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A Historical Perspective of Women Empowerment

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Abstract

A historical perspective of women empowerment highlights the significant strides made by women throughout history in challenging societal norms and asserting their rights. From ancient times to the modern era, women have fought for equality, education, and freedom in various social, political, and economic spheres. Key milestones include the suffrage movements in the 19th and early 20th centuries, which secured voting rights for women in many countries, and the feminist movements that advocated for gender equality in the workplace, education, and family structures. The historical journey of women's empowerment has been shaped by influential figures, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Sojourner Truth, and Simone de Beauvoir, whose ideas and actions inspired generations of women worldwide. Despite challenges, the progress made underscores the resilience and determination of women to reshape their roles in society and contribute to global development.

During Rig-Veda times women enjoyed a status of equality with men unsurpassed ever since. Some of the features of this equality noted by historians may be briefly mentioned:- Women along with men received education, participated in popular assemblies, took part in debates observed brahmacharya and Upanayan was performed for them. Studied Vedas and composed hymns, Ghosha, Apala, Vishvara were outstanding composers of Vedic hymns. Women saints like Gargi and Maitreyi are well known names. Marriage was sacrament and monogamy was a general rule. Child marriage, sati, polyandry were unknown. However, there were some cases of Polygamy among the rich. The wife was given a place of honour and participated with her husband in religious ceremonies.

The position of women deteriorated in the later Vedic period. They were denied the right inheritance and ownership of property. The situation however has not altered altogether as they continued to have upanayan and the right to receive education. During the Buddhist period, women were denied the right of Vedic studies if not learning altogether. The situation worsened in the real sense only since the Gupta period as right

to property and life had to be spent in penance and austerity. However, Purdah and Sati systems were as yet non-existent. We also hear names like Lilavati and Khana experts in arithmetic and astronomy even in this period

In the medieval period, the position of women became a worse than what has been mentioned under the Gupta period. In this period female infanticide, child marriage, purdah, jauhar, sati and slavery were the main social evils affecting the position of women. The birth of a daughter was considered bad luck. Giving freedom to women was thought of as the predecessor of doom. Women were largely uneducated and remained confined to their homes. Conservatism, superstition and belief in magic, sorcery and witchcraft were part of women's existence

During the British period some of the social problems which attracted the attention of the British administrators and enlightened social reformers were sati, infanticide, child marriage, the prohibition of widow remarriage and the overall deplorable status of Indian women. In the beginning of 19th century the practice of sati was confined to Hoogly, Nadia and Burdwan districts of Bengall, Gaziapur of Uttar Pradesh and Shahabad of Bihar. In southern India it was practiced in Ganjam, Masulipatnam and Tanjore districts. In Rajastan, Punjab and Kashmir the practice was confined to high caste women. In Bengal alone three fourths of the total incidents of sati took place during British India. The phenomena were prevalent among the Brahmans and Rajputs. The British has shown interest in the abolition of sati, Ram Mohan Roy actively campaigned against sati. He announced that the rite of sati was not a part of the shastras. However despite the laws against sati, occurrences of sati are reported from various districts of Rajasthan, even today. Female infanticide was widespread among the Rajputs of Benaras, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan and in parts of Pubjab and Sind among some Sikhs. The reasons for female infanticide can be traced to the deplorable position of women in Hindu society, the dowry system, hypergamy and the sense of honour and pride. In 1779, infanticide was declared to be murder by the Bengal Regulations XXI. In 1804, this was extended to other parts of India. However, the practice continued in secret till recently, particularly among the Rajputs in Rajasthan" dowry was its main cause.

Child marriage is prevalent even today among the rural people and among the urban illiterate people and poor. This situation is the result of hypergamy, dowry, the notion of virginity and chastity. It has resulted in the problems of over population, poverty, unemployment, ill health, dependence upon parents etc. the first legislation was passed in 1860 under which the minimum age for Consummation of marriage in the case of girls was raised to ten. In 1981, the age of consent for girls was raised to twelve. In 1929, the Child Marriage Restraint Act (Sharda Bill) was passed raising the age of marriage for a girl to fourteen and for a bride at fifteen and for a bridegroom at eighteen This was raised later and today stands at eighteen and twenty-one respectively. Even today in rural areas sanction against widow remarriage is quite strong although the Act providing for widow re-marriage came quite early with the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Iswar Chandra

Vidyasagar, the Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act was passed in 1856. In 1861, a widow marriage Association was formed. The Arya Samaj gave top priority to this programme.

The post-Independence period in India as also the decades 1960s and 1970s saw a universal Movement amongst women for equality with men. All over the world feminism has its origin in inequalities between men and women and discrimination and oppression against women for a long time women remained within the four walls of their households. Their dependence on men folk was total. But in recent years educated women in particular and the poor ones in general realized the need for taking up employment outside the household. The middle class women have taken up the issue of price rise and have launched anti-price rise movements in various cities in India. Within the household ill, women have demanded equality with men. What exists for men is demanded for women. Crimes against the Indian women are in international focus now. For instance, Amnesty International has observed that Indian Women are regularly raped in jail cells. The agency quoted a Guwahati High Court Judgement which ruled that women must not be taken to army camps for interrogation, or any other purpose. Even a United Nations report has pointed out that India has highest number of custodial rapes by men in position of power. Constitutionally, the women in India are equal to men in every sphere of life, but this equality is among unequals. Even among themselves, women suffer from vast divides of religion and class.

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