

## **Chapter Six**

### **Conclusion**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

The overall scenario of women in the twenty-first century India, the opportunities available for higher education, job possibilities open for all, political representation of women and so on, creates a utopian illusion in the mind of any Indian, that in contemporary times, women are on par with men, and that gender discrimination is only a past phenomenon that has been washed away by the new generation with its focus on scientific progress and technology.

However, a closer look at today's woman, whether she is a housewife, a professional or a working class woman, her conditions on a broad scale show that the lot of Indian women and the societal attitude towards them has not changed positively to the extent it should have.

Considering the vast mileage covered by the reform movements, freedom struggle, women's movement, Women Empowerment programmes of NGOs as well as the Government and all the awareness campaigns through media and universal education, Indian society has yet to bear the fruit of a truly gender-friendly ethos, egalitarian treatment and an integrally empowered status for women in India. However, alternately, the picture is also not wholly bleak in terms of the sheer awareness of this lacuna and sustained efforts of the government, the NGOs and the progressive section of society across class, caste and gender.

All this has created a paradoxical situation of sorts. Although, women in general are allowed to move out of the threshold of the house and create a niche for themselves in the world outside, yet when it comes to home, most women are still expected to hold a subordinate position to their male counterparts. They are not just permitted, but rather expected to earn, but they are not allowed control over their earnings. Moreover, even today in times of catastrophe, it is the women who are the worst-hit, and therefore new concepts such as the 'feminization of poverty' have emerged, as poor economic conditions affect

the women more than men as per scholars such as Srivastava, as also witnessed in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*.

The conservative, insensitive and biased comments passed even by the so-called 'intellectuals' and leaders of the country on the rape or molestation of a woman, censuring and critiquing women and their manner of dressing, time and mode of socializing, rather than condemning rapists and the perpetrators of violence and the highly regressive patriarchal ideologies which still promote Khap Panchayats, honour killings and discriminatory civil codes are responsible for such inhuman attitude towards women. They are the obsolete signs that point towards the still disempowered mass of women.

As such, the current researcher was drawn to raise the following questions: have the women in India been really empowered and to what extent? What does empowerment really mean? Is it only an external transfer of power to women by means of constitutional rights, legal provisions and governmental policies? Or is it an internal growth, change in consciousness and attitude leading to selfhood within women and the progress of society in general? These and other questions led to the study of women's empowerment in the pre-independence and post-Independence eras. On this backdrop, a detailed study on the women empowerment movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was undertaken to examine their impact on women and their empowerment. This study formed the basis for several observations and findings which are listed in this Chapter.

## **6.2 Chapter-wise Observations of the Study**

In the course of this study the following chapter-wise approach has been adopted and corresponding observations have been made:

### **6.2.1 Chapter One: Introduction**

This Chapter introduces the study on women empowerment in the pre-independence and post-independence eras, and delineates the aims, objectives, scope, hypotheses, methodology, delimitation, selected primary texts and the relevance of the study. A literature survey of secondary sources is also undertaken. Since, the primary texts selected are auto-narratives, they are expectedly based on facts and they reveal events, occurrences

and social customs or trends that have been witnessed by the authors in their life. Therefore, they are used to corroborate the actual social, historical and political occurrences that have taken place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that had an impact on Indian women and their empowerment.

The observations based on this Chapter are as follows:

- Certain facts and events have been reliably reported by others, to the authors of the primary texts. This information has been duly represented in the auto-narrative. For instance, in the case of Lakshmibai Tilak, the oppression faced by her mother-in-law, Jankibai at the hands of her husband, was not directly witnessed by the author, as her mother-in-law had died much before Lakshmibai's marriage. Her husband, Tilak told her about the suffering his mother endured. This information was confirmed and corroborated by Tilak's siblings. So when Lakshmibai wrote about this in her auto-narrative, she was actually expressing the plight and predicament of an average, high caste women from poor background.
- The chosen primary texts represent the cross-section of castes, classes, religions and geographic/linguistic regions in India. The authors selected for the study belong to the following states: Maharashtra, Assam, Jammu Kashmir, Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Kerala. However, most of the authors have migrated or travelled to several other places thereby depicting their social situation in their auto-narratives. For instance, Jawaharlal Nehru's ancestors were originally from Kashmir but later they moved to Allahabad. However, in his life-span Nehru has travelled vastly in India and abroad and he writes about these places and societies in his autobiography. So do the other writers to lesser or greater extent. This helps to form a fair idea of the overall situation in the country.
- Although the period taken under study is the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the earliest primary text chosen for the study, begins from the 1850's; this may be because not many women wrote in English in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, as very few privileged women were educated at that time. However, this does not mean that auto-narratives in regional languages were not written in that era, but hardly any

women's auto-narratives belonging to that era have been translated in English although an attempt to translate some excerpts of the earlier works have been, undertaken in Suise Tharu and K. Lalita's anthology, *Women's Writing in India*.

