Women's Leadership in India through the Ages

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Abstract: The evil customs like sati, devadasi, sex-selective abortion etc. were abolished long ago in India. However, the practices like, infanticide, child marriage, dowry killings etc. still plagues many parts of this sub-continent. Fortunately, 20th century had ushered India into a modern era. The new age had acted very constructively against religious orthodoxy, which has been against women in India over many years. A series of progressive legislation has been put in place post independence, which brought legal status of women in India absolutely at par with men. It is also not true that in Indian history, art and literature, women were always portrayed in a docile and submissive manner. To the contrary men emerged in Indian history often as meteors from time to time and were eulogized as rulers, scholars, religious leaders, brave and mighty as well. Razia Sultan, the only female ruler of Delhi Sultanate (1236 – 1240 A. D.) and Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi 1857 A. D. are the two iconic examples of martial women who during their own time had stirred popular imagination at two different eras of Indian history with their own courage, velour and statesmanship. In Indian traditional lore, female deities like Durga and Kali are often depicted capable of super-human righteous wrath, which can destroy the world. The Goddesses like Lakshmi, Saraswati and host of other female deities are worshiped by Hindu females as well as males alike for their supernatural powers of wealth, knowledge and bravery.

Keywords – Customs, Women, Female, Religious, Legal

1. INTRODUCTION

The data mining represents mining the knowledge from large data. Topics such as knowledge discovery, query language, decision tree induction, classification and prediction, cluster analysis, and how to mine the Web are functions of data mining. Manual analyses are time consuming in the real world. In this situation, WEKA can use for automating the task.

Weka is a collection of machine learning algorithms for data mining tasks. Classification was performed using WEKA in data mining research. WEKA is a data mining workbench that allows comparison between many different machine learning algorithms. In addition, it also has functionality for feature selection, data pre-processing and data visualization [1]. The algorithms can either be applied directly to a dataset or called from Java code. Weka contains tools for data pre-processing, classification, regression, clustering, association rules and visualization. Well-suited for developing new machine learning schemes. Weka contains tools for data pre-processing, classification, regression, clustering, association rules, and visualization. It is also well-suited for developing new machine learning schemes.

Introduction

Woman gains prominence in the recent years after a prolonged struggle with societal norms and religious strictures for their evolution and viewing them at par with men. This famous line of

71

French scholar Simone de Beauvoir "One is not born, but rather become a woman"[1] appears most appropriate in understanding the idea of an Indian woman. Keeping this in view, the Indian women like in most other cultures were historically not the authors of their own image and surprised none to gain such image in the society. Furthermore, Indian society, being predominantly patriarchal in nature, the image of woman was perhaps, a direct outcome of the idea of woman that was conceived in the collective psyche of dominant Indian males.

Rig Vedic Woman

The early Vedic societies were patriarchal, but evidence suggests that women were given considerable importance within the household, wherein the man was recognized as the head of the family but Rig Veda assigned important role for women in performance of religious rituals. Rig Vedic patriarchy seems it did not rob women their basic rights and privileges as individuals.[2] The very fact that, Vedic sacrifices were so significant and central to these cultures and were performed jointly by husband and wife. This in turn indicates that adequate value was given to the role of women in this society. During this period girls had access to education even though, the practice may be limited only to elite families. The scriptures suggested that "….women seeking education were divided into two groups namely Brahmavadinis and Sadyodvahas. The former were life-long students of theology and philosophy and latter used to prosecute their studies till their marriage at the age of 15 or 16".[3] Moreover, Vedic literature mentions a number of sagacious, capable and educated women teachers called Upadhyayinis "like Visvavara, Apala and Ghosha (who) even composed mantras and rose to the rank of rishis".[4] It is mentioned that a female preacher Lopamudra used to preach as many as 179 hymns of the first book of Rig Veda along with sage Agasthya. Many women poets and philosophers find their mentioning in this period. This suggested that women enjoyed fair opportunity compared to men as far as intellectual activities were concerned. Though, it is true that in Rig Vedic age, birth of a son was more welcome than birth of a daughter but the Rig Vedic society was free from social evils like: female infanticide, sati and child marriage. Also, girls normally get married after puberty, as can be judged from the frequent mention of unmarried ones such as "Ghosha" who grew up in the houses of their parents. Thus, not only early marriages were unfavoured in Rig Vedic period but also the society went out of its way to enable marriageable women and men to intermingle. The marriages like present time used to be finalized by families and bride was to assume a position of reverence and even dominance in the household. The arranged marriage for a girl was a norm, but it was not taboo for her to choose her own life partner. It is to be noted that as a sign of woman's social dignity widow remarriages were permitted in Rig Vedic society. While Vedic scriptures exhorts men to treat their wives with affection and respect, their stature as a mother got significantly enhanced to become a figure of profound reverence. To the contrary, with reference to Gods in most other religious systems were in male forms. Rig Veda was one of the earliest theologies that accepted divinity in both masculine and feminine forms at a very beginning stage of its evolution. The social values of post-Vedic society finds its reflection in Brahmanas, Upanishads, Dharmasastras, Smritis and great epics. Yet another book that throws light on the post-Vedic society of India is

