

## **Empowerment through Education and Skill Development: Women in the Partition Tales of the Indian Subcontinent**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In prior decades, the issue concerning empowerment of women has become a burning issue across the globe. Inequalities and discrimination against women have also been age-old issues all over the world. Thus, women are facing inequality and always suffer to get her identity, which she deserves. They have always demanded equality with men in matters of education, employment, inheritance, marriage, and politics.

In Indian Subcontinent, women are marginalized from the olden times with the exception of Vedic era when women were given the equal position with man. After that period, women were always viewed as a thing of subjugation and the need for women's empowerment emerged from the subaltern position they have been rendered for a long time. The Indian Subcontinent came into existence from a nation that was partitioned in 1947 resulting three emergent nations: India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. These entities have shared same socio-cultural norms such as tradition, rituals, and customs concerning women. In the era of Partition, the "community" of women and children suffered the most and the catastrophe that followed besieged the most vulnerable. They were treated like mere toys of exchange, without having their consent, between two states. Women were uprooted twice and victimized thrice: first, by their abduction; second under the recovery program in which, in many cases, they were forcibly recovered against their will; the third and the final most tragic moment came when they were rejected by their original families. When states were celebrating their freedom, women were at the flipside of the coin. They did not get independence in any sense though they were chaotically partitioned in a designed machination by the "deep comradeship of men", did not matter which community the men belonged. Women are still not in a good position in present scenario and somewhere suffering the same fate that was suffered by them during partition. No nation, society or even an individual can progress without a woman lag behind, so there is an urgency of look into this matter to bring about changes in their socio-economic condition. Pundit Jawahar Lal Nehru once said that if we educate a man we educate an individual, however, if we educate a woman we educate a whole family. Women empowered means mother India empowered.

Efforts have been made to bring dignity to the life of women in past centuries. There has been a long tradition of social reforms by our saints and social reformers which include: Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Mahadev Govind Ranade, and Jyotiba Phule, to

name a few, who tried their best to bring changes in the life of women but little had been gained in this effort. During the British Raj, the concern for women education had grown to some extent but the facilities were limited to certain class and cast. Women belonging to lower strata and the underprivileged women were still deprived of education. They remained within the four walls of their household and they have the total dependency on men folk. Muhammad Ali Jinnah in a speech in Aligarh stated that no nation can rise to the height of glory if their women are not side by side with them. He added further that it is a crime against humanity to shut up women within the four walls of the house as prisoners.

The problem of the unavailability of education in women in the backward areas can still be viewed in today's scenario. Being a patriarchal society, women and girls are not allowed to step out of their houses, which lead to lower educational status, low confidence to face the world. When the family faces financial constraints, an uneducated woman can also help her family by developing her skills and empower herself and her community at large. It was observed, if some kind of skill is imparted to the women, it would give them more chances to earn their living. By the help of vocational training program like stitching, embroidery or making food items will enable the rural women and girls to learn and enhance their skills, enhancing their confidence level by making themselves reliant. Due to their lack of economic independence and illiteracy, women have not actively participated in their emancipation, especially in rural areas. Women should be organized and strengthened at the grass root level to end their subordination. The nations should work to enhance the quality of life of women through increased knowledge and skills merely imparting literacy would not be sufficient. The women need vocational training or skills also to uplift their status. They should be able to stand on their feet and be an earning member of the family.

During the time of partition, women were abducted, raped, forcibly married, and even sold. They did not have any exposure to the outer world. Illiteracy prevailed in the women of lower strata. Even educated women did not have any say in any matter in which man folk was participating. In a way, they were not empowered and lacked self-confident. After Partition they remained silent, some were not accepted by their family because they were raped and they had to marry their rapists, some did not marry their rapists and committed suicide. Women could have stopped that brutality, but after partition, when they killed themselves or surrendered to their lot, that thing could have been changed if they were educated or they were given some opportunity to develop their skills in their own families. The picture would have been very different because they had not been dependent on anybody, especially on men folk. Mary Wollstonecraft rightly stated, "Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience." (Wollstonecraft, p.24)

Women who were lucky to get the formal education during the partition era had found jobs in the educational institutions, some who were able to do skilled work (like stitching, embroidery etc) had made these skills their means of income. Some took advantage of their household

training for trading purpose in preparing verities of pickles, *papad*, *badi*, and other culinary articles and even making paper packets and rolling *bidi* to support themselves and their families as well.

