



## REVISITING HER-STORIES: WOMEN, EMPOWERMENT AND INDIAN CULTURE

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### Abstract

Women studies in recent times have been instrumental in accentuating gender issues perceptible in our society- a society that unabashedly revels in androcentrism. Significantly, to counter the adverse impact(s) of “sexual politics” (Millet) ensuing from the binary opposition of biological sexes, it is imperative for women to reclaim their usurp status by traversing the itinerary from the margin towards the centre. In accordance with this pressing need of regenerative womanhood we have sought, in this investigation, to trace the trajectory of Women Empowerment in the Indian context. To particularize we have attempted to document how the gradual strategic “othering” of the “second sex” (a derogatory phrase insinuating her marginalisation in an overtly patriarchal societal set-up) has indeed necessitated her transition from powerlessness to empowerment-an odyssey which can and will herald the dawn of a better future for womanhood.

**Keywords** Empowerment, Patriarchy, Marginalization, Sisterhood, Androcentrism, Domesticity.



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### Introduction

“If you educate a man, you educate an individual; however, if you educate a woman, you educate a whole family. Woman empowered means Mother India empowered.”

Jawaharlal Nehru.

It is often said that the best way to measure the progress the progress of any civilization in the world is to perceive it through the lens of women emancipation, women rights and the status a woman enjoys in society. It is thus imperative to delve deep into the prospect of the status enjoyed by women against the backdrop of a multi-stratified and multi-coloured society as it has been for ages in India. The progress of Indian women from prehistoric times to the modern age of scientific and technological values has witnessed major social, economic and political upheavals. Women in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in India are found to be working in every sector-beginning from corporate houses, media and publications,

scientific and space research centres, railways, archaeological centres, politics, small scale industries, self-employment to any other field to which we can stretch our imagination [The woman, whose status and role traditionally was well defined and almost fixed in society, is now experiencing far reaching changes. (Kiran: Role and Status of Women in India: October 27, 2015)]. This adversely gives rise to a most pertinent question our mind – ‘Was it the same some thousands of years ago? ‘The paper endeavours to unearth the issues of gender inequality and discrimination from ancient times through the medieval era to the present day, a journey worth itself.

### **Women in Ancient India**

There lies ample evidence in the scriptures that women in ancient India enjoyed a privileged position in society. Not only were they allowed to receive education, but were themselves entrusted with the job of imparting knowledge. Women were encouraged to participate in the study of Vedic scripts during the Rig Vedic Age. Prominent among them were Gargi Vacaknavi, Vadava Prathitheyi, Sulabha Maitreyi, Ubhaya Bharati. Women were allowed to sing, dance and to nurture their aesthetic and artistic capabilities. Brahmavadinis were engaged in the study of Vedas and religious scriptures throughout their life. Women even went to battlefields and were trained in sword fighting and martial arts. They had equal access to education like men and their point of view was respected and heard in domestic affairs.

The presence of innumerable female deities, the worshipping of Shiva and Parvati as one unified soul, the very fact that the Goddess of learning was herself a female deity hints at the elevated status of women in Ancient India. Gender roles were nevertheless equal and fair. The numerous shrines dotted on a map of India and dedicated to female deities – Durga, Kali, Lakshmi, Saraswati adheres to the fact that woman power or ‘Shakti’ –the innate power of a woman to create and to sustain has been worshipped by men in the true spirit since ancient times. Rig Veda contains thousands of verses that has been attributed to Ghosha, Viswawara, Sikta and the great Maitreyi. It is to be noted here that thirst of spiritual knowledge was such that it made the great Maitreyi reject half of her husband Yajnavalkya’s wealth. The extremely talented wife of the learned Agasthya Muni, Lopamudra engaged with the sage in long philosophical discussions and debates. Women even had the right to inherit the property of their forefathers and were entitled to be members of legislative assemblies.

“Yatra naryaastu pujoyante ramonte tatra fevata,

Yatraitaastuna pujoyante sarvaastatra falaah kriyaah”

(Translation: Deity rejoices where women are respected, and where they are not respected all actions become fruitless.) – Kush Sharma: Women in Ancient India and Culture.

However, a sharp decline in the status and roles of women may be noticed as we move down the timeline towards the medieval ages.....an age marked by a profound chasm and dichotomy between the male and the female world.

### **Fate of Women: Medieval India**

Medieval India is a historical period marked by an upsurge of foreign invasions, a hoard of foreign rulers and was definitely an era of cohesion and acute suppression. The most fragile targets in such a male dominated and male directed world were definitely women. Their rights were mercilessly severed and they were mercilessly relegated to the background. Their right to inherit property was ceased and every effort was made to render them economically ostracized. They could no longer exercise their right over Streedhan, i.e., the wealth they inherited during marriage. Gradually it became a compulsion for girls to bring land, money, jewellery and property to their in-laws house on marriage in the form of dowry. Dowry thus became a social construct.

