Abstract
Historical studies indicate that Indian women enjoyed respectable position in family and public life during early Vedic period. The position and status of women in Mughal period was not that good. Women in India suffered from multifarious constrains such as lack of access to resources and obstacles caused by the cultural, social customs and traditions and low level of literacy. Women had been relegated to secondary status in the family and in the society during medieval period and to much extent in the British period. During 19th and 20th century the social reform movement in India played a very significant role in changing the status of women through education, legislative reforms and change in social attitude. After independence the constitution of India has made provisions to bring equality between men and women. Since eighties the buzz word is women empowerment. With the adoption of empowerment strategy towards women development, an ambience of concern for women and a heightened sense of gender perspectives have been created through combined efforts of the government and non-government organizations. Education is a process of human enlightenment and empowerment for the achievement of better and high quality life, and hence plays an important role in the empowerment of women, as it enhances the capability to work and participate in decision making.

1. Introduction
While nature has made men and women differently, society and culture determine their roles to perform and accord value to them. Their status therefore depends upon the attitude of the society towards men and women depending upon various roles performed by them at
home and in society. Women enjoyed a respectable status in the early Vedic period in India, notable examples being Gargi, Maitrayee, Lopa Mudra and Upala. The later period witnessed deterioration in the status of women and their participation in the public life largely on account of their low participation in education and decision making. It continued till the social reform movements emerged on the scene during the colonial period. The British period did not accord the significance uplifting of the status of women in India. The nineteenth century was watershed for women’s history western education was limited to handful of people but the liberal education brought change in the mindset of Indian leaders and youth of the time. When India gained independence the democratic institutions created space for issues concerning women, education being the first on priority. The constitutional provisions various amendments, five year plans, Govt. programmes, National and international conventions and later women activists and Non-Government organizations have significantly contributed towards women empowerment. Women’s empowerment has come to be associated with struggle for social justice and equality.

2. Objectives
The focus of this paper is to make historical survey of position of women with special reference to Modern India and study the constitutional provisions, Governments efforts and role of NGO’s towards empowerment of women and the outcomes. The objectives are as follows:-

- To trace the position of women in a historical perspective with the special reference to Modern India.
- To study the role of education towards empowerment of women and constitutional provisions.
- To highlight the government plans and programmes and role of voluntary / non-Governmental organizations
- To discuss the participation of women (outcomes) in various spheres.

Accordingly the paper is divided in to four sections.
Section- I: Condition of Women before Independence
Section- II: Empowerment of Women’s since independence (highlighting the role of education and constitutional provisions).
Section- III: Government initiatives and voluntary organisations
Section- IV: Participation of women (outcomes) in various spheres.

Section- I: Condition of Women before Independence
In the Medieval and British period women faced social prejudices. Girls faced discrimination in the matters of nutrition, health care and education. Indian women were believed to be fit only for household work and their place was in kitchen and at the best they might figure in the drawing room. The condition of women in general all over the country was at its lowest ebb from the point of view of literacy, individuality, health, social
status, freedom of movement and economic independence.\textsuperscript{1} The presence of foreigners and foreign missionaries, introduction of English language and outside influences brought new factors to bear on the Indian people, especially the intelligentsia.\textsuperscript{2} She was born and bred up to strictest privacy and married while a child, she was devoted to a life of domestic rigours, varied only by the rites of religion and the ordinary events of the family. Of the world around her, she could know little or nothing of her. Her mental abilities were either under developed or wasted upon questionable activities, while her notions of right and wrong were dictated by a superstition and credulity\textsuperscript{3}. Some of the most imperative traditions were ubiquitous in those days viz. Dowry System, Infanticide, Purdah, Child Marriage, Compulsory Widowhood, Polygamy, Devdasi and education was not the cup of tea for women. In the nineteenth century the position of women suffered due to low participation in education. The nineteenth century watershed for women’s history - The rise of social reforms movements namely Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj played an important role in female education, widow remarriage, elimination of Sati practice etc. During the British period the Rani Jhansi, Begum Hazratmul of lucknow showed their valour. The Stri Bharat Mahamandal set up in 1901 was actually the first formal step towards women justice. At the beginning of the 20th century women started participating in national movement actively. Mrs. Annie Besant had profound impact on spread of women education. Mrs. Sarojini Naidu is known for her notable contribution in Civil Disobedience Movement. The National Struggle for independence brought many women leaders.

