

Chintana Lekha

# **Transforming India in the 21st Century**

**Perspectives, Challenges and Policy Implications**



**Dr. Leela Appaji**  
Chief Editor

**Divya B.S.**  
Editor



**GOVERNMENT COLLEGE FOR WOMEN**

Mandya - 571 401.

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## SUBJUGATION OF WOMEN THROUGH AGES: A STRIDE TOWARDS SELF-RELIANCE

**Dr. P. Anita**

### **Introduction:**

As human development is a process of enlarging the choices for all people not just for one section of the society, it becomes unjust and inequitable if women are excluded from the benefit of participation. All people, women and men, must be empowered to participate in the design and implementation of key decisions that shape their lives.

Women constitute nearly half of the total population in the world but their rights are violated virtually in every society, developed or developing, eastern or western and rich or poor. Bennholdt and Thomson write, "Women do 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the world's work. In exchange, they receive 10 percent of the world's income and own a mere one percent of the world's means of production".

### **Status of Women in Indian Society through Ages**

Women in India have been deprived of equal education, equal employment, equal pay and equal status with men through ages. The prosperity and growth of a nation depends on the status and development of women for as they not only constitute nearly half of its population but also influence growth of the remaining half. The status of women has always been a subject of great concern over 4,000 years, which has been intertwined with the history of the country. The status of Indian woman is full of diversity and contradictions. The status of Indian woman has degenerated from that of a deity to devadasi, from pious to the ominous and from virtue to vice. Thus, the status of women in India has undergone dramatic and drastic change from era to era.

### **Status of Woman in Ancient India**

Woman did not have an independent existence of her own in all ages right from the Vedic age to modern age. The period of ancient India was approximately

considered to be from 4000 BC to 1300 A.D. This period could be divided into two, Vedic and post-Vedic periods.

### **(i) Vedic Period:**

Vedas or Srutis are considered to be the most ancient source of Hindu Law. The Vedic, a period of equitability, treated woman with a fair deal. The status of woman during the Vedic period could be judged by the way in which the birth of girl child was received. Rigveda, never considered the birth of a girl inauspicious. Woman was allowed to recite Vedic verses and perform Yagna. There were no child marriages and woman had freedom to marry a man of her choice irrespective of caste. The concept of Ardhangini suggests that there was equal status of woman along with man, and neither was superior to the other. Girls were equally educated along with boys. There were also references that woman used to participate in literary melas and at times in wars. The status of woman during the Vedic period was honourable and respectable.

### **(ii) Smritis Period-Post Vedic Period:**

The deterioration of the status of woman started from the period of Smritis (800 B.C–200 A.D) particularly with Manu and his Manu Smriti, which was considered to be the ancient Hindu code. Manu pronounced that "no woman was entitled to freedom". He said that woman should never be independent. She should be under the control of her father in her childhood, her husband in her youth and her son in her old age. Male chauvinism was prevailing. It was said that the wife should ever treat her husband as God, though he be characterless and devoid of good qualities. Woman should follow the word of her husband.

Woman was treated as Abala, a weak, helpless and powerless being utterly incapable of managing and preserving the family status. She used to be in veil and



behind Purdah making her to live in seclusion. She became a drudge in the household, a log for her lord's pleasure and had become a child-bearing machine. Thus, the honourable status earned by Hindu woman in Vedic period vanished during the period of Dharmashastras and Smritis. She was made subordinate and dependent on male. This unfortunate practice nourished by Dharmashastras was continued up to the Muslim Regime.

### **Status of Women during the Medieval Period**

The status of woman further deteriorated, during medieval period. Child marriages and sati became the order of the day. Due to insecurity and uncertainty with regard to women's chastity, Purdah became more rigid and women were even forbidden to visit the holy shrines. Female infanticide was practised during the Mughal period. The legal status of Muslim women was equally pathetic with easy 'talak' and virtual confinement to house. Therefore, it could be said that the status of women reached the worst position during this period.

### **Status of women during the modern period (British Period)**

The impact of western civilization through British rule gave an impetus to claim equal status and rights by the Indian women. Sincere efforts were made by eminent scholars, judges and social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Dwarkanatha Tagore, Kesava Chandra Sen, Eswara Chandra Vidyasagar and many to improve the status of Indian women. The reformative laws like Hindu Widows Remarriage Act 1856, Abolition of Sati Act 1929, Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929 and so on were passed as a result of the efforts made by the social reformers. In 1946, the Hindu Women's Right of Separate Residence and Maintenance Act 1946 were passed. The Hindu Women's Right to property Act was passed in 1937 to improve the legal status of Widows. Gandhiji's call for women's participation in freedom struggle brought out the Indian women from the seclusion in their houses. The First All India Women's Conference in the year 1927 discussed the problems of early marriages and stressed the importance of women's education. The Government of India Act, 1935 provided civil services under the crown for women.

