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## A SHORT HISTORY OF EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA THROUGH THE AGES

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### Abstract.

The social dignity and position of women was very favourable for them during the Rig Vedic India. They lost their freedom during the later Vedic period. They enjoyed maximum freedom during the Sangam Age that was the Dravidian civilization. They began to be enjoyed rights and freedom during the British period. Now they are more aware about their freedom and civic rights through Missionary Education, wealth and higher positions.

The History of empowerment of women in India occupies an interesting chapter in the History of postmodern India. The empowerment of women was not an accident in History; but it was a gradual and continuous processes. During the Rig Vedic period, they enjoyed maximum freedom in all aspects of life. But during the later Vedic period, their social and cultural dignity deteriorated. It was mainly because of the domination of men. They were neglected to get education and they were dragged into the prison house of wife. During the modern period, they are struggled hard for their own up- liftment through education, socio-political and cultural activities.

The socio-cultural life of the people of the Indus Valley Civilization or the Dravidians was an advanced one. Women were given due respect and were not subjected to merciless laws. They were as busy as men for their livelihood. The clay figurines of women found in the Indus valley is the best example for their good position. The women in the Rig Vedic period were respected and they were admitted to Vidatha, the earliest assembly for discussions on metaphysical subjects and great philosophical gatherings. They had access to and capacity for the highest knowledge, even the knowledge of Absolute or Brahma<sup>1</sup>.

The hymns of the Rig Veda show that, after the Aryanisation in India they used to treat the girls and the boys with equal consideration. So they enjoyed equal freedom with their menfolk. During that period, women formed an integral part of the social structure. Her role in the various walks of life contributed to the evolution of values that had counted for overall progress. According to Rig Veda, women enjoyed great

respect in society. They were even exalted to the position of goddesses and given different celestial names such as Arditi, Usha, Rathi, Aranyani, etc.. They wielded considerable influence in society and played a significant role in the religious ceremony during the Vedic period. Without the participation of their womenfolk, the rituals in their day-to-day life became stagnant.

The Vedic period accorded importance to women's education and freedom. They had full rights to education. They were eligible for the study of the Vedas and the performance of sacrifices. Some women scholars remained unmarried for a long time devoting themselves to higher studies. Women during the Vedic period had similar privileges in Vedic institutions and studies, and their cooperation in post-marital ceremonies was essential. Marriage was a flourishing institution in Rig Vedic society. The custom of sati did not exist. There was no dowry and purdah system in ancient India. The role and status of women in India was clarified in Manusmriti, which was written by ancient law giver Manu. Manu fully recognized the importance of women as a component complement of man. The role of women is crucial for formation of a live society, as per Manu. Later, the Vedic age discouraged female education, and sending out girls to teachers or education centres came to standstill. They were taught at home by their elders. There arose a tendency to curtail the religious rights and privileges of the average woman. Many functions in the society formerly performed by wives were assigned to male substitutes. Women were not allowed to attend public meetings. They gradually lost their previous position, and women's position deteriorated considerably during the Epic age. The tendency to lower the marriageable age of girls discouraged<sup>2</sup>. The neglect of education and lowering the age of marriage produced disastrous consequences on the status of women. Evil practices like child marriage, widowhood, female infanticide and sati suppressed the women, and the patriarchies became the order of the day.

Buddhism believed in social and religious equality. The women were assigned an honoured place in society and were admitted even into the Buddhist order. Buddha first refused to accept women in his monastic order even when requested by Mahaprajapati Gautami, who had brought him up. Ananda, the first disciple of Buddha, laid down the celebrated eight conditions to admit women into the Buddhist order. The conditions stipulated that an old nun had to respect the youngest monk, and while the monks officially reviled the nuns, they had to remain silent. Later, women were admitted to Buddhism and Jainism and nunneries were established<sup>3</sup>.

The status of women in ancient Tamil society is well described in the Tamil literature of the Sangam age, and that is the only source of information. It praises womanhood. Women enjoyed certain privileges and freedom during the ancient period. Women of the Sangam age had distinguished themselves in their cultural attainments and virtuous living. They were given good domestic science, literature, music, and dance training<sup>4</sup>. The ancient Tamil poets stressed the value of education for all. It is remarkable that one of the features of the Bhakti movement was the recognition of the equality of the genders in religious matters. Andal, Karaikal Ammaiyar and Thilagavathiar were fitting examples to show equality of status granted to

women in the sphere of religion. Andal and Karaikal Ammaiyar, the two poets of Tamil Nadu, broke away from their social nests to pursue their spiritual pursuits. They composed a lot of hymns. Andal was counted among the Tamil saints as a jewel. It is significant to note that Karaikal Ammaiyar was the first saint composer among the sixty-three Nayanmars.

During the medieval period, the freedom of the Indian women worsened due to child marriage and the Purdah system. Only the royal women were given education in their homes. After the advent of Muslims in India the position of women further degraded. They lost the opportunity to secure education and the polygamy system. The custom of Sati came to be observed generally by the Hindu ruling class. The Muslim women followed Purdah. They were not allowed to mix with men, and their place remained essentially home. There were no schools for women, but few women of the upper classes were highly active in political and social fields and accomplished in their literary pursuits. In ordinary families, girls mainly remained ignored<sup>5</sup>. The position of women in the Sultanate of Delhi was not as high as it used to be in ancient India. The woman was under the strict supervision of the male members of her family. The seclusion of Hindu women was common during the Muslim conquest of Northern India. Child marriage and Purdah brought about the segregation of girls and their degradation during the medieval period.

