

WOMEN EMANCIPATION DURING INDIAN RENAISSANCE: A QUEST

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ABSTRACT

Though the term 'Emancipation' is concerned with freedom, it actually connotes the freedom from the restrictions and limitations imposed by male dominated society. Thus, women emancipation refers to freedom from all types of social, political, legal, economical and others restrictions imposed on them by the male dominated society that make their position inferior in the society as well as in the family and consequently brings sufferings and exploitation for them. In fact, women emancipation aims at freedom from all these unjustified restrictions and thereby equality with the males in the society.

The aim of this article is to explore how Indian Renaissance during 19th century brings women emancipation in India.

Keywords: women, Emancipation, domination, Renaissance, equality

Introduction:

First of all, we should know what 'Emancipation' is. The word 'Emancipation' generally denotes to freedom. It is freedom from the restrictions, limitations imposed by the society. Thus, women emancipation refers to freedom from all types of social, political, legal, economical and others restrictions imposed on them by the male dominated society that make their position inferior in the society as well as in the family and consequently brings sufferings and exploitation for them. Thus, women emancipation aims at freedom from all these unjustified restrictions and thereby equality with the males in the society.

The main goal of this article is to explore how Indian Renaissance during 19th century brings women emancipation in India.

Status of Women in the Early Vedic Era:

If we go through the history, we find in India, the status of women in the society as well as in the family was praiseworthy and respectful during early Vedic period, (1500 BC to 1000 BC). Like men, they too enjoyed respect, equality and freedom in many cases and could take part in education, politics, leadership, philosophical debates and even in warⁱ. There is no concept of dowry, child marriage and sati in the Vedas. The Vedas stresses that intellectuality and power of knowledge are two gifts that parents should give their daughter before their marriage. Generally girls were married off after attaining maturity of age. So, there is no concept of child marriage. Widows were allowed to remarry. In the Rig Veda, we find prayer was offered to a widow for leading a prosperous lifeⁱⁱ which indicates that there is no system of sati. Women have right to study Vedas and who are highly intellectual and learned and who chose the way of Vedic study are known as 'Brahmavadini'. We find Rig Veda contains about 1028 hymns and some hymns were written by 27 women known as Brahmavadinis. Not only education, women enjoyed right to property also which we find in the Rig Veda that advocates that wife has the equal right to her husband's propertyⁱⁱⁱ and women also had the right to wear sacred thread also. The Vedas empowered women with leadership in family as well as government organization^{iv}. They enjoyed equality with men in getting appointed as a ruler^v. Women could take part in religious matter also.

Gradual Degradation of Women's Status in India:

But, though in the Early Vedic era, women's position was laudable as they enjoyed more rights at that time, in the later Vedic Era we notice rigidity escalated into Hindu Society and the Society started to project itself as patriarchal and women were viewed as subordinate, subjugated and inferior

to males in the society as well as in the family. They were deprived of property right and many social atrocities like custom of sati, child marriage, dowry, polygamy and purdah system etc came into practice that were not only horrible but made women status in the society deplorable also. Women hardly had any right at that time. They were treated like animals in the society.

However, in the 6th century B.C., at the time of Lord Buddha, women again were treated equally as men because Buddha treated everyone irrespective of their caste, gender, education etc. as alike. At this time, women folk started to lead a better life. Although at the post Vedic period, women again were considered as second-class citizen and their movement were confined to the four walls of their homes. They were deprived of education, religious activities such as reading Veda and chanting mantras etc. Gradually, various social evils emerge in the society. Child marriage, female infanticide, custom of sati, Seclusion of women, polygamy, dowry, custom of Devadasis etc. that made women subjugated to male came into existence. If we go through the various dynasties in ancient India like the Maurya, the Palas, the Sens, the Cholas etc. and medieval India we find women status was very low with few exceptions. In a word it may be said that women were denied their social position. Here we can mention some of the social evils that were prevalent and made women life miserable before 19th century India are as follows:

Female infanticide: Female infanticide was an inhuman and barbaric custom which allow killing a girl at her birth. We see at the later Vedic period, when the society became patriarchal, status of women not only deteriorated, they were unwanted in the family mainly due to economical reason as at that time dowry system was prevalent. Parents had to spend large amount of money for the marriage of their daughter.

