

Women Empowerment: Historical Perspectives in India

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Abstract

The empowerment of women in India has developed over the course of a lengthy historical process that has been influenced by changes in social, cultural, political, and economic conditions. As can be seen in the contributions made by academics such as GargiVachaknavi and Maitreyi, women in ancient India enjoyed relatively high social standing, access to education, and participation in religious and intellectual activities. This was especially true during the Vedic period. The status of women, on the other hand, began to diminish during the later Vedic and medieval periods as a result of the rise of patriarchal norms, restricted customs, and practices such as child marriage and purdah. There was a significant turning point during the colonial period, which was distinguished by the growth of social reform groups led by reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. These reformers fought for the education of women, the remarriage of widows, and the elimination of repressive rituals like as Sati. Women were also instrumental in the fight for India's independence, making enormous contributions to the country's political and social transformation. The Constitution of India, which was ratified after the country gained its independence, ensured that women would be treated equally and would be granted fundamental rights. This paved the way for legislative reforms and increasing participation in school, politics, and the workforce. Challenges such as gender inequality, violence against women, and socio-economic imbalances continue to exist despite the significant progress that has been made. The purpose of this study is to shed light on the historical progression of women's empowerment in India and to underscore the importance of maintaining efforts to achieve gender equality and inclusive development.

Keywords: *Women Empowerment; History; Gender Equality; Social Reform; Women's Rights; Indian Society; Education; Legal Reforms; Social Change.*

1. Introduction

The term "women's empowerment" refers to the process of providing women with the opportunity to exercise control over their lives, gain access to opportunities, and participate in the decision-making process over their lives. The path towards women's empowerment in India has been profoundly impacted by a variety of factors, including historical, cultural, religious, and political changes. From the comparatively egalitarian structure of early Vedic society to the restrictive standards of the medieval period, and from reform initiatives during colonial rule to constitutional safeguards in independent India, the status of women has undergone substantial transformations throughout the course of history.

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2. Women in Ancient India

Vedic Period: The early Vedic period (1500-1000 BCE) is widely regarded as a golden age for women in India. Women had equal standing with males in many areas of life. They had access to education, could attend religious rituals, and chose their own life mates. Notable female intellectuals, including Gargi Vachaknavi. Gargi Vachaknavi was an eminent Vedic philosopher and one of the earliest known women scholars in Indian philosophy. Active around 800–500 BCE, she appears in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, where she debates metaphysical questions with the sage Yajnavalkya in the court of King Janaka. Revered as a *Brahmavadini* (a woman who seeks and speaks of Brahman), Gargi symbolizes fearless inquiry and intellectual equality in the Vedic tradition. There is a reference to Maitreyi, an old Indian philosopher and Vedic scholar, in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. She is renowned for her profound explorations into the nature of the self and immortality, and she is considered to be one of the earliest recorded female intellectuals in the history of the world. The discourse that she had with Yajnavalkya is considered to be a foundational piece of early Hindu philosophy.

Later Vedic Period

During the later Vedic period, however, there was a progressive deterioration in the position of women overall. The values of patriarchy became increasingly rigid, and there were restrictions placed on the participation of women in public life and education. Child marriage and other practices like them began to arise, and women were progressively relegated to duties that were mostly domestic in nature.

The Indian queen Prabhavati Gupta, who governed as regent following the death of her husband, was a member of the Vakataka dynasty and lived during the fourth and fifth centuries CE. She was born a princess of the Gupta Empire, and she bridged two of the most powerful dynasties in ancient India. She influenced the politics of the early Deccan period, and she exemplified the unusual female authority that existed in the history of classical India.

Queen Naganika, whose name is also spelled Nayanika, was a powerful monarch who ruled during the Satavahana period in the first century BCE. She is known via the Naneghat Inscription, which is located in western India. She was the consort of King Satakarni I and is considered to be one of the earliest Indian women historically documented to have participated in the administration of the state as well as religious life.

Chandragupta I, the founder of the Gupta Empire, made Kumaradevi, a Licchavi princess from the ancient republic of Vaishali, his queen consort. Kumaradevi was then elevated to the position of queen consort. It was at the beginning of the fourth century CE that they tied the knot, which not only brought together two powerful north Indian dynasties but also represented the consolidation of Gupta dominance in Magadha, which marked the beginning of the "Golden Age" of India.

