

Women from Ancient to Modern india: An Analysis

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Abstract

Marriam Webster Dictionary has named 'Feminism' the 'word of the year' in 2017, making it easy to comprehend the relevance and popularity of this word at the present time. Feminism does not merely represent an idea, but there is a huge social truth hidden behind it. Women have been deprived at every age despite their equal contribution to every sphere of life, the extent of this deprivation varies across countries. The question is, today the equal rights of men and women are talked about everywhere, but is it protected at all? The article mainly attempts to highlight the history of the evolution and deprivation of women's status from ancient to present in the context of India. An attempt has also been made to explain the position of women in mythology as well as in contemporary and modern literature. This article also narrates the account of intense protests and struggles of women who have been subjected to deprivation and oppression over the ages.

Keywords: *Feminism, Patriarchy, Vedas, Gender, Discrimination, Women, Class.*

Feminism is not merely a theory about the interests of women, it is a philosophy of life which is nowadays taking the world by storm. From a long period of time there have been references to many debates and discussions focused on women. The position of women, so intimately associated with the Indian society of that time, that the position of women changed with the transformation and social structured and society issues. The position of women in ancient society was very diverging from the position of women in contemporary society. This shift in the position of women must have been based on the evolving nature of society and set of circumstances. Therefore, the discussion of the place of women in Indian society certainly demands a special significance in the context of the explanation of feminism. The main purpose of this article is to determine the place of women from ancient society to modern society as well as to focus on several philosophical views on feminism.

In India the definition of an ideal woman is that who satisfies all the needs of her husband, gives birth to a son and does not argue with husband. That is what the Aitareya Brahmana of Rigveda says. From early ages to the present to society, the position of women have always been valuable. According to the Hindu scriptures from the ancient times, women have always been placed in same standard with Sudras and animals in the Indian socio-economic structure. In the vadic period, this has been no exception. Main Advocate of Smriti Shastra, Manu said the 'women are as dishonest as lies.' However the position of women in the vedic period was somewhat better. In vedic period women used to participate in all sacrifices performed with their husbands.

The depiction of that time found in the Rigveda elucidate that women were privileged at that time. Not only the right to sacrifice together with their husbands, some women enjoyed the sages/ saints honour, normally Vishwavara, Atrey, Apala, Sachi (also known as Indrani).

On the other hand we see instances where the image of female deprivation erupts. When Sage Yagyavalkya's inquisitive wife Gargi vacnaknavi asked him about the guru essence of the divine principle (guru tattva) he told her to shut up and also said women have no right to ask such questions. Not only that, he also angrily asserted that if she did not abstain from her question, she would be decapitated

In Vadic period it was a custom of giving cow (Dhenu) to brahmins as a remuneration of sacrifice. Beautiful young girls also donated to Brahmins as a remuneration. So it is quite evident that at that period Women were considered as commodities.

During the region of Emperor Vikramaditya, eminent polymath Barahamihira's daughter-in-law Khana (also known as Lilaboti) was an unprecedented scholar in astrology and mathematics. To show respect to her

discernment Vikhyamaditya invited Khana to join his divan and become the 10th jewel (Ratna). Envious Barahmihira chopped off Khana's tongue to obstruct her from joining there.

From the above example it is understood that with the brutality of slavery and in the west there was no difference in the position of women in the social system of ancient India. Not only that, in the context of religious discipline of that time social laws or practices were mainly applicable to the upper castes only. At that time all women regardless of caste and class were given equal status as Sudras. All the scriptures properly performed the duty of exploiting, oppressing and depriving all women of the society. Some of its examples are as follows.

(A) Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas were known as 'Dwija' after the initiation ceremony (Upanayan). But Sudras were unable to enjoy this right. Similarly, women had the right to be initiated in the early part of the Vedic period, but they were subsequently deprived of it.

(B) In ancient India, education meant the lesson of veda. According to the Manu's provision, reciting veda and even listening to it was forbidden to the Shudras. Regarding women, Manu also uttered that women have no right to read holy scriptures (vedas). Thus it is clear that forbidding both the Shudras and women from the recitation of vedas, their social status and dignity were diminished.

