

Education & Empowerment: Women In Ancient India

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Abstract

Women's education is considered a necessary pre-requisite to their empowerment and vital to achieve gender equality. This is key to establishment of a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. Hence countries across the globe are striving for it. This paper attempts to study the link between education and empowerment in context of women. It also tries to explore why one section of the population-women have been deprived of education, which could have been the reason behind their subordination. It attempts to delve deep into our past- Ancient India history to figure out the roots of denial of education to women. Textual sources indicate that the early period of history (Rig Vedic Age) was one of relative equality between sexes as we hear of highly educated women, learned women scholars as well as warrior women. It seems they were empowered to exercise their rights and make their own choices. However, gradually over centuries with Manu's code of law and the Dharamshastras these rights were withdrawn from women and restrictions imposed on them. Child marriage resulted was a major setback to women's education. This led to the gradual loss of all other powers, prestige and status in society resulting in their subordination. This continued till modern age with some progress with respect to women's education and empowerment but the road to gender equality is far ahead.

Keywords: Women, Education, Empowerment, Patriarchy, Autonomy, Subordination.

Introduction

In modern times, women's empowerment has become an important area of state policy. Women constitute nearly half of Indian population. Their empowerment is a key to achieve gender equality and important for a peaceful, prosperous and progressive world. Hence, both state and civil society are striving hard to promote women's empowerment across the nation. Education is extremely important for the progress of any society and no society can progress if a significant section of its population-women, remains uneducated. It can be said that education is a step forward towards empowerment of women, which can bring about positive changes in the society. No nation can progress without the contribution of nearly half of its population. Hence education and empowerment of women is important for any progressive society. This is

reflected in the below mentioned statement by our first Prime Minister and national leader:

“If you educate a man you educate an individual, however, if you educate a woman you educate a whole family. Women empowered means mother India empowered” (Jawaharlal Nehru)

Various national and international organisations have been taking initiatives towards the objective of gender parity in education irrespective of differences of race, caste or class. Education enables women to face the challenges posed by society, customs, rituals since time immemorial. Education is an enabling factor through which a woman gain knowledge, earn her livelihood as well as the respect she deserves in society. It helps to reduce the gender gap and enhances women's position within the domestic space. Empowerment enables women to exercise her rights and choices gives a certain degree of

independence, exposure required for a better life (Singh, 2016).

Empowerment

As per Meriam Webster dictionary, Empowerment is the act of enabling someone or something: through grant of power, authority to perform various acts or duties. In simple terms, it is the process which enables women to exercise their rights and choices and take their own decisions in both in the domestic realm as well as external sphere (EIGE report). Womens' autonomy and empowerment is not a simple linear process. As per the United Nations, it has five key components such as women's understanding of their own worth, exercising their own choice, access to resources and opportunity, right over their own lives, capability to influence the society to create a just socio-economic order. This may be achieved through a number of measures such as education, generating awareness and confidence, varied choices, and greater access and control over resources as well as steps to eliminate gender-based discrimination and inequality (UN Women, 2011).

Education

The importance of education is foremost for empowerment of women in society. This has multiple advantages; besides personality development it also plays a significant role in economic and socio-cultural development (Majumdar, 1916). In modern independent India, Indian State has taken various initiatives and launched programmes like 'beti bachao beti padhao' to encourage full literacy of the female population. Educated Indian women are in no way inferior to men. They have proven themselves to be efficient workers in discharge of their duties in all walks of life. Hence, it is important they get equal access to proper education.

If we delve into India's past, it can be observed that access to education and resources was limited to some upper caste, royal, elite or women of rich families. Women at large were deprived of education due to social, norms, customs, apathy and secondary status of women

in the society (Sharma, 2015: 107). Even in modern India, social attitudes, child marriage and dowry have been the greatest obstacles to girls' education in modern times. Both, education and secure employment (in government, universities, other professions), are bridal qualifications sought after in the marriage market today—not as enhancing bride's self-confidence or independence—but as assuring the family a higher status with double income (Majumdar, 1916). All this is closely connected with the issue of subordination of women. Hence, we need to figure out the historical roots of this subordination to understand the denial of education to women at large.

The issue of women's subordination especially in context of India has a long history. To find answer to these questions of denial of rights to women we need to go back to the first phase of India's history, i.e. Ancient period. We need to assess whether women during this phase were educated and empowered. If so when did their subordination begin during the historical period?