Women in Medieval India

In the course of the medieval period, there was a dramatic decline in the position of women. Sati, purdah (seclusion), and child marriage were among the social customs that grew widespread during this time period. It was extremely difficult for women to participate in public life and receive an education. In spite of these limitations, there are a few women who have played noteworthy roles throughout history. By being the first female monarch of the Delhi Sultanate, Razia Sultana is credited with breaking down barriers between the sexes. As a similar example, Rani Durgavati is famous for her bravery and fight against the growth of the Mughal empire. Didda was a medieval queen who ruled over Kashmir in the late 10th and early 11th centuries. Didda lived around the year 924 and died around the year 1003 CE. During a period of upheaval, she successfully consolidated power and stabilized the region by transitioning from the position of regent to that of sovereign. She is renowned for her political acumen and her ability to persevere. In the Middle Ages, Razia Sultan was one of the few women to hold positions of power in the Islamic world. She was the first and only female Muslim monarch of the Delhi Sultanate, and she lived around the year 1205 until the year 1240 CE. She ruled from 1236 until 1240 as Sultan, not Sultana, insisting on the masculine term in order to demonstrate full royal authority rather than a consort's position. Her reign ran from 1236 until 1240. Rudrama Devi was a monarch of the Kakatiya dynasty who ruled from Orugallu, which is now known as Warangal in Telangana. She lived about the year 1259 and died around the year 1289 CE. Under the male regnal title of Rudra-deva Maharaja, she was one of the first women to be recorded as having ruled a significant South Indian state. She exercised full

control over the kingdom. In the Telugu-speaking Deccan, her reign is known for the administrative reforms she implemented, the military victories she achieved, and the lasting cultural influence she exerted. Mirabai, also known as Meera Bai, was a Hindu mystic, saint, and poet who was a part of the Bhakti movement and was devoted to Lord Krishna. She lived for around 1498 to 1547 CE. She was born in Rajasthan as a Rajput princess, but she chose to forego the regal life in order to pursue her spiritual calling. Because of her fervent songs of heavenly love, she became one of the most recognized devotional voices in India during the medieval period.

Women During the Modern Indian

During the period of colonial rule, which lasted from the 18th to the 20th century, an array of social reform groups emerged with the objective of bettering the situation of women. Reformers were those who opposed traditionally restrictive practices and pushed for the rights of women, education, and social equality.

Social Reform Movements

- Raja Ram Mohan Roy played a crucial role in the abolition of the *Sati* system.
- Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar championed widow remarriage and women's education.
- Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule pioneered girls' education and fought against caste and gender discrimination.

Savitribai Phule was an Indian social reformer, poet, and one of the first female teachers in India. She began her life in 1831 and passed away in 1897. She battled against discrimination based on gender and caste during the 19th century, and she was a pioneer in the field of education for women and communities that were marginalized. She did this while working alongside her husband, Jyotirao Phule.

Women in the Freedom Struggle

The independence struggle in India was heavily influenced by the participation of women. It was leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and Kasturba Gandhi who were able to rally large numbers of people and make important contributions to the cause of nationalism.

Post-Independence Developments

After India attained its independence in 1947, it immediately implemented a democratic framework that guaranteed women the same rights as men. The Constitution of India stipulates that all individuals are treated equally before the law, that discrimination on the basis of gender is prohibited, and that equal opportunities are guaranteed.

Legal Reforms

Several laws were enacted to protect and empower women:

- Hindu Marriage Act (1955)
- Dowry Prohibition Act (1961)
- Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005)

Political and Economic Participation

Women started taking an active role in a variety of fields, including politics, education, and the workforce. A symbol of women's capacity for leadership, Indira Gandhi became the first woman to ever hold the position of Prime Minister. Additionally, the implementation of reservation regulations inside Panchayati Raj institutions has resulted in an increase in the political representation of women at the fundamental level.

Women Empowerment and Contemporary Scenario in India

The term "women empowerment" refers to the process of helping women become more capable of fully participating in all aspects of life, including social, economic, political, and cultural situations. The empowerment of women has emerged as a prominent topic of discussion in India's development discourse, which reflects the country's dedication to achieving gender equality and inclusive growth. In addition to being an issue of social fairness, the empowerment of women is also a necessary for the development of sustainable ways of living. Historically, women in ancient India maintained a very high status; however, throughout the course of time, their standing was diminished as a result of societal practices such as child marriage, dowry, and limits on mobility. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, social reformers were the driving force behind reform movements that brought about change. After India gained its independence, the Constitution of India included clauses that guaranteed equality, including the following:

- Article 14 (Equality before law)
- Article 15 (Prohibition of discrimination)
- Article 16 (Equal opportunity in employment)