(C) Due to the prohibition of the recitation of Vedas, all religious activities based on sacrifices are still reserved for men especially for Brahmins, in which women have no rights. Some lower levels of pujas and 'bratas' are specific for women, most of which involve fasting.

(D) The most important way to keep Sudras and women in enslavement was to keep them poor and illiterate.

In ancient India the Shudras were clarified as slaves as servants. The condition of women was also the same. The women were subordinate to their husbands just as any property rights. From that perspective both women and shudras were poor class. Even though women's property rights have improved greatly, there is no denying that wives still live as maids. The wife still has no right in her husband's property while he is alive. The lives of ordinary women are tied up in marriage, nurturing children and serving husband and his family. Women of the lower castes were more miserable. They were tortured both at home and outside. Although the situation has changed a bit but the trend remains some today.

The position of all women irrespective of race, religion, caste is still at the bottom of the socio-economic structure. Like shudras and ordinary women are still backward in social status, education and economic status. According to the recommendation of the Mandal Commission only socially, economically, educationally underdeveloped groups are designed as 'backward classes'. From this point onward women are still in the backward classes, because they are still lacking in socio-economic status and education. In every governmental and non-governmental document women are given same status and Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other backward classes. So it means that women are comparable to backward classes.

While women of all classes are socially vulnerable, although lower class women had a relative uniqueness compared with upper class women. The upper class women did not have any financial profession of their own but extreme poverty drage the women of lower class into different financial professions. These women, neglected in social status and lacking in education, occupied an important place in the country's productive system. Even today their contribution to social production is crucial. Despite having such a predominant role in social production, they never got proper appreciation.

If we discuss the social context of the Ramayana-Mahabharata era, we can see that the condition of women was not so easeful there. During the period of Mahabharata, India was divided into several small and large states. Those states were different as Aryans and Non- Aryans. In those days, polygamy was prevalent in the society. King Dasaratha had multiple marriages. There was also the custom of having multiple husbands of one wife. For example Pancha Pandav married Draupadi. In the Non-Aryan society or Demon (Rakshasas) society, polygamy was also practiced. In fact, women were more independent in Demon society. It is understood from the incident where Surpanakha proposed to marry Rama and Lakshmana simultaneously.

However, during the period of Ramayana, women had the freedom to go out of their gynaeceum. When Rama went into exile in the forest, his wife Sita also accompanied him. But it is not possible to say with certainty that the honour of women was intact in the society of that time. Women were used as commodities back then, even they were donated to Sages and Kings as a gesture of goodwill. Sita's repeated ordeal proves that there was no empathy for women in the society of Vedic Age. Significantly, Sita was a royal woman, yet she had to suffer. It is easily conceivable from the fact that ordinary women had to endure a great deal of hardship.

Not only did the women of that age follow their husbands blindly, but in many cases they criticized their husbands as well. Here are some instances to discuss. Mandodari praised Ravana's appearance, qualities, virtue, valor and character, but she also condemned her husband for his cupidity for Sita. In another instance we see when a virtuous man like Rama doubted Sita, she protested strongly. Even a wise man like Rama did not dare to go against the prevailing social norms to protect his wife. Rama sent his five months old pregnant wife, Sita, into exile in the jungle and did not seek his children for once in twelve years. But sadly we recognize Rama as an ideal man.

Lakshmana's wife Urmila, is a deprived woman who has always been hidden from sight. When Lakshmana went into exile in jungle with elder brother Rama for fourteen years without thinking of his wife, Urmila spent those fourteen years alone in extreme grief. She did not get proper appraisal for her sacrifice. Although deprived of her husband, she lived her life without protesting.

Although there was no feminist movement in India in ancient times, women personally raised their voice against patriarchy. In the Mahabharata, it is mentioned that when Bhishma abducted the three daughters of Kashiraja, Amba, Ambika and Ambalika from the Swayamvara (the ceremony where the girl chooses her own husband), Amba stated Bhishma about her desire to marry king Salva. Bhishma sent Amba to king Salva to fulfill her wish. But Salva abandoned her, as other people had accepted Amba for marriage in accordance with the customs of that time. Amba spoke out against this injustice and strongly opposed the marriage tradition and customs of that time. She resolved to avenge this injustice at any cost. She wished to be a man to take revenge on Bhishma. The way she protested against conventional patriarchy is quite admirable. We can proudly say, Amba, is the first Indian woman to disapprove patriarchy and challenge it.

