



## **GENDER HISTORY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT DURING THE PRE-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW**

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### **Abstract:**

Gender history offers a vital perspective for comprehending the social, cultural, and political status of women in pre-independence India. During this era, women's lives were predominantly influenced by patriarchal norms, constrictive rituals, and restricted access to education and civic engagement. Nonetheless, it experienced substantial changes influenced by social reform movements, colonial interventions, and the emergence of nationalist awareness. The convergence of gender and nationalism broadened avenues for women's engagement in political and social endeavours. Education, print culture, and women's organisations cultivated awareness, self-expression, and collective action. Notwithstanding enduring disparities, these advancements established the groundwork for women's empowerment by contesting conventional gender hierarchies and promoting rights and representation. The pre-independence era signifies a transitional time in gender history, wherein the collective endeavours of reformers and women activists catalysed a slow movement from subjugation to empowerment, influencing the course of women's rights in contemporary India.

**Keywords:** Gender History, Women Empowerment, Pre-Independence.

### **I. INTRODUCTION:**

The academic discipline of gender history investigates how social, cultural, political, and economic frameworks have historically influenced the roles, identities, and experiences of men and women. In India, gender history offers essential insights into the status and agency of women during the pre-independence era, characterised by entrenched patriarchy and significant reform efforts. Prior to independence in 1947, Indian society was predominantly regulated by inflexible gender standards that limited women's access to education, property rights, and participation in public life. Customs such as child marriage, sati, purdah, and restricted inheritance rights exemplified the inferior status of women. Nonetheless, the 19th and early 20th centuries experienced substantial social and religious reform movements that contested these injustices and established the groundwork for women's emancipation.

Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy were instrumental in the abolition of barbaric traditions like sati, whereas Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar championed widow remarriage and women's education. Likewise, women reformers such as Savitribai Phule advanced female education and confronted caste and gender prejudice. These initiatives were enhanced by the proliferation of Western education and the impact of colonial modernity, which fostered novel concepts of equality, rights, and individual liberty. The involvement of women in the nationalist movement significantly expedited the empowerment process. Leaders like Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant engaged women in public and political domains, dismantling conventional boundaries. The freedom struggle served as a platform for political emancipation and a venue for rethinking women's societal responsibilities. The pre-independence era in India signifies a transitional moment in gender history, evolving from oppression and marginalisation to awareness, resistance, and gradual empowerment. Comprehending this historical trajectory is crucial for evaluating current challenges of gender equality and women's rights. The objective of the study is to systematic review on gender history and women empowerment pre-independence period.

## II. SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

**Banerjee, A. (2024).** The colonial era in India saw the emergence of many movements and the proliferation of liberal philosophy across the nation. The emergence of these movements originated in the Bengal province of eastern India, where figures such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, frequently referred to as the 'father of the Indian Renaissance', advocated for liberal and feminist beliefs in the eighteenth century. This study intends to examine the gender dynamics and the rise of feminist movements in Bengal during the colonial era. The era experienced a multifaceted patriarchal framework established by colonial authorities alongside indigenous cultural systems. Despite these prevailing and oppressive systems, Bengal experienced the emergence of feminism, as women contested their conventional gender roles and advocated for their rights.

**Uddin, M.B. & Akter, S. (2024).** This study investigates women's agency in pre-colonial Bengal through a structure-agency framework, employing content-based thematic analysis of secondary sources and contrasting two principal social groupings. It effectively illustrates precolonial Bengali Hindu and Muslim perspectives on women and agency interconnections. The conclusion indicated that women's agency increased alongside structural modernization, thereby establishing practices that created path dependency within the operational paradigm shift, where the modernization-induced transformation in women's status exemplifies agency. The socio-physical environment, religio-cultural contexts, economic conditions, and cultural norms linked to women's submission to men, particularly

among Hindu women constrained by caste and Muslim women who, despite being relatively better off, remained in the lower strata of society, prompted transformations in agency. This entrenched behaviour created a novel form of path dependency that had to endure until women were emancipated, as agency was predominantly limited to a select few upper-class women capable of self-improvement.

