

British India: The Watershed in Indian Women's Status And political Rights

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Abstract – The religious writings and the accessible writing on antiquated India have allocated ladies a subordinate way of life as these writings characterize the job of Aryan men in detail yet ladies are overlooked as the other subaltern classes. The sacred Indian sacred text Bhagwad Gita places Women, Vaisyas and Sudras in a single classification. As indicated by another content, the discipline for murdering either a ladies or a Sudra is the equivalent. Woman was never perceived as a free personality. The subordination of ladies to men is unmistakably portrayed in the Manu Smriti. Manu expressed that a lady ought to never be free: as a little girl she ought to be under the observation of her dad, as a wife of her husband and as a dowager of her child. Some other recorded confirmations propose that amid the Vedic time frame ladies had an equivalent status to men. They were permitted to contemplate the Vedas and take an interest in Philosophical dialogs. Indeed, even a few songs of the Rig Veda were made by ladies. In the wake of completing their training, they could either enter wedded life or give themselves to religious and mystical investigations much the same as men.

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This article explores the status of Indian women in British India highlighting the multifarious uplifts in status in the said period. After the decline of the Mughal Empire and the second half of the 18th century the Britishers established their complete political supremacy over the Indian people. During British period some long lasting progress was made in removing discrimination between men and women in matters of education, employment, property rights, social and political rights. After a long hiatus spanning over centuries nationwide endeavors were made for the first time to deal with gender-specific problems and issues. These issues attracted the attention of the nineteenth century social reformers. Efforts of social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Rai, Ishwar Chander Vidhyasagar, Swami Vivekanand, Swami Dayanand and etc. received further impetus from the British Government's various pro-women measures. Raja Ram Mohan Roy played a vital role in abolition the of Sati system. He raised his voice against child marriage and Purdah system. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar also made spearhead efforts for the upliftment of the status of women, it was due to his efforts that the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 could be passed. He also advocated for female education. They tried to raise the position of Indian women, and the renewed efforts by British rulers, there was seen a gradual change in the position of women in the 20th century.

The status of women in the British rule that "During the course of the 19th century the pattern of women's lives began to change in reality the concept of the

'perfect life' was being redefined. First, there was modification in the appropriate activities for a female at different stages of her life. Second the appropriate arena of female action was expanded and there was a new as well as grouping approval of individualism." (Forbes Geraldine) The status of woman even during the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh of the ruler of Punjab as well as in other regions of India was not so improved in the society. It was a deteriorate state in many communities of that time. For example, the general condition of females in the period of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and afterwards was such that "While the birth of a son was celebrated, and there was rejoicing in the family, the birth of a daughter was considered as inauspicious. Female infanticide, early marriage, purdah and sati continued to exist in the society..... The practice of sati was common among the higher classes and castes of Rajputs and Sikhs.... Widow re-marriage did exist among the Hindus and they had to lead a very hard and miserable life. However, marriage existed among the Jat Sikhs (with a simple ceremony known as Kareva or Chadar Pauni). The idea was that the property of dead brother should remain in the family." (Sudershan, 2002).

During the British rule in the 19th century , the status of women in India that were some reforms by the Britishers as well as other Indian social institutions or some organizations of that time to improve the status for in the society e.g. enacting some laws to obstruct the harassment of women,

trying to bring the equal status with males some welfare institutions set up for the welfare of women, encouraged the education policy, and Christian missionary ladies and other renowned leaders rendered the Yeoman's service for setting up many educational institutions and other social reforms for the women in the society. Their aim was to obstruct the social evils and practices in the Indian society, e.g. child marriage, Purdah system, the female infanticide, polyandry, polygamy, to remove obstruction of widow re-marriage, prostitution, sati system, and Devadasis (temple dancers wedded to the gods) etc.

Before the Britishers came into power, there was no ample awareness in every sphere of women's life. But during the British period, there began a little attention to improve the social, political and economic position of the women especially by way of providing the best education. The social and religious reformers thought through education, to women began by many leading leaders of that time, e.g. on that occasion, many "Socio-religious organizations like the Arya Samaj, the Dev Samaj, Brahma Samaj, the Singh Sabhas, the Chief Khalsa Dewan and Muslim Anjumans made strenuous efforts in this direction'... They advocated education for women, raising their marriageable age and remarriage of widows.... The Christian missionaries indeed were the pioneers in the field of female education..." (Amrita, 2000). Keeping in view various significant factors like worry about the physical efficiency and body health of the female, lack of the development of the children and also the worst effect of breaking of the joint families, etc., the reforms for improving the status of women became a dire necessity.

