

Women's Empowerment in India: Progress, Challenges, and the Ongoing Journey

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ABSTRACT:

Women empowerment is a continuous process that involves addressing various aspects of gender equality and ensuring that women have equal opportunities and rights. In ancient India, women played multifaceted roles and held positions of respect in society, evident through historical texts and archaeological findings. However, the eventual erosion of these positions due to societal shifts. The people of the Indus Valley civilization worshiped female deities; they were especially worshipped "Ammatalli". The Rigveda provides glimpses into the roles and contributions of women during that era; women were actively involved in religious rituals and ceremonies. They played roles in performing sacrifices and were often praised for their dedication to these rituals. The kings and people of the Satavahanas dynasty used to put their mother's name before their name. For example, Gautamiputra Satakarni, Vasishtiputra Pulomavi. Over time, the position of women in Indian society has declined.

The present modern world the position of women is lower than that of men in many countries. India is taking many steps to empower women, but the results are meager. Women's empowerment in India has witnessed significant strides, accompanied by a host of persistent challenges. Advances in education, economic participation, and legal reforms have propelled women forward, but societal norms and deep-rooted biases continue to impede their full realization of empowerment. The struggle for gender equality gained momentum with social reform movements and legal advancements, leading to increased access to education and employment opportunities for women. Although Global Gender Gap Report 2023 India has 127th place out of 146 countries. Yet, persistent issues such as gender-based violence, unequal pay, and under representation in leadership positions underscore the incomplete journey towards empowerment. In the current circumstances there is a need to examine the measures taken by India for women empowerment.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Indus Valley civilization, Economic Participation, Global Gender Gap Report, Violence, Social Reform,

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To discuss the high position of women and gender equality in ancient Indian society.
2. To analyze the laws passed by the British rulers to improve the position of women which has degraded due to social evils over time?
3. To describe the contribution of Indian women social workers for the advancement of women under the British administration.
4. To explain the efforts made by the Government of India for the empowerment of women in various fields after independence

5. To explain the integral approaches of the policies and schemes adopted by the Narendra Modi government for women empowerment.

3. INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment refers to the process of enabling women to have equal opportunities, rights, and control over their lives and choices. It involves promoting their social, economic, and political participation, as well as ensuring their access to education, healthcare, and employment. The goal of women's empowerment is to challenge and change the social norms, structures, and practices that have historically disadvantaged women, allowing them to achieve their full potential and contribute to society on an equal footing with men.

4. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Some ancient civilizations, women held respected positions in society, such as priestesses, healers, and rulers. However, their rights were often limited compared to men. Examples include the ancient Egyptian queens like Hatshepsut and Cleopatra. The Indus Valley Civilization flourished in the Indian subcontinent from around 2500 BCE to 1000 BCE. In this ancient civilization, archaeological findings suggest that women in the Indus Valley Civilization were engaged in various economic activities, such as agriculture, trade, and craftsmanship. They were likely involved in pottery-making, weaving, and bead production. This indicates that women had active roles in contributing to the economic activities of their society. Later Indus Valley Civilization Indian women status was decreased.

5. BRITISH GOVERNMENT LAWS TO IMPROVE THE POSITION OF WOMEN

The British colonial government's actions in India were primarily driven by their colonial interests, and while some initiatives had unintended consequences that could be seen as contributing to certain aspects of women's empowerment, it's important to view these actions within the broader context of colonial rule. Here are some actions taken by the British government that had implications for Indian women.

Sati Regulation Act (1829): Also known as the Bengal Sati Regulation Act, this was one of the earliest British interventions in social practices. ^[1] It prohibited the practice of sati, in which widows were expected to self-immolate on their husband's funeral pyre. The act made the act of forcing or coercing a widow to commit sati a criminal offense. ^[1]

The Widow Remarriage Act (1856): The Widow Remarriage Act, also known as Act XV of 1856, was introduced in India during British colonial rule. It allowed Hindu widows to remarry, challenging the prevailing social norms that restricted widows from remarrying. The act aimed to improve the status of widowed women by giving them the opportunity to start a new life.

