

# **The History of Feminism from Ancient to Modern India: An Analysis**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Marriam Webster Dictionary named 'Feminism' the 'word of the year' in 2017, making it suffice to comprehend the relevance of this word at this time. Feminism does not merely represent a thought, but there is a large social truth hidden behind it. Women are deprived at all ages despite their equal contribution to each sphere of life; the extent of this deprivation varies across countries and in various ages as well. The question is, to this day the equal rights of men and women are talked about everywhere, but is it protected at all? The article mainly attempts to spotlight the history of the evolution and deprivation of women's status from ancient to present within the context of India. An effort has also been made to present a comparative analysis of the status of females reflected in mythology and in contemporary and modern literature.

## **KEYWORDS**

Feminism; Freedom Struggle; Discrimination; Patriarchy; Mythology.

## **Introduction**

The fight is not for women's status but for human value. The claim is not to end inequality of females but to restore universal justice. The bid is not for loaves and fishes for the abandoned gender but for cosmic harmony, which never comes till woman comes. We all are aware that all over the world 50% of the population is women. But in our country only, there is decreasing ratio of female on the basis of sex selection abortion.

The situation of reducing sex ratio of male to female is the cause of unequal social status of women with men. On the other hand, in western countries women are equivalent with men. But in India the situation is not so, in fact it is just on paper that we also provide equal status to women in our country. It is evident from

our culture that at one side we treat woman as goddess in the form of Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, and very next movement all the heinous and illegal offences being committed against them like sexual exploitation, rape, abduction, kidnapping and most importantly nowadays 'Female Feticide'. On the other side, we can state that everyone treats women like a slave who work without any wages. Now as per our Constitution we provide equivalent status to women on the basis of equality principle. But to achieve or gain this equality Indian females have to struggle for a long time.

Our ancient era is the eye witness of this inequality, for example Draupadi, wife of five Pandavas, was used by them on the dice like goods. Women were also used for dance to entertain the kings and

other male members of kingship, females also not having the right to speak loudly in home or public places; these are some instances which show that in ancient period also females were not being treated equally with male. Even she did not have the right to participate freely in personal activities, social, political and economic. But Mahatma Gandhi started a national movement for liberalization of women in the rise of the 20th century.

During that time only Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Rajaram Mohan Roy, and many other social workers started a movement for education of woman, restraint of polygamy marriages, prevention of sati system, etc. The outcome of this was that Parliament enacted laws for Sati prevention, Dowry prohibition, Equal rights of women in property, Restrain of child marriages, and remarriages of widows etc. After the independence of India, Parliament had made sufficient effort to give equal position to women with men by removing inequality. For fulfillment of this purpose, they have also created a firm by making enactment for Indian Marriages which define the age for marriage, prevent polygamy and make monogamy marriages mandatory. They have also enacted adoption laws so that any man or woman competent to adopt the child and also make laws for maintenance to wife, parents, children etc. Through Indian Constitution they have also protected equality of women under articles 14, 23, 15(3), 25, 42, 26, 51 (A) (E) 27. In this way the Government on their level makes sufficient efforts to remove inequality of women with men by providing equal position. Till now the situation is as it is or we can say that, it becomes worse by committing the crime of 'Female Feticide' which results in a decreasing ratio of females in society. The very important thing is that, the crime rate of commission of these offenses is in the two largest countries in universe much high, i.e., India

and second is China and it's very disgraceful for our society. It illustrates the low status of women in these countries. It is a harsh and vicious demonstration against women by the patriarchal supportive society. In this way the status of females has been changed from ancient time to modern age. But still 'Female Feticide' and Infanticide are committed frequently in India and other countries.

### **Position of Women in Ancient Period:**

Women in Pre-Vedic Period: the scriptures and Historical studies indicate that Indian women enjoyed a comparatively high status during the early Vedic period (2000 B.C. to 1000 B.C.), surpassing contemporary civilizations in ancient Rome and Greece. The Aryans, who were mostly busy fighting wars, regarded females as productive and useful members of society. The situation of Vedic Woman was quite good. Women also enjoyed religious status like that of men, especially in Vedic studies and initiation. The Rig Veda provides ample evidence to prove the concept of equality of female with male as regards access and capacity to acquire the highest knowledge, even the absolute knowledge. The Rig Veda had rendered the highest social status to qualified females of those days. But the position of women fell in the later Vedic and Epic period. They were not at all treated equally with men or we can say that they were not enjoying equal privileges and rights as compared to male. Though the woman participated in each family ceremony and function with men, they only played a role as a silent observer not an active participant. As per Manu, men always enjoy unchallenged authority and rule over their wives. Sati, Polygamy and Child marriages, were prevalent at that time. Still, out of all these things, females at that time were admired by society. However, changes to the woman's status were introduced in the 15th

century. Supporters of bhakti movement and saints were expounded and spoke about equality of women with men.