Women have been oppressed in India since time immemorial, but they have never been able to revolt to end it. If freedom from suffering, the pursuit of happiness and self development as per desire are called human rights then it can be said that women in India are severely deprived of this right. The women of India are actually the maids of the family. Space of their work is very narrow, from kitchen to lying-in room, from lying-in room to kitchen.

From a practical point of view, discrimination between women and men has been sustained deliberately in most areas of society. Whether it is a discussion table or a meeting, men are given for more superiority than women. In society the image of men is mighty and valiant and women are depicted as feeble and timid. Supposedly, men's work is primarily about making money and women's work is child care and housekeeping. It is also believed that getting established in life is more desirable for men than family care, on the other hand, family care is more desirable for women than getting established in life. A girl's dream of getting established or pursuing a desired career in life is not widely accepted in society. Even with the use of common language in society, women are disgraced and disregarded.

In the context of gender discrimination, the attitude of Indians is very conservative, there is no space for new thinking, no initiative for reform. In the language of book, women are characterized as 'the better half of men', even though "Yad edat hridayam tava, tad astu hridayam mama / Yad edam hridayam tava, tadastu hridayam tava" (this heart of yours, may it be mine. This heart of mine, may it yours) is pronounced in the mantra of marriage, in reality, men treat women as maids or as commodities. Although the image of western society is more or less the same. Before and after the French Revolution, the elite men in France used women as adulterers in the guise of marital relations. Before the establishment of Marxism, Russian Women were used as expensive commodities during the rule of Tsar. In the male dominated society of England and USA the distinct value of Women's lives was not established before the Industrial Revolution. Even today many influential persons get rid of the charges of humiliation of women by using their power and wealth. That's why feminist movements like 'Me too' are spreading like prairie fire.

Seeds of gender discrimination are sown from a very tender age, in the families below the poverty line in India. Indeed, the lives of illiterate unmarried daughters of poor families are cursed. On the one hand, they can not be self-sufficient due to lack of education and on the other hand, they do not find appropriate grooms. Although her family finds a worthy groom, they cannot provide dowry according to the demands of the groom. As a result the nubile girl remains unmarried. The rest of the life the girl has to spend in extreme misery. And the plight of the widows of the poor family is unimaginable. Vidhyasagar initiated the widow's marriage in 1856, but the system is still not appreciated in Indian society. Child widows have to live with burdens in their fathers' home or in-laws. They sometimes have to satisfy the physical craving of people in and outside the family. It is no harm to the sinful man if the act of unchastity is reported, but the widow is persecuted and kicked out of the house.

Reviewing the history of South Asia, it can be seen that the discussion about the lower classes has always been neglected here. Incidentally, women have been included in the lower class. Excluding the time of the Rigveda in the twelfth century B.C, the same image of women is often seen. The Rigveda mentioned that women wrote poetry, participated with men in intellectual debates, fought enemies with valor. At that time criteria for the section of the bride was her sharpness of intelligence, depth of knowledge, not physical beauty, wealth or ancestry. But soon the condition of women deteriorated. After the tenth century B.C (particularly during the composition of Atharvaveda), the autonomy and independence of women was completely eroded. In Atharvaveda women are regarded as the equivalent of Shudras and it is indicated that serving the husband is their sole duty. Sage Vatsayana identifies girls as commodities and compared them to prostitutes. In various places of Vedas, women are sometimes compared to things like 'filth', sometimes 'intoxicants' and sometimes to the 'gates of hell'.

A woman's attire, hairstyle, posture, behaviour, everything is determined by society and all the masters of this society are men. So it can be said that all areas of women's lives are virtually dominated by men, if a woman refuses to adhere to these norms set by patriarchal society, they have to suffer punishment and alienation. In India, if a girl is raped, her dress is blamed for the rape but not the rapist.

