

# Women empowerment during the British period in India

Parminder Kaur,

Research scholar Desh Bhagat University Mandi Gobindgarh, Punjab, India.

Dr. Kuldeep Kaur Dhaliwal,

Principal, Mata Ganga Khalsa College, Manji Sahib, Kottan.

**Abstract:-**Women empowerment begins with the awareness about their rights and capabilities. It allows women to play an active role in home, society and nation. Women empowerment during the British period proved as a milestone in the path of women empowerment in India, because before this period many evil customs were imposed on Indian women like, sati pratha, devdassi system, child marriage, ban on widow remarriage etc. At that time gender discrimination was also very serious, and women had no identity. During the British period Indian reformers and government took initiatives to improve the status of Indian women. So it is a significant period for study of Indian women's empowerment.

**Keywords:-**1.Women 2. Social status 3. Education 4. Health issues 5.Economic issues 6.Empowerment.

**Introduction:-**Women Empowerment refers to the self-determination and self-confidence. It allows women to play an active role in home and society. Women Empowerment associate with their social upliftment, political decision making and economic independence. It also concerns with the awareness about their rights and capabilities. With it they able to understand how the socio-economic, political conditions affect them. Empowerment of women involves many things like economic opportunity, property and other rights, political representation, social equality etc.<sup>1</sup> Women empowerment does not mean to prepare women against man. Infact, women empowerment enabled both of sex to realize their changing roles and status. Through women empowerment men and women redistributed their work roles and values to maintain their homes, societies and nations. It is a new ideology for fulfilling democratic values into the family and society. Women empowerment provided equal status to women in all spheres of life. Infact, women empowerment wants total overhauling of Indian society.<sup>2</sup>

## SOME FEATURES OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT DURING BRITISH PERIOD

- 1.Women empowerment was empowered women, which made their lives better.
2. It enabled women with self confidence and independence.
3. Women empowerment gave the capacity to resist discrimination which imposed on them by the males and society.
4. With it they organized themselves to increase their self reliance.
5. Women empowerment provided greater economy to women of India.

6. With the process of women empowerment, women of India understood their rights and performed their duties towards their homes and society in a most effective way.
7. It exposed the oppressive power, which existed in gender and social relations prevailed in Indian society.
8. Women empowerment enabled Indian women to participate in policy and decision making process at domestic and public levels.
9. It challenged to traditional evil customs and relations.
10. It worked for creating awareness and capacity building among Indian women.
11. Women empowerment enhanced women's abilities to change the structure and ideologies of India, which kept them subordinate.
12. Causes of women backwardness and need of women empowerment.

**ILLITERACY:-** Low literacy level of Indian women has been one of the major impediments in the way of women's empowerment. Illiteracy and semi-illiteracy keep women in the state of assetlessness. According to the official educational Report of 1838 that there existed then in Bengal and Bihar as many as 100,000 schools, that is about one school for every 400 children. But in 1912 G.K.Gokhale stated that there was at his time only one school for every six villages in India. By 1930 there were only 5 literate women in Bihar out of every 1000 Bihari women.<sup>3</sup> So illiteracy became main hindrance in the way of women empowerment. In Bengal, the condition of women was more bad in comparison to other states due to strange believes held about the educated woman. It was commonly believed that a girl taught to read and write would become a widow.

**POOR HEALTH RATE:-** Under the British rule medical facilities were the privileged very few. There was no satisfactory medical facilities. The longevity of life was low. Millions of men and women did not to see even their 34<sup>th</sup> birthday. There were born dead and infants, who did not live more than one year, numbered in lacks. Million of them were disabled. In 1947, the estimated figure of deaths during child birth was about 2,00,000 every year.<sup>4</sup> The Health Survey Development Committee commonly known as Bhore Committee (1946) declared in their report, "Women suffering from varying degrees of disability and discomfort as a result of child-bearing must be very much larger, probably about four millions." Low nutrition, superstitions, ignorance, insanitary conditions, purdah, lack of sunshine and fresh air all these problems contributed to these diseases. But there was lack of medical facilities. According to the records of 1947, the total number of hospitals in India were 6,669, which were 4,617 in rural and 2,052 in urban areas. There were also lack of nurse, there was only one nurse for 43,000 persons.<sup>5</sup>

Evil customs of society which were imposed on women.

