

# WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND THE CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

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**Abstract:** *This paper attempts to study the status of Women Empowerment and highlights the issues of contemporary women's movement in Independent India. Today the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century. But practically women empowerment is still an illusion of reality. We observe in our day to day life how women become victimized by various social evils. Women Empowerment is the vital instrument to expand women's ability to have resources and to make strategic life choices. Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. In spite of contemporary feminist movement and efforts undertaken by Government, the study reveals that women of India are relatively disempowered and they enjoy somewhat lower status than that of men. It is found that acceptance of unequal gender norms by women are still prevailing in the society. The study concludes by an observation that access to Education, Employment and Change in Social Structure are only the enabling factors to Women Empowerment in India. The methodologies for find out such things are based on both secondary and primary sources.*

**Key Words:** *Women Empowerment, Social Structure, Crimes against women, Contemporary Women's Movement.*

## Introduction

Women's empowerment as a phenomenon is not something absolutely new. It has been there throughout history in almost all societies for a variety of reasons. What could be considered as new is its increasingly coming out in public, its having been shifted and reshaped from women's welfare and their development to now women's empowerment, and it is being discussed, reported and critically evaluated. The question of empowerment and emancipation of women in today's world has become the most common question, more or less in every corner of the globe. In most of the societies women had been facing psycho-physical, social, religious, cultural etc. maladies from the past and they had been fighting to overcome them. The term women's rights are used to describe that branch of the women's movement which is primarily active in attempting to bring about legislative, economic and educational reforms to eradicate sex discrimination in social institutions. The term feminism has been used by the experts to mean the organized activities to overcome all the socio-cultural, socio-political, socio-religious evils against the women folk. It means a movement or theory supporting women's right on the grounds of equality of the sexes. Like their feminist counterparts all over the world, Indian feminist also have fought against culture-specific issues within India's patriarchal society, such as inheritance laws, the practice of widow immolation known as Sati, rape, dowry

murders etc. The contemporary feminist movement, beginning in the late 1970s and still alive today. Now in the early twenty first century, the focus of the Indian feminist movement has gone beyond treating women as useful members of society and a right to parity, but also having the power to decide the course of their personal lives and the right of self-determination.

### **Objectives**

The specific objectives of the study are as follows :

- a) to know the need of women empowerment;
- b) to assess the awareness of women empowerment in India;
- c) to study the government schemes for women empowerment in India;
- d) to analyze the factors influencing the contemporary women's movement in independent India;
- e) to derive an understanding of the problems faced by the Indian women.

### **Methodology**

There are two types of sources for preparing this paper, which are primary sources and secondary sources. The data are collected from various published books on women's empowerment and movement, periodical evidence of important journals, research paper, and newspaper.

### **Empowerment: Concept**

Empowerment has become a fashionable and buzz word. It essentially means de-centralisation of authority and power. It aims at getting participation of deprived sections of people in decision-making process. In other words giving voice to voiceless. Activists want government to empower poor people including women by legislative measures and welfare programmes. Empowerment is the process by which the disempowered or powerless people can change their circumstances and begin to have control over their lives. It results in a change in the balance of power, in the living conditions and in the relationships. Unless capacity is built in these sections in reality the power is used by others rather than the section for which they are meant.<sup>1</sup> Women empowerment may mean equal status to women, opportunity and freedom to develop herself. The focus of empowerment is equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have a positive self-esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and they should be able to participate in the process of decision-making.

### **Empowerment of Women**

The world over women are struggling to break the shackles that bind them and challenging the unequal distribution of power in society. Transforming the existing egalitarian pattern of gender relationships necessitates leadership in the state, markets and civil society- the key centres of power in the present globalising economy. It is, therefore, imperative for women to be in the corridors of power and have the power to negotiate a better deal for themselves, if they are to influence policy decisions which have an impact upon them. Empowerment of women in all spheres, in particular the political sphere is critical for their advancement and the foundation of a gender-equal society. Women's political empowerment is premised on "three fundamental and non-negotiable principles: (a) the equality between women and men; (b) Women's right to the full development of their potentials; and (c) women's right to self-representation and self-

determination". In empowerment, the key indeed is 'power': it is power to 'access', 'control' and make 'informed choices'. To use an Indian expression, it is *shakti*, which is manifested through the use of a mix of power, effectiveness, capability, force and influence to challenge and transform the structures and institutions of patriarchal ideology and existing power relations.<sup>2</sup>

