



Research Paper

A Comparative Study on the Historical Development of Women Empowerment in the Indian Society and in the Indian Church

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ABSTRACT: This paper discussed the historical development of Women Empowerment in the Indian society from the pre- independence period till today and compare with the historical development of women empowerment and leadership in the Indian Christian Churches. First part deals with the history of women empowerment during the British rule and the post Independence period, and the second part deals with the parallel progression of women empowerment and leadership among Christian Churches in India.

KEY WORDS: Empowerment, Ordination, Equality, Social Reforms, Gender, Leadership

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I. INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment as a phenomenon is not something new. It has been there throughout the history in all societies. Now it has been developed and reshaped from women's welfare to their development to involve in decision makings. Empowerment of women includes equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have a positive esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and equip them to participate and taking leadership in all the developmental activities in the society. The empowered women should be able to participate in the process of important decision makings in the society and nation. Education would play the most crucial role in empowering women.¹

This Paper is a comparative study on the historical development of the women Empowerment in the Indian Church and Indian Society.

1. History of Women Empowerment in Indian Society

Movement towards equality never happens quickly in the Indian society as compared to the Western world and Western churches. However, we must not disregard how Indian women have overcome unique barriers in their struggle for equality. Although equal treatment of women and men is still a movement in progress in the Indian society, recently many positive changes have been made in political, social, and religious contexts.

According to Nayak and Brito,

"If Indian society has to truly progress, women have to be involved in the process of national development and participate actively in all spheres of life. They have to assume different roles and take leadership. Only then, will women's concerns be really focused upon and their low status begin to improve".²

The concept of 'empowerment' flows from that of power and in popular understanding the term 'power' is understood as the capability to do anything. In sociology, 'power' is understood as authority, right to command, right to govern or rule, capability to influence, et cetera. Thus empowerment simply means vesting power where it does not exist or exist inadequately. The word 'empowerment' essentially means decentralization of authority and power. It aims at getting participation of deprived sections of people in decision making process.

1.1. Women Empowerment during British Rule

The advent of the British rule in India during the nineteenth century had brought not only a new form of government, but also new knowledge, new ideas, and new technology. The members of the newly-educated class discovered their distress that the society which had inherited and about which they often boasted for

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centuries was not the ideal one, but ridden with many evils such as discrimination against women. Social reformers who had contact with the British people found that, on the one hand, there was the Indian society, basically hierarchical and accepting norms of discrimination based on caste and gender; on the other hand, there was the West, with its dazzling ideas of equality and liberty and offering new technology for a better society. Reformers were forced to harmonize the traditional and the progressive thoughts.³

Social reformers all over the country showed their deep concern over women's issues such as *Sati*, child-marriage, female infanticide, widowhood, *purdah*, polygyny, *devdasi* system, and education. Raja Ram Mohon Roy, in order to stop the custom of *Sati*, referred to various Sanskrit texts to prove that this practice was not prescribed by the religious texts. While many of the reformers like Raja Ram Mohon Roy were inspired by the liberal thoughts of the west, some preferred to go back to the glorious traditions of ancient India. Revivalists such as Dayananda Saraswati and Vivekananda made efforts to improve the status of women by evoking the ancient Indian norms of purity and duty⁴. There were some bold voices like Mahatma Jyotirao Phule who challenged the tradition of the Brahmanical rules and worked for equality and the education of the oppressed classes and women. Gopal Ganesh Agarkar was one of the few reformers who advocated the rights of women on the ground of equality. Pandita Ramabai also challenged the age-old traditions which had hindered the development of women in the Indian society. Christian missionaries like William Carey and Indian social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, with the help of the colonial rulers of the nineteenth century, played a major role to pass some progressive legislation such as banning of *Sati* in 1829, permitting widow remarriage in 1856, and determining age of consent in 1891. However, as the political feeling became surcharged with nationalist ideas, the British scheme for social reforms was dampened.⁵

Prior to Independence policies enacted to empower women, focused on giving women more basic rights. These included The Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 that allowed women to remarry after the death of their husbands, The Native Marriage Act in 1872 that allowed inter-caste marriage to be valid and disallowed polygamy, the Hindu Women's Right to Property Acts in 1929 and 1937 which aimed at making women, especially widows, economically independent.

