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Quest for Women Empowerment in India: Lessons from the Past

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ABSTRACT

Utilizing data from numerous sources, the current paper strives to gauge the current situation regarding women's empowerment in India through studying an assortment of indicators, including the potential of women to make decisions in their households, their financial self-determination, their freedom of movement, their political presence, their brushes with domestic harassment, media exposure, media acknowledgment, educational opportunities, and gender stereotypes that are not equitable, among other factors. Regardless of several attempts by the government, the survey shows that Indian women still have very less influence and a substantially lower status relative to that of males. In terms of occupation and educational opportunities, there is a gender disparity. Age, education, and work position all have a significant impact on a woman's ability to make decisions in her home and her freedom of mobility. According to research, women's acceptance of unfair gender stereotypes is still entrenched in society. For any reason whatsoever, almost half of the women adhere to the belief hitting your wife is permissible. Less women have an ultimate say in how they allocate their paychecks. The extent of control over one's revenue rises with age, education, and domicile. In envy of men, women are also less conversant with the media, compared to urban women, domestic violence against rural women is more common. There is also a substantial gap between the sexes in participation in politics. The study's conclusion notes that while job and educational opportunities are important for empowerment, achieving the aim inevitably hinges on the mindset of individuals towards gender equality.

Keywords: Gender, Equality, Empowerment, Discrimination, Education, Age.

I. INTRODUCTION

“No struggle can ever succeed without women participation side by side with men. There are two powers in the world. One is the sword one is the pen. There is a third power, stronger than both, that of women”. – **Malala Yousafzai**

Women retain an invaluable place in the history of humanity, and it is futile to argue about their

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aid to the advancement of human civilization. Their involvement in building national identity is remarkable in nearly every region of the globe. Although they never grasped the true significance of it, Indians used to address their land as Bharat-Mata. Every Indian's mother, known as Bharat –Mata, is someone we ought to venerate and safeguard. Approximately half of all people on Earth are women. In contemporary India, women retain equal status in several professions such as education, sports, politics, media, arts and culture, science and technology, and the field of service. The Indian Constitution not only protects women's equality but also grants governments the power to enact laws against racism that will lessen the overall obstacles women experience in terms of socioeconomic status, learning, and politics.

A few examples of fundamental rights include the commitment to equal opportunities for all citizens in matters pertaining to employment, the guarantee of equality before the law and equal protection under the law, and the outlawing of discrimination against any citizen on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth.

Articles 14, 15, 15(3), 39(a), 39(b), and 16 of the Constitution are quite important in this situation.

II. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S STATUS IN INDIA

The status of women in society is a gauge of its level of civilization. Indian women have historically been in an honorable position of dependence to males and protection from them. Hindu law has accorded women a dependent. But not dishonorable, position in society from the time of Indian law giver Manu. It goes without saying that women's standing in India has fluctuated throughout time. It is well known that women have more physical strength than males throughout the periods of households. She must rely on males for sustenance and safety because her physical strength power has been diminished by menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth. Eventually, patriarchal families replaced matriarchal ones, and polygamy was accepted. Nonetheless, women at that era were considered with equal regard in society. The status and prominence of women in India, however, has been a contentious issue since it captures the strange and conflicting aspects of Indian society.

Women have been referred to as Devi or Goddesses, the home of the gods, the ideal mentor or guru of their offspring, and more, but they have also faced criticism for their erratic and impetuous conduct and have even been denied the basic rights to exist as human being. The acronyms Jaya, Janni, and Patni symbolized women as wives, and each one indicated unique aspects of being a wife. Jaya is the term for the spouse who shares his or her affections. Patni was Janni's companion in performing and observing religious sacrifices, and Janni was the

mother of the children. Depending on the period, political and economic factors affected their standing. The introduction of the western educational system and the arrival of the British in India had an impact on Women's position. The Minto also entered the mainstream of the liberation struggle thanks to Gandhiji's influence. The principles governing marriage, divorce, inheritance, maintenance, widow marriage, prohibition, dowry, child marriage, and other matters set the groundwork for their current position. The notion of equality was first introduced through several clauses in the Indian Constitution.