### **Women in Pre Independent India**

Now the women in India enjoy a unique status of equality with the men as per constitutional and legal provision. But the Indian women have come a long way to achieve the present positions. First, gender inequality in India can be traced back to the historic days of Mahabharata when Draupadi was put on the dice by her husband as a commodity. History is a witness that women was made to dance both in private and public places to please the man. Secondly, in Indian society, a female was always dependent on male members of the family even last few years ago. Thirdly, a female was not allow to speak with loud voice in the presence of elder members of her in-laws. In the family, every faults had gone to her and responsible. Forth, as a widow her dependence on a male members of the family still more increase. In many social activities she is not permitted to mix with other members of the family. Other hand, she has very little share in political, social and economic life of the society.

The early twenty century, it was rise of the National Movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi who was in favor of removing all the disabilities of women. At the same time, Raja Ram Mohan Rai, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and various other social reformers laid stress on women's education, prevention of child marriage, withdrawals of evil practice of sati, removal of polygamy etc. The National Movement and various reform movements paved the way for their liberations from the social evils and religious taboos. In this context, we may write about the Act of Sati (abolish) 1829, Hindu Widow Remarriage Act' 1856, the Child Restriction Act, 1929, Women Property Right Act, 1937 etc.

### **Empowerment of Women in Independent India**

After independence of India, the constitution makers and the national leaders recognized the equal social position of women with men. The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 has determined the age for marriage, provided for monogamy and guardianship of the mother and permitted the dissolution of marriage under specific circumstances. Under the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956, an unmarried women, widow or divorce of sound mind can also take child in adoption. Similarly, the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 says that any person who gives, takes, or abets the giving or taking of dowry shall be punished with imprisonment, which may extend to six months or fine up to Rs.5000/ or with both. The Constitution of India guarantees equality of sexes and in fact grants special favors to women. These can be found in three articles of the constitution. Article 14 says that the government shall not deny to any person equality before law or equal protection of the law. Article 15 declares that government shall not discriminate against any citizen on the ground of sex. Article 15(3) makes a special provision enabling the state to make affirmative discriminations in favor of women. Article 42 directs the state to make provision for ensuring just and human conditions of work and maternity relief. Above all, the constitution regards a fundamental duty on every citizen through Articles 15 (A), (E) to renounce the practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

In India, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD- 1985) and the National Commission for Women (NCW) have been worked to safeguard the rights and legal entitlement of women. The 73rd & 74th Amendments (1993) to the constitution of India have provided some special powers to women that for reservation of seats 33%. In India ‘The New Panchayati Raj’ is the part of the effort to empower women at least at the village level. The most positive development last few years has been the growing involvement of women in the Panchayati Raj institutions. There are many elected women representatives at the village council level. At present all over India, there are total 20,56,882 Panchayat members, out of this women members is 8,38,244 (40.48%), while total Anchalik Panchayat members is 1,09,324, out of this women members is 47,455, (40.41%) and total Zila Panchayat members is 11,708, out of this women members is 4,923 (42.05%). At the central and state levels too women are progressively making a difference. Today we have seen women chief ministers, women president, different political parties leader, well established businessmen etc. The most notable amongst these are Mrs. Pratiba Devi Singh Patil, Shila Dixit, Mayawati, Sonia Gandhi, Bina Karat, Nazma Heptulla, Indira Nuyee (Pepsi-co), BJP leader Susma Soraj, railway minister M. M. Banerjee, ‘Narmada Bachao’ leader Medhapatekar, Indian Iron Woman, EX-prime minister Indira Gandhi etc.