1.2. Contribution of Christian Missions

Christianity in India played a crucial role in the social development of the Indian society especially in the area of social discriminations on the basis of caste, colour, and gender. The essence of Christianity is universal brotherhood, inclusiveness, egalitarian outlook, and service of the under-privileged. According to Hasnian, Christianity is one of the earliest agencies of social welfare for the weaker sections and through the vast network of social services which includes educational and medical facilities to the relatively isolated regions of India⁶. The best evidence in favour of this is the high rates of literacy in areas where Christianity and its social services network were strong. One of the major activities of the Christian Missions and missionaries who came to India during the early decades of the Nineteenth century was reforming the Indian society. Pioneer among them was the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) missionary William Carey who began his ministry at Serampore in 1800 along with Joshua Marshman, a schoolteacher and William Ward, a printer. They were also instrumental in prohibiting the evil practice of sacrificing children by drowning them in the water.⁷

Christian Missions were the pioneers in the field of women's education with a view of uplifting them from oppression and discriminations. Protestant Missions, from the very beginning of their ministry in India, gave importance to girl's education. Bartholomeus Ziegenbalg, the first Protestant missionary to India started India's first school for girls in 1707 at Tranquebar in Tamil Nadu. In the earlier times, protestant missionaries' wives and a few other single women missionaries started schools for girl children. Mrs. Hannah Marshman, the wife of Joshua Marshman of Serampore Mission started village schools for girl children in Bengal. Miss Mary Ann Cook in 1821 started educational institutions for girls in Calcutta. Since the second half of the nineteenth century after the women missionaries started coming to India, women's higher education too began to be given importance.⁸

Since 1870, a large number of schools and colleges began to be established for women by the Protestant churches and missions throughout India. Some of the early women graduates of Indian Universities were also products of Christian colleges. The Christian educational work for girls was the motivation for both Government and other agencies to begin female education⁹.

1.3. Post- Independence Era

The post-Independence phase of India has witnessed a tremendous rise for equality and gender justice. Women in the urban centers showed a mass desire for their rights. The State has been forced to come out against discriminatory practices. Female literacy has increased appreciably. Gender-blender trends are emerging strongly. Women of contemporary India have multiple roles to play such as at home, in office, factory, legislature, et cetera. They gradually reject all customs and traditions supportive of gender

discrimination¹⁰. According to *Jan Swasthya Abhiyan Women's Health Booklet-3 of 2018*, in some of the Indian Cultures,

Gender-based discrimination begins early and is evident in the falling sex ratio and the indiscriminate use of technologies to 'get rid' of girls even before they are born. Girls are typically married as young adolescents and are taken from their natal homes to live in their husband's households. They are subjugated not only by the men they have married but also by their in-laws. In most circumstances the money they earn, the dwellings in which they live, and even their reproductive 'choices' are not theirs to control. Women rarely have any autonomy in decision-making regarding their own bodies, sexualities and fertility. Women's mobility, particularly young women's is often controlled. In addition, the work they perform is devalued "Women's Health,"¹¹.

The Constitution of India imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen to renounce all practices derogatory to the dignity of women:

"To promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities; to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women"¹².

Constitution not only encourages equality in various spheres in society, but prohibits discrimination and enables the State to offer positive discrimination in favour of women. The Constitution says, "Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children".¹³

In 1947, after the independence, several laws were enacted to facilitate the empowerment of women. These include the Special Marriage Act of 1954 and the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 that codified the rules of marriage and also covered divorce and separation (amended in 1966), the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 that gave women the right to inherit equally, and the Married Women Property Act of 1974. Other acts have been the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971, and the Maternity Benefits Act, 1961.¹⁴ The Minimum Wages Act was passed in 1948. In addition, the Government of India introduced labour laws to ensure humane working conditions, maternity benefits, and laws to end exploitation of women and children by immoral trafficking in 1956. To give more opportunities to women, the Government of India also formulated policies for social and economic development for women to participate effectively in society. India adopted constitutional privileges, fundamental rights, and directive policies as focused measures for neutralizing the cumulative socio-economic, political, and educational disadvantages that have been faced by Indian women as an initial step toward women's empowerment. India ratified various international conventions committed to securing equal rights for women. One of the key conventions in this line was the Convention for the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Amongst Women (CEDAW) in 1993¹⁵