Section-II: Empowerment of Women since Independence

Having achieved independence there was exposure of new values. The Constitution on India emerged as amalgamation of all of these values, the first and fore most being social justice. To be more specific, it refers to equality between men and women or women empowerment. “Women Empowerment” is a new term in the area of women development in its wider sense it implies development of women’s life in every aspect. Empowerment of women also refers to equipping women to be economically independent self-reliant and have a positive self-esteem to enable them to face adverse situations and making them capable of participating in decision making. Education is the only factor to play crucial role in empowering women.

\begin{itemize}
  \item Role of Education
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In the words of Sarojini Naidu in her address in 1930 “ We have to educate the manhood that the Spiritual reforms of the world is the women’s great work”. Women are the universal repository of morality which sustains and harmonies the world through her mother power and mother value. Education influences women’s chances of employment, her earning power, her age at marriage, her control over child bearing, her exercise of legal

\begin{enumerate}
  \item M.B.Cousins, \textit{Indian Women Today}, Allahabad, 194i, p.15.
  \item \textit{The Friend of India} , 31st August, 1866, Vol. XXXII, p.1018.
\end{enumerate}
and political rights, and her ability to care for herself and her children. The change was visible as the educated and empowered women started taking decisions either alone or jointly with their husbands. In urban sphere the women enjoy more autonomy in nuclear family system. While having a look in the past, women were not allowed to go out of homes but after various initiatives freedom of movement accentuated.

Women education got a fillip after 1947; the government took various measures to provide education to all Indian women. This literacy rate increased from 12% in 1947. It grew from 54.16 percent for females in 2001 to female literacy rate of 65.45 percent by 2011. At present women enrollment in schools and colleges is increasing. There is no doubt that with the progress of education, science and technology has brought an incredible change in the life styles of men and women. Women are now enrolled for specialized technical courses in Universities, and studying non-traditional courses like business and commerce, management, medicine, law, engineering, science, agriculture, politics, paramilitary forces and police etc Modern Indian women is educated life style by getting higher education and adorning high offices in the country as well as across the globe.

The Mexico Plan of Action (1975), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), the Beijing Declaration as well as the Platform for Action (1995) and the Outcome Document adopted by the UNGA Session on Gender Equality and Development & Peace for the 21st century, titled "Further actions and initiatives to implement the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action" have been endorsed by India for appropriate follow up. 7


The year 1947 was a landmark in Indian history which brought all round change in the socio-political setup. The constitution of India is one of the advanced Constitutions of the world which has attempted to remove every kind of discrimination in the legal and public domain of life. After Independence, the Indian constitution provided for gender equality which is enshrined in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only granted equality to women, but also empowered the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Within the Framework of a democratic polity, Indian laws, development policies, plans and programmes were aimed at women’s advancement in different spheres. Fundamental Rights, among others, ensure equality before the law and equal protection of law prohibited discrimination against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, and guaranteed equality of opportunity to all citizens in matters relating to employment. A number of constitutional provisions for women’s social, economic and political benefits were made. They offered Equality before law 8 and the constitutional authorities ensured that the State would not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race,

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4 Ander bethi lakh di, Bahr gayee kakh di (Sitting inside the home is of worth millions going out worthless)
5 Census Report, 2001
6 Census Report, 2011
8 Article 14 of Indian Constitution
caste, sex, and place of birth or any of them\textsuperscript{9}. Constitution of India provides Right to equality (Art 14, 15) Right against exploitation (Art 23) Directive Principles of State Policy (Art 38, 39 (a), 42, 44).

Article 15(3) guaranteed the State to make any special provision in favour of women and children.

Article 39(a) ensured the State to direct its policy towards securing for men and women equally the right to an adequate means of livelihood and further ensured Equal pay for equal work for both men and women.\textsuperscript{10}

The State was asked to make provision for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief (leave).\textsuperscript{11} The State had to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation\textsuperscript{12}.

Government from time to time has been enacting certain laws to protect the dignity of women:


The Sexual Harassment of Women at work Place (Prevention Prohibition and Redressal Act) 2013 is a legislative Act in India that seeks to protect women from sexual harassment at their place of work. Lok Sabha passed the bill on 3 September 2012. This act is serving as severe deterrent against exploitation and brutalization of women.

- Amendments to Safeguard Women Rights

Not only constitutional provisions but also the legal system of India framed various Acts and made amendments to empower Indian women rights such as: The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 1983, the Factories (Amendment) Act, 1986, Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986, Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987 , the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005etc. were the milestones.

Section III: Government initiatives and Voluntary Organisations

After independence empowerment of women was recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women. Within the framework of a democratic polity, our laws, development policies, Plans and programmes have aimed at women’s advancement in different spheres. The Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-78) onwards a marked shift in the approach to women’s issues has been witnessed\textsuperscript{13}. In 7\textsuperscript{th} five year plan the strategy of organizing women around socio economic activities was emphasized. The land marks are

\textsuperscript{9} Article 15 of Indian Constitution
\textsuperscript{10} Article 39(d) Indian Constitution
\textsuperscript{11} Article 42 Indian Constitution
\textsuperscript{12} Article 46 Indian Constitution
\textsuperscript{13} National Policy of Women Empowerment, 2001.
department of women and child development in 1986, National policy on education, the 8th plan mentioned gradual shift from development to empowerment of women. The 9th plan declared women empowerment as one of its objectives. It called for reliance on women’s self-help groups. The year 2001 was declared as “The year of Women Empowerment”.

The Department of Women & Child Development in the Ministry of Human Resource Development prepared a “National Policy for the Empowerment of Women” in the year 2001. The goal of this policy was to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. The Government setup a statutory body ‘National Commission for Women In January 1992’, with a specific mandate to study and monitor all matters relating to the constitutional and legal safeguards provided for women review the existing legislation to suggest amendments wherever necessary, etc.