Women in Ancient India

Vedic Age : Renowned historian Max Muller opines, although Rig Vedic Age was patriarchal, it was considered the golden age for women due to their equal status and rights, especially the right to receive education (Selvi 2021:6). Although this has been a topic of debate among the historians. It is largely believed that education of women was part and parcel of the Vedic society. Children irrespective of their sex received education. If any women wanted to acquire education and wanted to remain spinster they were allowed to do so (Rout, 2016). Most girls, belonging to well-to-do families had the privilege of acquiring education. Females of three higher varnas could study Vedas from a teacher who at many times used to be a lady. The final aim of education was to attain moksha or liberation. The student became a brahmachari after going through upanayana sanskara or the ceremony of initiation (sacred thread ceremony). One was not allowed to recite the Vedic mantras at any occasion without the upanayana sanskara. Textual sources reveal that female (girls, wives, mothers, widows) chanted mantras at several

occasions both public and private. The term Kathi was given to a female student of Katha school and Bahvrichi to that of Bahvricha school. Female had the right to study mimamsa and once she completed her study of mimamsa-sutra from Rishi Kasakritsna, she was known as Kasakritsna. In this period, female students were commonly referred to as chhatri and female teacher as Upadhyayi. Panini refers to residential places or chhatrisalas which housed female students or chhatris, under the direct supervision of upadhyayi. (Sharma, 2015). Prayers were not only offered for a son but also for a beautiful and intelligent daughter. The Haritasmrti mentions two categories of educated women - Brahmadhinis, were spinsters dedicated to the study of Vedas. The second category was that of the Sadyodvahas who studied Vedas until marriage by the age of 15 or 16 years. Women mostly participated in religious rites along with their spouse (King, 1987) but we have evidence of single women performing religious rites as well. We find mention of women as scholars, philosophers, artists and poets during Vedic age. Upanishad (800-500 BCE) mentions learned scholars like Sulabha, Maitreyi, and Gargi during Kathi, Kalapi, Bahvici, Visvavāra, Ghosā, Apālā, Lopamudra, Romasha and Indrani. Some of them composed hymns and many hymns have been attributed to few of them (Mookherjee, 1994). 27 out of over 1000 hymns of Rig Veda is said to have been composed by women sages, including Visvara (King, 1987).

Women wrote Sanskrit plays and verses, received training in fine arts, music and painting, dancing as well. Sources indicate, women of royal or elite families received military training and actively participated in the battle. Other economic activities performed by women in this age were dyeing, thread, basket-making, plaiting mats, rope, garment and perfume-making, doll-making, etc. Such occupations enabled women to lead a decent socio-economic life. In spite of early exceptions, higher education remained largely confined to male members of Brahmanical caste (King, 1987).

“The scholarly woman purifies our lives with her intellect. Through her knowledge and action, she promotes virtue and efficient management of society” : Yajur Veda (Sharma, 2015).

There is evidence of women of high intellect like Gārgi and Maitreyi one who could address a Congress of Philosophers on learned topics and had attained the highest philosophical knowledge or Brahmavidya (Mookherjee, 1994). A famous conversation between Yajnavalkya and his highly educated wife Maitreyi, at the time of his retirement to forest, indicates that women were then 'considered as intellectual companions of their husbands'(Majumdar, 1916). Upanishads mentions case of verbal duel between women philosophers and their male colleagues, such as Gargi Vacaknavi challenged Sage Yajnavalkya (Rout, 2016). Education enabled or rather empowered women to live a dignified and respectful life. Learned women received due respect and appreciation in the society. They could protect themselves against any form of maltreatment (Kapur, 2018). However, the condition did not remain the same, over centuries, the societal rules and laws relegated women to the domestic realm, deprived them of education and disempowered them in the hands of patriarchy.

Later Vedic Age: Around 500 BC women were gradually deprived of the rights and privileges they had enjoyed during the Vedic age. They could no longer undergo the Upanayan sanskara, hence made ineligible to receive education. This further made them ineligible to chant Vedic mantras or perform sacrifices. Later the law codes of Dharmashastra and Manusmriti put stringent restriction on women, by reducing the age of marriage to 8 or 9 years, thus depriving them of the opportunity to receive education.

Manusmriti (200 A.D): “By a girl, by a young woman, or even an aged one, nothing must be done independently”. He further adds, “In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons” (Sharma, 2015).

However, some women of elite and royal families continued to receive literary education but not allowed to study Vedas. In general, common women were trained to be good wives and mothers as their lives were confined to the domestic space (Sharma, 2015).

Age of Buddha & Mahavir: Initially Buddhist order had kept its gates closed for women. However, on the insistence of his aunt Mahapajapati Gautmi and his disciple Ananda, he permitted womens' entry into the Sangha for the purpose of education. A bhikshuk or monk was assigned the task of imparting education to the bhikshunis. Bhikshunis had to stay in Sangha and undertake a two-year apprenticeship before they could receive 'Diksha' (religious custom). Initially, Buddhist education was limited to only 'bhikshus' and 'bhikshuni's, much later it was opened to commoners in order to propagate Buddhism. Notably 13 eminent Buddhist nuns were sent to several countries including Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to propagate Buddhism. Rani Kshema, Sujata, Shuva, Anupama, Sumedha, etc. were notable disciples of Lord Buddha. Although the number of female nuns was very less in number as compared to Buddhist monks, they composed several hymns, wrote Sanskrit plays, verses and were also trained in music, fine arts and painting. Sources indicate that several Buddhist nuns excelled as teachers and scholars in their domain and many could also attain high intellectual knowledge (Sharma, 2015).