72

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[1] The Second Sex, 1949, translated by H M Parshley, Penguin 1972.

[2] Altekar, Position of Women in Hindu Civilization (1938; New Delhi:MotilalBanarasidass, 1959), p. 10.

[3] A. S. Altekar, Position ofwornen in Hindu Civilization (1938; New Delhi: MotilalBanarassidass, 1959), p. 11.

[4] R.C. Majumdar, Ancient India mew Delhi: MotilalBanarassidass, 1964), p. 44.

Kautilya's Arthasashtra, which is assigned to 2nd century B.C. The modern scholars rely on these works to understand the society of that time by discounting the elements of imagination contained in some of them.

The above literature indicates that the world of Indian woman had become quite restricted by the time Smrithis and Dharma Sastras[5] were written. The scriptures as well as Dharma Sastras during this period started making the patriarchal system more and more rigid, which marginalized the role of Indian women. It accounted for nothing other than expecting implicit obedience or subordination from her. The Dharma Sastras and Smritis became the principal sources of lawyer's law. The codes of Manu[6] and Yajnavalkya[7] primarily dealt with rites, penance, true knowledge of Brahma and liberation. However, they also lay down rules, which have to be observed by persons in the course of their life. The modern liberal scholars deep-dived into these literatures and analyzed them critically, wherein it becomes more and more apparent that customs and traditions, which were reinforced by the law-givers during this time actually set in motion a process that systematically eroded the status of women in Indian society.

As far as the treatment of daughters is concerned, Manu orders an affectionate treatment. According to him "where women are honoured there the gods reside".[8] However, he disqualifies the putrika for marriage by saying that a prudent man should not marry a maiden who has no brothers. He also prohibits the custom of bride price and he emphatically says that the father accepting the cow and bull during Arsha marriage as highly improper. In course of time, women began to identify her as a subordinate being and as a mere instrument of man. This gradually destroyed her self-confidence as well as her self-concept. The roles began to get stereotyped, wherein she began to suppress her real feelings and it became difficult for her to untangle her true self from the existing social roles. It is from there, which grew a deep rooted belief among women that they were capable of only producing children and managing households. Thus, the Rig Vedic concept of "Saha-dhangini" or equal partner was gradually replaced with 'Pativrata Dharma' or the duties of a chaste wife who would fulfill the wishes of her husband without questioning them. The Saga of troubled journey of women through Indian history will remain incomplete if the brief interlude and breathing space provided to them by Buddhist movement goes unmentioned. Also, the Islamic values accompanying the Muslim rule for six to seven hundred years as well as socio-religious movements like the Bhakti and sufi also exerted their influence in this area.

The Age of Budha – The essence of both Buddhist and its contemporary Jain ideology was kindness towards all living beings. Thus, in their attitude towards women, Buddhists and Jains were much more liberal than Brahmins. Gautam Buddha was not a social reformer but he had a

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[5] Genre of Sanskrit texts refers to the treatises on Hindu Dharma. There are estimated to be 18 to about 100 Dharma Shastras with different and conflicting points of view. Each of these texts existed in many different versions, and each is rooted in Dharmasutras texts dated to 1st millennium BCE that emerged from Kalpa Vedanga studies in the Vedic era.