Many scholars have dwelt upon various measures and reforms to improve the status of women taken up in the 20th century and 21st century necessitated by the unequal status and position of women vis-à-vis men in Indian society at that time. "English education and Western ideas have played an important part in engendering this change, but an equally great, if not even greater, part has been played by an appeal to the ancient Hindu ideals of womanhood and to the teachings of the ancient Hindu religion in the matter of the relations of the sexes. A study of ancient Hindu literature made it abundantly clear that the present unenviable lot of Indian women was due to the deterioration of their old ideal." (Lajpat Rai, 1967).

As forces education is concerned, "very little has been done to further the education of Indian women. The system of Government introduced by the British, necessitated the education of Indian men for administrative reasons (census report of 1911 Males: 100 per 1000; Female 10 per 1000; an average of 58 per 1000 of the total population). The Arya Samaj occupies a higher position in the Punjab and United Provinces of Agra and Oudh. It can be safely said that there had occurred a metamorphosis in the

outlook of men towards women." [5] Moreover, during the second half of the 19th century, "the Arya Samaj is strongly opposed to Child marriage. It has conducted a fiery crusade against the unnatural customs, and may be congratulated on its successes in rallying public opinion in favour of its view." [6] Dr. S. K. Gupta also states: "With the coming of the British, and the spread of Western education in India, many people awoke to awake the millions in slumber. They felt the pulse of the times and came to the conclusion that if India was to awake, if it was to break the chains of slavery, first and foremost work was raising the status of women." (Shiv, 1991) He further mentions that "Almost all socio-religious movements of the region viz. Namdhari, Singh Sabha, Brahma Samaj and Dev Samaj of the 19th century played key role in the raising womanhood. Of course, the results of their efforts differed only on account of the strength of the organization and means at its disposal." [8]

The observation about the improved the improved status of Indian women in Indian society now is: "if a person who lived a hundred years ago come to life today, the first and most important change that would strike him is the revolution in the position of women in modern India. ... Arrival of European women in India and their lifestyle was a great impact on the lifestyle and modern change in India's women played a great factor... 'when European first landed in India, the condition of Indian women was at the lowest ebb. The Europeans brought with them and exhibited customs of a permissive society, i.e. ballroom dancing, frank and open meeting of members of both sexes, drinking, widow re-marriage, etc. To these were added horse races, tennis, hunting and riding in which both men and women participated. ... Albuquerque abolished sati by law in the Portuguese territories in India and later William Bentinck stopped it in British India. It was however left to some dedicated European ladies like Flora Annie Steel, Lady Dufferin, Lady Mountbatten etc. and others to uplift womanhood with their devotion and selfless work in India." (Bhatia, 1979)

It was during British period that Education for women was adopted as the cardinal means of reform and improvement in the status of women. The Christian Missionaries took keen interest in the education and upliftment of girls. The ball was set rolling with the establishment of girls' school in Bombay in 1824. The need for female education was further highlighted by the Hunter commission in 1881. The Calcutta, Bombay and Madras universities practiced gender discrimination and refused permission to women and their entry into higher education became a reality after 1882.

The renowned historian, B. N. Lunia states that "The Christian missionaries and all the Indian reformers have been promoting women's education... After the mutiny female education

received a great impetus from the Government as well as various social institutions like the Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, the Theosophical society and the Ramkrishan Mission... A large number of schools and colleges have been opened for women and each succeeding days shows steady progress in this direction." (Lunia, 1970)

Thus, we may conclude that the status of women in India registered a remarkable upliftment during the British regime. The impact was visible in the social and education fields. Various social evils like child marriage, sati system, devadasi system, purdah system, prohibition of widow remarriage, etc.. were controlled/eliminated by formation of gender-friendly legislations. Along with the social upliftment in the status of women, a major shift in perception about the roles and functions of women folk became the hallmark of this period. The British period proved to be watershed in the status of Indian women as for the first time the focus came on women as individual entities which later bloomed into the appreciable ideal of gender-equality and women empowerment in post-independent Indian society and country.

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