Women herself was reduced to the status of a commodity –an object a man could buy, own , transfer, sale, keep in alienation, force to abide by patriarchal dictum at the sole whims of a man. Her children, whom she had conceived and given birth to belonged to her husband and his family. Her desires and wishes in domestic affairs was overshadowed by a patriarchal father-figure was considered to be final. It was a preconceived notion that a woman is incapable of taking any decision and based on such hypothetical assumption, it was decided that in every stage of life, she would be guided by either among the following – father, brother, husband or son.

A line of contour was thus drawn to limit a woman's activities to domestic chores, breeding and upbringing of children. Hers was essentially a life of seclusion and confinement.

### **Devadasis: Untouchable Sacred Whores**

Devadasis were temple dancers in the Medieval India commissioned with the job of serving in the temples. It was customary for Devadasis or maidens to undergo customary marriage with the temple deity before she became a Devadasi[‘A Devadasi was considered nitya sumangali, a woman eternally free from the adversity of widowhood as she was married to God and married forever’ -Rekha Pande & .Jeevanandam: Devadasis, the Temple Dancers in Medieval Deccan] . Being well trained and versed in dance and song, she was supposed to dance and perform during religious rituals and ceremonies. However, behind

the garb of social duties and functioning, lies the original motive of serving the priestly class and providing physical and sensual gratification to larger pockets of society.

The Devadasis were often invited to the courts of Kings for performance. This gave rise to a distinct category of dancers –‘Rajadasis’, who danced for the King’s entertainment. Satisfaction of the King and his subjects was more important than the satisfaction of the soul. Exploitation in the name of religion was rampant and in a way, ‘Rajadasis’ and ‘Devadasis’ were commoditized, enforced, humiliated and treated in an unjust manner. Shockingly enough, the term Devadasis, which had a divine connotation was replaced by the term ‘Bhogastree’, literally meaning women for enjoying. Their knowledge of classical dance and music was considered to be an asset for alluring clients. Their life was one of exploitation by patriarchal forefathers. Finally they were reduced to poverty and misery and left to provide for them when their youth passed away and they lost patronage.

### **Jauhar: A Flight from Penance**

The North Western Frontier was considered to be the gateway for foreign invasions. The daring Rajputs died a valiant’s death fighting till the last breadth to protect their motherland. History bears testimony not only to the courage of Rajput men, but also Rajput women, who, having received the news of their men defeat and sabotage in the battlefield, jumped into fire or into wells to avoid sexual enslavement, disgrace and dishonour in the hands of Islamic invaders.[ “It ensured that the body is pure and chaste from the hands of enemies even after their death...and ensured their journey to heaven according to Hindu tradition as Agni (Fire) is considered the gateway to purity and Atma Mukti” – Jauhar and Saka- The Ethos of Rajputana ]

Women committed Jauhar to avoid being kidnapped and enslaved by foreign invaders for fulfilling domestic duties or for the purpose of sexual gratification. The male children of the enslaved were kept as slave concubines who would serve as able bodied defenders without having a pass at women. In the pages of history, we find mention of the widespread Jauhar performed by Rajput women in Chittor when it was attacked by Alauddin Khilji(1303), Bahadur Shah of Gujarat(1535) and the great Akbar(1568).It was thus a woman’s self-devised way of fleeing male atrocities.

### **Sati: A Virtue or A Vice?**

There is a common misconception regarding the term ‘Sati’ even among the most educated people of the world. People mostly relate Sati to the horrendous practice of self-immolation or widow burning. The original meaning of the term in Sanskrit has become inconspicuous. Sati originally means a virtuous woman. It is

noteworthy that there is no Sanskrit word for self-immolation. Early Hindu scriptures never supported, preached or professed such a heinous act of discrimination against women amounting to criminal offence. It was originally the evil plotting of some privileged men in society, especially the priestly class, who contorted religious scriptures, upholding the immolation of widows in the funeral pyre of their husband to be a religious dictum.

Much like Jauhar, Sati has its psychological roots in the endeavour to protect the modesty of women from vandalism by outrageous forces. In the absence of the husband, it was considered to be most fitting for a wife to jump into the funeral pyre of her husband so as to practice celibacy and sanctity. Absence of the husband might also arouse the question of sustenance and exploitation in all forms. The close minded, dumb, ill-rotten, ignorant, insecure, insensitive, patriarchal society remained a distant passive observer while tens of thousands of innocent lives were lost. Sati system became a widespread massacre in the Indian society all because of the injustice and discrimination of women among all sections of society

“From woman, man is born; within woman man conceived; to woman he is engaged and married. Woman becomes his friend; through woman, the future generations come.”  
(Guru Nanak, Raag Aasaa Mehal 1, Page 473)

Those widows, who somehow escaped the torture, had to shave off their hairs in the fashion of an ascetic. This was known to be the custom of Tonsure. Such prejudice and bigotry against women continued. They were not allowed to wear clothes with colours and had to survive strictly on vegetarian diet. They were not allowed to participate in social ceremonies and their presence was considered to be evil. The male patriarchs converted their life into that of an endless desert.