Since United Nations’ Declaration of the Decade of Women in 1975, attention and action on women’s concerns have already increased and education whether it be from consciousness raising or acquisition was one of areas women’s organizations focused on. The underlying assumption was that if women understood their conditions, knew their rights and learned skills traditionally denied to them and empowerment would definitely follow.

The Indian government ushered into various schemes for the development and growth of women empowerment. At present there are 34 schemes which are being operated by different departments and ministries such as : Rashtria Mahila Kosh(RMK) 1992-93; Mahila Samridhi Yojana(MSY) 1993; Indira Mahila Yojana(IMY) 1995; Women Empowerment Development Programme (1997-98); Mahila Samalkhya, Sewa Shakti Group etc. On 31st March, 2004 women constituted 19 percent of total work force.

The role of voluntary agencies in creating awareness about their rights and motivating them to join the mainstream and in exploiting leadership qualities to fight themselves for their rights is appreciable. These voluntary organizations receive grants from the government and financial institutions. The intelligentsia of the country, more appropriately the women activists have largely contributed towards women empowerment.

Section IV: Participation of Women in Various Spheres (outcomes)

Traditionally women were not allowed to work outside the home for wages but after the spread of education they shifted their responsibility. In the traditional village, women made distinctive contributions to cultivation, crafts, menial services and to the marketing of agricultural products and handicrafts.

Due to education of women, there are unmistakable signs of awareness about improving the condition of women. There is evidence of desire in women to take charge of their own life and become free from the stereotypes imposed upon them. The Women’s Conventions

14 National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001
inculcated a spirit among the women to realize ‘their individual and collective potentials’\textsuperscript{16}. The women made major inroads in the male dominated world and started showing their potentialities in law, business, medical, engineering and in multi-faceted arena. Educated females entered in the job market in increasing numbers. There is dramatic change in their outlook. Modern Indian women are educated and are entering in job market in increasing numbers and even adorn highest offices in the country and across the globe. In 1971, 80 percent of women workers were in agriculture, 10.5 percent in industry, and 9.4 percent in services.\textsuperscript{17}

After independence many women became active politicians and they joined different political parties. Some of them have adorned the seats of Chief Minister, Cabinet Ministers, Deputy Ministers and Ministers of State. The action Reservation for Women in Local Self-Government and 73\textsuperscript{rd} Constitutional Amendment Acts were passed in 1992 by Parliament which ensured one third of the total seats for women in all elected offices in local bodies whether in rural areas or urban areas.

Women now participate in politics at all levels. At some villages the elected Village Council consists entirely of women. We have had women Governors, President of the nation, Speaker of Lok Sabah, Chief Ministers, Supreme Court Judges, MLA’s, MP’s Ministers. Large numbers of women enters the Administrative services, and perform as CEO’s of MNC’s.

\textit{The result is visible as in many villages women sarpanch are heading and taking the decisions in Panchayats:}

In the social domains Indian women became particular not be satisfied being designated ‘Ghar ki Laxmi’, and beaten for not bringing dowry. She challenged the traditional set up and came out of kitchen politics. The said change was not only visible in high society urbanized women but also among the middle class. The expansion of global capitalism due to globalization brought about partial socialization of housework.

With the socio-economic and political changes in India since 1947 women lives started changing. In spite of various hurdles she is continuously striving hard for better survival. They not only organized themselves against injustice but also working for the preservation of environment and to create new ventures of empowerment through education.

In spite of all odds the women play multiple roles and contribute significantly to the family, society and nation in this competitive world. At workplace, Indian women participate in both organized and unorganized sectors and have shown their potentialities. Managing her role conflict the modern women is carrying a double burden of home and work. The vocal emergence of feminism also helped the women to widen the horizon of her rights.

\textsuperscript{16} Rebecca Cook, Women’s Health and Human Rights, p.19

\textsuperscript{17} Towards Equality, pp.149.
7. Conclusion

Women enjoyed a respectable status in the early Vedic period in India. The later period witnessed deterioration in the status of women and their participation in the public life. The social reform movements fought for injustice toward women during the British period. After independence the constitution of India made provisions to bring equality between men and women. With the adoption of empowerment strategy towards women development, an ambience of concern for women and a heightened sense of gender perspectives have been created through combined efforts of the government and non-government organizations. Women now participate in politics at all levels. At some villages the elected Village Council consists entirely of women. We have had women Governors, President of the nation, Speaker of Lok Sabah, Chief Ministers, Supreme Court Judges, MLA’s, MP’s Ministers. Women will need to free themselves from what an activist once described as ‘Inner Colonization’ which is a mindset that makes women construes victimization as opportunity. The media perpetuates the stereotypes by promoting the values of a consumerist society and uses its global reach to make those values standard. Woman as commodity is as unwholesome aspect of present day globalization. The challenge of the new millennium has been to concretize all the developments in the field of women empowerment in real terms and make a qualitative difference in the lives of women.

8. References