Child marriage: Girls who escaped of the horrible custom of infanticide were married off before attaining the age of puberty because it was believed that it would be a sin to marry after puberty. This practice brings various hardships and oppressions for them. Chopra et al writes,

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“Motherhood at the tender age, with numerous sickly children around her, made the Indian woman the epitome of misery and distress.....there was no concept of a proper match as is understood in modern times. The difference of age between the bride and the groom was of no account”^{vi} We find in most cases of child marriages, it was the girl who was the child and this marriage was not only responsible for increasing young mothers’ mortality rate, but due to huge age difference between a wife and her husband, left huge numbers of widows who had to follow forced celibacy rest of her life because at that time widow’s re-marriage was prohibited.

Custom of Sati: The most horrible and cruel act is the custom of sati in which a widow had to sacrifice her life in the funeral pyre of her husband in the hope to attain heaven though the main intention of such inhumane custom was to deprive a widow from her husband’s wealth.

Polygamy and purdah system: Polygamy allows a husband having more than one wife at a time and purdah system keeps women behind the veil to restrict their movements in the society and thereby keep them confined in their house.

Debdasi system: In this system, women were kept at temple prostitution in the name of God or religion and this system was a disgrace and insult to all women.

All these repressive social systems in India have lowered the status of women and made them subservient to the males and they hardly had any freedom of expression and action.

Women Status during Indian Renaissance:

Under such pathetic circumstances, in the 19th century, some reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Henry Vivian Derozio, Debendranath Tagore, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Akshay Kumar Dutta, Radhakanta Deb, Keshab Chandra Sen, Mahadev Govind Ranade, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Annie Besant, Rao Bahadur Kandukuri Veeresalingam Pantulu, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, Jyotiba’

Govindrao Phule, Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy and many more started to reform the society including women's deplorable condition.

We know that the pioneer of Indian Renaissance, 'Father of Bengal Renaissance', Father of Modern India and the greatest feminist of India was Raja Ram Mohan Roy. (1772 –1833), who was born at Radhanagar, a village of West Bengal in India. He was deeply moved by the pitiable condition of Hindu women in India and revolted against the ill-treatment towards them. At his time, widows specially, from upper caste, had to live as slaves whose main duty was to serve others in the family or they had to lead an immoral life for their maintenance or they had to sacrifice their lives on the pyre of their husbands which was considered as pious act that can bring respect to their families. Roy rebelled against the murderous practice of sati in spite of being threatened from various corners of the Hindu society. But ignoring all such threatens he was able with the help of William Bentinck to abolish this gruesome custom of sati lawfully in 1829 A.D. He also agitated against the inferior status of women in family as well as in the society, evils like polygamy and the deplorable condition of the widows on the one hand and demanded the right to education and inheritance of property for women, widow re-marriage, inter-caste marriage, abolition of polygamy and child marriage that are needed for both the uplift of their status as well as the progress of the whole society. In the book 'Narider Prachin Adhikar Bartaman Sankochoner Upor Sankhipta Mantabya', Raja Ram Mohan Roy mainly focused on women education and their equal rights like their counterparts. In the book 'Ancient Right' he shows that how Hindu women enjoyed right to property like men. He quoted the Yajnavalkya Smriti, a Hindu sacred text, in order to establish that women had right to their paternal property. The Brahmo Sabha which was later known as Brahmo Samaj and whose members were famous personalities like Debendranath Tagore, Keshab Chandra Sen, Pt. Sivnath Shastri, and Rabindranath Tagore, fought against various social evils like sati, polygamy, the purdah system, child marriage etc on the one hand, and on the

other, it also worked for women's rights, such as widow remarriage and female education and much credit should be given to Raja Ram Mohan for this who established Brahma Samaj in 1828.

Another jewel and intellectual of the nineteenth century Bengal was Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) who was a Bengali Sanskrit Pandit and social reformer. He was a true humanist and the reform work started by Raja Rammohan Roy was carried by him. In order to reform Hindu orthodox religion and society he like Rammohan, was dead against of child marriage and polygamy. His main concern was to uplift the status of women in India. For this purpose, he introduced the practice of widow remarriage and female education. He himself opened few schools in Bengal for girls' education. In 1856 the widow re-marriage Act was passed.

Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883) who founded Arya Samaj in Bombay in 1875 was against the rigidity of Hindu Society that allowed child marriage, purdah system, polygamy, denial of widow remarriage, women education, right to property and many rights enjoyed by males only. Dayanand protested against all these ills in order to free women from all of these ills and thereby uplift their status in the society. Realizing the importance of women education, he wanted provisions for them in DAV (Dayanand Anglo Vedic) schools and colleges, founded on the principles of Swami Dayananda Saraswati. He wanted a legislation to stop child marriage. His reform was a moral boost to the women that helped to uplift their position in the society.

Another social reformer and great thinker during 19th century India was Jyotirao 'Jyotiba' Govindrao Phule (1827- 1890) who was born in Maharashtra. He too played a pioneering role in promoting women's education in India throughout his life and established many schools for girls during that time when women's education was considered as sin. He was moved by the sad condition of Indian widows and wanted widow's remarriage. Their deplorable condition led him to establish an orphanage that provided them shelter.

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Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886), one more prominent reformer, a great saint and humanist of Bengal of the nineteenth century tried to harmonize the different conflicting Hindu sects who preached “Jato mat, Tato Path”. (All religion are different pathas to the same God) and “Service to man means service to God”. He believes that there is innate divine strength in all women and saw the Goddess Kàli in them and elevated Sarada Devi to the plinth of divinity that indicates his care and respect for women.

Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884), a key figure of Brahma Samaj, was against child marriage that is responsible for high rate of infant girls' mortality and widows also, introduced that before marriage, the consent of both bridegroom and bride must be secured and thereby ceased marriage as a contract between both families. In this way it was Kesab Chandra Sen who played vital role in bringing the recognition of women's individuality. Brahma Act 1872 that made bigamy, polygamy and infant marriages impossible allowed marriageable age for girls was 14 years and for boys 18 years. The child marriage restraint act, 1929 approved these marriageable ages, however, the child marriage restraint (amendment) act, 1978, raised these ages from 14 to 18 for girls and from 18 to 21 for boys.

Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842-1901) who was born in Maharashtra and who was the early member of the Prarthana Samaj whose main goal was to modify and reform conservative Hindu society, wanted to “Humanize and Equalize” the Indian society and realized very clearly that in order to do that the status of women must be improved. To materialize his dream, he revolted against various social injustices against women like purdah system, child marriage, tonsure of widows on the one hand, and on the other he campaigned for widow remarriage, female education. In 1885, Ranade along with Vaman Abaji Modak and historian Dr. R. G. Bhandarkar founded the Huzurpaga, the oldest girls' high school in Maharashtra, India^{vii}.

Rao Bahadur Kandukuri Veeresalingam Pantulu (1848 –1919) who was born in Rajahmundry, Madras presidency in British India, considered as Raja Ram Mohan Roy of Andhra as he was a key

figure of renaissance movement in Telugu. He was encouraged by the movement of Brahma Samaj and established Brahma Mandir in Rajahmundry in 1887. Like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, he too wanted to promote women's education, widow's remarriage. He even established 'Remarriage Association' in order to find out willing men for widow's remarriage and in December 1881, he was able to arrange first widow remarriage. He also revolted against dowry system, where the family of a bride had to pay huge amount along with other things to the family of her husband, prevalent at that time. This dowry system sometimes led to dowry death if the father of the bride failed to pay that amount demanded by the family of groom. Kandukuri was conferred by the government the title 'Rao Bahadur' in 1893 in appreciation of his reformatory work.

