

Title: Replacing Patriarchy with Parity – Redefining the Role of Women

Student's name : Kanishka Ajwani

School: Zydu School of Excellence, Godhavi

Grade: 11

Category: Senior

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Abstract

‘The hand that rocks the cradle, the procreator, the mother of tomorrow, shapes the destiny of civilization. There indeed is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women.’

My research project delves into the empowerment of women in the Indian context over centuries, with its primary focus on the recent and contemporary times. The past of women empowerment is one of dynamic ebb and flow, acting as a loss and gain enterprise throughout history. Drawing upon a wide range of secondary sources including magazines, newspapers, online articles, political writings, as well as official government portals, this study intends to trace the changes in women’s status in society and reflect upon how far they’ve come in society, and the way their role has changed.

It brushes upon The Ancient Period, visiting the Rig Vedic period and Manu’s Laws, as well as the Medieval Era, the Bhakti Movement and powerful personalities like Nur Jahan in the Mughal Empire. The Medieval Era is followed by the Colonial Period and the Modern Age, which traces the significant improvements in women’s status and position in our country, looking at empowering personalities, and elucidating movements, landmark judgements and bills, such as the recent Women’s Reservation Bill, the 106th amendment to our constitution that will improve women’s participation in politics and provide them with fair representation.

Ultimately it intends to look at how Indian women have redefined and cemented their role in today’s and tomorrow’s India.

Keywords: Legal Reforms, Religion and Patriarchy, Landmark Judgements, Empowerment

Introduction

‘Rashtriya Sarva Naari Asti, Nari Rashtriya Akshi Asti’. A woman is our tomorrow, a woman is the eye of the nation. The best thermometer to the progress of a nation, is the treatment of its women. For centuries, women have been subjected to inequality, rendered as inferior to men. In India, which has a pluralistic and inclusive constitution, women empowerment over the ages has been impacted a lot by religion, religious interpretations of text have often bound women to the shackles of patriarchy, and religion has often been cited as the justification for the same. The status of women empowerment has fluctuated a lot over different ages and centuries, but the status of women was not always unequal in society.

Discussion

Tracing the roots of feminism in Ancient and Medieval India

The Rig Vedic period, which dates to around 1500 BCE, describes a period that laid the foundation for Indian society. The women in the Rig Vedic period enjoyed a respectable status in society (Roy). They were free to participate in religious rituals, could hold political authority, engage in their intellectual pursuits, and education was not just restricted to men. Marriages were based on equality and mutual respect. Women could also choose their husbands through the *Swayamvara*. Written records show that in most households, women had a significant level of authority in decision making. (Punam and Sharma 3)

The position of women deteriorated with the coming of the Manusmriti, which was compiled sometime between 200 BCE and 200 CE. An ancient Hindu legal text which was considered as one of the sacred *Dharmashastras*, it outlined steps to control every aspect of a woman’s life. According to this text, the main purpose of a woman’s life was to serve her husband in perpetuity, and ensure his complete satisfaction. They were objectified and considered as the property of their father, husband or brother. It was portrayed that they were only created to bear children and to continue the race. Their status was subordinated and they had no right of control even over their own bodies. Their sexuality was narrowed, and limited only to biological terms or expressed in terms of male sexuality. (Naseera and Kuruvilla 5)

The Medieval Age saw the development of the Bhakti Movement, in the 7th century CE. It emphasised on the profound love and devotion between a devotee and their God, and laid the

roots of feminism in India. Women broke all societal and domestic norms that they were earlier bound in. The Bhakti saints believed in the importance of inner bhakti which

transcended all gender barriers. These women challenged the patriarchal norms of a time when women were not even allowed to hold opinions. This movement advocated for the autonomy of women, believing that since God does not differentiate between Man and Woman, neither should we. The women refused to be tied down by societal norms and learnt to have their own aspirations and own voice through the medium of poetry and songs and challenged Brahmanical patriarchy. (Thaosen)

With the coming of the Mughals in India, the position of Indian women further deteriorated. The Mughal society stood on the principles of patriarchy, and men held the political and financial power. Child marriage became a common practice for cementing family alliances and securing dowry. A detailed analysis of paintings and Persian texts show that women were employed in several intensive tasks, crafts and other professions. Nur Jahan, the wife of Mughal Emperor Jahangir, is an interesting female figure who played an important role in politics. She was also a remarkable poet and a humanist and had coins bestowed in her name, signifying her political authority. Jahangir's memoir (Tuzk-e-Jahangiri) is filled with Nur Jahan's hunting expeditions, and portrays her as a 'tiger slayer.' (Yadav)

Empowerment under the Colonial Milieu

"She is headstrong, mannish, and full of the perfervid spirit that espouses lost causes" (M.E. Watt, Dewan of Travancore, quoted in Devika 2019)

