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RENAISSANCE AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The study entitled "Renaissance and Women Empowerment in India" aims to investigate the contributions of renaissance movements in Indian Society. This work gives a brief account of the position of women in early Indian society and the role played by social reformers for socio-economic development of women through various movements. The work highlights the particular efforts of Brahmasamaj, Arya Samaj, Theosophical Society, Ramakrishna Mission and Prarthana Samaj in bringing up women into the vanguard of Indian society.

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INTRODUCTION

*"Father protects her when she is a girl,
Husband looks after her in the youth,
in old age sons take care of her,
The women does not deserve freedom"*¹.

For ages this was thought to be sad plight of women's life, especially of Indian women. Women's lives were imprisoned with the four walls of the household. Their lives were kept behind the Purdah and the darkness of ignorance. It was a prevalent belief that women were only fit for household work and their place was in the kitchen. Some of the most important customs which hampered the progress of women were. Infanticide, child marriage, sati, polygamy, customs of offering girls to deity and prejudices against women's education. Since the mid-nineteenth century, various religious reformers have opposed these evil practices. Indian Renaissance movements played a key role to uphold the dignity of women in the society and freed them from the bondage of evil practices.

Position of a women in Early Indian Society

In the history of India, from pre-historic to modern times there were distinct stages of rise and fall in the status and role of

women.² During Vedic age, position of women was considered to be fairly satisfactory. The society as a whole showed proper concern and respect for women allowing them considerable freedom in different activities of the social and political life. They were allowed to fairs and festivals, attend important assemblies and take part in state functions without hindrances.³ None of the hymns of Rigveda considered the birth of a daughter as inauspicious. The Rigveda praised the father of many daughters. Her position was an honoured one in the family. She was described by the vedic sages as an ornament of the home. There was no custom of sati and Purdah was also unknown. Women as daughters, sisters, wives and mother had equally honourable places in the family, society and state alike. Thus in all aspects they had equal rights with men and were their equal partners, friends and helpers all through. From about 1500 B.C. there were perceptible changes in the position of women in the society. During this period there was a gradual decline in women's education. Girls were not allowed to go to the centres of education but were taught only by near relatives like father, brother or the uncle. Therefore, only the girls of rich and cultural families received religious and other training. As a result, there appeared a tendency to curtail privileges of women in general.

Position of women in the Post – vedic Period

The social and familial status of the daughter deteriorated in the post-vedic period. The following line depicts the position

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of the daughter. "A wife as a comrade, a daughter is a misery and a son a light in the highest heaven".⁴ Early marriage became a hindrance in the education of girls. Women came to be regarded as being of the same status as the Sudra. She lost all her social freedom. At the in-law's house the woman was expected to serve all the inmates without a murmur, and bring forth male children. There was a definite deterioration in the women's status during Manu's period. Manu believed that a woman did not deserve freedom and she should be dependent on man throughout her life.⁵ From 11th century onwards, the position of women further deteriorated. All kinds of progressive opportunities were denied to them in the field of education, equality and liberation.⁶ Foreign invasions and impact of Muslim civilization brought deterioration in their status. Women faced a number of hardships and cruelty due to evil practices like child marriages, purdah system, Sati, widowhood, infanticide etc. These social evils took deep roots in Indian society and women's lives were imprisoned within the four walls of the household. It was the darkest period so far as women were concerned.

Women Empowerment through Renaissance Movements

The emergence of reform movements in the nineteenth century was a turning point in Indian society. Western education and industrial revolution brought about a new awakening in the minds of the people. It was this class which was responsible for awakening the country both for social and political reforms. Various social and religious reformers rose to the occasion to meet the challenge of the times. The objectives of these reformers were to uplift the society of its long standing social evils and women's emancipation. Organisations like the Brahma Samaj, Aryasamaj, the Theosophical society, Ramakrishna Mission and Prarthana Samaj were socio-religious movements that worked for the equal opportunities of women in various fields.

The Brahmo Samaj

The first reformist movement was the Brahmasamaj, founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1828 at Calcutta. He was the first great social reformer of modern India and known as the "Father of Indian renaissance".⁷ He was a stout champion of women's rights. He opposed the prevailing idea that women were inferior to men in intellect or in a moral sense. He was deeply concerned with the eradication of social evils like Sati, Child marriage and polygamy etc. To raise the status of women he demanded that they be given the right of inheritance and property. For this, in 1822, he published a pamphlet 'Brief Remarks Regarding Modern Encroachments on The Ancient Rights of women.' Schools for the education of girls were set up by the Brahmasamaj. Keshub chandrasen, a Brahmo leader, lectured on the importance of female education and in 1862 organised by a society, the Bamodhini Sabha for women's education. Its repercussion reverberated all over the country. Thus, this was the first organization which treated women as individuals and also paved the way for their life outside at home.

The Arya Samaj

The second great movement was the Aryasamaj founded by Swami Dayanand on 7th April, 1875 in Bombay. He advocated the equality of sexes by opening schools for the education of both girls and boys. He wanted to abolish early

marriage, Purdah, dowry and championed the cause of widow remarriage and women's education. The leaders of the Aryasamaj were opposed to the caste system. Its constitution made provision that the women could be on any administrative or general body of this organization. This was a great step towards the emancipation of women. By condemning these customs the Aryasamaj paved the way for women's participation in the social and political life of the country.

Theosophical Society

The theosophical society organized by Madam Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott in New York in 1875. It came to India in 1879 and established its headquarters at Adyar. The most prominent leader of this society was Dr. Annie Besant. The society stood for the equality of sexes. For the education of girls, a number of schools were set up under this organization. Theosophical society worked for women's emancipation. She believed that education is the only means to eradicate social evils and to emancipate the women folk. Annie Besant condemned the seclusion of women and remarked, "For India's uplift the women must have an open field, unfettered hands, and unimpeded activity. Womenhood as well as manhood must be consecrated to the motherland, for in their union lie the strength, the stability, the freedom of India."⁸ The objectives of the society were to form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity, with out distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour. She encouraged child widows to re-marry. Her's was a call to the women.

Ramakrishna Mission

Swami Vivekananda established the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897 in memory of his spiritual mentor Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa who is regarded as one of the greatest saints of India. Vivekananda worked for women's upliftment through Ramakrishna Mission. He attacked all sorts of superstitions, illiteracy, purdah and child marriage etc prevalent in the society. He also paid great stress on women's education because he had a strong conviction that educated women would be capable of solving their own problems. Hence, the Ramakrishna mission opened a number of schools for girls.

Prarthana Samaj

The Prarthana Samaj had been established in 1867 in Bombay by Atmaram Pandurang under the influence of Keshub Chandra Sen. The Prarthana Samaj had a programme of religious and social reforms on the same line as those of the Brahma Samaj. It worked for improving the status of women and tried to introduce widow marriage, encouragement of women's education and the eradication of evils like the Purdah system and child marriage. M.G. Ranade was one of the illustrious luminaries of the Prarthana Samaj. He worked for women's emancipation through Prarthana Samaj.

Conclusion

Today the world is changing rapidly. In this change, women has not lagged behind. She has marched shoulder to shoulder with the male of the species and shared his endeavour in every field of life. Women play a vital role in every sector without which we cannot think of socio-economic development of the country. Due to Renaissance movements launched by Annie Besant, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dayananda and Vivekananda,

the Indian women came to the fore front of the society. Hence, the renaissance movements have a perennial value in the history of India.

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