

## WOMEN EMPOWERMENT : AN HISTORICAL APPROACH

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**Abstract :** *Historically women's issues had been a major ingredient of social reform movement in modern India. Abolition of 'sati', and campaigns for widow remarriage, women's education, property rights and political rights were some of their focal points. However, all the earlier movements and their leaders had, by and large, accepted the existing pattern of gender relations, along with the division of labour and authority between men and women, as natural. The contemporary women's movement goes beyond concessions and benefits; it supports women's rights to equality, participation and role in decision making. The needed instrument for this is empowerment and not welfare. This research paper deals with the condition of Indian women in the past and the consciousness, awareness which improves the status of women during the course of times due to the women reformers .*

**Keywords :** *Women Empowerment, Ancient History, Nineteenth Century, Pandita Ramabai, Savitribai Phule.*

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Women's empowerment as a concept was introduced at the UN's Third World Conference on women in Nairobi in 1985, which defined it as a redistribution of social and economic powers and control of resources in favour of women. The United Nations Development Fund for Women includes the factors as "Acquiring Knowledge and understanding of gender relations and the way in which these relations may be changed" and Developing a sense of self worth, a beliefs in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life".

### **Ancient History Women Empowerment :**

The history of women's empowerment in the ancient age is quite confusing because on one side it encouraged women to choose their life partner on their own and on the other side, they were forced to perform Sati as per social norms. The first ever social network for women was created in ancient age, and it was known as the "Bhikkuni Sangh". As per Buddha, women too can achieve nirvana by the systematic practice of his teachings (Dhamma). But after the death of Buddha, Bhikkuni Sangh lost its connectivity and this group of women was oppressed by society. In ancient text, '*Manusmriti*' (laws of Manu) not only insulted women but also degraded them to the lowest Level.

Due to injustice in ancient age, for many centuries, women didn't know what is freedom, liberation, and independence. The stigma of women's slavery has crused India's development.

### **Modern History - Reformers & Status of Women :**

Most of the nineteenth century social reformers were male and members of the leaned elites. The majority were products of the new system of "English" education, though some came from the indigenuous traditional systems. All were scholars in their own right, who had mastered one or more of the major philosophic-cultural-religious systems that met in India, modified through centuries of acculturation in the Indian sub-continent. The amalgam of indigenous cultural pluralism-mediated by centuries of philosophical efforts to systematise or homogenize-for want of an alternative word, came to be known as Hindu religion, philosophy and culture.

The nineteenth century reformers, however, were neither unanimous nor homogeneous in their inspiration and objectives. The common element was their preoccupation with problems that primarily affected women in their own social class and milieu, and made them vulnerable to humiliation. These 'social evils' brought charges of barbarity and uncivilized behavior from the new rulers, the new teachers and the new dispensers of rewards and recognition.

Accepting women's status within the family as an index of their own progress and modernity, the earlier reformers criticized particularly inhuman practices like widow immolation (*sati*), marriage of child brides to much older men, ban on remarriage of widows, and sought to promote some form of education for women. Orthodox criticism of such moves was countered by statements that such reforms would arrest conversions to Christianity or the drift of oppressed widows to prostitution, and strengthen the stability of the traditional (patriarchal) family.

The second group of social reformers, focusing on the same issues but far more outspoken in their rejection of western values, projected their attempts as those of 'revival' of pristine traditions of 'Indian' culture, to rescue women from the cultural degeneration of which they had become victims. Education of a controlled kind and positions of protected dignity within the family and the community were argued as necessary to enroll women as 'custodians of traditional cultural values', against the onslaught of Westemisation. The role prescriptions for the *aryamahilas* (noble or respectable women, or followers of the Arya Samaj, one of the reform movements) strangely enough, reiterated not only the ideals prescribed for high caste Hindu women-thus reasserting the traditional claim of higher caste groups to be leaders of culture within the hierarchical social systems-but also of the 'gentlewomen' of Victorian England. Similar role prescriptions were made for upper class Muslim women.

Is warchandra Vidyasagar-neither a product of Western education nor inspired by the need to 'whitewash' Indian practices to earn the approval of the rulers-was pushed into his campaigns for widow remarriage, the education of women and against polygamy by his

mother's influence. His attitude to women was not instrumental (as with the 'modernists' or the 'revivalists'), but humane. Nor did he nurse any illusions about women's status having been high in ancient India as projected by revivalists, or nationalist historians later. On the other hand, he declared that Mother India had always been unkind to her daughters. He deliberately selected for his anthologies for school students extracts from classical Indian literature that brought out women's subordination sharply. An agnostic who rejected religious rituals, the caste system, and the monopoly of education by elites, he attached enormous importance to educating women and men equally through a system of mass education half a century before the introduction of compulsory elementary education in Great Britain and nearly a hundred years before some nationalists began to propagate mass education in India.

One generation later, Jyotiba Phule, from another corner of the sub-continent, and from a very different social background, pushed the analysis of the inter-relationship—between women's subordination and the maintenance of the caste hierarchy—far beyond the point that Vidyasagar—a doer rather than a theoretician—had managed to articulate. Phule identified women's sub-ordination as an *instrument* to perpetuate existing models of hierarchy. Phule's and his wife, Savitri Bai's efforts for women's emancipation acquired a far greater radical stance.

Pandita Ramabai, whose intellectual upbringing matched that of most nineteenth century reformers, remains distinct "in her status as a solitary woman leader of the women's cause, whose equal in stature is yet to emerge in Maharashtra". A high caste Hindu, steeped in both Sanskrit and Western learning, she challenged patriarchy, both through her personal life and the causes that she adopted for her struggles—self reliance for women, motivating women for self-improvement, and women's participation in public including political life. In all these respects, she was far ahead of the rest of the nineteenth century reformers. Her personal independence, her marriage of her own choice to a man of a different linguistic community and caste, and her religious conversion marked her out as a rebel and a feminist. Her analysis of a clear and close connection between the condition of women and the degradation of the nation reads very much like Mahatma Gandhi's statements made four decades later. She too advocated the critical necessity of educating women, but recommended the need for women teachers, inspectresses of schools and training women as doctors as essential to break through the prevailing oppression of "educated men of this country".

These contradictions within the reform movements were reflected, mirror-like, in the reformers' struggles to promote women's education. The new opportunities thrown up by the colonial administrative and legal systems (landed property, education-based jobs and professions—in law, medicine, clerical work, education, the press, publishing etc.) were utilized in the most part by members of the class to which the reformers belonged *i.e.* those sections of upper caste, upper class Indians who already possessed the requisite cultural skills and social roles enabling adaptation. The rise of such elites created disparities between men and women of this class, and these, in turn, were sought to be bridged by a specific type of education for women.

Muslim reformers arguing for women's education were not as successful as the Hindus nor could they transcend the imperatives of their traditions, but they did establish major centres of education for women in Aligarh and Lahore. Indigenous, vernacular centres of learning attracted Muslim youth including girls, in Bengal, United Provinces and Bihar. Unexpectedly, on the whole, *purdah* was not as regressive a factor as it might have been in the case of women's education.

Despite limitations on girl's access to equal education, education opened up and widened women's intellectual horizons, exposed them to new ideas and other processes of modernisation, altering their view of the world and themselves.

### **Conclusion :**

It was 1848 AD when India got its first women educator in the form of "Savitribai Phule". This year marks the rise of women's empowerment in India as Savitribai Phule busted the social norm that a woman can not be educated. The impact of this movement was so profound that 100 years later, India, as a nation accepted the Leadership of a Women Indira Gandhi so as Kalpana Chawla the first woman to travel in space. All these activities are the fruits of women's empowerment.

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