[6] Patrick Olivelle (2005). Manu's Code of Law, Oxford University Press, ISBN 978-0-19-517146-4.

[7] Yájnavalkya Smriti with Vijnanesvara commentary, Book 1 of 3 SC Vidyarnava (1918), English translation.

[8] Shakunthala Rao Shastri, Women inSacredLaws (1953; Bombay: Bharathiya Vidya Bhavan, 1959), p. 84.

solid faith in essential man-woman equality regarding the attainment of salvation. It was proved in the "Therigathas" composed by alms-women during Budha's time indicates the accommodative nature of Buddha towards women.[9] Furthermore, Buddha carried forward the early Vedic tradition of educating women by opening the doors of his monasteries for them to learn his teachings. Notwithstanding the efforts of Buddhist tradition of encouraging women education have symbolically prompted some Kshatriya and elite families to continue educating their women at home. Buddhism, as long as its influence lasted, tried to treat women with a degree of fairness. They were allowed to practice the eightfold path, which assured salvation. Although, the patriarchal system remained intact, Buddhism tried to bestow inheritance and property rights to women, which was to the extent, that a man let his wife inherit his property. The Vedic tradition of allowing daughters or putrikas to have a share in father's property was supported by Buddha. He insisted that unmarried daughters were to be looked after by brothers and given share in property after the death of father. These Buddhist customs, which gave them the right of inheritance, provided them economic independence.

The Medieval Ages: The period between 12th to 16th centuries A.D. is also known as medieval Ages in Indian history, which is characterized by a long drawn struggle for political supremacy in between two very different social and religious systems. The medieval period in history was also the time when rigidity of caste system in Indian society had reached its peak. It is with the advent of Muslims in India, life of Indian women became further restricted. The devoid of education and right to property, women remained politically, economically and socially most deprived. Hence, most exploited class during this time coupled with 'Purdah System' such that their social isolation was complete. The medieval societies have accepted them only as a labour in farming and weaving activities. Therefore, it was taken for granted that proper place for women was their home and nothing else. This accounted for many social evils of later Vedic society like: child marriages, sati, female infanticide and dowry were added purdah system and polygamy during the Islamic period. All these anti-women social practices got deeply rooted in the society during this time due to the political instability of northern India. The Purdah system has gained popularity with the advent of the Muslims. Many writers feel that the system existed among Kshatriyas in the period of Dharma Sastras, but the Hindu women veiled only their face or sometimes only covered their heads with sarees or 'dupattas'. However, in case of Muslims it meant complete veiling. The term 'Purdah' is actually derived from a Persian word, which means curtain. According to Patricia Jeffrey, 'Purdah' is a part and parcel of stratification in India. It becomes the mental foot binding, which means well-frog syndrome that indirectly embraces the submissiveness of young bride and inability of adult women to cope with outside world.[10]

The polygamy also contributed to the subordination of women in India considerably and Muslim rulers had the tradition of maintaining large harems. This practice objectified women as instruments of sensual satisfaction. It was whilst that time even Hindus were not having limit set

[9] The Therigatha contains passages reaffirming the view that women are the equal to men in terms of spiritual attainment and contain verses that address issues of particular interest to women in ancient society. It includes verses of a mother whose child had died (Thig VI.1 and VI.2), a former prostitute who became a nun (Thig V.2), a wealthy heiress who abandoned her life of pleasure (Thig VI.5) and even verses by the Buddha's own aunt and stepmother,Mahapajapati (Thig VI.6).
[10] Patricia Jeffrey, Frogs in a Well: Indian Women in Purdah (New Delhi: Vikas, 1979), p. 174.