The main cause of gender discrimination is not determined by birth but the society. This discrimination is not spontaneous, it is entirely manufactured by society. Torture of women has become a casual phenomena in India. It is often seen that sons are given priority over daughters. In poorer families daughters are fed less food than sons. Education is provided for sons, but not for daughters. According to a study conducted by Amartya Sen, if there is no good school for boys in India, intense dissatisfaction is seen among the people of that region and they also protest. But they are not so serious about girls' education. Even today there are many villages in India where there is no school for girls at all. Most of the families in the village are very keen to maintain social conservatism in educating girls.

India's identity in the eyes of the outside world is very pale, especially for its racism and women oppression. The words 'Feminism', 'Gender Equality', 'Women's Empowerment', 'Women Rights' in large numbers of people outside some wealthy and aristocratic families are meaningless. India's billions of women blame their own destiny for being a woman. Indian women have been lamenting in grief for ages.

The first issue of women's suffrage in India was raised in 1917. A group of 14, led by Sarojini Naidu, raised this demand in the British Parliament. In 1921, women were granted limited voting rights based on education and the amount of their husbands property. The voting rights of women in India were first granted in 1929. These were three conditions to this franchise- (i) The woman must be married, (ii) She must be the owner of the property, (iii) She has to be educated. It is important to note that those who took major roles in the education of women in India are Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jotiba Phule, Dayanand Saraswati. It is known from the 'Report of the Committee on the Status of Women' (December 1974)- "Only a few girls, mostly belong to urban upper and middle class families, entered the formal system of education between 1850 and 1870."

The kind of deprivation that Mary Wollstonecraft mentioned in the late 17th century is equally applicable to the women of contemporary India. In India, women also faced various complications due to colonialism. Indian women had to submit their demands to the British. In spite of the fact that the British Government did various welfare work to sustain their commandment in this country, but they were not concerned at all about the adversity of the women of this country.

When the women's liberation movement was spreading organically in the western countries, no organized form of women's movement was seen in India. However, In India, various individuals and organisations tried to make women more capable through personal initiatives. But their seemingly noble undertaking was not fully free from narrowness. The purpose of their initiative was to make women fit in the lifestyle of British era.

At one time both men and women fought together against British rule. The names of Rani Lakshmi Bai, Matangini Hazra, Kalpana Dutta, Pritilata Waddedar, Lakshmi Sehgal are proudly remembered in this regard. Their aim was to liberate the country from the shackles of subjugation. The cuff of women was somewhat relaxed in this regard. But there was no independent movement for women to solve their own problem. The periodic waves of feminism, that was following across the globe, could not be effective in India. As the Anti-British movement intensified, India's economy and social status began to change. As a side-effect of this change, women also began to have some opportunities. But these opportunities were not enough to relieve their distress. At that time women in India had to fight against two types of stress simultaneously. One is the pressure of

gender discrimination and the other is the pressure of colonialism. The second issue was given more importance at that time when it comes to women's movement, It was believed that gender discrimination would no longer exist after being liberated from colonialism.

From our childhood, the seeds of gender discrimination have been sown in our minds. As a child, we have learned from textual topics that men and women have to play different roles in society. It is believed that men will perform all kinds of salient responsibilities, while women will perform insignificant and less important responsibilities. Here are some instances. This discrimination is visible in two lines of 'Sahaj Path' - "ডাক পাড়ে ও ঞ্চ/ ভাত আনো বড় বৌ" ('O' and 'Ou' are shouting/ Bring rice elder daughter in law). Here it means that house hold works like cooking, serving or feeding are completely women's responsibility, men have nothing to do with it. The short story 'শাস্তি' (Punishment) by Rabindranath Tagore, shows how husbands exercise rights over their wives in society. In one part of this story, one of the main protagonist, Chhidam, threatens his wife Chandora that if she goes to pond alone, he will break her bones. Soon after Chandora ignoring Chhidam's threat, he immediately pulled Chandora's hair and dragged her into the room and forcefully locked the door. Chiddam's behaviour towards Chandora shows how much women were tortured in their marital life at that time. It is also understood that they did not have the right to step outside the house with the permission of their husband. In the latter part of the story, when Chiddam's elder brother Dukhiram wants rice to his wife, she is unable to serve it because there was nothing to serve in the house. Then the hungry and furious Dukhiram assault his wife with a cutlass. At that time it was a casual occurrence in poor families.