- It has been observed that even in the regions colonized by the Portuguese and the French, which do not fall under the purview of this study, there were educated and empowered women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For instance, Propertia Correia-Afonso de Figueiredo was an educationist, a reformer and a literary stalwart in Portuguese- ruled Goa in the early decades of the twentieth century.
- With a majority of women's auto-narratives as primary texts, two male auto-narratives had also been chosen to represent the male point of view of the events and movements that occurred in India and their impact on women. The male authors selected, being enlightened and observant intellectuals, with critical acumen, they provide both, a corroboration of events and occurrences, as well as the sounding board for assessing the veracity of crucial facts and observations stated by the women authors.

#### **6.2.2 Chapter Two: Empowerment of Women: Context of Feminism**

This Chapter dwells in depth on the concept of women's empowerment, the approaches to and perspectives on the empowerment of women, the levels of empowerment and the criteria of empowerment. This Chapter also studies Feminism, its various definitions, the diverse perspectives and theories of Feminism and briefly traces the feminist movements in the West and in India. The observations based on this study are as follows:

- Although efforts to empower women go back even before the nineteenth century, the concept of women empowerment per se was introduced and defined only in 1985 in the International Women's Conference at Nairobi.
- Empowerment is dynamic in nature. Its meaning and scope changes from time to time according to the changes in the society and therefore there are multiple approaches to empowerment.

- Empowerment is at times considered to be power given to women by the society and the government through laws, policies and provisions. However, as Ranju R. Dhamala has pointed out, empowerment has to be from ‘within’ not merely from ‘without’. This argument is relevant in the context of India, where all kinds of equality and freedom from discrimination have been enshrined in the constitution as fundamental rights and yet, average women are not truly empowered in the proper sense of the word.
- There are several dimensions of empowerment such as Economic Empowerment, Political Empowerment, Social Empowerment, and Familial Empowerment. For complete empowerment, women have to be empowered in all of these areas.
- With regard to Sarah Longwe’s five level framework of empowerment including Welfare, Access, Conscientization, Participation, and Control, it has been observed that Conscientization is the most fundamental level. Especially in India, for centuries, majority of women have not been aware that the patriarchal system, its conservative ideologies and discriminatory norms are the main sources of women’s oppression.
- Although, several criteria of empowerment have been identified by the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995, they focus primarily on three areas: reforms in social outlook towards women by getting rid of discriminatory customs and practices; increase in self-esteem of women through education, participation, and decision making powers; and changes in the roles and responsibilities of women within the house and outside. Some of these criteria have been met in the Indian context. It is observed that as a result of the nineteenth century reform movement, Indian women became increasingly aware that the discriminatory practices were just patriarchal ploys to subjugate women. In the twentieth century, more and more women were educated. Women also participated in the national freedom struggle and later in the other campaigns against dowry and rape. With the

economic independence attained in the post-independence era, women's roles in the home also underwent a change, although to a limited extent.

- Like empowerment, feminism is also a dynamic concept which evolves from time to time along with the changing ideologies and attitudes in society.
- Although the concepts of feminism and women's empowerment were developed theoretically, only in the twentieth century, have there been women writing about women-centric concerns. In the West, for instance, Christine de Pisan's books envisioning women as powerful and educated (written in 1405 and translated in English by 1521), are some of the earliest feminist texts. In India also, way back in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., *Therigatha* contained songs focused on women's issues and struggles.
- The concept of *écriture feminine* introduced by Hélène Cixous, is very much applicable to the women's auto-narratives selected as primary texts for this study, as through their auto-narratives, the women authors not only reveal their own experiences and struggles, but also break the silence of women's sufferings and victimization in general.
- It has been observed that various social and political movements have tried to improve the condition and uplift status of women in India. This, although each of them had a different approach and objective. The social reform movement aimed at women's welfare and education; the freedom movement aimed at representation of women in the political struggle, and thereby, women's participation; the women's movements that emerged much later aimed at voicing out, creating awareness, and protesting against the injustice suffered by women.