The Age of Consent Act (1891): This act rose the age at which girls could legally consent to marriage from 10 to 12 in British India. It was introduced to address child marriage and protect young girls from early marriages, which had adverse health and social consequences.

Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929): Also known as the Sarda Act, this legislation raised the minimum age for marriage to 14 for girls and 18 for boys. ^[12] It aimed to address the practice of child marriage, which had harmful effects on the health and well-being of young girls.

6. INDIAN WOMEN SOCIAL REFORMERS CONTRIBUTION

During the British colonial period in India, there was a significant movement for women's empowerment that emerged as part of the broader socio-political and cultural changes taking place in the country. This movement was characterized by efforts to improve the status and rights of women, promote education and awareness, and challenge traditional gender norms.

6.1. Pandita Ramabai: She authored several books and writings that highlighted the importance of education, gender equality, and social reform. "High-Caste Hindu Woman" this book is a critical examination of the treatment of women in Hindu society, particularly those of higher castes. ^[13] The book highlights the injustices faced by women and argues for the need to reform social and religious practices that oppress them. "The Devadasi System in Ancient India" this work delves into the Devadasi system, a practice where young girls were dedicated to temples as dancers and servants. Ramabai critiques the system and discusses its impact on women's lives, advocating for its abolition. She established the Arya Mahila Samaj in Pune, which focused on promoting education and vocational training for women.

6.2 Savitribai Phule: She was a prominent social reformer and educator who worked towards women's education and empowerment. ^[9] She and her husband Jyotirao Phule founded schools for girls and widows, aiming to combat illiteracy and discrimination against women. ^[9]

6.3 Durgabai Deshmukh: She worked extensively for women's rights and welfare. She contributed to the establishment of organizations like the National Council of Women in India.

6.4 Rukhmabai: She was a pioneering medical practitioner and a key figure in the fight against child marriage. Her legal case to nullify her marriage became a landmark event in discussions about women's rights and personal autonomy.

These leaders and many others contributed to the ongoing movement for women's empowerment during British colonial rule in India. Their efforts paved the way for changes in societal attitudes and norms, leading to greater recognition of women's rights, education, and participation in various fields.

7. AFTER INDEPENDENCE THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA MEASURES

Since India's independence in 1947, there have been significant efforts to promote women's social, economical, political empowerment. Here are some key developments and initiatives in this regard:

7.1 SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT

The Constitution of India guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender. Women's rights have been a major focus of social empowerment in India over the past 75 years. The country has made significant progress in promoting gender equality, with laws protecting women from domestic violence and sexual harassment. The government has also implemented various schemes to empower women socially.

7.1.1. Legal Reforms: The Indian Constitution guarantees gender equality and prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex. Article 15 of the Constitution prohibits discrimination against any citizen on grounds of sex. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the law for all citizens. Dowry Prohibition Act prohibits the giving or receiving of dowry, a practice that had often led to exploitation and harassment of women. The act aims to prevent the materialization of dowry demands and provides for penalties for those who violate the law. Maternity Benefits Act provides for maternity benefits like paid leave to women employees for a certain period before and after childbirth. It aims to

protect the health of both the mother and the child and promote the well-being of working women. Equal Remuneration Act, (1976) prohibits discrimination in remuneration on the basis of sex and ensures equal pay for equal work for both men and women. ^[10] Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act provides legal protection and remedies to women facing domestic violence, including physical, emotional, verbal, economic, and sexual abuse. It allows women to seek protection orders, monetary relief, and residence orders. Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act requires employers to establish mechanisms to prevent and address sexual harassment at the workplace. It defines sexual harassment comprehensively and lays down procedures for redressal. These legal reforms represent significant steps towards promoting women's independence, empowerment, and gender equality in India. However, it's important to note that while these laws exist, there may still be challenges in terms of implementation, awareness, and societal attitudes that need to be addressed for full realization of women's rights.

