppression, Patriarchal Society, Vedic Period and Feminization of Poverty

I. INTRODUCTION

Women had high status during prehistoric period but gradually lost their status. [1] There are many stages during prehistoric period three main epochs of social evolution — savagery, barbarism and civilisation. It was at this latter stage of social evolution that the division of labour and commodity exchange between individuals arising from it developed. Only at this stage was the subjugation of women was fully manifested. Women enjoyed equal rights during Vedic period but deteriorated during post Vedic period. Women oppression is not biological but social. Even today there is gender gap in education. Feminization of poverty is a great problem for whole society. Women can be empowered through education.

II. WOMEN'S STATUS DURING VEDIC PERIOD

During the Rig Vedic period the status of women was held high they enjoyed equal rights like men. Some verses in Rig Veda is written by women Upanayana ceremony was performed for women also and consequently they were sent to gurukul like man. But latter this ceremony was performed only to men and they were not allowed to attend gurukul therefore education was denied to them. Widows are allowed to remarry. These references are available from the works of Grammarians such as Katyayana and Patanjali. Women also had the freedom to select their husbands. This system was known as 'Swayamvar.' In fact during this time, women had superior position than the males. In the family, they enjoyed complete freedom and were treated as Ardhanginis. But women had unhappy married life because polygamy was prevalent during that period. Child marriage was common and widow should live in austerity.



Figure 1: Image Courtesy :
videshisutra.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/statue_of_goddes_s_or_queen_at_monas.jpg

Manu describes women as depended throughout her life time she is dependent on father during childhood, then husband and finally her son, she is not allowed to live independently. Same thing is described in arthasastra women movement is restricted. [2] Julia Leslie thinks that some Vedas were composed by women who performed sacrifices to the Aryan gods and probably wore the sacred thread that signified their knowledge of the Vedas and participation in sacrifice, the key religious act of the Aryans. She argues that three of the most notable hymns composed by women are Ghosa (Rg Veda [RV] X, 39 & 40), Apala (RV VIII, 80), and Visvavara (RV V, 28). Apala sacrificed to Indra, the god of storms and monsoons, telling him "Drink thou this Soma [a still undefined ritual liquid which may be translated literally as moon juice] pressed with teeth, accompanied with grain and curds, with cake of meal and song of praise." Visvavara offered sacrifice to Agni, the fire god and a major rival of Indra, pouring oil on the fire and chanting, "Thy glory, Agni, I Adore, Kindled, exalted in thy strength" (Leslie 1983: 91-92). Thus the evidence is mixed on whether or not the Vedic age was a golden age for women. In other parts of the world the shift to a sedentary, agricultural economy appears to have reduced the physical mobility, the public parts of the world the shift to a sedentary, agricultural economy appears to have reduced the physical mobility, the public economic activity, and the personal rights of women, and there is evidence that by the end of the Vedic period such changes were occurring in the lives of Aryan women.

[3] Unmarried daughters had share in their fathers' property. Daughter had full legal rights in the property of her father in the absence of any son. Mother's property, after her death, was equally divided among sons and unmarried daughters. However, married women had no share in father's property. As a wife, a woman had no direct share in her husband's property. A widowed mother had some rights.

But indeccan it is different they are allowed to move freely. There are several instances were royal women were excelled in music and art.

III. STATUS OF WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

[4]The status of women in India deteriorated during the medieval period with the entrance of the Muslims. Several evil practices such as female infanticide, sati and child marriage were practiced during this period. 'Purdah' was introduced to the society. Women were also forced to practice 'zenana.' Polygamy was also common during this period. Women also excelled in literature, music and arts. They were also rulers during this period.

Some great-women rulers were Razia Sultana who was the only women-monarch to-rule-the throne of Delhi, Nurjahan, Gond queen Durgavati who ruled for fifteen years before she was defeated in a battle by Ali emperor Akbar's. Nurjahan is still considered as the most effective ruler by the society. In spite of these powerful women, the condition of poor women remained the same. At this time girl were forced to get married at a very tender age. The society also practiced Sati where women were forced to jump over the burning bodies of their husbands during funerals. The southern India also practiced Devdasi tradition where girls were forced get married to trees or deity.

According to ancient Hindu texts and tradition, until about 500 B.C. women in India enjoyed considerable freedom ie till vedic period. But during the next thousand years, women's position gradually deteriorated. Educational and religious parity was denied to them and widow remarriage was forbidden. [5]Child marriage had started in the Smriti age. During this period, a woman's husband was regarded as God. During the middle ages, the position of women in Hindu society further degenerated. A number of problems arose for Hindu women in the Mughal period.