The government of India has ratified various international conventions and human rights instruments committing to secure equal rights to women. These are CEDAW (1993), the Mexico Plan of Action (1975), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), the Beijing Declaration as well as the Platform for Action (1995) and other such instruments. The year of 2001 was observed as the year of women’s empowerment. During the year, a landmark document has been adopted, ‘the National Policy for the empowerment of women.’ For the beneficiaries of the women, the government has been adopting different schemes and programs i.e. the National Credit Fund for Women (1993), Food and Nutrition Board (FNB), Information and Mass Education (IME) etc.

Women are also involving in human development issues of child rearing, education, health, and gender parity. Many of them have gone into the making and marketing of a range of cottage products-pickles, tailoring, embroidery etc. The economic empowerment of women is being regarded these days as a sine-qua-non of progress for a country; hence, the issue of economic empowerment of women is of paramount importance to political thinkers, social thinkers and reformers.<sup>3</sup>

### **The contemporary Women’s Movement**

The first women’s movement, dubbed in retrospect “first-wave feminism,” condemned tradition and religion for women’s suffering and sought redress in education and legal change. It was feminist in the sense that leaders of the organizations forming this movement recognized women as oppressed because of their sex. They constructed women as biologically, psychologically, and spiritually different from men and based their claim for representation in public life on the complementarity of this difference. Women social feminist had argued, could bring a special knowledge of the household and family matters to forums where public policy was debated and formulated. This ideology fitted well with Gandhi’s view of women and the nationalists’ desire to bring women into the freedom movement. With the British gone, social feminism was incapable of either explaining women’s subordination to men or providing a blueprint for change.

Beginning in the 1930s some feminists critiqued the patriarchal state and family system but they were unable to forcefully challenge social feminism. In the 1960s, woman dissatisfied with the status quo joined struggles of the rural poor and industrial working class.<sup>4</sup> Participation of women in the Naxalbari movement, anti-price rise demonstrations, Navnirman Youth Movement in Gujarat and Bihar, rural revolt in Dhule District in Maharashtra and Chipko Movement provided a backdrop for the ensuing struggles on women's issues.<sup>5</sup>

The UN declaration of International Women's Year and the International Women's Decade led to the appointment of the Guha Committee and its subsequent report. Dr. Phulrenu Guha, Union Minister for Social Welfare chaired this committee with Dr. Vina Mazumdar, appointed in 1972, as member secretary. This two events coincided with a new spirit among individuals, groups, grass-roots activists, and researchers that made them search for ways to prevent "the oppression and exploitation, sexual harassment and domestic violence" they were now experiencing and which they knew were equally a fact of life for the agrarian poor, artisans, and tribal populations.<sup>6</sup> Vina Mazumdar remembered her shock when she first read the data being assembled by the Guha Committee. Her second reaction was anger and the feeling that "something has to be done." The heat and energy generated by Toward Equality and the emerging research data provided the intellectual foundation for a new women's movement.

The contemporary feminist movement emerged in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. Replacing the all-India women's organization were a large number of autonomous groups, joined not through the structure of a formal association, but through the connection of their leaders, an emerging feminist press, the general media's coverage of women's issues, and the periodic large scale meetings or conversations. In October, 1975 a coalition of activists women organized the United Women's Liberation Struggle Conference in Pune. This conference was followed by others in different regions of India. What is especially significant about this conferences is the class diversity and the breadth of issues under discussion. This women's movement continued to focus on traditional practices, beliefs, and institutions as the source of oppression. It also attended to violence against women, the institutional framework for the maintenance of gender differences, and the impact of the economic situation on the day-to-day lives of women.

One of the first steps taken by the leaders of this movement was to break the silence: to expose the "various categories of humiliation, atrocities, tortures and individual and mass assault to which they were subjected." Exposing gendered violence began in the mid-1970s but escalated toward the end of the decade. In 1979 a small group of women in New Delhi began to publish *Manushi*, *A Journal about Women and Society* in Hindi and English. This has now become India's premier feminist journal, treating specifically women's issues, such as sexual harassment or the adjustment expected of a new bride; violence against women, in the home and as a weapon of political and social control; history and literature on, about, and by women; and social/ political/economic issues such as communalism and public health policy.