The oppressive nature of British rule affected the interests of almost all sections of society. Under the burden of excessive taxes, the peasantry became indebted and impoverished. The traditional landed aristocracy suffered less; the talukdars lost their power and privileges. British rule also meant misery to the artisans and handicraftsmen. The British policy discouraged Indian handicrafts and promoted British goods. The reforming zeal of British officials under the influence of utilitarianism had aroused considerable suspicion, resentment, and opposition. Thus, there was a general fear that the British were trying to destroy the religion and culture of the natives through social legislation. However, it may be noted that the social legislations were intended to liberate Indian women from their age long oppressive practices. The abolition of Sati, Child Marriage, female infanticide and Widowhood cannot be taken to mean that they were against religion and women. In fact women welfare legislations went a long way to usher in an egalitarian society in India in the long run<sup>6</sup>.

The 19th Century reform movements and social renaissance initiated the process of improving the status of women. British rule tried to remove the evil practices of Indian society in respect of women and children. They emphasized female education and started compulsory primary education for girls. In the matter of education, the Christian Missionaries made the first efforts towards female education. The formation of the Bethune School of Calcutta in 1847, Hindu Balika Vidyalaya in 1849 in Calcutta, with the effort of Drinkwater Bethune and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, marked a turning point in the history of female education in our country. In Bombay, Francina Sorabji, Ramabai Ranade and Pundita Ramabai dedicated themselves to the education and upliftment of women<sup>7</sup>.

Lord William Bentinck, the Governor-General of India during 1825-35, initiated social reform. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who is called the father of Indian Renaissance, opposed the inhuman custom of Sati and raised a strong public opinion against it. On 4<sup>th</sup> December 1829, sati was declared as "a crime of culpable homicide punishable with fine or imprisonment or both". Religious and social organizations like the Brahma Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj and the Ram Krishna Mission fought for the cause of women<sup>8</sup>. Despite the Doctrine, many regard Lord Dalhousie as the 'Maker of Modern India.' Lord Dalhousie also started many Anglo-vernacular schools in India. He also brought about social reforms such as banning the practice of female infanticide.

Begum Hazrat Mahal and Rani Lakshmi formed part of the outbreak of 1857. Begum Hazrat Mahal, mounted on an elephant, fought against the English. Rani Lakshmi of Jhansi, dressed in a man's attire, fought with determination against the forces of the East India Company. Rani Tace Bai, the queen of Ramgarh in Madhya Pradesh, fought against the British during the outbreak of 1857-1858. These women served as role models and a source of inspiration to the women to participate in the national movement<sup>9</sup>.

Besides these leaders, Maharani Tapasvini, Panditha Rama Bai, Swarn Kumari Debi, Rani Shurnomoyee and Rama Bai Ranade made a distinct contribution to the cause of Indian freedom, and they inspired the other women to participate in the freedom struggle. Maharani Tapasvini took up the cause of women's education. Panditha Rama Bai started schools for girls and homes for destitute women. Swarn Kumari Debi also helped the spread of women's education<sup>10</sup>.

The agitation against the partition of Bengal and the Swadeshi Movement attracted women's attention in many parts of India. Saraladevi Choudhurani of the Tagore family, Sister Nivedita and Yesubai Savarkar, participated in the Swadeshi Movement. The entry of Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu and Bibi Amma, mother of the Ali brothers, into the active political nationalist movement, marked the beginning of a new era in which women started participating in agitations against the British Government<sup>11</sup>.

Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu rendered outstanding services to involve women in the national movement. Annie Besant came to India in 1893. Her work in this country was in four distinct fields. She was a theosophist, educationalist and social reformer before she plunged into politics. Her presence was felt through her writings and speeches in Indian politics since 1898<sup>12</sup>. It is possible that she wrote, "I would have never jumped into political work, had not increased repression by the authority narrowing of liberty, the ill-treatment of students and the danger of revolution forced me into the field<sup>13</sup>.

Margaret Cousins played a significant role in the general awakening of the masses, especially the women. Margaret Cousins came to India in 1915 and joined with Annie Besant at Adayar, Chennai. Her interest in the country, to begin with, was mainly in the sphere of education<sup>14</sup>. Later she joined the Home Rule-agitation of Annie Besant and contributed enormously to this demand. Margaret Cousins and her

husband were the progenitors of the idea of the vote for women in 1917. Montague was respected in India at the close of the year, and she wanted to put this demand before the Secretary of State for India.

During the First World War, the Women Indian Association came into existence in 1917. This organisation became a pivot around which women gathered to discuss and demand their rights. The members emphasised the need for a responsible government that could satisfy the people's aspirations<sup>15</sup>.

To sum up, the women enjoys some more good position in the postmodern India through the attainment of quality western education, accumulation of wealth and through highest positions in government sector as well as private. Postmodern India witnessed the emergence of women as Prime Minister Post and even Honourable President of India. They showed their great skill, courage and diplomacy for the holistic development of New India. Even then, they have some hurdles in various parts of India which they are trying to overcome through liberation movements.

### End Notes

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