

Status of women since the Vedic Period to current Era of Women empowerment in India

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Abstract

Women are always seen as commodity in India. The reasons can be traced in history. The women had a golden period in Vedic period and she was having every right and respect without any written laws. After the Vedic period the status of women started deteriorating. India being patriarchal society women has struggled for their rights and to reach to the level of women empowerment. The article is historical journey of struggle of women since Vedic period to current era of women empowerment.

Key words

Women Empowerment, Equality, rights, history, Constitution

Introduction

Women have always been the vulnerable group of the society. Since ancient time to Modern time historical study shows that woman has always exploited may be economically or socially. The research shows that Vedic period was best period as far as status of women is compared with the later stages. The reasons behind the women victimization are many like lack of education, socially backwardness etc. Her Human rights are always be infringed by the society on all fronts. The condition of her was miserable after Vedic period. To study the status of women one must study the phases such as Vedic Period, Medieval Period & Modern period. In India patriarchy is the base since ancient time and equal opportunity and equality in status did never exist for the women. Women always have strived for the social justice. Women have to swim against the stream that requires mere strength. Such strength comes from the process of empowerment. The women empowerment can be done through providing proper education, health and nutrition facilities.¹ Decades after freedom India have seen tremendous changes in the status of women in the Indian culture. The constitution has been set down as an elementary right to the equity of genders. It is not a simple case of progress of women in this modern era as it was changed in the nineteenth century from a position of absolute degradation and suppression of women to a position of equality in the middle of the twentieth century.

In India, after independence, government had passed series of laws for the upliftment of women. These legislations have been implemented in order to give equal rights and privileges to men, to eliminate discriminations against women, remove inequality between sexes, and remove external barriers coming in the way of their self-realization and development. (Dr. Geetali D. Tilak, 2019)

¹ S. Manikandan, V. Raju and T. Taghu, "Women Empowerment for India's Development",

Status of women in Vedic Period –

The Indian cultural tradition begins with the Vedas. It is generally believed that the Vedic period is spread over from 300 BC to 600 B.C. Some general observations and broad generalization can only be made regarding the status of women during this vast period.²

Women enjoyed the freedom in Vedic period. Women had complete family freedom and they used to participate in social gatherings. The Vedic period was glorified time for the women. During this period women were given equal educational opportunity. They were having freedom to choose their life partner. Rather women were given right to be spinster during their life. The concept of Divorce was not in existence and was not permissible too. The evil which we are combating today in modern India i.e child marriage was not present during this period. Women used to get married after completion of their education. In Vedic time women were having economic freedom too. Women used to work in agricultural field with their husbands and some were engage in teaching too.

Upayanayan sanskar were performed on daughters as well. They were given education of Vedas, Shastra & Dharma. She was having property rights as well. Therefore during Vedic period women truly enjoyed the freedom in social as economic life.

But unfortunately the status of women started diminishing in post Vedic period. Manu in his Manusmirti considered women as Goddess but denied her social and other rights which she was having in Vedic period. All the freedoms which were given to her in Vedic period were denied in post Vedic period. She was denied the right to take education. Child marriages were supported and she was not given choice to choose her life partner. She was not allowed to work other than household. The evil practices like Sati was started. Only the right of Stridhan was given to women otherwise property rights were denied to her. Therefore whatever freedoms women enjoyed in Vedic period were not given to her in post Vedic period.

Status of women in Medieval Period-

Medieval Indian history spreads over 500 years. It is predominantly the history of Muslim rulers. Muslims appeared in India as a warrior class. Their rule in India is divided into two Eras; The Era of Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Era.³

During this period many women ruled the Muslim throne like Razia Sultan, Nur Jahan, Chand Bibi. In addition to that many brave Hindu women were seen in this period like Tara Bai, Jija Bai. Irrespective of this women were used as commodity by the male dominated society. The evil systems like female infanticide, Sati, child marriages, Purdah system, gained thrust during the middle ages due to the political unsteadiness of Northern India, especially due to various invasions. Polygamy came in existence during this time. The immoral system of dowry was promoted and supported during this period.

The only good and positive change which was observed during this period was of Bhakti movement which gave religious freedom to women.