**Nandwani, B. & Roychowdhury, P. (2023).** This study examines the long-term relationship between women's empowerment in India and British colonialism. We analyse the disparities in the economic condition of women today among regions that had direct and indirect British colonial governance. Utilising a specific policy to regulate selective annexation reveals a significant advantage in nearly all domains of women's empowerment, including employment, mobility, and household decision-making. We demonstrate that British colonialism positively influenced several aspects that promote women's empowerment, such as education, fertility rates, marriage age, and gender norms. We assert that the 19th-century social reform movement, influenced by Western ideals, along with the institutional and legal modifications implemented by the British to benefit women, may elucidate this enduring connection, notwithstanding the data constraints that hinder our examination of the underlying transmission mechanisms.

**Vikas & Pathak, V.K. (2023).** This study analyses the influence of British colonial policies on women's chances in India, investigating how economic, social, and political transformations throughout colonial rule redefined women's societal roles. Originally intended to assert dominance, British policies unintentionally created opportunities for women in education, healthcare, and restricted economic positions, initiating progressive social transformations. Reform movements of this era, bolstered by British administrative reforms, contested customs like Sati and child marriage, fostering some progress in women's rights. Moreover, exposure to Western political ideologies throughout the independence movement catalysed political activism among women, cultivating a legacy of resilience and agency. Nonetheless, colonial governance simultaneously strengthened patriarchal institutions, resulting in a contradiction of empowerment and limitation. This dual legacy has had a lasting influence, establishing a basis for post-independence advancement while underscoring the intricate journey toward female equality. As Indian women progressed in this endeavour, the contradictions of the colonial era highlighted both the challenges and opportunities for revolutionary change, shaping modern movements for women's rights and social justice.

**Pandey, S.K. (2022).** It analysed contemporary studies centred on women's empowerment in the twenty-first century. The primary objectives of the study are to investigate women's education in precolonial, colonial, and contemporary India; various forms of women's empowerment; violence

against women; women's rights; the legal protections afforded to women by the Indian Constitution; the contributions of non-governmental organisations to women's empowerment; government initiatives and programmes aimed at women's empowerment; the impact of education on women's empowerment; and the transformation of Indian society through women's empowerment in the twenty-first century. This has resulted in the recognition that women's education in Indian society has a historical lineage extending back to the Vedic period. This study defines women's empowerment as the enhancement and expansion of women's social, economic, political, and legal authority to assure equality and instil confidence in advocating for justice. National progress is contingent upon the empowerment of women. This research demonstrates the benefits provided by several national and international organisations, along with the rights conferred to women by the Constitution. Restoring women's empowerment necessitates women's education. Women will exhibit more concern for politics, society, and the economy due to their education. This study demonstrates how women's empowerment has contributed to the transformation of Indian society in the twenty-first century.

**Lakshmi, M.J. (2021).** "Yatra Naaryantu Poojanthe Tatra Ramanthe Devatha" signifies the locale where deities delight and ladies are revered. Age, caste, class, educational attainment, and geographic location (rural versus urban) significantly influence women's empowerment in India. Due to cultural, religious, and traditional perspectives, women in India have been marginalised from the development process for numerous generations. Consequently, they have forfeited prospects for political, economic, and social advancement, adversely affecting their reputation. Since independence, there have been significant functional alterations in the status and role of women in Indian society. The Constitution ensures that Indian women possess the right to vote. Numerous committees have issued suggestions about the employment of women. The organised public sector employed a greater number of women than the organised private sector. The extensive unregulated industry employs the majority of women in both rural and urban areas. In independent India, women occupy significant roles in politics and administration. Political parties have nominated 8–9% female candidates in the past 10 Lok Sabha elections; there is a deficiency of women in the legislative assemblies. Their frequently referenced argument, which is evidently erroneous in light of the contradictory evidence, is that women are not conquerable.

**Nazneen, S, Hossain, N. & Chopra, D. (2019).** The issues of women's empowerment remain a sensitive issue globally, particularly in South Asia, due to the region's recent history of rapid economic expansion and structural transformation. This special issue explores the methods by which women in South Asia are acquiring and wielding power, alongside the challenges and resistance they encounter.