The first Muslim invasion was in eight century during this period Hindu society was engaged in evolving under the leadership of Sankaracharya which is the counter effect of spread of Buddhism throughout India. Sankaracharyareemphasised the supremacy of Veda and there by high status of women as said in Vedas. India experienced second Muslim invasion during eleventh century when Mohammad Ghazniinvaded India. Status of women decorated purdah system was introduced. The 'Purdah' system was followed which resulted in seclusion of women. Education of women in whatever form came to be stopped. Child marriage was introduced. During this period the inhuman practice of 'Sati Pratha was in vogue. Purdah Pratha, Sati Pratha, child marriage, girl killing, polygamy etc. were the main social evils of this period. This period we can call the worst period of women in Indian history.

IV. STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE BUDDHIST PERIOD

Many evil social practices, like the practice of prepuberty marriages, denial of right of women to education

and also to mate selection etc were imposed on women during the periods of Brahmans and Puranas.

In the Buddhist period, the position of women improved to some extent. In the religious field, women came to occupy a distinctly superior place. They had their own Sangha called Bhikshuni 'Sangha', which provided avenues of cultural activities and social services. They got ample opportunities in public life. However, their economic status remained unchanged.

V. SOCIAL REFORM DURING FIFTEENTH CENTURY

During the fifteenth century, the situation underwent some change. The Bhakti movement organised by Ramanujacharya during this period introduced new trends in the social and religious life of Indian women. The saints like Chaitanya, Nanak, Kabir, Meera, Ramdas and Tulsi stood for the right of women to religious worship. Hence, this movement, at least, provided religious freedom to women.

As a result of this freedom, they secured certain social freedom also. The saints encouraged women to read religious books and to educate themselves. Although the Bhakti movement gave a new life to women, this movement did not bring any substantial change in economic status of women. Hence, women continued to hold low status in the society.

VI. STATUS OF WOMEN IN MODERN SOCIETY

In modern society women status is no equal to man. Our society is dichotomous, patriarchal and patriaral society. Oppression of women is common in modern Indian society but type of oppression is changed from pre modern society. Today women should work in office as well as house, childcare with less support from male counterpart. Gender discrimination is common in India and it is the fourth most dangerous country in the world. Brutal gang rape is common even in a state headed by female chief minister. Other instances of violence against women has an astonishing and grim variety to it – with acid throwing, domestic violence stemming out of dowry, rape, harassment and an assortment of others. It is not surprising that woman empowerment is hotly discussed topic in India with no real solution. Most of the women face sexual harassment in office, common places and even in their own homes.

A. Crimes against Women

The crimes against women fly directly against organizing women empowerment in India. A report on the crimes against women by the National Crime Records Bureau comes up with some alarming statistics:-

Table 1
Crime Against Women

Sl No.	Crime Head	Year 2006	Year 2007	Year 2008	Year 2009	Year 2010	Year 2011	Year 2012	Percentage Variation in 2012 over 2011
1	Rape (Sec. 376 IPC)	19,348	20,737	21,467	21,397	22,172	24,206	24,923	3.0
2	Kidnapping & Abduction (Sec. 363 to 373 IPC)	17,414	20,416	22,939	25,741	29,795	35,565	38,262	7.6
3	Dowry Death (Sec 302/304 IPC)	7,618	8,093	8,172	8,383	8,391	8,618	8,233	-4.5
4	Torture (Sec. 498-A IPC)	63,128	75,930	81,344	89,546	94,041	99,135	1,06,527	7.5
5	Molestation (Sec. 354 IPC)	36,617	38,734	40,413	38,711	40,613	42,968	45,351	5.5
6	Sexual Harassment (Sec. 509 IPC)	9,966	10,950	12,214	11,009	9,961	8,570	9,173	7.0
7	Importation of Girls (Sec. 366-B IPC)	67	61	67	48	36	80	59	-26.3
8	Sati Prevention Act, 1987	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	-100.0
9	Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956	4,541	3,568	2,659	2,474	2,499	2,435	2,563	5.3
10	Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986	1,562	1,200	1,025	845	895	453	141	-68.9
11	Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961	4,504	5,623	5,555	5,650	5,182	6,619	9,038	36.5
	Total	1,64,765	1,85,312	1,95,856	2,03,804	2,13,585	2,28,650	2,44,270	6.8

A total of 2,44,270 incidents of crime against women (both under IPC and SLL) were reported in the country during the year 2012 as compared to 2,28,650 in the year 2011 recording an increase of 6.4% during the year 2012. These crimes have continuously increased during 2008 – 2012 with 1,95,856 cases in the year 2008, 2,03,804 cases in 2009 and 2,13,585 cases in 2010 and 2,28,650 cases in 2011 and 2,44,270 cases in the year 2012. West Bengal with 7.5% share of country's female population has accounted for nearly 12.7% of total crime against women by reporting 30,942 cases during the year 2012.