However, in 1974, the Ministry of Welfare and Education in India commissioned researches to determine the status of women under Article 14 of the Indian Constitution. According to the report submitted by the Research Committee (Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI), 1971) it was found that there was a huge gap in implementation of laws, and policies and that large numbers of women were not impacted by any of the laws, especially the women in rural India. The CSWI had two tasks before them. First, to examine the constitutional, legal, and administrative provisions that have a bearing on the social status of women including their education and employment, and second to assess the impact of these provisions. The Committee submitted the report on the status of women in India on January 1, 1975 to the ministry for Educational and Social Welfare, Government of India. CSWI in its report highlighted that, "Even after two decades of Independence, there was persistent disparity in the status according to women in India in terms of constitutional, legal, and administrative provisions"¹⁶. The Committee came to the conclusion that there was an increase in the marginalization of women in the economy and society. CSWI also made mention of the difficulties involved in women's access to literacy, education, and livelihood. This shows that the Indian State had failed in its constitutional responsibility of gender equality. In the middle of the 1970's, the National Plan for Women was adopted, and it was the main treatise for women until 1988 when the National Perspective Plan for Women was formulated. The plan had 350 recommendations covering "a uniform civil code, property rights to women, reservation of seats for women in elected bodies, banning of sex determination tests, and making harassment of wives for dowry as a ground for seeking divorce" (National Perspective Plan 1988)¹⁷.

In 2001, the National Policy for Empowerment of Women (NPRW) was formulated with the goal of bringing about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. The NPRW laid down detailed prescriptions to address discrimination against women, strengthen existing institutions which includes the legal system, provided better access to health care and other services and equal opportunities for women in decision making¹⁸.

2. Historical Development of Women Empowerment in Indian Churches

One of the early women involvements in mission was from the Roman Catholic side in the eighteenth century when a Roman Catholic force with the name Ursulines arrived at Pondichery on 8th September 1738. This Order had been founded at Brescia in Italy by St Angela Merici in 1535. The objective of this group was to combat heresy by giving instruction in Christian doctrines and to oppose the widespread immorality of the time. This Order was notable as the first religious orders for women to engage in work outside Europe. They were established in Quebec, Canada, as early as 1639. A party arrived at New Orleans in 1727 and founded their first convent there.¹⁹

They came to India at the invitation of Fr Norbert, who had probably heard of these overseas enterprises of the Order and believed that the nuns were well suited to work in India. He wrote to the convent at Vannes, France, asking the authorities to send to India qualified nuns to give good literary and religious education to the poor girls of the French colony. The nuns arrived in Pondichery without prior notice to the authorities and without any regulation of their ecclesiastical relationships.²⁰

Three months after their arrival, the French council in Pondichery granted them leave to reside and a site for the creation of a school. A contract in seventeen articles had been drawn up by Fr Norbert and was forwarded by the Governor of Pondichery to the Bishop of San Thome under whose jurisdiction the religious ladies would come. Initially, the bishop raised a number of objections and refused to sign the contract. However, after modification in the light of the bishop's comments, the contract was signed in the council chamber on 31st December 1738. However, the bishop continued to make objections and that resulted in a clash with the council. Council's letter to the bishop on 5th January 1739 quoted by Stephen Neill is the proof for the conflict.

“As for us, our opinion is that it would be better not to establish a house of religious women at Pondichery than it on the conditions which your Lordship requires. This has led us to the resolution to send them back on the same ship that has brought them to Pondichery”.²¹ However, the Ursulines did not leave Pondichery on the same ship, but waited for some more days and finally returned even before an answer was received from France in February 1741.²²

In the nineteenth century, ministries from the side of women were concentrated on personal evangelism, education, medical work, and rescue work. This was also limited to among the widows, orphans, children and famine victims. These women were called as Bible women, women workers and Zenana workers²³ The Bible women and Zenana workers were mostly the products of the rescue homes and orphanages run by various missions. They were mostly widows and deserted women without any encumbrances. As per the need and the context of the day, they had basic education and some were even illiterate. They preached the Gospel in simple language and clear terms as they understood the Gospel. Their main audiences were the women who were illiterate and less educated like them.²⁵

From the role of preachers they slowly moved on to the status of a teacher where they had to teach in schools as church workers. As the ministry spread and the work consolidated, there was a slow shift of emphasis from the mission to the church. In Dornakal, Andhra Pradesh, the ministry of Zenana workers was later developed as Mothers' Union and the local pastor's wives became presidents of the Union. They conducted Mother's Union festival which became one of the major events in the life of the church. In order to develop women's leadership in the Church, Bishop V.S. Azariah introduced the ordination of deaconesses and in 1933 Miss Carol Graham became the first deaconess to be ordained in the Dornakal Diocese. This was one of the major steps taken by the bishop in recognizing the ministry of women in the Indian Church²⁶. Bishop Azariah also introduced a new programme of women's leadership in the villages by electing women as Church elders. By 1944, there were almost 200 women elders in 800 Dornakal villages. Most of them could neither read nor write but were perceived to be leaders of the Christian communities. Their major responsibility in the church was to keep the church clean, calling the women to services, taking up the offerings on the women's side and generally keeping order among women and children. Through this, women receiving opportunity to teach and work in the field as mission agents along with men was indeed the beginning for the women's consciousness for equal rights.²⁷

