



## Education-A Tool of Women Empowerment in India: A Historical Perspective

V. Subhashini

Lecturer in Zoology, K.B.N. College, Vijayawada-520 001, Andhra Pradesh, India

### ABSTRACT

*Education is the basic requirement for human development and right to education is a fundamental human right. The Goddess of Education is Saraswathi a woman, but women are deprived of education in India. Educating a woman creates a vital opportunity for the social and economic development of the country and society. In Asia, India has the lowest rates of female literacy. This is attributed to the fact the country has a biased outlook towards the education of women. On one hand India is referred to as "Bharat Mata" or "Janani" the mother to every Indian and on the other hand, a disregard towards girls and women. The traditional mentality assumes that women are mainly confined to the household activities like "kitchen and kids". Women nowadays, are no less proficient than men in any field. They are not what they used to be some years ago; they have now made their presence felt in every sphere of life. Women have ultimately discarded their homely image and are now making meaningful contribution to the progress of the nation but, the TRUTH is that in the modern India, the woman has always been a second grade citizen, no matter what its esteemed leaders have said or done. Education is milestone of women empowerment because it enables them to respond to the challenges, to confront their traditional role and change their life. The growth of women's education in rural areas is very slow. This obviously means that still large womenfolk of our country are illiterate, the weak, backward and exploited." Education of women is the most powerful tool to change her position in the society. Education also brings a reduction in inequalities and functions as a means of improving their status within the family. In this context one has to think about the precise questions like, have all women been empowered? If not how they will be empowered? Is the common woman vested with powers to drive the nation? Does women empowerment become a reality? This paper explains how education and empowerment has gone hand in hand in ancient, medieval and modern India. It also explains the problems faced and the possibilities ahead in achieving women empowerment through education.*

**KEYWORDS :** women empowerment, education, globalization, and female literacy rate.

### Introduction:

Since the inception of the civilization women in India have been experiencing different socio-economic status, mainly because of illiteracy, and denial of equal opportunities and importance as men. They form almost half of the population, yet struggling for equal rights over the past millennium. Various female reform movements all over the country resolved the condition of Indian women gradually. In such a situation empowerment of women is the need of the hour. Empowerment refers to the increasing of the spiritual, social, political or economic strength of all women. It is frequently seen that the empowered in their capacities develop confidence move towards life with greater dignity and self assurance. This can only happen if there is a channelized route for the empowerment of women. Globalization has presented new challenges in the realization of the goal of empowering women and now women empowerment has become the slogan and motto of many social reformers, governmental agencies and voluntary organizations. Women have a long cherished wish to have better avenues in life in order to lead the life in a more fruitful way. However the concept women empowerment is a matter of controversy even now. In fact an empowered woman is a Nation's strength. The United Nations Organization had declared the year 1975 as Women's year and the decade 1975-1985 as Women's decade which enabled economists and social scientists to unveil many issues related to women. Various studies that were conducted made a consensus that so long as women remain depressed and exploited, no nation can enjoy freedom and justice. It is found that when half of the population is denied the opportunities for utilizing their full potential, the economic parameters like growth, development and welfare remain undefined. So various steps are to be taken to educate women through which empowerment is possible.

### Importance of women empowerment:

Empowered women contribute to the health and productivity of whole families and communities and to improved prospects for the next generation. According to Sushama Shay (1998) Women Empowerment is a process which helps women to change other women's consciousness through creating awareness. The dignity and culture of a society can be detected from the status of women in that society. According to Rameshwari Pandya (2008) empowerment has become the key solution to many social problems.

"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".

---Pt. JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

Hence a special focus should be laid on empowering girls and women, since it will lead to a change in the society which would be sustainable and will be in effect for ages to come. A united approach must be followed while empowering women and it is society's constitutional, moral and social responsibility to confirm women's progress giving women equal opportunities and rights. India is poised to emerge as one of the most developed nations by 2020, more literate, knowledgeable and economically at the forefront. No doubt, women will play a vital role in contributing to the country's development. Women power is crucial to the economic growth of any country. In India this is yet to meet the requirements despite reforms. Little has been achieved in the area of women empowerment, but for this to happen, this sector must experience a chain of reforms. Though India could well become one of the largest economies in the world, it is being hindered due to a lack of women's participation.