(A) Status of women in vedic period

Despite their freedom and equality, the position of women through the period of the Vedas was indisputably great. Women are engaged in every facet of life currently. Women had freedom in all areas and studied at Gurukuls. Prominent women like as Apala, Vismara, Yamini, Gargi and Ghosa seized the initiative and rose to prominence in society. They became proficient in music, painting and even in their demeanor and manners. A few of the Rig Veda's songs are credited to female rishis. Women and men were on an equal footing in ancient India. Women were respected for who they were throughout the Aryan era. The Vedas make this clear by praising women in their hymns. Even now, people worship feminine goddesses like Saraswati, Kali, Lakshmi, and Durga. In philosophy, women were associated with Shakti or strength. Religious ceremonies were extensively participated in by women. They enrolled in residential institutions called Gurukuls and took part in discussions or debates in public. It was acceptable for women to select their own life partners.

Hindu law during the Vedic era commanded that men keep devoted and trustworthy wives. According to Yagnakaya, a man should be forced to provide one-third of his property to his wife and to support her if she had no property if she was an obedient, industrious, amiable mother of a boy, and pleasant to be around. Women were revered as "Shakti" goddesses and were thought to be more powerful than males. The wife was viewed as her husband's Ardhana Gini, which indicated that she constituted half of his personality.

(B) Status of women in post vedic period

Women's rights and privileges were forbidden during the post-Vedic era by Manu, and as a result, establishing themselves was negatively impacted and they were confined to their dwellings four walls. For the family, the girl's birth was viewed as a catastrophe. Girls were not allowed to attend school. It was forbidden for girls to participate in the thread ritual. At this point, the pre-puberty marital system was formed, bringing the legal age for girls to get wedded down to 9 or 10 years old. However, women in the ruling class were allowed to pursue

schooling, military training, scientific research, and others. Between 500BC and 500 AD, roughly corresponding to the time of the early smritis, the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharat, and the early Puranas, the Upanayana ceremonies for the females were totally abandoned. Legislators curtailed women's freedoms not just in words and acts but also in society, encouraging polygamy. Except in extremely exceptional circumstances, such as the Pandava family's use of polyandry by Draupadi in Mahabharat, polyandry vanished at this time. During the Puranic and epic periods, girls marriageable age was lowered, and women were denied rights in several locations. Observing the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharat, where women's primary job was to submit to their husbands without question.

(C) Status of women in medieval period

India was invaded by Muslims in the Middle Ages. Due to the influence on the Muslims, the traditional Hindu system was all but obliterated. In the long term, women came to be perceived as the male's servants, dependent on him always, and in a clearly subservient position. Hindu beliefs held that a woman's primary role was bear a male child. Indian women were limited to taking care of the home and household's duties. She so focused all her dreams on attempting to please her husband and giving herself to a loving wife. There were class differences in women's intellectual cultures. Cultural development was impossible in places where women had majority of the rural population. However, the less fortunate peasant women had less time for academic pursuits. Thus, their mental culture never advanced above a very primitive level.

(D) Women in post independent india

Many laws were passed following independence to raise women's status, equality and quality of life. A type of marriages for those who do not practice Christianity, Judaism or Hinduism was made possible by the Special Marriage Act, 1956. Matrimonial law became more consistent with the passage of the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 which applied to Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains. Women now could own and utilize property thanks to the Hindu Succession Act, 1956. The goal of the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act 1956 was to stop women and girls from being exploited. In 1958, the prostitutes and Immortal Traffic Act was passed, outlawing prostitutes. Some of the unique obstacles faced by women in relation to dowries were eliminated by the Dowry Prohibition act 1961.

III. LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The rights and empowerment of women have emerged as a major concern in India. The government has established several committees and initiatives aimed at uplifting women since independence. Among those guidelines are:

(A) National Policy for Women Empowerment

The 2001 National Policy for the Empowerment of Women's main objective is the empowerment and welfare of Indian women. Other tenets of this policy include the following:

- To foster an atmosphere in which women may reach their greatest potential
- To provide women decision-making authority in addition to equal participation and opportunity
- To guarantee that it has fair salary, excellent training, comparable access to health care, and other necessary guidance.
- It should include efficient judicial and legal institutions, to safeguard women from

(B) The National Commission for Women

The National Commission for Women was founded in 1992. It was put into place to safeguard women's legal rights. The Commission primary goals were:

- To maintain oversight of the legal safeguards afforded to women
- Should recommend pursuing litigation
- Responding to women's grievances and concerns
- To support the state in putting different women related initiatives into action

(C) Beti Bachao Beti Padhao

Since its 2015 debut, the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao Scheme as grown to become a significant policy for the empowerment of women. Prohibiting female feticide is the goal of this campaign. Other goals of this programme are to eradicate gender biased sex, raise awareness among the poorer segments of society, and educate and protect girls. The areas that the programme primarily targets Uttarakhand, Haryana, Delhi, U.P and Bihar.