Rama Dongre (1858-1922), who was known as Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, born in the Gungamal forests, Maharashtra. In 1878, University of Calcutta conferred on her the title of 'Pandita' and 'Saraswati' in recognition of her interpretation of many Sanskrit books. Her main goal was to uplift the status of Indian women who were facing oppression in the society due to rigid Hindu traditions. In her famous book 'The High-Caste Hindu Woman', she described the miserable condition of Indian women, child brides and child widows. Like other social reformer, she was against child marriage and wanted to encourage women's education to stop child marriage and established Arya Mahila Samaj, the first feminist organisation in India in 1881 for promoting women's education. It was Ramabai who even wanted to see women in the medical college where only men could take admission at her time, and her vision and mission inspired Lady Dufferin who started Women's Medical Movement in London as well as made Anandibai Joshi as the first female Indian doctor. She established 'Sharada Sadan' Krupa Sadan, Mukti Mission in India that provides shelter, education, medical help to the widows and other destitute women.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was not only a great poet, philosopher and artist, but a great reformer also. In his many writings we notice he talked about women sufferings in the society and

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wanted their emancipation from the then repressive evils and patriarchal norms that denied the basic human rights of a woman. For example, “Aparichita or Woman Unknown” (1916), is a famous short story of Tagore that shows women’s emancipation from the dowry menace existing in the society. He started co-education system at Visva-Bharati, Shantiketan in West Bengal in order to emphasize women education. Rabindranath depicted Giribala as the first emancipated women in his writing who taken theatrical profession which was not considered as commendable for a married woman at that time. Through the character of Giribala, Tagore wanted to change the mindset of a wife of obliging her husband’s male repressive psyche and at the same to stimulate the awakening of womanpower in the minds of women. Again, in the short story “The Laboratory” (1940), Rabindranath showed a unconventional marriage between Nandakishore and Sohini where the groom spent money to marry his bride Sohini, who believed woman empowerment, breaking the traditional norms of dowry menace prevalent in the society at that time.

We see Ramakrishna’s message towards mankind was carried forwarded by his beloved disciple Narendranath Dutta (1863 – 1902) who later became Swami Vivekananda. He was not only a great Indian philosopher, but also a true reformer of humanity. The main concern of his philosophy and thoughts was to uplift the whole mankind including the status of Indian women and free them from all sorts of sufferings. He was aware of the socio-economic conditions of the Indian people, their poverty, caste rigidity, untouchability, shocking condition of women in the society and illiteracy that stand as impediments in the way of development and realized that without the uplift of the toiling masses of India our country cannot be flourished properly.

Swamiji said, ‘Liberty is the first condition of growth’^{viii} and is attainable by education only. He was deeply concerned with the plight of the Indian women and realized correctly that for the development and welfare of the humanity as a whole, the conditions of both men and women should be improved. He considered men and women as the two wings of a bird and it is not possible for a bird

to fly on only one wing. In his views “That best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women.”⁹. So, to get back India’s lost pride and honour, the status of women should be improved. According to him, for the betterment of women as well as India the only tool is to educate women.

He envisioned rightly that without love and respect towards women, no nation can progress and one of the main causes of the India’s decline is the repressive attitude of the patriarchal society towards its women.

He said though some sacred texts of Hinduism portray women as inferior to men but some glorify their status also. In his own words,

I admit that in our sacred books there are many passages which condemn women as offering temptation; you can see that for yourselves. But there are other passages that glorify women as the power of God. And there are other passages which state that in that house where one drop of a woman’s tear falls, the gods are never pleased and the house goes to ruin^{ix}.

Like other great men he also believes that only education can improve the status of women and hence suggests that type of education for them that can build their character as well as that can help them to stand on their own feet.

He believes in equality between men and women which we see when he says that:

. . . though outwardly there may be difference between men and women, in their real nature there is none. Hence, if a man can be a knower of Brahman, why cannot a woman attain to the same knowledge?^x.

Again, to indicate the equality and the oppressive mentality of the patriarchal society like India he observes:

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No man shall dictate to a woman; nor a woman to a man. Each one is independent. What bondage there may be is only that of love. Women will work out their own destinies—much better, too, than men can ever do for them. All the mischief to women has come because men undertook to shape the destiny of women^{xi}.

We all know that it was Swami Vivekananda whose inspiration for uplifting Indian women's status enabled Margaret Elizabeth noble and Irish lady (1867-1911) who was known as Sister Nivedita to play major role in promoting the rights of women in rural India. She even started a girls' school for giving them basic education which is known today as "Ramakrishna Sarada Mission Sister Nivedita girls' school", situated in North Kolkata", West Bengal.