**Education and women empowerment: Literacy levels in India continue to stand at about 65.46% for women and 82.14% for men.**

Education is especially significant for girls and women as it is an entry point to other opportunities. Educational achievements of women can have ripple effects within the family and across generations. Investing in girls' education is one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty. Investments in secondary school education for girls yield especially high dividends. Girls who have been educated are likely to marry later and to have smaller and healthier families. Educating a woman uplifts her life as well as the quality of her life and her entire family. It is a fact that any educated woman will definitely support the education of her children especially a girl child and provide a better guidance to her children. More importantly, an educated woman in a society like India will assist in reducing the infant mortality rate and control the blossoming of the population. Closing the gender gap in education by 2015 is also one of the benchmarks for the Millennium Development Goals.

### Education and empowerment of women in Ancient India:

The references available from the works of Grammarians such as Katyayana and Patanjali, Hindu religious books like Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, and Mahabharata reveal that women were properly ed-

ucated in ancient India. They enjoyed equivalent status in all fields of life and rights like their males counterparts. Wife was regarded as 'Arthangini' and all religious ceremonies were performed by the husband along with the wife. Through the massive Women Education in Ancient India several women seers and thinkers such as Gargi and Maitreyi originated. These women intellectuals in ancient India gathered eminence by participating in educational debates and discussions in the assemblies of erudite persons. Gargi was a prominent participant in the ancient society beside men such as Uddalaka Arni. In Vedic period, educational system was well developed and women enjoyed the tremendous right to education and teaching. This produced women with significant authority who showed their influence on the society. In the ancient Vedic times women had all rights similar to men in studying the Vedas. Literature reveals that many Vedic hymns were attributed to rishika (female Vedic scholars) and in Rig Veda alone there are around 30 women Vedic scholars (rishika) such as Aditi, Indrani, Lopamudra, Godha, Vasukrapatni etc. to whom different hymns have been attributed. Now obviously, it would be naive to say that women cannot study the Vedas, while there are hymns in the Vedas which were revealed to women sages.

### **Education and empowerment of women in Medieval India:**

In the medieval period, women were considered to be inferior to man and the status of women went down considerably. Decline in the status of women in Indian society begins with the Muslim rule in India: customs of *pardha*, *sati*, child marriage, restrictions on widow marriage and prevalence of joint family system have been the factors responsible for the injustice meted out to women. The girls of medieval India and especially Hindu society were not given formal education. During the time of king Ashoka, women took part in religious preaching. According to Hiuen Tsang, the famous traveler of that time, Rajyashri, the sister of Harshavardhana was a distinguished scholar of her time. Another such example is the daughter of king Ashoka, Sanghmitra, she along with her brother Mahendra went to Sri Lanka to preach Buddhism. At that time education in South India was better than in north India. In spite of great women rulers and administrators like Razia Sultana, Nur Jahan, Gond queen Durgavati, Priyaketaladevi, queen of Chalukya Vikramaditya, the condition of normal women remained the same. Girls were forced to get married at a very tender age; the society practiced *Sati* and *Devdasi* tradition. Domingo Paes, famous Portuguese traveler has written in his account that in Vijayanagar kingdom women were experts in many fields of education. He says that women could wrestle, blow trumpet and handle sword with equal perfection. Nunez, another famous traveler to the South also agrees to it and says that women were employed in writing accounts of expenses, recording the affairs of kingdom, which shows that they were educated. The plight of Indian women in medieval period and at the starting of modern India was summed up in the words of great poet Rabindranath Tagore:

"O Lord Why have you not given woman the right to conquer her destiny? Why does she have to wait head bowed, By the roadside, waiting with tired patience, Hoping for a miracle in the morrow?"