It transcends the conventional concept of women's empowerment, which emphasises control over familial finances or involvement in the labour market. Publications from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan examine the challenges encountered by middle-class professionals, wage labourers, subsistence farmers, and garment workers within global value chains. These articles enumerate the individuals, organisations, and movements that either promote or obstruct women's advancement to leadership roles. The papers collectively assert that paid labour should not be regarded as an end in itself, but rather as a crucial domain for the pursuit of women's empowerment. They highlight the enduring characteristics of gendered norms that sustain patriarchy, as well as the methods by which patriarchal states and forces facilitate or impede pathways to power. They emphasise the significance of centring women's empowerment research on pivotal political disputes as crucial junctures in the advancement or decline of women's empowerment.

**Chakraborty, S.P. & Chakraborty, D. (2018).** Critical works such as the inaugural autobiography by a Bengali woman, Rasasundari Devi, alongside the non-fiction writings of Kailashbasini Devi, Krishnabhabini Das, and other female authors in the latter half of the nineteenth century, challenged the constructed idealisation of Hindu domesticity and marriage as realms of affection and spiritual devotion. They condemned compulsion in underage marriages and the oppressive mandates of Hindu scriptures regarding both married and widowed women. This narrative of apparent strength must be deconstructed to sustain the problems of 'double colonisation' and 'dual-hold' within Indian feminism. The inquiry concerns the existence of any foundations for women's agency within the Indian tradition. Eurocentric criticisms lack the capacity to politicise all forms of social exclusion inside Hindu imaginaries. Consequently, while issues of equality, liberation, and empowerment are vigorously contested in contemporary India, it is essential to articulate how inherent rebellious female subjectivity might emerge to challenge the various patriarchies present in Indian contexts.

**Pande, R. (2018).** This study examines the historical context of the women's movement, gender norms in India, and the emergence of feminism. Women's movements and feminism have consistently been interconnected, mutually promoting and advancing each other not only in India but globally. The women's movement in India has a lengthy history, but the term 'feminism' is very modern. Feminism encompasses a diverse array of social, cultural, and political movements, ideologies, and ethical systems that focus on women's equality and gender disparity. Before independence, during the 19th century, the women's movement predominantly functioned as a social reform initiative. Our educated elite diligently adopted Western principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity throughout this period through their studies of English and exposure to the West. This Western liberalism was implemented

in relation to women's issues, culminating in the establishment of a social reform movement. The principal focus throughout the initial decades following independence was on overall economic growth. Subsequently, an additional decade ensued during which apprehensions regarding equality and poverty alleviation intensified. Discussions of gender issues were predominantly overshadowed by concerns regarding poverty, with limited legislation expressly targeting women. Since independence, the women's movement has focused on various issues, including dowry, women's employment, rising costs, land rights, political participation, Dalit women's rights, and women's representation in the media. These issues have also been addressed by numerous non-governmental organisations. Women's studies and, more recently, gender studies originate from India's extensive history of women's movements. Numerous women's studies centres currently exist, although they are at risk of becoming obsolete once more. Despite the ongoing challenges and the considerable work remaining, the women's movement has heightened awareness of women's issues.

**Banerjee, D. (2017).** The empowerment of women is a critical topic in contemporary India that warrants meticulous attention. In India, where there is a daily increase in crimes against women, including rape, gang-rape, marital rape, dowry death, female infanticide, workplace sexual harassment, and teenage molestation, it is imperative to discuss how the theories of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo can facilitate women's emancipation. The objective of this essay is to ascertain whether individuals continue to develop as they age. Consequently, we must analyse the authentic condition of women's empowerment in India post the eras of Sri Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda, utilising data, tables, and graphs.

**Sarkar, L. & Chowdhury, P. (2017).** The entire globe comprises a multitude of nations. Every nation possesses a distinct historical narrative on women's empowerment in political, religious, and socio-economic contexts. India is a big nation; hence, it possesses a history of notable female figures. The history of women's empowerment in India commences with the Indus Valley civilisation. Empowerment is a concept frequently employed in the realm of 'development', especially with women's advancement. Empowerment, in essence, is the process of identifying and surmounting obstacles in one's life, hence enhancing the individual's capacity to influence her life and surroundings. A comprehensive evaluation of the position of women in India necessitates a succinct overview and historical context of women throughout the ages. This study aims to investigate the extent to which the status of women reflects societal cultural achievements and national growth. The status of women in ancient India varied across different historical periods. The portrayal of women was elevated. Women

possessed property rights and autonomy. During the pre-Vedic era, women held a prominent standing, and a matriarchal society was predominant.