1.1. Women Ordinations in India

In India, since 2000 there are many churches that have women leadership and ordinations. Ajitha Karthikeyan in 2008 reported in the *Times of India* about the outstanding services of the women pastors in the city of Chennai. She also reported that Chennai had the most number of women Pastors in India “Women Leads the Flock: Chennai has the most Women Pastors in India”.²⁸

After the formation of the Church of South India (hereafter, C.S.I.) in 1947 and the formation of women's fellowship in 1948 and the order of Sisters in 1952 by Sister Carol Graham²⁹, women's ministry was delineated from the mainstream and confined to women alone. Women's Fellowships were organized in all the local churches and women's wing in the Synod level, where women themselves served as leaders and managed

their local fellowships and women's wing. In the Church, women did not participate in any decision making. They became only representatives of women's ministry in the committees but were not recognized as active workers in the church.³⁰

Even the Indian Christian intellectual elite could not consider their female counterparts as their equals intellectually, and they also conformed to the patriarchal concept of women's restricted spheres of action within the narrow understanding of domesticity. Women normally sat separately in the churches and they rarely held positions or offices in the Church. They never participated in conducting the worship and in decision-making. The struggle of the Indian Christians regarding their identity in the post-Independence era must have not only made them adhere to the Indian ideals of womanhood of being good wives and mothers but confined to the traditional norms of domesticity.³¹

The debates regarding women leadership in the C.S.I., started with a request for the ordination of women as Presbyters from the Madras Diocese as early as the 1970's, to the Synod meeting. Jean Berinjoti, in an article writes,

Both in 1972 and 1974, an amendment to the constitution of the CSI was unsuccessfully sought at the 13th and 14th synod meetings, to substitute the word 'person' for 'men' in regard to the ordination as Presbyters. It is hoped that during the 15th CSI Synod meeting to be held in 1976, if Christians are consistent, there can be only one possible decision on this matter.³²

In Church of south India, it took more than two years to implement the amendment to ordain women to the diaconate with three women ordained as deacons³³. However, even before the discussion regarding the inclusion of women in leadership became vibrant, J. Russel Chandran wrote in *The South India Churchman* about the need of Women leadership. "By allowing women, the freedom to serve in the ordained ministry, the church would make it easy for the world to believe what the church has been trying so far?".³⁴ The Church of South India realized that there was an acute need to incorporate women also in the ordained ministry of the church, since they too are acceptable before God, to serve the Church and God's people. Mary Thangaraj says,

"When women stand shoulder to shoulder with men in all spheres of life, it is inconceivable that God would want to keep women in the background where His ministry is involved. Women should take their rightful place along with men in the church's ministry by being eligible for full ordination if needed".³⁵

The need to amend the constitution for presbyter ordination was at last accepted in 1982. A series of women ordinations happened in the CSI during 1983, right after the Synod gave permission to do so and the first Holy Communion conducted by a woman was on 25th May 1984.³⁶ The Church of North India (CNI) also ordained women as presbyters for the first time in 1986³⁷.

The Mar Thoma Church, while accepting the full participation of women in all realms at the theological level, is reluctant to take administrative steps to include women in the pastoral ministry of the Church. The Mar Thoma Church's response to the Lima Document of 1982³⁸ with the title "*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*" by *The Commission on Faith and Order* stated:

*... the Mar Thoma Church presently has barriers due to custom, culture, tradition on allowing women to share in the ordained ministry of the church. It is earnestly hoped that these will break down as men developed greater consciousness of the change of times and women become willing and open to new challenges that God is opening before them.*³⁹

One of the progressive steps taken in the Mar Thoma Church under the reform movement initiated by The Rt Rev. Dr Geevarghese Mar Theodosius, the Bishop of the Mar Thoma Church for the Diocese of North America and Europe and the Rev. Sam Panicker, the Vicar of the Carmel Mar Thoma Church at Hudson, USA, was assigning Ms Anitha Oommen, a member of that congregation to be the Deacon for the Holy Communion Service on Sunday, January 4, 2015. This was the first time that a woman served as the Deacon for the regular Holy Communion service in a parish church of the Mar Thoma Church in a culture where the very entry of women in the sacred space of the high altar was considered as a taboo.⁴⁰ Though it happened in the United States of America, the event of January 4 is marked as a major step in the participation of women in the ministry of the Church in an Indian Christian denomination.