Rape was only one issue that galvanized the contemporary women's movement. In 1980 the Mathura case shocked middle class women into the demonstrating against police brutality and government complacency. Mathura, a low -caste girl of between fourteen and sixteen years of age, was detained by the police for

questioning and raped in the police station. Released, Mathura complained about the rape but the policeman claimed she had consented to sexual relation. The sessions judge believed the policeman, but the Nagpur branch of the Bombay High Court found them guilty of rape and imposed prison sentences. This incident happened in 1972. Six years later the supreme court reversed this judgment since there was no evidence Mathura had resisted.<sup>7</sup> When the Supreme court dismissed these petitions on technical grounds, women in New Delhi and Bombay demonstrated in the streets shouting: “Supreme Court, Supreme Court. Against you, where can we report ? ” The government appointed a Law Commission to study the problem and suggest amendments to the existing law and in 1980 a criminal law amendment bill was introduced. This was deemed unsatisfactory. When the supreme court reviewed the issue, it concluded: “the uncorroborated testimony of a rape victim should not be ordinarily doubted.”<sup>8</sup> Women activists had wanted rape recognized as a violent crime but knew this legislation would not protect women from rape.<sup>9</sup> The gang rape of a 23-year-old student on a public bus, on 16 December 2012 sparked large protests across the capital Delhi.<sup>10</sup> The following day, there was an uproar in the Indian Parliament over the incident. MP’s in both houses had set aside their regular business to discuss the case and demanded strict punishment for those who carried out the attack. Leader of the opposition in Lok Sabha, Sushma Swaraj demanded that “the rapist should be hanged.”<sup>11</sup> Thousands of people mostly young, participated in a massive demonstration on 22 December in protest.<sup>12</sup>

“Dowry murders,” the term used to refer to the deaths by burning of young married women by their in-laws, emerged as a new phenomenon in the late 1970s. One of the first protests against these incidents occurred in July 1979 when 200 angry demonstrators shouted slogans in front of a house in a prosperous New Delhi suburb. A young wife of twenty-four years had burned to death in her father-in-law’s home and the crowd were demanding a police investigation of this accident. Earlier that evening the woman had gone to her parent’s home and told them her husband wanted a scooter. She also told them her in-laws were mistreating her. When her husband came to take her home, she resisted and he bit her in the presence of her brother. Her husband called the police but they would not interfere. Hours later she burned to death in a kitchen fire. Many of the neighbors refused to believe this was an accident and those protesting accused the death women’s in-law’s of committing a “dowry murder.”

In the following months women activists began to pay particular attention to the deaths of young, newly married women. There were 358 such deaths in Delhi in 1979, less than fifty were suicides, twenty three were labeled as “accidental.” Everyone who investigated these deaths heard from grieving families and shocked neighbors eager to expose these accidents as grisly murders. Families produced evidence in the form of letters from their daughters about continuous harassment and demand for additional dowry. Neighbors had their own stories to tell: of wife abuse, of seeing young women with their saris on fire run into courtyard screaming for help, and of hasty funeral services. Only rarely were the police involved and on most of those occasions they seemed to concur that the deaths had been suicides or accidents.

In 1982 a group of women activists in New Delhi set up Saheli, a small-scale women’s centre, in a garage in south Delhi residential colony. None of the volunteers who staffed this space believed they would be able to stop dowry murders but they hoped to provide counsel and shelter for endangered women. Saheli volunteers

began to keep records on the deaths of women and whenever possible intervened with the police to demand more thorough investigation. “Dowry murders” were reported daily in the capital’s newspapers discussed in all the established women’s organizations, and addressed by the editors of important feminist publications. Outside Delhi, cities and towns all over India began to report unusually high numbers of young newly married women dying following domestic fires. The numbers never approached those in Delhi but they pointed to a widespread pattern of violence against women. As the campaign against these deaths escalated, politicians hastened to condemn the practice and blame it on non-compliance with the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961. Pramila Dandavate introduced a private members’ bill in 1980 to amend the laws against the Dowry. Activist agreed that additional legislation was in order. By August of 1982 the Joint Committee of the Houses (chaired by Shrimati Krishna sahi), appointed to examine the question of the working of the Dowry Prohibition Act, presented their report to the Lok Sabha. During subsequent hearings the Law Commission of India presented a report titled “Dowry Deaths and Law Reform.” These hearings produced a bill in 1984 that was then amended, and passed, in 1986. This legislation increased the punishment for accepting dowry and decreed that in cases where a women died an unnatural death, her property would devolve on her children or be returned to her parents. The campaign was over, new legislation had been passed but the dowry deaths continue.<sup>13</sup>