### **Education and empowerment of women in Modern India:**

The status of women in modern India is a sort of a paradox, on one hand she is at the peak of ladder of success; on the other hand she is mutely suffering the violence afflicted on her. Two Indian women Kalpana Chawla and Sunita Williams have made their mark in the whole universe by flying to space; still women education receives little attention in India, especially in rural areas. As compared with past women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality they have to still travel a long way. Women have left the secured domain of their home and are now in the battlefield of life, fully armored with their talent. They had proven themselves, but as education is concerned, the gap between women and men is severe. While 82.14% of adult men are educated, only 65.46% of adult women are known to be literate in India. An illiterate woman is at the mercy of her husband or father, she also does not know that this is not the way of life for women across the world. The UNICEF Executive Director Mr. Carol Bellamy says; "No country has ever emerged from poverty without giving priority to education." (Indian Currents, 13 June 2004). However, modest improvement is gradually coming up in educational level of women. After independence many steps have been taken, many

laws have been passed; many reforms were undertaken by enlightened thinkers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, many programmes in the areas of education, health and employment have been initiated for the increase of literacy rate of women. Mrs. Annie Besant, Dr. Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Mrs. Nellie Sengupta, Durgabai Deshmukh and many others gave a change and betterment. But the condition of women is still miserable in the rural India with respect to various socio-economic aspects like poverty, violence and economic exploitation. Better health care and higher educational opportunities are far reaching dreams for the children of tribal areas. The obstacles like gender discrimination still persist in India and lot more needs to be done in the field of women's education in India.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Even after six decades of Indian Independence, women are still one of the most powerless and marginalized sections of Indian Society. This is mainly due to atrocities and discrimination faced by women in India. Women's representation in Parliament and in the State Assemblies has never been beyond eight and 10 per cent respectively. Most of the working women remain outside the organized sector. Mere 2.3 per cent of women are administrators and managers. In fact, empowered women are a nation's strength. In the Indian social, cultural and economic context, no one can achieve the whole purpose of women's empowerment and emancipation within a short span of time. However the women have utilized the chances given to them and made considerable progress. As formal agency, the government of India wanted to improve the living conditions of women at different times by passing various legislations to safeguard Constitutional Rights to women. Mere formulation of laws and acts do not improve the women status but their implementation is necessary.

#### **Recommendations:**

##### **1. Change in the attitude of men in the society:**

From the very onset an attitudinal change in the mindset of men is necessary towards the concept. Men and boys have a critical role to play in reversing the pandemic of violence against women. They have to strengthen women's security in crisis.

##### **2. Change in the attitude of women in the society:**

Women's own perception on their empowerment should be changed. They should strive to change their image as weak, dependent, passive and docile persons to independent, active, strong and determined human beings.

##### **3. In the academic level:**

It is important to create awareness about education and empowerment among the younger generation especially among the students and the youth.

##### **4. In the political level :**

One of the ways by which women empowerment can become a reality is through proper policies and legislations that are women friendly in nature.

##### **5. In the administrative level:**

Empowerment of women is a necessity for the sustainable development of a nation. So policy of the government should be women friendly in its various schemes. It should try to implement the following:

1. Expand women's citizenship, participation and leadership, and advance women as decision-makers.
2. Strengthen women's security in crisis and stop violence against women.
3. Laws to protect women's rights must be included and enforced within legal frameworks.
4. Ensure gender-responsive recovery and promote women as leaders of recovery.
5. Include women's issues on the national agenda.

**REFERENCES**

1. Law Commission of India; Report No. 205; Proposal to amend the Prohibition of Child Marriages Act, 2006; New Delhi; 2008 | 2. Dr.DigumartiBhaskara Rao, MRS. DigumarutiPushpaLatha (ed.s), „International Encyclopedia of Women“; Vol.2, Discovery PublishingHouse, Delhi, 1999. | 3. New World Dictionary, Webster Second College Edition, New York, 1982. | 4. SushamaSahay, „Women and Empowerment- Approach and Strategies“, Discovery Publishing House, Delhi, 1998. | 5. RameshwariPandya, „Women in changing India“, Serials publications, Delhi, 2008. | 6. JaspreetKaurSoni, „Women Empowerment the substantial challenges“, Authors press Delhi, 2008. | 7. S.P.Agarwal(2001), Women's Education in India (1995-98) Present Status, Perspective, Plan, Statistical Indicators with Global View, Vol III Concept Publications Co, New Delhi | 8. N.L.Gupta(2003)Women's Education Through Ages, Concept Publications Co, New Delhi. |