### **Status of Women after Independence**

Effective steps were taken to improve the status and position of women after independence. There were nearly 13 women members in the constituent assembly which framed the constitution of India. Women enjoy the same rights which men do. Many Acts have been passed to raise the status of women. Hindu Marriage Act was passed in 1955, Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act in 1956, Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act in 1956, Dowry prohibition Act in 1961, Maternity Benefit Act in 1961 and Equal Remuneration Act in 1976. They raised the status of women. After independence, the position of women has been stabilized and they had become economically free which helped them to break permanent bondage or dependence on men.

### **Empowerment of Women**

Women constitute 48.30 percentage of the country's population accounting for 495.74 million as per the 2001 census. Without their involvement in the process of economic development, the development itself would be incomplete and lopsided. Emancipation of women is an essential pre-requisite for economic development and the social progress of the nation. Hence, in recent times greater emphasis is being put on empowering women so that they could develop and realize their full potential and contribute to the society and nation as well.

The year 1975 was declared as "Year of women" by the United Nations since there is an increased concern of women's sufferings and their empowerment in the society. In this connection UNDP has brought out its Human development report 2003, which speaks about the Millennium Development goals (MDG). It has listed eight goals out of which the third goal is to achieve the gender equality and empowerment of women.

Women empowerment is a global issue which has gained momentum in recent decades. Empowerment of women has been recognized as a central issue in determining the status of women. The position of women and their status in any society is an index of its civilization. Empowering women basically means to provide them opportunities to live and work "with dignity".



Women are to be considered as equal partners in the process of development. But due to the centuries of exploitation and subjugation, Indian women have remained at the receiving end. In this context in order to provide a big push, institutional support is necessary to empower Indian women in general and rural women in particular. Empowerment covers aspects such as women's control over material and intellectual resources. Empowerment is a process, not an event, which challenges traditional power equations and relations. However, empowerment would mean "the process of challenging existing inequality, power relations, and of gaining greater control over sources of power by the under privileged.

"Empowerment is the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes both control over resources (physical, human, intellectual and financial) and over ideology (beliefs, values and attitudes)".

The Nepal Human Development Report views empowerment as a process and also as the result of the process, whereby, the powerless or less powerful members of the society and the women gain greater access and control over material and intellectual resources, and challenge the ideologies of discrimination and subordination (NPC/UNDP).

The final goal of empowerment is to transform the ideology and practice of domination and subordination, challenge and transfer existing power structures, systems and institutions which have upheld and reinforced this discrimination and gained access to and control over material and knowledge resources (DFID/The World Bank).

### **Key Elements and Indicators to Assess**

**Empowerment:** Empowerment perhaps is the most difficult to measure. The empowerment has certain key elements such as power, autonomy and self-reliance, entitlement, participation and process of building awareness and capacity.

**Power** refers to the control of resources, power to make decision at household level, level of control over sources of power and level of change in power relations with time (household and group level). **Autonomy and self-reliance** refers to freedom of action, the possession of critical elements to

effectively and efficiently undertake desired activity and development of a sense of self and vision of the future. **Entitlement** means right to equitable share and access of resources in home, village and society at large. **Participation** refers to the level of influencing decision and the level of acceptance of responsibility and bearing consequences of decision. **Capacity building** refers to the abilities in undertaking economic, socio-cultural and political activities, and enhancing self-respect. Here capacity to undertake economic activities would include ownership and control of productive resources and creation of alternative employment at local levels. Capacity to enhance self-respect refers to the ability to assert independent rights to make choice, to challenge and eliminate subordination, to develop self-confidence and assertiveness in attaining the status of decision-making power in household.

The potential sources of women's empowerment are education, media exposure and gainful employment. Education and media exposure can help to empower women by equipping them with the information and the means to function effectively in the modern world. The employment, particularly for cash and in non-traditional occupations, potentially empowers women by providing financial independence, alternative sources of social identity and exposure to power structures independent of kin networks. In this category, the variable extent to which household expenditure depends on women's earnings, on the grounds that women are likely to have greater access and control over resources if they were the primary earners in a household.

### **Conclusion**

The empowerment has multiple dimensions that are inter-related, namely, economic empowerment, social empowerment and political empowerment, which reinforce each other. The economic empowerment would include increasing women's access to and command over tangible and intangible resources, such as wealth, property, employment, knowledge and information. The social aspect would include changing the existing discriminatory ideology and culture, which determine the environment for women's existence. Finally, political process must increase women's presence and influence in the power



structure and it includes the ability to bring about changes in women's legal status, to direct resources to women and get access to positions of power.

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