On September 4, 1987, when the days were still warm but the nights were getting cooler, a young girl of 18 in the village of Deorala in Rajasthan was murdered. She was burnt alive on the funeral pyre of her husband. Yet, according to local tradition, Roop kanwar had become a “sati” and had “voluntarily” immolated herself as she sat with her dead husbands head in her lap even as family members lit the funeral pyre and curious villagers watched.<sup>14</sup> On September 16 the chunari mahotsava, a ceremony that commemorates a recent sati and consecrates the ground where it took place was performed with an estimated 500,000 people in attendance. While Rajasthani men guarded the site of the pyre, enterprising businessmen sold photographs and souvenirs, and clever politicians reverentially visited the spot.<sup>15</sup> For the first time in history Indian Feminists made the burning of women their issue and declared they would not stand by their sisters were murdered in the name of some distant and purportedly hallowed tradition. The government reacted with legislation. Parliament passed a Sati Prevention Bill, a repeat of the 1829 legislation, and outlawed its glorification.<sup>16</sup>

There was a sensational aspect to the Mathura case, “dowry deaths,” and the Deorala sati that attracted both Indian media and foreign attention. Young single women at colleges and universities and working at jobs in cities read about this incidents, met and talked about them, and decided to take action. In major Indian cities street theater, demonstrations, documentation centers and new organization emerged. And in the rural areas new groups and coalitions formed to protest exploitative work and issues of violence. Even as questions of violence against women have brought a new and significant focus to the women’s movement other issues have fragmented this new solidarity. The gravest challenges have come from a revitalized and gendered communalism as illustrated by the Shah Bano case. In April of 1985, the Supreme Court granted Shah Bano, a divorced Muslim woman, the right to financial support from her former husband. The Muslim community protested. This was the final decision in a long series of suits and appeals in which her ex-husband argued that

he had discharged his duty according to Muslim law. The Supreme Court, in reaching their decision, cited Section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code that requires husbands with means to support destitute ex-wives. Very quickly what had been perceived as a women's issue become a communal issue as Muslims challenged the right of the courts to interfere in their law. Throughout India, conservative Muslims argued that this decision was an attack on their identity as a religious minority. Feminists, liberals, and conservative Hindus denounced Muslims for their backward laws. In 1986 Rajiv Gandhi's government introduced the Muslims Women's (Protection of Rights in Divorce) Bill denying Muslim women redress under section 125 and naming the natal family responsible for support in cases of destitution. Outside Parliament Muslim women's group and Indian women's organizations, notably the National Federation of Indian Women, the All India Democratic Women's Association, and the Mahila Dakshata Samiti, protested against the bill.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

Today we have noticed different Acts and Schemes of the central government as well as state government to empower the women of India. But in India women are discriminated and marginalized at every level of the society whether it is social participation, political participation, economic participation, access to education, and also reproductive healthcare. Women are found to be economically very poor all over the India. A few women are engaged in services and other activities. So, they need economic power to stand on their own legs on par with men. Other hand, it has been observed that women are found to be less literate than men. According to 2001 census, rate of literacy among men in India is found to be 76% whereas it is only 54% among women. Thus, increasing education among women is of very important in empowering them. It has also noticed that some of women are too weak to work. They consume less food but work more. Therefore, from the health point of view, women folk who are to be weaker are to be made stronger. Another problems is that workplace harassment of women. There are so many cases of rape, kidnapping of girl, dowry harassment, and so on. The Empowerment of Women has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century not only at national level but also at the international level. Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient to achieve this goal. Society must take initiative to create a climate in which there is no gender discrimination and women have full opportunities of self decision making and participating in social, political and economic life of the country with a sense of equality. For these reasons, they require empowerment of all kinds in order to protect themselves and to secure their purity and dignity.

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