**Banerjee, D. (2016).** Women exert a more substantial influence on the labour circumstances in West Bengal and India right now. Due to the advancement of study and campaigning concerning women's issues, we now possess a more comprehensive awareness of women's contributions to the economy and society through their diverse work across all groups. This section examines the work engagement habits and economic conditions of women in West Bengal within the context of globalisation, which has become increasingly evident in India during the 1990s. With the rise of globalisation, an excessively high percentage of women entered the workforce.

**Banerjee, S. (2015).** Literacy is seen as an essential preliminary stage in education and a key indicator of a nation's educational progress. The material and non-material surroundings worldwide are rapidly evolving due to scientific and technological advancements. The continually altering scenario necessitates that humans have a heightened awareness to adapt to new events and environments. India, with a literacy rate of 74.04 per cent and an illiteracy rate of 25.96 per cent (Census 2011), faces various challenges to its development and progress. Educating the illiterate is essential due to the clear correlation between literacy and productivity, as well as literacy and enhancements in family welfare, health, sanitation, and hygiene. The significance of universal literacy in mobilising and invigorating the populace, fostering a feeling of community, and enhancing civic engagement to facilitate social change was evidenced in the early 20th century. This essay examines the recent efforts concerning women's employment, welfare, and higher education implemented by the West Bengal state. This study also aims to compare the average status of women in West Bengal with that of India. The data indicates that women's status in West Bengal is marginally superior to the national average in several important categories.

**O'Dell, B.D. (2014).** Recent years have seen a lack of scholarly focus on the subject of educational reform in colonial India compared to the broader topic of colonial India itself. In the past decade, eight English-language books have been written on the subject, alongside a continuous stream of academic articles. The research's allure undoubtedly derived from India's esteemed position inside the British Empire during the eighteenth century. In 1881, the inaugural comprehensive census recorded 253,891,821 Indian subjects living under the British Raj. This population exceeded the combined population of Wales and England by more than tenfold. A particularly valuable instrument for scholars in comprehending the ideology of British colonialism is education. It offers a significant insight into the daily lives of Indian subjects. A comprehensive print collection available from many sources,

including periodicals, political speeches, bureaucratic records, and memoirs, has demonstrated significant utility for research on the evolution of colonial education. Nonetheless, significant deficiencies exist in the historical record due to research's tendency to prioritise specific areas of study.

**Thakur, D.N. (2012).** Feminism denotes a political, cultural, or economic movement aimed at securing equal rights and legal protections for women. Feminism encompasses theories from politics, culture, and sociology, along with ideologies that tackle gender imbalance. It is a movement that promotes gender equality for women and advocates for their rights and interests. Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker delineate three waves in the history of feminism. The feminist movement has unfolded in three distinct waves: the first occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; the second transpired throughout the 1960s and early 1970s; and the third wave commenced in the 1990s and persists into the present. Feminist philosophy emerged from these feminist movements. It is apparent across various academic fields, including feminist geography, feminist history, and feminist literary criticism. The examination of pre-colonial social institutions and the role of women within illustrates the divergent perceptions of feminism in India compared to the West. The colonial essentialisation of "Indian culture" and the redefinition of Indian women as its pinnacle through social reform movements led political theorisation to manifest as nationalism rather than only feminism. Notwithstanding these theoretical breakthroughs, numerous barriers persist that hinder individuals from fully capitalising on these new possibilities and rights. The Indian constitution mandates that women receive support to operate as equal members of society, as they are classified as a "weaker section" of the population.

**Chattopadhyay, S. (2012).** Bengali novelist Ashapurna Devi (1909–1995) explored themes of women's enlightenment and creativity in Bengal, India, during the colonial and postwar periods. She exhibited formidable determination, perseverance, and an indomitable spirit, which facilitated the establishment of a significant presence in the creative writing domain. Her varied life experiences, spanning both colonial and independent India, influenced her perspective and thought process, enabling her to depict the evolving representation of the middle-class, educated Bengali woman. Her essays illustrate the evolution of Bengali women into resilient, astute individuals who challenge the constraints imposed by societal prejudices. She elucidates the conventional upbringing experienced by women of her generation before delineating the spectrum of reactions to these frameworks. Some individuals would resist and establish their identity within society, while others would blindly adhere to regulations due to the apprehension of causing offence. A thorough analysis of Ashapurna Devi's trilogy, comprising *Pratham Pratishruti* [The First Promise] (1964), *Subarnalata* (1967), and *Bakulkatha* [The Story of Bakul] (1974), reveals the struggle set against the evolving context of India's shift from a

British colony to an independent nation. Ashapura Devi addresses these themes in several of her short works. The trilogy chronicles the lives of three generations of a family: Satyabati, Subarna, and Bakul. Furthermore, it depicts Ashapura Devi as a pioneering advocate for women's emancipation during an era when such endeavours were uncommon.