IV. WOMEN'S MOVEMENT & ACTIVISM

Foreign feminist movements served as an inspiration for the Indian women Movements. They address challenges specific to women and aim to equalize and empower them with males. The 1800s saw the beginning of a global feminist wave that has since spread to encompass every aspect of a women's life. At first, it was about outlawing immoral behaviors, later it was about granting people greater freedom and privileges, which would ultimately enable them. In the contemporary conception, it has expanded to encompass matters such as granting them the same level of freedom as men and greater options, among other things.

(A) Women's Movement in 19 Century

British control began to spread throughout the Indian subcontinent in the 19 centuries. There have been numerous social, economic, and cultural changes in our nation. Indians were introduced to western ideals and concepts. Societal revolutions that sought to eradicate societal abnormalities like Sati, Illiteracy, the Purdah system etc. got their start because of the English Perspective. These posed significant barriers to women's advancement, and it was eventually accepted that society cannot advance unless every individual contributes equally to it.

During this time, influential figures like Savtribai Phule, Swarna kumari Devi and Rassundari Devi made significant contributions to raising awareness of women's issues and working to find solutions. Here, Savitribai Phule is a lady who merits recognition. She was from a lower caste and was known as the first female teacher in India. She and her husband put in a lot of effort to eradicate prejudice based on gender and caste. She advocated for women's education and spoke out against harmful societal norms and violence against them.

(B) Women's Movement in the Post-colonial Period

After achieving independence, India made great strides in addressing issues such as female infanticide and feticide, sati pratha, the purdah system, and woman education. During the post-colonial era, certain educational establishments catered solely to female students. When males were imprisoned during the British Raj, Indian women led the independence movement an spread headed the movement. This demonstrated that women are competent in politics in addition to being capable of leading and managing well outside the house. During the post-colonial era, several laws were established with the intention of empowering women. The Indian Constitution articles 15 and 16(2), which prohibit discrimination based on gender, are essential to the women movement. There has also been a rise in the involvement of women in politics. In 1966, Indira Gandhi became the first female prime minister of our time. The National Federation of Indian Women was founded by the Communist Party of India with the goal of empowering women in politics.

The year 1975-1985 was acknowledged as the International Women's Decade, March 8 was originally observed as Women's Day in 1975 and ever since then, March 8 has been observed globally as women's day. During that period, a few women's movements occurred both in India and elsewhere.

(C) Economic empowerment of women

Economic independence for women is a prerequisite for achieving gender equality and equal rights for women. Empowering women economically includes granting them equal access to

markets, managerial authority over resources, their own time, lives, and bodies, as well as increased agency, voice, and meaningful involvement in economic taking decisions at every level, from homes to global organizations. Gender imbalances in job opportunities must be eliminated and women's economic fairness and rights must be advanced for the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda to succeed. Women's financial empowerment encourages income equality and economic diversification for mutual prosperity. Raising the educational attainment of women and girls promotes more equitable, ecologically sustainable economic growth as well as the economic empowerment of women. For women's and girls' health and welfare, as well as their capacity to earn a living and join the formal labour force, learning, retraining, and upgrading are crucial. This is particularly so considering how quickly innovations in technology are changing the nature of work. Business benefits from the economic equality of women. By providing women with greater opportunities in employment and in positions of authority, employers stand to win significantly, as this improves organizational efficiency and expansion. In all organizational performance areas, enterprises with three or more women in managerial positions are believed to perform better overall.