Tagore, however clearly favors Chandora in concluding this story. In each part of the story, the helplessness of the women is revealed. As long as they play the traditional role of wife, mother and daughter from confined within the four walls of the house, their vulnerability will not be erased. As long as the equality of the men and women is established in society, the helplessness will not be eliminated. That is why women need to be economically self-sufficient immediately. When an economically self-sufficient woman is able to participate in the social decision making process, she will be able to attain appropriate social status.

In accordance with the prevailing notion, it is believed that women are generally oppressed by men. But it is often seen in society that women are being persecuted by women. Especially in rural areas of India, housewives are often abused by their mother-in-laws. Daily newspapers often report the active role of mother-in-laws in domestic abuse and murder of housewives. The root cause of hatred of one woman over another lies within the economic structure of society.

In many instances, this disproportionate division of men and women have been acknowledged by eminent and celebrated women of society. As Jyotirmoyee Devi writes, women are divided into two classes. The women of a class are the housewives of the family of her husband and the mother of children, they are 'Sati's or virtuous women. Women of the other class are playmates of many men, impious, debauchee and lonely, they are called 'Asati' or unchaste women. If an elite woman like Jyotirmoyee Devi has this attitude when it comes to defining women, then the attitude of ordinary women is easily conceivable. Here one thing is clear that in this patriarchal society women have never been able to respect themselves.

Of course, biological differences exist between men and women, but society creates the principal difference. Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement in the regard is remarkable "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (The Second Sex). Hence womanhood is something that is attained by a woman rather than something that innate. Psychological conditioning starts from a very early age right from the gifts including skirts that hinder free movement and her ability to climb trees, enjoy play. It is at this point, a girl becomes aware of the difference between herself and boys.

One famous psychological observation can be maintained here in the context of the social construction of gender. When a baby is born, and if he is dressed in male clothes, relatives who come to see the baby refer to his behaviour as masculine. If the same child is kept dressed in women's clothes, then the child seems to be feminine to his relatives. From this observation, scientists have concluded that children did not behave differently according to gender, but the society divides them into men and women and treats them differently. Female children are given dolls and male children are given balls and guns. In this way, the stereotypical idea of gender formation has become entranced in every aspect of patriarchal society and has engulfed the subconscious minds of people.

One of the ways to eliminate discrimination against women is to raise awareness. And it has to do with people from all walks of life. We need to break away from our old ways of thinking about women and bring new ideas. As the education and consciousness of the society increases the situation will improve. It is true that

a boy who has watched his mother work outside as a child will be able to easily understand the difficulties of working outside of his wife later in life. In our generation we still do not realise it. Our own life experience will make us much stronger.

According to the Indian Penal Code, the laws regarding torture of women are quite strict. But unfortunately for the most of the cases, reports of torture against women do not even reach the police station. Prejudice, fear of reproach, lack of social security, illiteracy, lack of awareness prevent women from reporting. Even in rural areas, it is believed that beating his wife is the legitimate right of a husband. Law alone can not solve this matter, for the sake of women's liberation, people of the other sex need to respect women first. "Where the women are respected there Gods reside" - Mahatma Gandhi's statement supports this view.

By climbing the ladder of improvement we are rising very fast today in the twenty-first century. But the progress that deprives the half of society, can it really be called 'progress'? It may be time to remember Swami Vivekananda's statement today, "That country and the nation that does not respect women have never become great, nor even be in future." Without the establishment of equality, the actual progress of society may be unattainable. It is undeniable that the position of women is better in today's society than even before. At the same time it has to be acknowledged that women have not yet become completely free from male influence. Today women want to establish their own voice, not to get lost in the voice of men.

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