**Ruth, S.S. et al. (2010).** The evolving landscape of women's empowerment. One of the authors has been researching these groups since 1991. This essay evaluates the relevance of indicators created for a 1992 survey by presenting data from subsequent research conducted in the villages and addressing theoretical issues related to the assessment of women's empowerment. This paper analyses the impact of social, economic, and political changes on the assessment of women's empowerment; it introduces and elucidates a new set of metrics suitable for the rural Bangladeshi context; and it explores the ramifications of measuring women's empowerment in different settings.

**Chakraborty, I. & Chakraborty, A. (2010).** West Bengal exhibits some of the lowest rates of female labour force participation in India, which are adversely correlated with the number of Muslims residing in a block and female literacy rates. Nonetheless, there remains a substantial rate of female workforce participation due to the predominance of home-based labour in regions with a considerable Muslim demographic. A probit model was employed to characterise work participation in two of the regions targeted by the surveys. Men do not appear to possess enhanced career opportunities, even in areas where women dominate home-based occupations. The projected income functions for males and females indicate a slight earnings disparity; nonetheless, decomposition implies a minimal degree of "discrimination".

**Nair, J. (1994).** In 1928, certain women from the All-India Women's Conference called for "new sastras" in reaction to Madan Mohan Malaviya, an early Hindu nationalist thinker. This represented an acknowledgement by the Indian middle-class women's movement of the necessity to engage in knowledge production, predating by several decades the call from feminist historians for not only new narratives but also for a reconfiguration of the historical archive. Ultimately, feminist historiography aims to introduce a novel historical subject while simultaneously critiquing the discipline's ostensibly gender-neutral, yet fundamentally gender-blind, methodologies. In the last two decades, feminist political activism in India has acquired significant prominence within the academic sphere. Consequently, it is imperative to underscore the deeply political nature of the feminist historical issue addressed in my work from the beginning. Reevaluating history to assert that all facets of reality are gendered is inherently a contentious endeavour, requiring careful acknowledgement of the political struggle's progress and setbacks. While political engagement beyond academia significantly

contributes to Indian feminist studies, the growing institutional advantages of women's studies in Europe are far removed from the material circumstances of feminist historical creation in India. A feminist interpretation of history serves as an essential foundation for the advancement of feminist social transformation. The feminist critique of colonial India's historiography has been particularly impactful, as significant developments occurred within less than two centuries of colonial rule, with British control yielding enduring material and ideological consequences.

### III. CONCLUSION:

The review of gender history in pre-independence India demonstrates that women's empowerment developed through a multifaceted interaction of social reform, education, and nationalist politics. During this period, women progressively shifted from confinement inside stringent patriarchal frameworks to active engagement in public and political spheres. Early social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar significantly contributed to the opposition of repressive practices such as sati, child marriage, and the restriction of women's education, thereby establishing the groundwork for gender equality. The advent of women's education and the efforts of trailblazers such as Pandita Ramabai significantly bolstered women's status in society. The emergence of the national movement saw leaders like Mahatma Gandhi advocate for women's active involvement, thereby converting the independence struggle into a broad movement encompassing women from various backgrounds. Notable women like Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and Kasturba Gandhi illustrated the increasing political awareness and leadership among females. Nonetheless, despite these improvements, women's empowerment in the pre-independence era was constrained by socio-cultural limitations, class obstacles, and unequal access to education and opportunity. The advancements made were substantial yet not widespread, frequently favouring predominantly metropolitan and upper-caste women. In conclusion, the pre-independence era signified a pivotal period in the history of women's empowerment in India. It established the conceptual, educational, and political foundation for post-independence changes and the ongoing pursuit of gender equality. The legacy of this era persists in shaping modern discussions around women's rights and empowerment in India.

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