(D) Education and gender equality

It is believed that education is an especially important tool for empowering women in community. It has a big influence on the interpersonal, cultural and economic domains in addition to being limited to an individual's personal development, irrespective of gender, race, age or other variable affecting their social or economic status, UNESCO strove to guarantee that everyone has equal access to education. When it comes to women's economic empowerment, education is essential. It took the lead, but not for a lengthy period, most women especially those living in rural areas have been denied this privilege and had to put up with extremely demeaning roles and behaviors. Girls who have an education are more capable of achieving in their personal, professional, and financial life. Numerous variables, particularly women's education, contribute to the nation's low rate of female literacy. A low or high literacy rate can be attributed to a number of socioeconomic, demographic, political factors. The low acceptance of women in educational institutions serves as one of the main barrier to women's emancipation in India. According to credible statistics, 50% of all girls have never one to school. One the other hand, two in ten girls around the ages of six and eleven do not go to school. The place of women in educational institution could have a big effect on society. Women's education and social lives have undergone a dramatic transformation due to global advancements in culture, society, politics and technology. Women's educational deficit is inefficient from an economic standpoint if female only schools increase human capital,

economic development, and productivity on par with male only schools. Studies show that educational achievement for women results in an economic growth rate that is equal to men's education. Empowering women is essential to every community, nation, or state. In a child's fundamental existence, a woman has a dominating position. A significant portion of our society is made up of women. A shift in attitudes towards women's empowerment via education is possible. For India's political and social development, it is consequently essential. The Indian Constitution gives the government the authority to implement affirmative action policies that support strategies for empowering woman. Women's lifestyles vary considerably depending on their level of education.

(E) Health and reproductive rights

In addition to the freedom from torture, women's reproductive rights have connections with numerous other human rights, including the rights to life, health, privacy, education, and non discrimination. Reproductive rights, which cover a variety of options and rights pertaining to women's autonomy and reproductive health, are an essential part of women's human rights. Women Empowerment, equality, and well-being dependent on these rights. The States have a duty to uphold, defend and respect women's sexual and reproductive health rights. Like in many other nations, reproductive rights for women in India cover a wide variety of concerns and rights pertaining to their capacity to make decisions regarding their family planning, reproductive health, and general well-being.

- Women should have access to a range of contraceptive options so they may decide for themselves whether and whether to have children.
- Women are entitled to make choices regarding their bodies, including the option to undergo a safe and authorized abortion. "The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act", 1971 in India allows abortion up to a certain gestational age and under certain conditions.
- Child marriage is a violation of reproductive rights since it can result in early and frequently hazardous pregnancies. To outlaw child marriage, India passed the "Prohibition of Child Marriage Act", 2006
- Protection from gender-based violence, such as forced pregnancies and coercive reproductive decisions, is another aspect of reproductive rights.
- The right to maternity benefits and assistance both before and after childbirth is included in the category of reproductive rights. To safeguard these rights, the Indian government

has passed legislation like the Maternity Benefit Act.

- Ensuring the full realization of these rights is a continuous effort that includes education, infrastructural upgrades for healthcare, and legislative revisions. The right to procreate is crucial to women's general health, well-being and empowerment.
- The denial of reproductive rights is now recognized by the Supreme court of India and numerous State High Courts as a violation of women's and girl's basic and human right. This is a significant advancement:
- Under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, the judiciary in India rendered the seminal **K.S Putta Swamy** ruling, granting an individual the sense and privilege of personal liberty.
- The Supreme Court of India has expanded the definition of personal liberty decriminalizing adultery and homosexuality in the case of **Navtej Singh Johar v. UOI**
- In the context of girl's reproductive rights, the Supreme Court ruled in the case of **Independent Thought v. UOI** that a female child's human rights are very much alive and kicking, regardless of her marital status and she deserves respect and acknowledgment.

V. CASE STUDIES AND SUCCESS STORIES

1. "Vishaka Vs State of Rajasthan AIR 1997 SC 3011"

Raped by five men for rejecting a child marriage was Bhanwari Devi, a social worker from Rajasthan. Because she was adamant about obtaining justice, she chose to put herself in court. All of the suspects were acquitted by the startling trial court decision. Bhanwari Devi's cause was taken up by Vishaka, an organization that promotes women's research and education. It appealed to the Indian Supreme Court on sexual harassment in the workplace after merging with four other women's organizations. On August 13, 1997, the Supreme Court issued an order known as the Vishaka guidelines, which defined sexual harassment and gave employers the duty of ensuring safe working conditions for women.

2. "Lata Singh Vs State of Uttar Pradesh (2006) 5 SCC 475"

As a mature woman, Lata Singh went out of her family's home when she married a man from a lower caste. Her brothers filed a missing person's report and said Lata had been kidnapped because they were unhappy with the alliance. Thus, three family members of her spouse were taken into custody. Lata Singh entered a plea to have the charges dropped, which resulted in a

landmark decision by the Supreme Court allowing an adult woman the right to live and marry anybody she desires. The police must also bring criminal charges against anyone who uses violence against anybody who decide to get married regardless of own caste or religion, according to a court order.