During Ancient period men were polygamous and widow burning was an accepted norm. Arthashastra imposed more stigmas on females as Kautilya dismissed women's liberation. They were not free to even go anywhere without their husband's permission. Women became worse off in the Gupta period. But in Vedic period the status of women was not worse as that of today. Our history depicts that female in Vedic period was also on strong footage as compare to male and therefore they were not subjected to 'Female Feticide' and Infanticide or people never think about that. Though the overall status of women was lower than men, yet on the whole the position of women was good. In the post Vedic period, women started being discriminated against on the ground of education and many other rights. The 'Child Marriage', emphasis on physical chastity of female and their unquestioned obedience to husband leads to progressive deterioration of their position. In the Smriti Sastras as well as in Manu, it has been quoted in very strong terms that women should be honored. But then again Manu has given complete rights to men to inflict corporal punishment on her and discard her if she said anything disgraceful to him. Therefore, there was a contradiction in the rules of treatment for females. In Indian society Manu's system continued for long after the Mauryan period. However, the upper-class women enjoyed freedom and were admired in society. Besides this woman, a vast majority worked in the homes and fields. In the 20th century their condition worsened.

As we have studied, the status of women in the Pre-Rig Vedic period was very high. The position enjoyed by women in the early Vedic society, was not retained in the later Vedic period. In Vedic society participation of wives was

required in many rituals, customs and traditions. Women could choose their husband in an assembly called 'Swayamvara'. But in most cases the woman had to lead an unhappy and unsatisfied married life. This was simply because their husbands were permitted to have more than one wife and this was especially very common among the upper classes of the ancient Indian society. A widow was expected to burn herself on the funeral pyre of her husband and this would make her 'Sati'.

The roots of Hindu sect are in the Aryan society of the patriarchal system. The family unit was a large one, usually extending over three generations and with the male offsprings living together. The birth of a boy was especially welcomed in the Aryan family for the son's presence was essential and one of the important ceremonies. At the same time the status of women was on the whole free. Hindus considered that the male and female represent the two aspects of one person. Scriptures and symbols say that Lord Shiva consists of a body of two halves – one is of male and other is of female and he is called 'Ardhanarishwara'. Woman was considered more powerful than man and treated as Goddess of 'Shakti'. The highest social ending in ancient Indian 'Swayamvara' means it is a form of marriage which had been followed in Vedic period. Bride selects one of the bridegrooms amongst all the eligible bachelors for example Draupadi marriage in Mahabharata which is very well known to everyone. The term is derived from the name of the goddess Sati, who self-immolated because Sati was unable to bear her father Daksha's humiliation to her husband Shiva. The Indian Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987 Part I, and Section 2(c) define Sati as the act or rite itself.

## **Status of women in Indian mythology through the eyes of Kavita Kane and Chitra Banerjee**

Indian mythological narratives conventionally have always been male-focused against the grand, sweeping background of great wars. Females, even if they are central to the narratives, have existed in peripheral spaces with the focus being on heroism, valor and war. Conventional renditions have revered and glorified men such as Rama, Karna, Arjuna, or Krishna but have largely ignored females such as Sita, Urmila, Draupadi, Vrushali, Mandodari, Gandhari and many others. Females are generally misjudged and misrepresented models in the annals of history. This is extremely reasonable in patriarchal nations, particularly, the sacred articles and mythologies, where females are either completely resisted or primarily discerned as conveyances of men's worth.

Somewhere, between these two phases, the two Great Indian Epics, which this paper is concerned with, were composed. Women of the ancient society receive a more concrete shape than mere names and references by being depicted as definitive characters with distinctive behaviors and personalities.

This paragraph focuses on two such female characters from Indian mythology that were bold, brave, fierce, and assertive. The two female characters discussed in this paragraph are Urmila from Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* and Paanchali from Chitra Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusions*. Both characters have been depicted as a woman who is bold, strong, fierce and assertive, having an independent existence as well as being capable of taking their own decisions and also prepared to face the consequences of those decisions. Even in the ancient period Urmila and Draupadi had a broad outlook.

The first character is Urmila from Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*. Urmila, the most neglected and overlooked character

in the epic, has been presented in her full potency in this novel. She has been given a dominant feminist voice. She questioned patriarchy that subdued women. She carried out all her responsibilities but simultaneously took a strong stand against the injustice done to her and her sisters by their husbands and in-laws. She was capable of taking her own decisions and standing by the consequences of her actions

The second character is the well-known Paanchali from Chitra Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusions*. She portrayed Paanchali as a powerful, strong and bold woman, an equal to the men around her, instead of being submissive and docile. Born out of vengeance, she emerged from the holy fire along with her brother Dhri. She was rebellious and defiant by nature and had an individual and independent character.