**Sati:-** Sati is described as a Hindu custom in India in which the widow was burnt to ashes on her dead husband's pyre. Basically the custom of Sati was believed to be a voluntary Hindu act in which the woman voluntarily decides to end her life with her husband after his death. But there were many incidents in which the women were forced to commit Sati, sometimes even dragged against her wish to the lighted pyre. Those women who committed Sati were highly honoured and their families were given lot of respect.<sup>6</sup>

**INFANTICIDE:-** During British period another very common and serious evil was infanticide, which prevailed in the country especially in Rajasthan, Punjab, Gujrat and Uttar Pradesh. Infanticide was the custom by which

parents of daughters maintain their respect in the society.<sup>7</sup> **PURDA:-** Purda system was also an obstacle in the empowerment of Indian women. The general adoption of the Purdah System by the ruling and aristocratic families of Hindu community is subsequent to the advent of the Muslim rule. It was accepted by Hindu society partly in imitation of the manners of the conquerors, and as additional protection for the women folk.<sup>8</sup> **CHILD MARRIAGE:-** Child marriage has been traditionally prevalent in India. Girls were usually married before they attained puberty and if by any chance parents failed to find a suitable match within the age limitation of 6 to 10 years they suffered religious and social disgrace.<sup>9</sup> **WIDOWHOOD:-** Condition of widows in India was very pitiable. They were not permitted to carry long hairs or wear colored cloths and ornaments. They were considered very unfortunate persons of society. As an offshoot of child marriages widowhood also became rampant. In 1921 the number of widows was 759 and their no. of increased to 1515, within the period of 10 years.<sup>10</sup> **DOWRY:-** Dowry crimes and sexual abuse were the commonest forms of violence against women in society. Most societies have been characterized by payment at the time of marriage. These payments typically go hand-in-hand with marriages arranged by the parents of the respective spouses. **POLYGAMY:-** Polygamy during our research period became very common in all sections of society. Men could easily take a second wife even when the first wife was alive. Infact, man got the freedom to marry any number of times.<sup>11</sup> **DEVADASSI:-** Devadassi originally described a Hindu religious practice in which girls were "married" and dedicated to a deity (deva or devi). In addition to taking care of the temple and performing rituals, they learned and practiced Bharatanatyam and other classical Indian arts. Society never considered the habit to be beneath the dignity. Women became mere things of luxury, it gave the birth of prostitution.<sup>12</sup> **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE:-** An unnoticed form of violence, which takes place in the four walls of our domestic spheres called domestic violence. Silence of the four walls writes many stories sprinkled with blood. Domestic violence was very common in British period. Where a man beaten a woman, they continued to live together in the system of domestic violence. History of the society speaks about the unspeakable cruelties, women were subjected to in the protected walls of domestic sphere. Domestic violence in the Indian society was very much the product of unequal power of distribution. It was the form of different social-cultural background. The violence related to women in domestic sphere like dowry harassment, sexual abuses were also very common.<sup>13</sup> **THE BIASED BEHAVIOUR OF SOCIETY:-** The biased behavior with woman was started from their birth in India. Girl child in the society of India considered low status as comparatively to her male counterparts. The birth of a girl child was usually unwelcomed. Girls in the Indian society from the very initial stages were trained to respect. So they were gradually instilled with a fear of male members of the house. Boys were treated with special care and love by birth so, they usually develop superiority over their sisters. The girls had been considered as a financial burden because of the expenses in the form of dowry. Biased behavior of society about widows also make their life pitiable. In India after the death of the husband the wife was supposed to live a asceticism and unflinching devotion to her husband's memory, self sacrifice etc. But all these limitations were not applied on males and they could easily take a second wife even when the first wife was alive.<sup>14</sup>

## THE APPROACHES FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the Britishers were ruling India, a degree of political orderliness was brought in the India and some modifications took place in the social structure through legislative measures for better condition of women.

**WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION:-** In the early years of the British rule women's education remained slow. Their achievements were very little till the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>

century. Margaret E. Cousins stated that only one out of every hundred of India's girls get primary education, only one out of every thousand girls gets secondary education.<sup>15</sup> Brahma Samaj a modern reform movement gave it a great impetus. Members of the Brahma Samaj wrote journals for the promotion of women's education. Many Muslim reformers were also came forward to rescue the state of affairs prevailing in the country. Issue of women's education was also discussed. So no. of Muslims decided to educate Muslim women, so that they could understand their rights and duties which provided them Islam.