7.1.2. Education: The level of education achieved by women, including enrollment rates, literacy rates, and access to quality education. Education has been a major area of focus in India. The country has made significant progress in increasing literacy rates and improving access to education. Various policies and programs were launched to increase female enrollment in schools and colleges. The National Policy on Education (1968) and the second National Policy on Education (1986) aimed at increasing access to education, especially for girls from marginalized communities. Special programs targeting girls' education were introduced, such as the Mahila Samakhya Program (1989) which focused on empowering rural women through education. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2000) aimed to provide free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of 14, with a focus on marginalized groups and girls. Initiatives like Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (2004) aimed to establish residential schools for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds. The 86th Amendment Act reflects the Indian government's commitment to providing education to all children, ensuring that a significant section of the population receives access to basic education. ^[3] The Right to Education Act (2009) mandated free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14. ^[3] These above reforms Indian women literacy rate has improved significantly over the past 75 years, from 9% at the time of independence to over 77% today. ^[7]

7.1.3. Healthcare: India has been numerous health initiatives and programs aimed at improving the health and well-being of women in the country. These initiatives have sought to address various health challenges faced by women, including maternal and child health, reproductive health, nutrition, and gender-based violence. Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme, this program has played a significant role in improving maternal and child health. It provides supplementary nutrition, health check-ups, immunization, and preschool education to children Under 6 years of age and pregnant and lactating women. National Rural Health Mission aimed to provide accessible, affordable, and quality healthcare to rural populations, including women. It included components like Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY), which provided cash incentives to encourage institutional deliveries and reduce maternal mortality. Over the past 75 years, India has made significant progress in reducing maternal mortality rate has decreased from 2000 per 100,000 live births in 1947 to 103 per 100,000 live births in 2021. ^[2]

7.1.4. Social Awareness: Various NGOs and women's rights organizations have worked tirelessly to raise awareness about gender issues, advocate for women's rights, and provide support to women facing violence or discrimination, child marriage, and dowry, aiming to change societal attitudes.

7.2 ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Economic Empowerment includes women's access to and control over economic resources, income, employment opportunities, and entrepreneurship.

7.2.1. Employment opportunities: India has implemented reservations for women in various sectors, primarily in government jobs, public sector undertakings and government-owned corporations. Police and paramilitary forces, there are efforts to increase women's representation. Educational institutions and universities provide reservations for women in teaching and administrative positions to promote gender diversity among the faculty and staff.

7.2.2. Empowerment Schemes: The government introduced schemes like the Mahila Samridhi Yojana to promote women's economic empowerment through self-help groups and microfinance.

Sukanya Samridhi Yojana is a government-backed savings scheme in India aimed at promoting the financial security of the girl child. The scheme was launched by the Government of India under the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao campaign to encourage parents to save for the future education and marriage expenses of their daughters. ^[5] The Sukanya Samridhi Yojana is designed to promote long-term savings for the girl child and help secure her financial future. Women Self Help Groups SHGs are community-based organizations to collectively address their socio-economic needs, enhance their financial independence, and promote empowerment. These groups provide women with a platform to come together, pool their resources, and engage in various activities that contribute to their socio-economic development. SHGs are an integral part of India's efforts to empower women and promote inclusive growth at the grassroots level.

7.3 POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

7.3.1. Political Participation: The representation of women in political leadership roles, such as in government, parliament, and decision-making bodies. Women have held prominent positions in Indian politics, including being elected as the President and Prime Minister. The Women's Reservation Bill, which aims to reserve a third of all seats in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies for women, has been proposed but not yet enacted. But in the local level the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments were introduced to provide reservations for women in local governance bodies, which include Panchayats and Municipalities. The amendments were aimed at empowering women and increasing their participation in decision-making processes at the grassroots level. 73rd Amendment Act provided constitutional recognition to Panchayats and introduced reservations for women. It mandated that at least one-third of the seats in Panchayats at all levels (village, intermediate, and district) be reserved for women. ^[5] This reservation applies not only to seats but also to the positions of Chairpersons in these bodies. 74th Amendment Act extended similar provisions to Municipalities. It mandated the reservation of one-third of the seats for women in Municipalities, including Mayoral positions. These constitutional amendments were a landmark step towards gender equality and women's empowerment in India. They aimed to create a more inclusive and representative local governance system by ensuring that women have a voice in decision-making processes and development initiatives at the grassroots level. The reservations have resulted in a significant increase in women's participation in these local bodies and have had positive impacts on issues like health, education, sanitation, and overall community development. These amendments have been a model for increasing women's political participation and representation in many other countries as well. The Andhra Pradesh government has amended rules in the Panchayat Raj Act providing 50 per cent reservation for women in Panchayat Raj institutions. ^[5]