² <https://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/women/status-of-women-in-ancient-india>

³ <https://www.sociologydiscussion.com/status-of-women/status-of-women-in-india-ancient-medieval-and-modern-sociology>

Therefore whatever horrible practices women were facing during the post Vedic period were not curtailed in medieval period rather some more immoral practices were started. Hence we can say that though during this period Mughal Ruler made many developments in the country but they never had any policy to uplift the status of women, rather it deteriorated the status women in the society.

Status of women in British Rule-

The position and status of women saw no change till the advent of British rule in India and the efforts of various social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekanand, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Justice M.G. Ranade, Annie Besant and many more. It was due to the efforts of these social reformers that the British Government passed various Acts for the betterment of the women, and to uplift their position and status in the society. Involuntary Sati was yet practiced.⁴

The social activist Raja Ram Mohan Roy fought continuously for the prohibition of female infanticide and practice of sati. Because of his efforts William Bentick took a decision to pass the enactment i.e. The Prohibition of Sati and Female Infanticide Act, 1829. Further because of the struggle and efforts of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar British Government enacted the Widow Remarriage Act, 1856.

During this period many freedom fighters and social reformist fought for the rights of the women and women got some relief as compared to the earlier phases. The real reform for women started because of Gandhi Disobedient movement.

Status of women in Post independence-

Post-Independence various laws were passed for the betterment and upliftment of women. The most important being Article 14, 15 and 16. Article 14 provides Equality before the law, it states that “The State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India.” Article 15 states “Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.” Article 16 states “Equality of opportunity in matters of public employment.”⁵

Other than this constitutional provisions, many important enactments were passed in India like, Maternity Benefit Act of 1861, Special Marriage Act of 1954, Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act of 1956, The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act of 1956, The Hindu Succession Act of 1956, The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, Indian Divorce Act of 1969, Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971, The Hindu Women Right to Property Act of 1973, The Equal Remuneration Act of 1976, Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 etc.

When we see the above list of laws enacted in India to protect the rights of women still these enactment failed to raise the status of women in India. The justice still denied to her. We say

⁴ Puja Mondal, Changing Status of Women after the Independence of India, December 10, 2013, 10:45:11, <http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/society/changing-status-of-women-after-the-independence-of-india/4398>

⁵ <https://fastforwardjustice.com/status-of-women-from-ancient-to-modern-erain-india>

constitution gave protection to women but in reality lack of willingness of the administrators in implementation of laws is also one of the reasons.

Status of Women in 21st Century i.e. Women empowerment Era-

Women are showing their representation in Politics, science, education, medical, defense services, and engineering. Rather in every field we could see women from upper rank to lower.. The government is taking effort to uplift the status of women by enacting various policies. For women this era can be called as era of Women empowerment. The women is touching new horizon every day. They have left the mark on every field. Various policies and laws have increased the strength of women to face all the social problems.

As per the United Nations, “the economic impact of achieving gender equality in India is estimated to be US\$700 billion of added GDP by 2025. The IMF estimates that equal participation of women in the workforce will increase India’s GDP by 27 percent.”⁶

Conclusion

Framers of the Indian Constitution were well aware about the vulnerability of the women and children. Therefore they incorporated special provisions in Indian Constitution to bring them into main stream of the society.

Recently the Ministry of Defence issued the formal Government Sanction Letter for grant of Permanent Commission (PC) to Women Officers in the Indian Army, paving the way for empowering Women Officers to shoulder larger roles in the organization. This is a proud movement for every Indian. Now to increase the participation of women in Politics, women reservation Bill is proposed. Therefore definitely our country has started respecting the potential of women.

Though Government is taking efforts and enacting policies for women empowerment, we still read the cases of dowry death, rape, female infanticide etc. We do have Indian Penal code to punish the criminals but something is still not up to the mark to stop these heinous crimes against women in India. We say that we are in the era of women empowerment and we all want gender justice in reality not on paper. Women empowerment in true sense is giving her strong support to conquer the new challenges by accepting her at par with men and respecting her human rights too. The vision of the framers of the constitution will be achieved only when the society’s mind set will be changed. Since ancient time people from society are eager to give her status of goddess but not ready to give respect. Mere incorporation of new laws and policies by Government will not bring women empowerment. Rather mentality of the society towards women should be changed. Gender equality should not be brought by compulsory laws but should be given by the society with free mind then only we can say yes we empowered our women to conquer new fields.

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