to number of wives a man could own. The marriages in Islam are carried out through a contract, which allows men to have as many as four wives. Thus, even religion encouraged the abject subordination of women. Furthermore, Islamic system also confers status of head of the family to husbands and insisted that a wife should obey all his commands and should serve him with utmost loyalty, whether he is worthy or unworthy. Yet another social evil that existed in medieval India was female infanticide. This particular system was prevalent among Rajputs and other high castes and existed among Muslims. The evil mainly originated from the belief that only birth of a son could make salvation possible for parents. A short breeze of fresh air was felt between 11th to 12th centuries A.D. when wave of Bhakti movement swept-in most of India. The Bhakti followers believed in the idea of one God and their attitude towards women followed the footsteps of Buddhism i.e. to believe that men and women were of equal significance to God and equally qualified to attain spiritual reunion with almighty. It also restored religious status to women. The women came out in large numbers from their homes to listen to Bhakti saints and took part in community singing in the glory of God in public. In furtherance, few women saints like Meera Bai become very popular even though she was not an acclaimed saint but her poems and songs influenced many women across the nation. Unfortunately, the effect of this movement did not last long beyond 16th century A.D.

The Modern Era: The Britishers invaded India in the late 16th century AD, they found Indian society stratified in a multi-layered cast-ridden system, infested with practices sharply aligned against women and all aspects of Indian life, wherein both Hindu and Muslim controlled and regulated them through their religious orthodox and societal norms. It was during the freedom struggle, great social reformers like Dayanand Saraswati, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekananda, Gandhi Jee, Dr.Ambedkar etc. openly challenged many of the discriminatory social practices including those affecting women. The national leaders in the post independence period were all educated and liberal with progressive western system. They tried their best to correct the past erroneous practices through constitutional and legislative routes to provide Indian women with her legitimate social, legal, economic and fundamental rights that are at par with men.

Suggestion

The emergence of women leaders is possible in the current era, wherein women have gained momentum in terms of claiming their rights and livelihoods at par with men. However, the historical study on women needs to be conducted so as to understand society and cultures of ancient times. This will provide some new insights with regard to their skills like administration, coordination, self-confidence and adroitness whilst andro-centric times.

Conclusion

In the recent past, many women from higher castes emerged as prominent leaders during India's struggle for freedom from British rule. Also, common women came out in large numbers from the confines of their house to take part in that freedom struggle. To the contrary, the post independence period accounts for modern educated elite women in India. These women participate fully in areas such as education, sports, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology etc. and hold leadership positions. They even have an impressive representation in male bastions like: defense services, frontline nuclear and space research. It was Mrs. Indira Gandhi who served as the first women Prime Minister of Independent India for nearly fifteen years, which holds a unique record of having served as the longest Prime Minister after World War II. India also had the distinction of having women

75

(Mrs. Pratibha Patil from 2007 to 2012) as its 12th President. Today, many powerful woman leaders like: Ms. Mamta Banerji Ms Mayavati and Late. Ms. Jayalalithaa exhibited the formidable command and possessed a political clout to be as Chief Ministers of some of the most populated states of India. The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality[11], wherein no discrimination by the State[12], equality of opportunity[13] and equal pay for equal work[14]. In addition to this, it allows special provisions to be made by the State in favour of women and children[15], which renounces derogatory practices that deter the dignity of women[16]. This equality allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing justice and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief.[17] The law of inheritance now gives equal rights to women to inherit ancestral property at par with male child in the family. The Government of India declared 2001 as the Year of Women's Empowerment (Swashakti) and issued the National Policy for Empowerment of Women in the same year. It was on 9th March 2010, a day after International Women's day, Indian Parliament's Lower House passed the Women's Reservation Bill requiring that 33 percent of seats in India's Parliament and state legislative bodies should be reserved for women. Thus, women in India, once again gained prominence and commenced walking with dignity at par with men.

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[11] Article 14, Constitution of India.
[12] Article 15(1), Constitution of India.
[13] Article 16, Constitution of India.
[14] Article 39(d), Constitution of India.
[15] Article 15(3), Constitution of India.
[16] Article 51(A) (e), Constitution of India.
[17] Article 42, Constitution of India.