In order to advance women's rights and empowerment, India has implemented a number of political and legislative reforms over the years. Issues including discrimination, unequal access to resources, and gender-based violence have all been addressed by these measures. Here, we examine a few significant legislative and policy developments that have influenced women's empowerment in India. The Dowry Prohibition Act, which was passed in 1961 with the intention of preventing dowry-related violence, was one important legal change. Giving or receiving dowries was prohibited by the act, and infractions carried severe penalties (Government of India, 1961). Even with this law in place, dowry-related violence is still a major problem in Indian society. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, which was passed in 2005 and offers women who are victims of domestic abuse legal protection and redress, is another significant piece of law. Physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, and financial abuse are all considered forms of domestic violence under the legislation (Government of India, 2005). In order to guarantee victims' safety, it also creates protection officers and permits the issuance of protection orders. In order to safeguard women's job rights during pregnancy and childbirth, the Maternity Benefit Act of 1961 was also passed. The statute forbids discrimination or termination on the basis of pregnancy and requires paid maternity leave for qualified female employees (Government of India, 1961). Numerous numerical data show the effects of these law revisions. In 2013, the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reported 135,477 occurrences of cruelty by husband or family, highlighting the continuation of gender-based abuse despite legal interventions (NCRB, 2013). The Maternity Benefit Act has increased the number of women seeking maternity leave and benefits, according to data from the Ministry of Women and Child Development (Ministry, n.d.). Political actions have increased women's representation and decision-making. Women were required to be represented in panchayats and municipalities by the 1992 Constitution (73rd and 74th Amendment) Acts. The reserves have led to increasing political participation among women at the grassroots level, empowering them to address community issues. Conclusion: Legal and political changes have significantly advanced women's rights and empowerment in India. Implementing and enforcing these laws remains challenging, emphasizing the necessity for ongoing efforts to promote gender equality and justice.

Role of Education and Media

Education is an essential component in the process of empowering women since it leads to increased awareness, skills, and self-assurance. A further contribution to the dissemination of information on women's rights and issues has been made by the media and digital platforms, which have made it possible for women to express their concerns and rally support.

Challenges:

In India, the process of women's empowerment is hampered by a number of obstacles that inhibit its progress. The subservient status of women is manifested and maintained in developing countries like India by the social norms and family structure that are prevalent in those countries. In practically all communities and societies, there is a persistent

preference for the birth of a son over the birth of a female kid. This desire is one of the norms that exists. Within the context of education, nutrition, and other chances, the society has a greater tendency to favor male children than female children. The assumption that male children in India, with the exception of Meghalaya, inherit the clan is the fundamental reason for this kind of mentality. Meghalaya is the only exception to this rule. It is common for women to adopt the conventional notion that their role is considered natural, which results in their being subjected to an injustice. The vast majority of women in India are living in poverty. This is the reality of their lives. The accomplishment of women's empowerment is further complicated by the presence of this additional component. The issues of women's rights in India are being brought about by a number of obstacles that are currently being faced. By addressing these concerns, the empowerment of women in India will be directly benefited on a direct level. Despite the fact that the nation has made significant progress in terms of education since it gained its independence, more progress is still to come. The disparity between men and women is very large. Despite the fact that 82.14% of adult males in India have completed their education, only 65.46% of adult females are known to be literate. It is in higher education and specialized professional trainings that women are subjected to discrimination, which makes it difficult for them to obtain employment and achieve top leadership positions in any area. It is widely acknowledged that poverty poses the biggest danger to global peace. Therefore, the elimination of poverty ought to be a national objective that is on par with the elimination of illiteracy in terms of its significance. Because of this, women are exploited in the role of domestic assists. Health and Safety: The health and safety concerns of women are of the utmost importance for the economic and social well-being of a nation, and they are also an important factor in determining the degree to which women in a nation are empowered. When it comes to maternal healthcare, however, there are some very concerning aspects.

3. Conclusion

The dynamic interplay that exists between tradition and development is exemplified by the progression of women's empowerment in India throughout the course of its history. Ancient India laid the groundwork for a foundation of relative equality; nevertheless, during the medieval period, major restrictions were placed across the entirety of the country. Reform initiatives were initiated during the time when India was under colonial rule, and after the country attained its independence, constitutional and legislative measures were put into place to institutionalize gender equality. Despite the fact that tremendous progress has been made, in order to achieve true empowerment, it is vital to make continual efforts to remove the persistent disparities that are currently in place. The emancipation of women is not only a matter of social fairness, but it is also essential for the progress of the nation and for the development of practices that are environmentally sustainable. Finally, India has many constitutional and legislative provisions to empower women. Many development programs for women have been launched to improve their fortunes. These measures are yielding positive results for women's issues. Our country's position of women is still lacking. Our development plans should prioritize improving female literacy and giving women the skills and abilities to stand on their own. Development is threatened unless properly engineered. A common kind of gender discrimination is the Glass-Ceiling Effect. The term "Glass Ceiling" refers to an invisible barrier that restricts women's employment opportunities and discrimination based on their gender. There is no doubt that women can achieve equality with men. Social practices and male attitudes create an invisible barrier that prevents women from achieving success. Women can only be empowered by improving their economic and social status. For women to realize their potential as strong individuals, it is crucial to adopt comprehensive social and economic policies that prioritize their whole development. Educating women should be the top priority to address the root cause of the issue. Swami Vivekananda stated that a nation without respect for women can never be great. To make India a great nation, we must prioritize giving women their due status.

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