Another stalwart and ardent social reformer in the field of women's status upliftment during 19th century who fought for the women's right to education as well as right to property was Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy (1879- 1973) who is known as Periyar(The title 'Periyar', conferred on him, means 'respected one' or 'elder' in Tamil) and also the Father of modern Tamilnadu'. He also revolted against child marriage, the dowry system and Debdasi system and advocated separation and divorce from husbands under justified ground and birth control not only for the health of women and population control, but for the liberation of women also which was opposed by many at that time. He also suggested separated, divorced women should have right to claim maintenance allowance from their husband as well as widows who get remarried should be entitled to have rights to their first husband's property^{xii}. He advocated women should have right to join both armed services and police force which was enjoyed by the male only at his time. His rigorous movement uplifted women status in especially Tamil Society when we see that women joined to both army and police departments. He believed that it is in the mind of patriarchal society to see women as slaves and subservient to men and freedom of women and equality will register growth once such tendency is abolished.^{xiii} Periyar said:

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"There should be a drastic revolution in the desires and ideals of Indian women. They should equip themselves to do all types of work that men are doing. They should have good domestic life without allowing nature's obstacles in their own lives. Therefore, there should be a welcome change in the minds of our women. The administrators also most pay special attention to the advancement of women"^{xiv}.

At the Self-Respect conference^{xv} held in 1929 in Chengalpattu, Tamil Nadu, the following resolutions were taken on women's rights^{xvi}:

1. Women should have equal inheritance in their father's property like men.
2. Women should have right to join to any job according to their qualification and ability
3. Schools should recruit women teachers.

Conclusion:

We find that 19th century Indian Renaissance made Indian women's entry into public life possible. Though Indian Renaissance during 19th century was a revolution in almost all fields, but the main focus was on the upliftment of the status of women. The social evils like sati, child marriage, female infanticide, dowry menace etc that made Indian women subjugated under male dominated society were prohibited by acts on the one hand, on the other; widow remarriage, female education, women right to property etc were permitted by the acts. Now-a-days, women education, which was considered as sin before 19th century, and literacy rates are improving noticeably. Indian women have been progressing in almost all fields like men. We find by the end of 19th century, many women started to form their own organizations for their upliftment. We can say Right to equality (Articles 14-18), Right to freedom (Article 19-22), Right against exploitation (Article 23-24), Cultural and educational right (Article 29-30) and Right to property (Article 300-A, Part 12) that Indian Constitution provides

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are the outcomes and blessings of the 19th century Indian Renaissance especially for the Indian women folk.

Thus, as the term ‘Emancipation’ denotes freedom from any type of oppression, we find 19th century Indian Renaissance brought women Emancipation and relief to a great extent from the atrocities they were facing before 19th century. So, the contribution of 19th century Indian Renaissance towards Indian women’s emancipation is not only praiseworthy but unforgettable.

Notes and References:

ⁱ . Yajur Veda 16.44.

ⁱⁱ Rig Veda 10.18.8

ⁱⁱⁱ .Rig Veda 10.85

^{iv} . Rig Veda 10.85.26; 10.85.46

^v . Yajur Veda 20:9

^{vi} Chopra, P.N., B.N. Puri & M.N. Das. 1974, A Social Cultural and Economic History of India, Vol. III, Modern India, New Delhi, Macmillan India Ltd., pp.76-85].

^{vii} . Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi, ed. (2002). Education and the disprivileged: nineteenth and twentieth century India, Hyderabad: Orient Longman, P. 239

^{viii} .The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. III, p. 246

^{ix} . Ibid Vol. IX, p. 196

^x . Ibid, Vol. VII, p. 219.

^{xi} . Ibid, Vol. VIII, 1959, p. 91.

^{xii} . Veeramani, k., Periyar on Women’s Right, Chennai: Emerald Publishers, 1992, p., 50.

^{xiii} .Ibid., p., 31.

^{xiv} . Ibid., p. 45

^{xv} . Self Respect Movement was started by Periyar in 1925.

^{xvi} . Gopalakrishnan, G.P., *Periyar: Father of the Tamil race*, Chennai: Emerald Publishers:., 1991, p., 31.