Mauryan Age: Even Emperor Asoka's daughter, Sanghamitra was inducted into Buddhist fold and sent for propagation of Buddhism. Jain sources mentions Kosambi princess, Jayanti remained unmarried to study religion and philosophy (Radhamma, 2022). Lines from Lalita Vistara clearly indicates female at the time of Buddha were taught to read and write and be accomplished in several ways (Majumdar, 1916). They wrote plays, verses, new various arts like music, painting and were trained in warfare and even participated in religious ceremonies. They also preferred to receive education in warfare, medicine, dharmashastras, business code ethics etc. (Selvi, 2021). One category of women, courtesans were skilled in specific arts like music, poetry and sexual pleasure. This clearly indicates that not all women were deprived and relegated to the domestic space. There were a section of women who acquired certain specific skills and education, still, the scope of womens' education was very limited.

Empowerment in Ancient India

We have seen how early centuries of Ancient India was a period of relative equality in terms of the right to education. During this period women had the right to exercise their rights and choices. This indicates the progressive nature of Vedic age. Let us see how empowered were women of Ancient Indian society. Sources suggest several women played important roles in the socio-political fabric of that time. Maitrayee, Gargi and Leelavati were not only highly learned women, but well versed in mathematics, astronomy and humanities (Lakshmi, 2011). Hence women not only acquired knowledge but disseminated it too. Along with it, they also carried out family responsibilities and were active members of the society (Thakur, 2017).

Women of Vedic age were not only educated, but skilled in warfare as well. Sources indicate that names of women like Mudgalini who won a battle while Vishpala and Vadhrimati were amputated while fighting the battle. Vadhrimati and Sasiyasi are known for their bravery in the battlefield (Leslie, 1983). Megasthenes (traveller in Mauryan Court) mentions that Chandragupta's palace was heavily protected by armed women guards (Rout, 2016). Not only that he also mentions a Pandyan women running the administration (Radhamma, 2022). Names of three women Gargi Vacknavi, Vadava Atreyi and Sulabha Maitreyi were recited during the daily offering of water to gods and father. Few female rishis, like Arundhati was honoured with a reserve seat along with the male sages at the utsarga day (Leslie, 1983). All this indicates that women enjoyed equal opportunities and respect in the Vedic society and to a great extent they seem to be empowered. They had the choice with respect to education, marriage, selection of groom and they could choose to remain single. Moreover, many women were involved in political as well as economic roles outside the domestic space similar to males.

However, as mentioned in the earlier paragraphs, the period between 500 CE-1800 CE was a period of progressive deterioration with respect to women's rights (Altekar, 1938). It is not clear what led to the denial of rights and choices to women, and their confinement to domestic space. The Brahmanical texts, Dharmashtras, Hindu law books, especially

Laws of Manu (200 BCE-100 CE) are believed to be behind the disempowerment of women in Ancient India post-Vedic age. Even women of higher castes were equated with lowest caste - shudras, as both were deprived of the Upanayan sanskar and recitation of Vedic texts in Sanskrit. They were deprived of religious education and the right to perform sacrifices independently (Leslie, 1983). Women's formal education was abandoned and substituted by early marriage, moreover widow remarriage was also prohibited. In case of women, post 500 CE. Women's duties were exclusively defined in terms of wife and mother. However, Manu's code of laws did not allow women to leave home for asceticism (King, 1978). This suggests that denial of education meant loss of empowerment for women in Ancient Indian society.

Conclusion

Hence, we can trace the roots of women's disempowerment and deprivation of their right to education to the Ancient period of Indian history. This curtailment of women's rights and choices in India, however, continued up to modern times. Gradually social evils like Sati system, purdah, female feticide further worsened the condition of women. During colonial period, efforts were taken by our social reformers to do away with social evils such as sati, and efforts were taken for female education etc. in order to improve the image of India before the Western world. These initiatives came in response to the colonialist view of Indian society being a backward society with draconian customs like Sati. Hence, due to the initiatives taken by the Social reformers of the early 19th century many such customs were outlawed during the colonial rule, but the right to equality between the sexes was granted only with enactment of the Indian Constitution. Despite, the legal grant of equality, centuries of deprivation, inequality and oppression had left women way behind the other sex.

Positive interventionist measures by the state, womens' rights groups, civil society in modern independent India has led to considerable progress in the field of womens' education. This has certainly led to women's empowerment as they are visible in all walks of life today marching ahead shoulder to shoulder with men. However,

women's education or empowerment is not an all-India phenomenon, the road to achieving complete gender equality is still too far. However, the fact remains that empowering women for full participation in economic life across all sectors is essential to build strong economies and achieve internationally agreed goals for development and sustainability, and improve the quality of life for all and the community at large and womens' education has an important role to play in this regard (UN Women, 2011).

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