Despite these efforts, challenges remain, including gender-based violence, unequal access to resources, and deeply ingrained cultural norms. Progress has been made, but continued focus on education, economic empowerment, health, and legal reforms is essential for sustained women's empowerment in India.

7.3.2. NCW: The National Commission for Women is a statutory body in India that was established to safeguard and promote the rights and interests of women. [8] The primary objective of the NCW is to improve the status of women in Indian society and ensure their participation in all aspects of life on an equal basis with men. The commission plays a significant role in advocating for women's rights, addressing gender-based discrimination and violence, and ensuring that policies and laws are in place to protect and promote women's interests in India. [8]

8. AFTER 2014 MODI GOVERNMENT INTEGRAL APPROACHES FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

“Women empowerment is crucial to India's growth. Days of seeing women as home makers have gone we have to see women as nation builders” PM Modi had said. India has taken many steps to achieve women empowerment since independence. This action has improved India's position on Human Development Index (HDI) from 1990 and Gender Inequality Index (GII) from 2007. This growth has been faster since the formation of the Narendra Modi government in 2014. The reason for this is that government policies, laws and measures are integrated for women's development.

Some of the initiatives taken by the Narendra Modi government for women empowerment as follows:

8.1. Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY): As part of the economic empowerment of women, more than 70% of the houses constructed through the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana have been given ownership in women's names. Under the PMAY 1.72 cores houses owned by women since 2014.

8.2. Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana: The Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana scheme marked its 8th anniversary in 2023, Government of India statistics indicate that 69% of the 40 crore borrowers in the Mudra Yojana program are women entrepreneurs. A total of Rs 27 crore in Mudra loans has been distributed to female beneficiaries.

8.3. Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana: In the last 9 years, under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana scheme, 9.6 crore gas connections have been given free of cost to the poor women. Through this, women's health has been protected from severe respiratory diseases. And the Union Cabinet has recently given permission to give another 75 lakhs free gas connections in the next 3 years.

8.4. Menstrual Hygiene Scheme and the Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram: The government of India introduced the national guidelines on menstrual hygiene management in the year 2015. Menstrual Hygiene Scheme (2011) and the Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (in 2014), have been launched to promote menstrual hygiene among adolescent girls in the age group of 10 to 19. Under this scheme 27 crore sanitary pads are distributed in every year.

8.5. Swachh Bharat Mission: The construction of toilets under the Swachh Bharat Mission by the Government of India has significantly contributed to enhancing women's dignity in several ways.

8.5.1. Dignity and Respect: The availability of toilets ensures that women do not have to resort to open defecation, a practice that can be embarrassing and undignified. Access to toilets empowers women to maintain their dignity.

8.5.2. Safety and Privacy: Access to clean and safe toilets has reduced the vulnerability of women to sexual harassment and assault. It provides them a secure space to attend to their hygiene needs, especially during nighttime.

8.5.3. Education: Girls are more likely to attend school regularly when there are clean and safe toilets available. Improved school attendance contributes to their education and future prospects.

8.5.4. Workforce Participation: Access to toilets also plays a vital role in enabling women to participate in the workforce, as they can manage their sanitation needs efficiently. This, in turn, can lead to greater economic empowerment.

8.5.5. Social Empowerment: By addressing the sanitation needs of women, the Swachh Bharat Mission has contributed to their social empowerment. It signifies recognition of their rights and needs, promoting gender equality.