This was an initiation by the bishop towards reformation in the church with regard to gender equality, in which he rejected the excuse of tradition to prevent women from standing in the holy altar traditionally reserved for men. Since that time, some other women have overcome much resistance to assist during a service, but it usually happens only if a woman strongly advocates on her own behalf. To serve as a lay leader does not require ordination in the Church and we can see a clear difference between the spoken faith of the Church and daily practice. Presently, the Mar Thoma Church has chosen not to initiate any conversation about female ordination in favour of maintaining unity and allowing patriarchal norms⁴¹

The formation of the Catholic Church, the CSI, CNI, and the Mar Thoma Church has played a key role in the spread of Christianity in India, and each has a distinct view of women's roles within the church, specifically concerning women ordination. The global Catholic Church does not ordain women due to the theological barriers. However, CSI and CNI doctrinally promote female ordination and currently have over one

hundred clergywomen and a woman bishop. Yet, the Mar Thoma Church which has communion with the CSI Church did not align with them in the practice regarding the ordination of women.⁴² Though the Mar Thoma Church claims and traced back its roots in Reformation, all the bishops and priests of the Mar Thoma Church are men and there are no other paid positions within a local congregation other the priest. Many theologically trained women in the Church do not have an opportunity to work in the local church besides volunteering in the same ministries that were available to them prior to training

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church is one of the oldest churches with the Eastern background and clings on to the St Thomas tradition. It is believed by the traditional Orthodox Christians of South India that the Church in India is founded by St Thomas, the Apostle of Jesus Christ in AD 52⁴³. In the fourth century, one Thomas of Cana (Syrian-Palestine) came to south India, and then onwards the church in India came to be known as the Syrian Church.⁴⁴ The tradition and liturgy of the Indian Orthodox Church have been influenced by the tradition of the West Syrian Church and over the ages, and the Church has adopted local customs in its practices. At the top of the hierarchy of the Church is the Catholicos. Under him the holy Episcopal Synod which comprises all the bishops of the church. The Malankara Association comes next and it is the body that elects the members of the managing committee, bishops, and the Catholicos. The association comprises a few elected members from every parish of the Indian Orthodox Church across the world. The managing committee comes next in the hierarchy, and it is a smaller body to look into financial and other administrative matters of the church. It consists of two priests and four lay members representing each diocese, who are elected for five-year tenure. The working committee follows next, and it serves as the advisory council to the management committee and the Catholicos.

Though the Indian Orthodox Church has an elaborate and organized management, it stands out for comprising of only men. It is only men who lead, discuss, dissent, debate, vote, and make all the decisions that impact every aspect of running the church at the macro, micro, and all the in-between levels.⁴⁵ The impact of a gender- specified socio-religious order is evident in all aspects of the Indian Orthodox community life. It is evident in elections held in the parishes or administrative decisions are made. Women who make up more than half the community, most often have no say or role to play in the decision-making process or in the operations of the church. However, these same women of the Indian Orthodox Church hold positions of authority in secular spheres outside the Church community. The women in the Indian Orthodox community are as educated and empowered in the social sphere outside the church as the men. However, till today there was no voice raised from the women flock of the community for individual rights and autonomy. Furthermore, a collective move to improve the status of women without sacrificing the community's religious traditions and doctrines has also not been initiated⁴⁶.

It is quite clear that the women in the Indian Orthodox Church are subjugated, powerless, and dominated by a seemingly patriarchal socio-religious order. However, for the first time in 2011, in a landmark and historic amendment to the church constitution, women were granted voting rights, membership to local parishes, and the right to get elected to the parish managing committee. According to Varghese, "Archaic taboos and an outdated cultural bias towards women's participation combined with misogynistic stereotypes inherited from a patriarchal society have co-existed in the life of the Indian Orthodox Church"⁴⁷.

Pentecostal leaders and pastors in India are generally men as other church traditions have. When many Indian mainline churches promote the ordination of women at least theologically and theoretically, the overwhelming majority of Indian Pentecostal leaders, especially the south Indian pastors, have denied the permissibility of ordained women pastors on theological grounds. Even preaching to Christian believers is generally not allowed⁴⁸ Apart from the restriction of preaching and teaching in the church, women have the freedom to engage in many authoritative ways in the congregation. For instance, the gift of prophecy is exercised especially by women. Women have complete freedom to lead a circle of women and to preach there. Preaching to those who are not born-again Christians is allowed.⁴⁹

II. CONCLUSION

Movement towards equality never happens quickly in the Indian society and in the Indian Church. The growth of women's ministry in the Church from an ordinary Bible women status to an ordained minister is an evolution that took place along with the times and the changes that happened in the Indian society. The Indian Church moved along with trends in the Indian society and the changing context in which it was placed in the area of Women empowerment.

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