

Research Article

**ROLE OF MODERN SOCIAL REFORMERS TOWARDS THE EMPOWERMENT OF  
WOMEN IN INDIA**

P. Kavitha<sup>1</sup>, Dr. A. Thennarasu<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract**

The progress of any society largely depends on the advancement of the position of women in that society. However, modern social reformers towards the empowerment of women in India consideration in the present development debate that is genuinely reflected in the contemporary development literature. Women empowerment isn't too old a phenomenon. In oriental belt of globe; it has got currency just in the ongoing past. The approach of women empowerment is expected to conquer any hindrance among men and women. During the 1980s and 1990s, researchers and specialists turned to empowerment, which is said to happen when females assemble themselves and take initiative positions in work settings or the community. The paper will thus focus on the role of modern social reformers towards the empowerment of women in india national perspective.

**Keywords:** Modern Social Reformers, Empowerment, Women

**Introduction**

In a personal recollection of his participation in a session of the Second Vatican Council (The status of women in our country depicts the social condition of the age. From time immemorial woman along with man, has formed an integral part of the social structure. Variations in her status have been taking place now and then due to numerous forces such as economic development, political participation, and ideological overtones.

Women plays manifold roles in the society: as a mother, sister or wife she socializes, loves, feeds and supports individuals of the family with devotion, affection, love, sincerity and obedience. She is the foundation stone of the family in particular and the society in general.

Women in India are treated as a goddess-Shakti. She has to be respected, worshipped and honoured.

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<sup>1</sup>Ph. D. Scholar (History) Associate Professor & Head,

<sup>2</sup>Department of History, Government Arts College, Salem-7

All the noble rivers which irrigate our fields and make them productive are worshipped in the form of a woman. The deities Saraswathy for learning, Laxmi for wealth and Annapurna for harvests are all women. Further each god is worshipped along with his consort and there, too, the name of the woman appears first e.g., Sita-Ram, Radhe-Shyam, Laxmi-Narayan, Uma-Shanker etc.

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The position of woman in any civilization shows the stage of evolution it has reached. The best way to understand the spirit of civilization is to study the history of the position and status of women in it.

### **Women in Ancient India**

During the early Vedic age women enjoyed a high status particularly related to learning and culture, as is mentioned in the Rig Veda and the Upanishads, the oldest known literature in the whole world. The Vedic tradition of culture and education continued in the age of Panini (fifth Century) and Patanjali. Women scholars and wives of teachers called upadhyaya and acharya are mentioned in these sacred texts.

Many instances of ascetic and domestic types of Indian women are found in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Sita is an idol of Indian womanhood while Gandhari, Kunti and Draupadi are characterized as dedicated housewives. The position of women gradually deteriorated as the golden Vedic ideals of unity and equality began to fade with the passage of time.

Religion is a universal phenomenon. "Many religions developed in India, of which Hinduism is unique due to its content, complexity and in reality being simply "a way of life". It started with the pre-Aryan sources of image worship, yoga system of self-discipline, sacrifice to ferocious deities, superstitions and elaborates funeral rituals. Next followed the Aryan traditions of fire worship, the yajnas (sacrifice) to the many gods and the growth of varnasharma dharma and the four-fold division of society or caste system, which became the backbone of Hinduism. Its ideals were reaffirmed in the Hindu philosophical and religious document, the Gita.

In the Hindu social organization the woman's position was not uniform over the ages in history. All sacred texts relegate women's place to a lower or secondary rank to men. Women had no social life outside those of the family.

On one hand, Manu, the first law giver has been very particular in granting a dignified and honorable position to women. He categorically says. "Women must be honoured and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands and brothers-in-law who desire own welfare. Where women are honoured their gods are pleased. Where women are not honoured, no sacred rite yields reward. Where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes, but that family where they are happy prospers. Hence men, who seek their own welfare, should always honour women on holy days and festivals with gifts of ornaments, clothes and dainty food".

In view of her emotional and physical condition Manu lays great stress on her all round protection. He says, "her father should protect her during childhood, husband during youth and sons in old age".

On the other hand, Manu has also said "no sacrifice is allowed to women apart from their husbands', no religious rites, no fasting: as far as a wife honours her lord, so far she is exalted in heaven". This has led thinkers on the subject to wonder whether the aim of the early laws, since they were made by men had been to keep women in complete submission, so that they dare not have their own free will.

A wife according to the Vedic texts is thus a mere material machine and a domestic drudge. She is a part of her husband that is why a widow ascended his funeral pyre and burnt herself alive in sati. The husband is directed never to eat with his wife, and the wife never to mention his name and respect him as a god, whatever his qualities are.

The Hindu woman has no individuality of her own. A man considers his son more important than his wife, who considers her husband more important than her children. If a

woman gives birth to a daughter first, the family members look down upon her and if she continues to deliver a female baby for a second time, there is all possibility of her husband to go in for a second marriage. A son is desired in order to be a successor, an inheritor, the trustee, the perpetuator of tradition and a saviour of the father's sins. Child marriages were also in vogue.

Education considered as a luxury was denied to the female members. Usually bigamy was practiced but even a young widow was prohibited to marry again. A girl was imposed with many restrictions such as 'not to laugh', 'not to talk', 'not to run', etc. According to the Hindu tradition the family is patrilineal, patrilocal and therefore patriarchal.