They Both Urmila and Paanchali started a fight against age old patriarchy long before the theories of feminism came into existence. Both were capable enough of taking decisions for themselves and strong enough to face the repercussions of these decisions.

## **Status of Women in Medieval Period**

As time went on, the status of females became worse in the medieval period, rather than developing some good changes in their status. During the medieval period only, Purdah system and Jauhar were being introduced by Muslim and Rajput community against woman. First 'Purdah' means, Muslim community's woman is fully covered with clothes, so as to cover their body from male. Second 'Jauhar' means, women with their own consent immolate themselves so as to save their body and property from detention of the enemy, if they are from a defeated Warriors family. In both the systems, the liberty of females was curtailed by the community that they were not given the right to moment or leave their lives

without any restriction of fear and without any burden. Instead of all these religious restrictions, woman at that time actively participated in social, educational political and religious field like Raziya Sultan who was first lady Monarch of Delhi, Chand Bibi who has defeated Akbar etc. in this period too, bhakti moment had played a very significant role for improvement and impoverishment of the position of woman. These movements tried to give equal status to women in society at that time. 'Guru Nanak' was the best example, who preached the equality of men and women at that time. He advocates equality of females in each sector that is educational, cultural, religious and political.

Unlike in the ancient Indian period, the status of women in the Mughal period was not quite high. Purdah system and child marriage had become very common. Except those of the lower classes, women in the Mughal period did not go out of their houses. The Muslims females observed purdah much more strictly than the Hindus. The birth of a girl was considered inauspicious, while that of a boy was an occasion for celebration. On account of early marriage, there were several widows in our society. Usually, females in the Mughal Period were not allowed to remarry. Polygamy was very common among rich society. Divorce was not common among the Hindus, while it was permitted both for Muslim male and female. Whereas, women exercised great influence at home and some of them helped their husbands in their occupations. Although, the overall position of woman in Mughal period was low, there were many Hindu and Muslim woman of outstanding ability, whose fame is still relevant today like, notably Rani Durgawati of Gondwana, Mira Bai, Rani Karmawati, Tarabai, etc. Among the Muslim woman in Mughal Period, Nur Jahan, Mumtaz, Chand Bibi, Jahanara, etc.

played an important role in the affairs of that time.

During the period of East India Company, many social reformers such as Ishwarchandara Vidyasagar Raja Ram Mohan Roy, and Jyotiba Phule had struggled for the improvement of status of females in Indian society. Peary Charan Sarkar had started firstly a girl's school in India in 1847 at Calcutta. Under this period Raja Ram Mohan Roy had succeeded to abolish the sati system from India only with the help of Governor Bentinck. Due to the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, we have been able to introduce the concept of widow remarriage. So many women social reformers such as Pandita Ramabai and others at that time also started a movement of freedom against society for the protection of women. Rani Lakshmi Bai is the best example who has begun a war against the Britishers even though she was a lady who fought for her state of independence.

### **Status of Women in Modern Period:**

In ancient and medieval period status and position of women was practically inferior to the male but in scripture; theoretically it has given higher status to women. Women are awarded the degree of perfect home maker by society, because Indian women have dedicated their whole life for the welfare and wellbeing of their families. Women are also prayed by human beings in the form of goddesses. Still no change is there in their status. They are treated inferior as it is. As we all know that, it's a human nature, if they want some powerful things, so they always pray to goddess in the form of 'Devi' but, if the woman who exist in their life as mother, daughter, sister and wife, they do not treat her like this or treat like a slave in their family, who works 24 hours for them without expecting anything. This position becomes, when she gave birth to a girl child in a literate or

illiterate family after devoting all her possible efforts to her family. But the status and position of today's woman in India has considerably changed in modern Indian Society. The population of females is almost half of the total population of India.

A country or a community cannot be considered civilized where females are not honored. Indian Laws are being made without discrimination against woman, as an outcome Indian woman enjoying high position in our society. Females today occupy high ranking posts like I.P.S., I.A.S., also in our Defense Services. The modern Indian woman participates in various sports and games like hockey, cricket, football, table tennis, lawn tennis and also in athletics namely Sania Mirza, Saina Nehwal etc. The Contemporary Indian women serve as M.L.A, M.P., Governors and Ministers. Women of recent times like Mother Teresa, M.S. Subhalakshmi, Lata Mangeskar Soniya Gandhi, Vijay Lakshmi Pandit, and our ex-president of India Pratibhatai Patil have achieved international fame. Females have also achieved high fame in the areas of literature, music and acting. Moreover, women are joining the field of agriculture, technology and science also. In fact, there is no sphere of activity in which women are incompetent or unsuitable. In modern period of India, our legislator made various legislative enactments to protect and save woman from crime and offences like Dowry death, Infanticide 'Female Feticide', cruelty etc. and it gives the concept of Empowerment of woman.