Wood's Education Dispatch of 1854, gave new focus to women's education. Government worried about that women were wishing to learn but the pressures of household works on women rising.<sup>16</sup> Progress in women's education was very slow, because girls were married in the age of 9 or 10 and they could not continue their study more than 3 or 4 years. Then a legislation was passed, which fixing 14 years of minimum age for the marriage of girls in 1929 and it has been raised to 18 in 1955. Thus the rising of marriageable age of girls has helped the cause of the female education in a remarkable level. Economic factors also responsible for the spread of women education. In the year of 1924-25 the no. of girls scholars was 1,230,698. In 1934-35 no. of girls scholars were 2,890,246 and in the year of 1947 the no. of girls scholars was near about 37 lakhs. So the no. of girls scholars regularly rose from 1924 to 1947. Same the progress of higher education was also remarkable. The number of girls scholars in the secondary and collegiate education were 108,660 and 14,435 in 1937 and in 1947 their number were 2,32,136 and 24,466 respectively. But it was not satisfactory because at that time only 16.5 percent of the girls of the school going age were attending the schools. The ratio of literate women to men was 1:4.<sup>17</sup>

Women empowerment was to a great extent during the British rule in India, as they became free from the condition of subjugation and subordination, and started moving ahead to the goal of equal footing with men, due to the increasing impact of western education in the country. A new awakening came in the Indian women as they became alive to their age old sufferings at the hands of an orthodox society and were able to launch movements against the social evils. During our long subjugation under the foreign rule, women's health and education suffered. Health and medical education of women had drawn the attention of British Government. In 1885 Dufferin Fund Committee was established to provide medical aid to Indian women through women doctors. In this direction a number of Dufferin Hospitals were opened. Women doctors were trained on scholarships of Dufferin Fund. The Victoria Memorial Scholarship Committee, established in 1902 to improve Midwifery services, had collected funds for training of Dais. Lady Chelmsford All India League of Maternity and Child Welfare was established in 1920. In 1931 a Maternity and Child Welfare Bureau was established under the aegis of Indian Red Cross Society.<sup>18</sup>

**EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH SOCIAL UPLIFTMENT:-** During the British period many reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotirao Phule, Keshav Chandra Sen etc. fought for the empowerment of women. Many women reformers such as Pandita Ramabai also helped the cause of women upliftment. Many foreign missionaries started taking interest to improve the social condition of the India. Brahma Smaj was against the social customs which had rooted in Indian religion included child marriage, polygamy, limited rights to inherit property and seclusion of women. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's efforts led to the abolition of the Sati practice in 1829.<sup>19</sup> Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar raised his voice in favour of the marriage of

widows. Finally , because of his continuous efforts Government passed the Hindu Widows Remarriage Act in 1856.<sup>20</sup> It legalized the marriage of widows. Law banned female infanticide in 1870. Indian Muslim women can obtain divorce through the Dissolution of Muslim Marriage Act(1939). It deals with the situations by which Muslim women can obtain divorce. Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act of 1955 also allows divorce if there is a change of religion or cruelty, rendering saying with the other party unsafe in any circumstances.<sup>21</sup> Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929 prohibited child marriages.<sup>22</sup> The Special Marriage Act passed in 1954. It is replaced to the old Act III, 1872. It is enacted to provide for registration of certain marriage and divorce. Hindu Women Parliament enacted the Hindu Succession Act 1956. This Act provides the rights that male and female heir shall have equal rights.<sup>23</sup> Till the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the institution of purdah was scarcely shaken, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the system of purdah began to be seriously breached. The Home Rule Movement, The Non-Co-operation Movement gave a great strength to the Anti-Purdah Movement in India in general and Bihari in particular.<sup>24</sup> Women in the purdah provinces also went outside their homes to caste their votes. In Bihar 4 ladies succeeded in becoming member of the Assembly, they were Smt. Sharda Kumari De, Smt. Kamakhydevi, Smt. Sarswati Devi and Lady Anise Imam. In the United Provinces 2 ladies became members of the council and 7 of the Assembly. Smt. Vijay Lakshmi Pandit became a minister of the cabinet rank. In Assam 1 lady became a member of the council and another of the Assembly. In Central Provinces 3 ladies, in Orissa 2 ladies and in Sind 1 lady became member of the Assembly. In the Punjab 2 Muslim ladies became member of the Assembly and one of them Begum Shah Nawaz became a minister in the Government formed in 1937.<sup>25</sup>

## WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH POLITICAL ACHIEVEMENTS

During 1900 AD the condition of Indian women may be said to have been its lowest ebb. Then by the time of 1940s, the tide of social , educational and political honor for women had risen very high then India has (80) women members in the Legislatures of its combined provinces and states, and at that time India got third rank amongst the nations of the world as regards the political status and partition secured by its women. At 1914, the entry of Mrs. Annie Besant into the Indian politics increased national consciousness in women. Indian women joined Home Rule League with great enthusiasm. At the Calcutta Congress three women occupied the place of power and honour. Mrs. Besant in the President's chair, Mrs. Sarojini Devi Naidu, was the representative of the great Hindu race and Begum Aman Bibi veiled daughter of the strong Muslim people. It was the time of women empowerment when women had came out of its seclusion to share with manhood the struggle to achieve the freedom of India. In 1928 she was elected President of the Indian National Congress in Bijapur, Bombay Presidency. Dr. Muthu lakshmi Reddi was the first woman to sit in the Legislatures of Indian Provinces. She made a historical record by achieve the difficult position of Deputy Speaker of the Madras Legislative Council. Mrs. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay had been the first woman who took the risk of a Legislative Council. She stood as an independent against a man congress candidate in 1926 for the South Kerala Constituency, Madras.<sup>26</sup>

Women played an important role in the independence struggle of India. The Rani of Jhansi, Rani Lakshmi Bai led the Indian rebellion of 1857 against the British . Begum Hazrat Mahal, the co-ruler of Awadh, was another ruler who led the revolt of 1857. The Begums of Bhopal were also few

of the notable female rulers during the period. Then Rani of Jhansi Regiment of Subhash Chandra Bose's Indian National Army consisted entirely of women including Captain Lakshmi Sahgal.<sup>27</sup>

Smt. Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Rukmini Lakshmi Pathi (Madras), Mrs. Hansa Mehta (BOMBAY), Mrs. Kasturba Bai Gandhi (Sabarmati), Mrs. Nellie Sen Gupta (Calcutta), Satyavati Devi (Delhi), Miraben (Miss Slade, Ahmedabad), Mrs. Jaffar Ali (Lucknow), Durgabai (Andhradesa) were the prominent leaders of the time.<sup>28</sup> These women leaders paved new paths for the empowerment of Indian women. These women leaders between the time 1917 and 1934 mostly brought about new political status of India through their personal contacts with Members of the British Parliament.

**WOMEN ORGANIZATION:-** Women organizations like All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) emerged. Women of the organization were grappling with the issues relating to the scope of women's participation in political spheres, women's franchise, communal awards and leadership roles in political parties. These organizations developed their critical consciousness about their role and rights in their homes, society and nation.<sup>29</sup> This resulted in the introduction of the franchise and civic rights of women in the Indian Constitution. In 1941 over 80 women members have been elected legislators. It forms a new chapter in the history of Indian women. It was the time when they foot their steps in a new phase of time.

**EMPOWERMENT THROUGH HEALTH ISSUES:-** After the independence of India has seen the emergence of women in the field of health administration. A good number of women have headed the ministries of Health both in the centre and states. The Union Ministry of Health has seen two outstanding women as Ministers. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was the first woman Health Minister of the first Government of India. The second woman Health Minister at the centre was Dr. Sushila Nayar who had an insight into health programs and had the vision of a healthy India. Vijaylaxmi Pandit. She was very prominent president of the United Nations. So a remarkable progress has been made in the field of medicine since Independence. Estimated figures of 1968 show the longevity has increased for females and for males. The mortality has come down to 22 per 1000 in 1961 from 51 in 1911.<sup>30</sup>

**EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:-** Indian women also availed of the opportunity to be recruited. Medicine and education were the two main fields where women gained entry as early as late eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. It was proposed that trained female nurses should be introduced in the hospitals. And as an effect of this proposal, the trained nurses were being appointed in the hospitals of towns of Madras and the first time a female native doctor was appointed in the Bareilly Lunatic Asylum in 1869. European and Anglo Indian women had already been working as nurses, midwives and doctors. A resolution regarding women in practical midwifery was also passed in 1869. Again stress was laid on the training of female native teachers in Bombay presidency.<sup>31</sup> Almost Indian women employed in all the departments at the clerical and higher administrative posts. The maximum number of Indian women (86) working in the post and telegraph department, held a variety of postings like as 68 in the clerical grades while 17 worked as telephone operator while one was on the post of an inferior staff, whereas not even a single European female was employed. In the Education, Health and Lands Department seven women were working on important posts. After Independence first competitive

examination for the two All-India Services (IAS & IPS) was held in 1948. But women's entry was restricted only to the IAS, as they considered unsuitable for the IPS. It was the year of 1951 when the first lady stepped in the arena of IAS, where before then existed the monopoly of the male sex.<sup>32</sup>

So, we can say that it was the time when women tried their best to cut a niche of respectability and self-independence for their breed. It was the time when reformers and government took initiatives for the empowerment of Indian women. Though these initiatives were not sufficient to achieve the goals but they paved the path for the further developments. Women empowerment under our research period was touching familial relations, religion, place of women in society, politics, gendered language and relationships between men and women.

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