Jainism and Buddhism rejected the sanctity of the Vedas, considered all sex relations, in or out of marriage, as inferior to brahmacharyam. Women too were admitted to the religious order of nuns, though placed inferior to the monks, being prohibited to read certain chapters in their texts such as the Artha Sastra. But marriage for the laity (non-clergy) was recognized as either arranged by parents, swayamavara or by Gandharva or love marriage. Monogamy was the general rule; conjugal infidelity and adultery begin severely punished. Desirability of women was considered bad and woman was looked upon as the temptress. But courtesans held a high position in society. Ladies of the royal class who did not wish to be seen by vulgar eyes observed purdah. The ruling kings who professed Jainism did lead a polygamous life. Eunuchs and old men-end women guarded the harem. Recruiting women for the harem was through marriages, purchase or capture.

Gautama Buddha also considered women as possessing anger, passion, envy and stupidity which made them incapable of being present in public assemblies, carry on business and earn a living by any profession. Buddhism recognized the individuality and independence of women, at a level higher than their Hindu counterparts.

Yet there is the other side of the coin. The stereotype image of the Indian woman was that of a tradition bound, meticulously religious person in a subservient position. She functioned in an environment, which was considered as dull and monotonous with limited opportunity of self-expression. But the 'Joint Hindu Family' is the social milieu where women find avenues for interaction and communication with other women. Moreover, the social and religious festivals are designed as a source of creative activity, entertainment and diversion. Women socialized in this environment and no one ever regarded life as dull or limited and had minimal feelings of conflict or distress with their role. Also, many women when provided with chance opportunities, grabbed it, broke the shackles of restrictions and shone with their potentialities e.g., Gargi, Maithreyi, Anusuya, Sulbha, Gandhari, Kunti, Draupati etc. The 'Tolkappiyam' modeled on Sanskrit grammar, states that with the growing Aryan influence, the position of women began to decline.

### **Women in Premedieval and Medieval period**

The trend regarding the position of women at home and in the society continued on the same lines further. Megasthenes testified to the growing practice of polygamy, permission of widow remarriages, divorce and employment of women as judges, dancers, domestic servants, palanquin bearers, wrestlers, accountants, palace guards, bodyguards to the king, spies, etc. Owing to the suppressed condition of women in society. Ashoka appointed superintendents who were solely concerned with the welfare of women.

During this period right to study was denied, marriageable age for girls was lowered, women were distrusted and kept in seclusion and their life was regulated by male relations.

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However, the property rights of women increased and they could inherit the property of their male relations. Thus, the growth of the feudal society strengthened the concept of private property for women.

The practice of dancing girls or Devadasis attached to temples was also in vogue. They held a highly respectable position in society and were given land grants, maidservants, jewellery, etc.

The invasion of India by the Muslims brought about further deterioration in the status of women. The Muslim conquerors attempted to impose their norms on the conquered Hindu population while the Hindu society on its part became more rigid and curtailed the rights and freedom of the lower castes women. Social evils such as Sati, Purdah, child marriage, dowry system, divorce and remarriages, polygamy etc., got established deeper in society.

Yet, even during this period quite a few eminent Muslim women like Razia Sultana, Nurjehan and Chand Bibi had achieved brilliant success in different walks of life. Among the Hindus, Rani Rupmati and Padmavati brought about significant changes in the socio cultural fields.

### **Women in Modern India**

The impact of the British rule on Indian society and on the status of women was far reaching. The introduction of market economy, modern educational system and the new values of equality, nationality, secularism and respect for personality generated a new climate for a change in the old feudal structure.

The social reformer in the 19th century for the first time raised their voice against the inferior status of women in society. Rajaram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, M.G. Ranade, Maharishi Karve, Jyotila Phule, Dayanand Saraswathi and many others were quite concerned with woman's subordinate position in society. They felt that education was a major measure for improving her status.

During the Indian National Movement and particularly in the Gandhian era many women came out of the four walls of their homes and worked in many ways to free the country. With the attainment of independence, a constitution was adopted which guaranteed equality, social, economic and political justice and liberty of thought, expression, belief and worship to all the citizens, both men and women. With this constitutional safeguard, a feeling was generated that the problems of inequality, inferiority and discrimination have been solved. But Indian society has always been and is even today a semi-feudal society. In the Indian social structure woman continues to be a secondary citizen with limited rights. She is oppressed and exploited, working eighteen hours a day inside and outside the home with no leisure. She enjoys no economic freedom too.

After independence, though women's position has been raised, the progress is neither uniform nor universal. It is observed that the seeds sown in the past are so strong that the influence of religion is still widely seen in every action of the society. Though progressive thinking of Sankara's, Vivekananda's and Gandhiji's philosophies is deeply concerned with the status of women, they failed miserably because they were combined with issues of religion and social aspects. The Indian society, though scientifically advanced is yet to achieve scientific temper. It has to differentiate religion from science, religion from economy, religion from polity etc.

During the past decade, there has been a spurt in women studies, sparked off by the International Women's Year Conference held in Mexico City in 1975 and the World

Conference of the United Nations for Women organized at Copenhagen in 1980. Scholars should go ahead, examine and assess the trends of women's status and role in society and work to establish an egalitarian developed society where women will be recognized as an equal.

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