### **Empowerment of Woman:**

Empowerment not only points towards their material development, but is oriented towards mere economic growth which generally plays a significant role in the overall developmental strategy as has been conceived of in the case of other disadvantaged classes. Woman Empowerment should be construed as the

overall development of their faculty of self-image, self-realization and identity and the economic development which holds the keys to their actual development. Woman Empowerment has ceased to be a national or local issue. United Nations Charter, which significantly projected discrimination against female as a problem of universal alarm. In order to weed it out the Charter in its preamble expressed to uphold Fundamental Rights one is Human Rights and another is equality between male and female. This sufficiently depicts the kind of concern of the international community espoused with regard to women's rights in general and their right to equality with men in particular. The declaration provides that all the fundamental freedoms and rights are available equally to both men and women without any distinction. Therefore, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights also played a significant role in protecting the rights of females.

### **Women Empowerment in Reality**

To maintain this equality, they have made their possible effort by making different legislative enactments for promotion and protection of gender equality which has already been mentioned by the researcher in this topic. Today the very important thing is that, whether this equality really exists? And whether these laws are really effective to empower women? If the answer is in affirmative form, then again, the question came into researcher mind that, then why the offences of Sexual Assault, Rape, Domestic Violence, Dowry Death and most recently 'Female Feticide' committed against female. Why does the infant girl share unwanted rights from her conception in the mother's womb? To be very honest, it is pertinent to note here that, 'Equality' and 'Empowerment' are only big words with shadow of promotion and protection of woman in different

walks of life and which are only suitable in news, magazines, and newspapers used by leaders for their personal gain, otherwise, in reality it always gives secondary position to woman in India. Our ancient culture and modern culture are not so different from each other, in ancient times expressly women were differentiated from male whereas in modern context women impliedly differentiated from men. However, it is not at all surprise to anyone who live in India that, brutal and heinous offences only committed against female like a girl raped in running bus and then thrown to her out of the bus i.e., Rape case of Nirbhaya.

### **Conclusion**

By climbing the ladder of improvement, we are rising very fast today in the twenty-first century. But the progress that deprives the half of society, can it really be called 'progress'? It may be time to remember Swami Vivekananda's statement today, "That country and the nation that does not respect women have never become great, nor even be in future." Without the establishment of equality, the actual progress of society may be unattainable. It is undeniable that the position of women is better in today's society than even before. At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that women have not yet become completely free from male influence. Today women want to establish their own voice, not to get lost in the voice of men.

Thus, to conclude, Kavita Kane and Chitra Banerjee have expressed her concern for women status and position which both have established to help battered women and their problems by presenting female protagonists in her novels. The variety of subjects they have touched upon is a great contribution in creating awareness for the modern women all over the globe. Kane and Banerjee have given a distinct dimension to the psyche of women in the family and

society by scrutinizing the old patriarchal domination through her characters Urmila, Draupadi and many others.

Both authors message is uproarious and clear. Women are more than delicate bits of glass, equipped with basic reasoning and decision-making skills. They destroy the myth that a woman is made for the man and is quite gifted enough to understand and project her inborn feelings. Both give space in literature to the female psyche to enjoy real existence that it has been denied at the social, political, monetary and literary levels. Indian writers like Kavita Kane and Chitra Banerjee don't deny womanhood but aim to establish the personalities of her protagonists. They try to establish that both sexes can have the qualities or characteristics like valiance, courage, fearlessness, dominance, intensity, love, compassion, affection, forgiveness, individuality, self-expression, self-identity and independence as these qualities are human traits common to either sex.

When reading Kavita Kane and Chitra Banerjee it is important to not stray and be blindfolded by the very vices that the author herself is trying to purge us from i.e., being judgmental. This would then be self-defeating as men and children unlike women can fall victims to patriarchy. Hence, Kane through Satyavati and Ahalya is combating gender oppression by generating awareness which is definitely a precondition for the development and spread of feminist ideology. An analysis of Kane's and Banerjee's selected female characters suggests that though all of them lived in a male dominated society, these females never cater completely to the men's desires. The editors of the *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing* (2003) note that Marie de France's texts "use a female voice that interrupts masculine traditions," This exactly is Kane's and Banerjee's vision and philosophy. In *Ahalya's Awakening*, The

*Palace of Illusions* and *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, Kane and Banerjee describe the pathetic circumstances faced by woman to achieve their passion for education and power. The victory of the main female characters, Ahalya, Draupadi and Satyavati in the novel provides an

optimistic and logical message to the people around the world that their life is in their hand and if they have the intention and guts to protest the impediments enclosing their path then they can extricate themselves.

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