The quote from the Dewan represents his resentment, and in a way the Britishers' resentment to 'headstrong' young women. These women were considered to be misguided and were called 'mannish'. (Rajgopal 2)

The modern world was marked by the coming of industrialisation and capitalism. Against the backdrop of colonialism emerged dauntless warriors like Rani Lakshmi Bai, who, even today, serve as an example to the power of women and the way they can bring about change and shape history. In the 19th century, Rashsundari Debi, learnt to read in the secrecy of her kitchen, and by eavesdropping on teachers who taught boys at a school near her house. A pioneer for women's education, she wrote her autobiography *Amar Jiban* which was published in 1876, and acclaimed fame as the 1st full length autobiography in the Bengali language. In the 1880s

Tarabai Shinde and Pandita Ramabai wrote about the plight of the upper-caste Hindu widows. In fact, the topic of widow remarriage took centre stage in the 19th century reform movements. Tarabai Shinde is known for her published work *Stri Purush Tulana* (1882), a critical account of caste and patriarchy, and is considered as the first modern Indian feminist text. (NCERT 172)

Three associations were formed between 1917 and 1927, after World War 1, with the aim of making women a part of public life. These were: Women's India Association (WIA), All India Women's Conference (AIWC), and the National Council of Women in India (NCWI). They had on their agendas a need for comprehensive reform of personal laws that included issues such as child marriage and widow remarriage. (Rajgopal 6)

Raja Rammohan Roy was one of the early feminists who argued that *sati* was not supported by the Hindu scriptures and was nothing less than murder. EV Ramaswamy, known popularly as Periyar spread the idea that adorning women with expensive garments and ornaments is not better than giving them education which will help them earn self-respect in society. (Sithadharan and Thirumal). Periyar's vision was codified in law by B.R Ambedkar, the father of our Constitution. In order to liberate women, he thought it best to reform the laws defined in the Manusmriti, which stood for Brahmanical patriarchy, and burnt it recognising the *Manusmriti Dahan Divas* as the *Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas*. (Omvedt)

Post Independence Developments – Legal and Political Reforms

Post-independence, India has seen considerable developments in the status of women. The democratic fabric of our nation provided women with the right to voice their own opinions and fight for their rights.

The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 brought uniformity in inheritance laws, and conferred greater rights on women, proclaiming them as the full, and not limited owners of property. Section 14 of the act states that 'any property possessed by a female Hindu, whether acquired before or after the commencement of this Act, shall be held as full owner thereof and not limited owner'. (Sridevan)

The Equal Remuneration Act of 1976, was an act designed to provide equal payment for equal work. It prevents discrimination on the grounds of sex and ensures the provision of increasing employment opportunities for women. Section 149 of The Companies Act of 2013 mandates that some companies must appoint at least one woman in the board of directors, which helps in

their economic empowerment. The very recent 106th amendment to our constitution, passed on 18th September 2023 (Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam) requires 1/3rd

of the seats in Lok Sabha, State Assemblies and in the Legislative Assembly of the NCT to be reserved for women. This political empowerment will undoubtedly increase women's participation in politics, and help them earn their seat at the table. Even their participation in the 2024 Republic Day Contingent highlights their participation in every social sphere.

Schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) have played a significant role in providing women in rural areas with financial autonomy. More than half the MGNREGA workforce is women. However, the same cannot be said for the urban society as social norms, lack of safety and hostile transportation options are factors inhibiting urban women from entering the workforce. (Abraham and Narayan)

Landmark Judgements

Numerous legal judgements in the Indian context are a true testament to how far women have come, but also highlight that there is still a long way to go.

- **Vishakha v. State of Rajasthan (1997):** A landmark judgement, it outlined guidelines to prevent sexual harassment of women in the workplace. It resulted in the formation of guidelines called the Vishakha Guidelines, which provide a framework for employers to address and prevent workplace sexual harassment.
- **Mary Roy v. State of Kerala (1986):** The court held that women are entitled to an equal share in their father's property, and changed the inheritance laws for Syrian Christian women in Kerala, bringing an end to gender-based discrimination. (George)
- **Shayara Bano v. Union of India (2017):** This ruled the practice of triple talaq as unconstitutional under articles 14, 15, 21 and 25; and gave Muslim women the right to seek legal redressal in case their husbands unilaterally dissolve their marriage.

Conclusion

The struggle for equality in India has been going on for centuries. Women have been fighting for their rightful place in society, and have been met with significant hurdles. However, in the contemporary world, ideas about women empowerment are not met with the same resistance

as in the previous centuries. It is not that women have won the battle against inequality, but just the fact that today so many women are voicing their opinions is a testament to how far

we've come. Women empowerment should never be about man-hating. It isn't necessary to bring one down to lift the other up. It is time we replace patriarchy with parity.

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