### **The Path towards Enlightenment: 19<sup>th</sup> Century Reformers**

However it was not that all men treated women with equal disgrace and contempt. With the advent of the nineteenth century, things began to change dramatically. The East India Company brought along with them a fresh gust of air of Western thought and education which began to slowly seep into the colourful fabric of Indian society. It was the initiative of some of the pioneers of women liberation reforms that the entire scenario began to drift from cultural and societal orthodoxy to a more emancipated and enlightened platform.

Prominent among the social activists who initiated such reforms was Raja Rammohan Roy, who, stricken by the ill-fate of Hindu widows specifically and Indian women in general, condemned vehemently the barbaric system of Sati. He was the founder of the Brahmo Samaj. Their initiative was supported by prominent social reformers like Jyotiba

Phule, Behramji Merwanji Malabari and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. The efforts made by these stalwarts accelerated the struggle against gender inequality and finally culminated in the historic Sati Abolition Act (1829), Widow Remarriage Act(1850),Criminal Law Amendment Act(1885) and Age of Consent Act,1891.

Since then, women have come a long way. Although such evils as female infanticide, child marriage, tonsure, have been outlawed and abolished, gender disparity and unequal treatment in both urban and rural areas in India still finds its way to the headlines. Although prohibited in 1961 by an Act of the Parliament, dowry related deaths are still high. Dowry related deaths are attached to abuse, insult, and denial of food and basic human rights, burning, and acid throwing. The system of Purdah or covering of the face with a veil like object to cut off the view of outsiders is another measure for restraining their freedom. In a nutshell, progress of women in different fields of knowledge and achievement has not been able to eradicate social evils from the grassroots level. Such evils are still very much prevalent, even though much subdued in nature, is still a compulsion and a constraint.

#### **A New Dawn: Horizon is the Limit**

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century is an era of rapid and rhythmic progress. No wonder, the women folk, who have endured gruesome atrocities in the dark and dismal pages of history, have bounced back with exceptional fortitude and unusual strength of mind. Their resolve to stand at par with their male counterparts bears testimony to their achievements in various fields beginning from Pandita Ramabai (Founder of Arya Mahila Samaj), Swarnmukhi Devi (the first writer-editor), Savitri Phule(started the first school for girls in the subcontinent) to Tarabhai Shinde (who wrote the first Modern Indian Feminist Text, *Stri Purush Tulana*), Kamini devi (the first woman honours graduate), Sarla Devi Chaudharani (founder of India's first woman organization "Bharat Stree Mahamandal") and Saroj Nalini Dutt (who pioneered the formation of Educated Women's institutes in Bengal).

The journey towards emancipation continues with such great women achievers as Saint Teresa (prominent social activist), Vina Mazumdar (secretary of the first Indian committee on the status of women in India), Medha Patkar (founder of Honour for Women National Campaign), Amrita Pritam (first to win Shahitya Akademy Award for Literature), Geeta Sehgal (writer and journalist), Vandana Shiva (environmentalist and prominent leader of the Eco feminist Movement), Ruth Vanita (academician and specialist in gay and lesbian studies), Arundhati Bhattacharya (Chair Managing Director of the SBI), Bhakti Sharma (swimmer), Priyanka Chopra (actress of national and international repute), Rupa Devi (first international referee for FIFA), Arunima Sinha (world's first female

amputee mountain climber), Mary Kom (World Amateur Boxing Champion), Saina Nehwal(Olympic Champion in badminton), Wing Commander Puja Thakur, Tessy Thomas(Project Director for Agni-IV Missile, the first Missile Woman of India). The journey is infinite.....

### **Conclusion**

In recapitulation, I would seek to reiterate, in an ecstatic spirit, Nellie L. McClung's assertion that "women are going to form a chain, a great sisterhood than the world has ever known". Shattering the narrow confines of enforced domesticity, our sisters have started actively participating in the public domain alongside their male counter parts to rectify an unwholesome imbalance perceptible in almost every conceivable sphere relating to human life. The emergence of autonomous women, in harmony with but not dependent on the supposed superior sex, is a pre requisite in our age as it is only with the emancipation of women that a society, a culture, a civilization can thrive and flaunt a spectacular standard of living attuned to the well-being of both the sexes.

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