8.5.6. Health and Hygiene: Proper sanitation facilities help women maintain better personal hygiene. This, in turn, reduces the risk of urinary tract infections and other health issues, promoting their overall well-being.

8.5.7. Community Well-being: Improved sanitation has a positive impact on the overall health and well-being of communities. Reduced open defecation leads to cleaner environments, which benefits everyone, including women.

In summary, the construction of toilets under the Swachh Bharat Mission has had a profound impact on women's dignity by providing them with a safe, private, and hygienic space to attend to their sanitation needs. This initiative has not only improved the quality of life for women but also contributed to gender equality and community well-being.

8.6. Beti Bachao Beti Padhao: Launched in 2015, this campaign aims to address gender imbalances and promote the value of the girl child through awareness, education, and policy interventions. It indirectly impacts women's health by raising awareness about the importance of prenatal and postnatal care for girls. ^[4]

8.7. Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan (PMSMA): Launched in 2016, this program provides free antenatal care to pregnant women on the 9th of every month to ensure safe pregnancies and reduce maternal and infant mortality.

8.8. Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (2017): This program aims to provide financial assistance to pregnant and lactating mothers for their nutritional needs during the first six months of pregnancy. It helps in reducing maternal and child malnutrition. ^[6]

8.9. One Stop Centers (Sakhi Centres): These centers provide support and assistance to women who are survivors of gender-based violence. They offer medical, legal, psychological, and counseling services.

8.10. Skill Development: Programs like Skill India and the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (2015) focus on enhancing women's employability by providing training and skill development opportunities. ^[15]

8.11. Maternity leave policy: The Maternity Benefit Act was amended in August 2016 to extend the maternity leave duration from 12 weeks to 26 weeks. ^[11] This change reflects a positive step towards recognizing the importance of supporting pregnant women and new mothers in the workplace.

8.12. Triple Talaq: "Triple Talaq" refers to a practice that was prevalent in Muslim communities, where a husband could unilaterally divorce his wife by pronouncing the word "talaq" (divorce) three times in succession, either verbally, in writing, or even through electronic means like text messages or social

media. ^[14] This practice allowed husbands to instantly and irrevocably divorce their wives without any legal recourse or the need for court proceedings. In August 2017, the Supreme Court of India, in the case of Shayara Bano v. Union of India, declared the practice of Triple Talaq unconstitutional, stating that it was against the principles of gender justice and equality enshrined in the Indian Constitution. ^[14] The court held that the practice was arbitrary and could not be considered an essential religious practice protected under Article 25 of the Constitution. Following the Supreme Court's decision, the Indian government introduced the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019, which criminalized the practice of instant Triple Talaq. ^[14] According to the act, pronouncing Triple Talaq is a punishable offense with imprisonment. Prohibition of Triple Talaq is a step in the right direction for Muslim women's empowerment.

THE 128TH CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT BILL: Union Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal introduced the 33% Women Reservation Bill in Lok Sabha on 19-09-2023 in the name of “Nari Shakti Vandan Adhinium” to achieve political empowerment of women. 454 members of the Lok Sabha voted in favor of the bill and 2 members voted against it. ^[16] Later Rajya Sabha gave unanimous approval. The “Nari Shakti Vandan Adhinium” Bill became law after the assent of this bill by the President on 29-09-2023. With this, India has taken a step forward in achieving women's empowerment.

9. CONCLUSIONS

Indian Government and Numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society groups have worked tirelessly to address issues related to women's empowerment. Despite progress, women in India still face significant challenges such as gender-based violence, unequal access to resources, and limited participation in decision-making processes. Cultural norms, deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes, and economic disparities continue to be hurdles. The implementation of the Women's Reservation Act (Nari Shakti Vandan Adhinium) in India will help achieve women's political empowerment as well as women's empowerment.

10. METHODOLOGY

The present study makes use of only secondary data. Secondary data have been collected from the Government websites, journals, articles, news papers and so on. The present study is explorative in nature.

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