3. “Mary Roy Vs State of Kerala 1986 AIR 1011 1986 SCR (1) 371 1986 SCC (2) 209 1986”

The Syrian Christian community in Kerala had a patriarchal system that prevented its women from inheriting property. The decision was challenged by educator and woman rights campaigner Marry Roy. After the death of her father, she sued her older brother, claiming that she was not awarded an equal share of the property. Despite the lower court's denial of the plea, the Kerala High Court reversed the prior decision. Syrian Christian women now have the legal right to petition for an equal share of their father's assets thanks to a landmark Supreme Court decision in 1986.

4. Roxann Sharma Vs Arun Sharma 2015 (8) SCC 318

With her ex-husband, Roxann, there was a heated disagreement about child custody. Roxann was granted interim custody of their child by a Goa court, but Arun Sharma whisked the child away and refused to let her see it. After she sued him, the Supreme Court issued a landmark decision on kids caught in the middle of a parental disagreement. As per a Supreme Court order, the child who is under five years old and is the subject of a custody struggle between divorced parents will remain with the mothe

5. “State of Tamil Nadu Vs Suhas Katti C No. 4680 of 2004”

The first verdict under Information Technology Act, 2000 was brought by this case. When the victim of crime declined to marry the accused, Suhas Katti, she began to receive threats from him. He would mail her on yahoo in an online group, sending her vulgar and libelous messages. She started getting calls for sex services from strangers, which made her condition even worse. In February 2004, the victim lodged a complaint, and the accused was found guilty after seven months. Women may utilize this judgement as an arsenal to protect their dignity in the age of vicious trolling as well as other sorts of online harassment.

6. “Laxmi Vs Union of India 2014 (4) SCC 427”

In 2006, Laxmi, who had been attacked by acid, submitted a petition requesting legislation to regulate the trade of acid and provide adequate compensation to the victim. After observing a rise in cases of acid attacks on women, the Supreme Court imposed astringent restriction on the

sale acid in 2013. The ruling prohibited the over-the-counter sale of acid. Traders are only allowed to sell acid if a consumer shows a valid form of documentation and a declaration confirming the requirement of the purchasing. Within 3 days, the vendor must inform the police the details of the transactions. It also made it illegal to sell acid to anyone under age of 18 years.

7. “Termination of 24-week-old pregnancy permitted on account of abnormal fetus”

The petitioner, a 24-week pregnant baby with defects who wished to remain nameless, appeared at the Supreme Court seeking permission to abort the unborn. The petition contested the Maternal Termination of Pregnancy Act, which was passed 46 years ago and prohibits the abortion of fetuses older than 20 weeks, or around 4 and a half months. After the board of medicine issued a report stating that the life of the mother could be in jeopardy if the pregnancy proceeded, the petitioner successfully argued their case in the Supreme Court.

8. “Centre for enquiry into Health and Allied themes (CEHAT) Vs Union of India AIR 2001 (5) SCC 577”

Prenatal diagnostic methods that potentially identify a fetus’s gender have led to an increasing tendency of aborting female fetuses. The Indian government adopted the PNDT Act in 1996 with the goal of reducing female feticide. Nevertheless, the PNDT Act's obligations were not being sufficiently enforced by the national and state governments. The Supreme Court banned advertisements related to prenatal sex determination technologies and directed the Central and State governments to swiftly execute the provisions of the legislation in response to a petition by the Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Them

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The outcomes of this study demonstrate that women’s empowerment improves their prosperity to seek health care and this conclusion should be accepted as the standard and a crucial element of health systems design. Religious misconceptions need to be dispelled for women to work more and move outside the house. Media campaigns and the participation of local religious authorities could help disseminate views in favour of women’s empowerment and rights. Men and women should both be able to obtain more education, and it should be ensured that no woman marries becoming eighteen. It is important to boost women’s engagement in the workforce so they may become financially independent. To establish a culture of communication between husband and wife regarding family concerns, attention should also be paid to male participation in all aspects of conjugal life, including the use of healthcare services for mothers. An integrated plan for India’s growth and health must take this result into account.