In the literature of partition, there are many examples in which women are presented as powerful characters. They are delineated as the financial support or the breadwinner of their family. Writers from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as well, pictured women as economically and socially capable in their tales on the partition. In the story "Housing Society", Buta Begum saved her thirteen-year-old girl Basanti Begum, by the help of her mistress Shams Ara Begum, from the clutches of an old Nawab Sikander Quli Khan, who had abducted her. Later in this story, Shams Ara Begum's own son had also tried to get her but somehow Buta Begum again succeeded in saving her child's life. In this story, Buta Begum has been portrayed as strong and empowered women. Though she was illiterate, she filed a case against the offenders. She worked as a maid in collector's house to educate her girl. Subsequently, after partition, it was her educated daughter Basanti Begum, who became a famous painter, had helped, and cared her during her old age. She said to her mother "I'm not that same Basanti Begum whom Nawab Bhure's minions could abduct." (Bhalla, Vol iv, p.64). Both characters represent an immeasurable strength of their will to get hold of their lot as they did not surrender themselves or did not make themselves depended on any man folk. If Buta Begum was not determined and her daughter was not educated, the situation was upside down. Buta Begum through her skill of household management and Basanti Begum through education proved themselves survivors instead of sufferers.

Ashraf Siddique's in his story "Rabeya Apa" sketched a woman who was very well educated and had the courage to marry a revolutionist without her parents' consent. Rabeya Apa was lucky to get educated and this made her take decisions in her own independent ways. She loved Alauddin, a man who was working as a revolutionist during Indi- Pak partition. Her parents did not approve her love and forced her to marry to a high government official. As she was a free-spirited and confident person, she eloped with him on the day of her marriage. She supported her husband and her children by doing a job at the corporation school. After her husband was handicapped due to an assailant's bullet, the whole responsibility comes to her shoulder; she did teaching as well as stitching to support her family, "I worked in a poor private school at a meager salary of forty taka." (Bhalla. Vol.iv, p.167). She sacrificed her husband as well as her elder son for her country but she was not broken. She said, "Rangpur is my holy land. I have to bring colour to its soil. I shall make proper human beings of each child in the school. I shall make each life an unconquerable fort in the hope that these young buds shall one day blossom." (Bhalla, Vol iv, p.167)

Bhoori a character drawn by Sundri Utamchandani in the story "Paparwali" is a very good example of the self-employed and self-reliant woman. Before partition, Bhoori was considered the famous beauty of her mohalla, but after partition poverty had blighted her

beautiful face. Although "In place of the old light-hearted Bhoori, a new hard-working, self-reliant Bhoori has been born." (Bhalla, Vol iv, p.380). She made *papad* and sold them door to door to support her husband financially. She had three children to take care of. She left her two girls in school before starting her work. Her boy showed no interest in studies so she took him with her to made him capable of doing her job to survive in the future. She said to a woman "Two rupees are quite ample for us. Anyway, we are not dependent on anybody." (Bhalla, Vol iv, p.377). She nourished no regrets about her meager salary, she was confident that she was not dependent on anybody.

These tales of partition tell us that the women were never weak in the past; they just did not understand their true place within their family and in the outer world. Although during and after partition women were the worst sufferers but partition has brought about some positive and striking impacts on their perspective and attitude towards life and they emerged as survivors. Women who survived during partition became more and more financially empowered and independent as they came to know their real existence within their family and in the outer world. They started actively participating in the decision-making process within their respective families as well as public affairs. In a way, partition opened the door of empowering women and made them realize their inherent strength. It made them realize that each and every woman is the true form of Durga, Laxmi, Saraswati. They started utilizing their power through education and developed their skills in various fields to made themselves strong and face the world bravely. It is needless to say that the process is still going on and yet to be completed.

Cecily Mwaniki rightly states, "A woman is the full circle. Within her is the power to create, nurture and transform" (Mwaniki, p.53). Skill Development and Education have become necessary and compulsory need in today's world. Especially women should be educated and they should have been given chances to enhance their skills in various fields to become self-employed and self-reliant. Every region offers different program content, composed to work specifically for the community that it is serving. In India Handicraft work, embroidery and stitching are flourishing nowadays, in Afghanistan, rug weaving and tailoring are the most popular vocational and business skills training courses; in Nigeria, Rwanda and Congo it is farming, and in Iraq, it is hairdressing and candle making. It would help the innumerable women in the world who get abandoned by their husbands and have no means of proving their marital status. It would truly empower Indian women to exercise their rights.

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