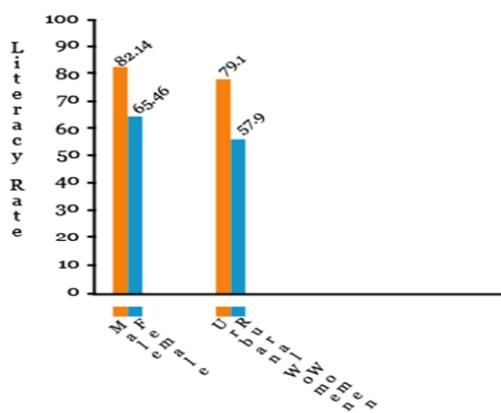
B. Challenges for Women Empowerment in India

There are several challenges for issues of women's rights in India. Lot of the challenges are quite basic issues faced across the country, these are the contributory causes to the overarching status of women in India. These issues can be targeted to attain empowerment of women in India.

- Education is one such issue women is facing. Our country has achieved several goals in education, many committees and commission work on education. But gender gap in education is not decreased. While 82.14% of adult men are educated, only 65.46% of adult women are known to be literate in India. Not only is an illiterate women at the mercy of her husband or father, she also does not know that this is not the way of life for women across the world.

In order to achieve women empowerment this gap should be reduced and women should have equal access to education. Every men and women should realize this and take positive step.

Literacy Facts of Women in India



*Literacy rates relate to the population aged 7 years & above

Figure 2: Data Source: Census of India 2011

• Poverty in our country

About a third of the country's population lives on less than 1.25USD per day. The GINI index keeps rising slowly over the years, indicating that the inequality in the distribution of wealth in the country is increasing, currently hovering a little close to 33.9.

Andhra Pradesh accounts for nearly half of all sex trafficking cases in India, the majority involving adolescent girls. According to police estimates, a shocking 300,000

women and girls have been trafficked for exploitative sex work from Andhra Pradesh; of these just 3,000 have been rescued so far.

[6] An institutional approach draws attention to the fact that deprivation is experienced differently by women and men, girls and boys. Women occupy an unequal position within different institutions of society.

It is frequently asserted that 70 per cent of the world's poor are women (UNDP, 1995 and UN, 1996a). Slightly more modestly, the UNIFEM states that 'women constitute at least 60 per cent of the world's poor'. Poverty is experienced more severely by poor women than poor men with the resultant feminisation of poverty due to less access to food, education and health care, unequal inheritance rights, lack of equal opportunities, etc.

Poverty Headcount Ratio (2010)	
Poverty Trend	World Bank
Live less than \$1.25 a day	32.7% (400 million)
Live less than \$2 a day	68.7% (841 million)
Live less than \$2.5 a day	81.1% (992 million)
Live less than \$4 a day	93.7% (1,148 million)
Live less than \$5 a day	96.9% (1,179 million)

Table 2

Poverty Headcount Ratio 2010 Data Source: Wikipedia

• Health and Safety:

The health and safety concerns of women are paramount for the wellbeing of a country, and is an important factor in gauging the empowerment of women in a country. However there are alarming concerns where maternal healthcare is concerned. In its 2009 report, UNICEF came up with shocking figures on the status of new mothers in India. The maternal mortality report of India stands at 301 per 1000, with as many as 78,000 women in India dying of childbirth complications in that year. Today, due to the burgeoning population of the country, that number is sure to have multiplied considerably. The main causes of maternal mortality are:-

- Haemorrhage: 30%
- Anaemia: 19%
- Sepsis: 16%
- Obstructed Labour: 10%
- Abortion: 8%
- Toxaemia: 8%

VII. CONCLUSION

- Women status during Vedic period was high and was equal to man.
- Women status deteriorated during post Vedic period.
- Women are oppressed in this parochial society

- Women experiences violence (domestic violence, sexual harassment etc)
- There exists gender gap in education.
- Feminization of poverty
- While there are several programmes that have been set into motion by the Government and several NGOs in the country, there is still a wide gap that exists between those under protection and those not.
- The empowerment of women begins with a guarantee of their health and safety.

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