### **6.2.3 Chapter Three: Auto-narratives and Empowerment: A Critical Discussion**

This chapter focuses on the study of the genre, the definitions, etymology and critical discussions on auto-narratives. Various critical perceptions on auto-narratives have been studied and the dual link between auto-narratives and empowerment has been critically examined. The observations based on this study are as follows:

- The genre of writing about one's own life has witnessed many shifts in terminology, based on the changing perspectives of self-life writing. It was first called self-biography in 1796, then autobiography in 1797, then during the postmodern period it was referred to as autobiographical discourse.
- Although autobiography, memoirs and reminiscences have been traditionally considered to be separate genres, in the contemporary age all these distinctions get blurred and an umbrella term such as auto-narratives, life writing and life narrative is used to describe such writing.
- Historically self-representation in different forms began very early, although not in the form of a book. However, prior to the eighteenth century autobiographies were not seen as separate from historiography and biography.
- Although Gul-Badan Begum's *Humayun-nama* in Persian, is said to be the first reminiscences by a woman written as early as the fourteenth century, it is more of her memories of her father and brother than of her own self. The first full-fledged autobiography of an Indian woman with the focus on her (own) life is Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* in Bengali, published in 1876.
- There is a propensity among the authors of auto-narratives, to fictionalize either intentionally or unintentionally, as even memory on which the auto-narrative is based changes and is reinterpreted differently in each act of remembering. Some memories are also based on repressed desires that are creatively redesigned using imagination and thereby get an outlet through the auto-narrative.

- Although the recorded memories in an auto-narrative may not be factual, the auto-narrative still reveal the inner thoughts, ideologies and perceptions of the author and it also shows the degree of empowerment in the author in terms of the courage and determination to voice them.
- Traditionally the focus of autobiography was on individuality. As Philippe Lejeune argues in his definition of autobiography, women lacked individuality, and so there were not many women's auto-narratives earlier. Moreover, only famous men with a public appeal would write their auto-narratives. Since most women were confined within their homes, they were discouraged from writing and publishing their auto-narratives. However, with the changing times and the rise of women's empowerment movements and advent of feminism, more women were motivated to write about their day-to-day lives and unveil the woman's private world.
- It has been seen that while the male auto-narratives focus on self and individuality, women focus on relationality, as individuality was denied to them in the patriarchal system. Even great intellectuals like Nehru and Abbas make only a passing reference to their womenfolk, while focusing more on their own inner selves. Whereas most of the women's auto-narratives focus on the relationship with the parents, siblings, in-laws and husband. This can be seen very clearly in the auto-narratives of Lakshmibai Tilak and Padma Sachdev.
- It has also been argued that male authors try to conceal the gaps of memory, insecurities, and hesitations in their auto-narrative, whereas women state it clearly in their auto-narratives. However, Nehru's case becomes an exception, as at several points in his auto-narrative, he clearly states that he does not remember the exact chronological flow of events that took place. Thus he openly informs the readers about the gaps in memory.
- A strong connection between auto-narratives and empowerment has been observed, as this genre is a significant medium of expression of one's views and opinions thereby challenging patriarchal norms.

#### **6.2.4 Chapter Four: Women Empowerment in India: The Pre-Independence Era**

This Chapter studies women's empowerment movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The social reform movement, the emergence of women's organizations and the national freedom struggle have been carefully examined with regard to their impact on the society, its outlook towards women and the individual empowerment of women.

- In the pre-independence era there were three major movements that had an impact on the collective empowerment of women, they were: the social reform movement, emergence of women's organizations, and the national freedom struggle. While the first movement, attempted to liberate the society and get rid of the customs and practices that were demeaning to women, the second, united women together who shared an experience of oppression, through organizations which in the beginning were founded or supported by men, but later through women's organizations run by women independently. The third movement, united not just the elite but the masses of Indian women who broke away from the age-old custom of seclusion and actively participated in the national cause.
- In the nineteenth century the reform movement tried to alter the position of women by getting rid of discriminatory customs and practices such as sati, child marriage and purdah system. Evidence of these practices are found in the works of Lakshmibai Tilak and Cornelia Sorabji. However, even after the abolishment of sati and child marriage, the twentieth century texts prove that this movement was not completely successful in establishing a fair and just society for women. Nevertheless, this movement was fundamental in challenging the age-old patriarchal beliefs and in creating an awareness of the oppression faced by women.
- The reform movement also campaigned for the education of women, but at this time the education provided for was only in domestic skills that would make them better wives and mothers. Although the declaration that men and women would be equally admitted in educational institutions was passed, as affirmed by Sorabji in *India*

*Calling*, her own struggle proves that women were not easily allowed to attain any degree of education and thereby enter in the professions monopolized by men.

- Although the reform movement was said to have been pioneered by men, a small number of eminent women have also greatly contributed to the movement, such as Ramabai Ranade, Pandita Ramabai and Savitribai Phule.
- Along with the reforms, the social reform movement, also helped create a new section of respected upper middle class women called the bhadra mahila, detached from the masses.
- The case of Rukhmabai, as cited in Cornelia Sorabji's *India Calling*, shows that with education, women not only got the ability to realize their dreams and an opportunity to work towards achieving them, they also acquired intellectual and emotional strength and conviction to desist from succumbing to the will of their oppressors. Marriage did not remain the only way of life, as economic independence through education was a new option. However, during this time very few women could choose their own path and be financially independent. But a gradual change began from here, and thus in the post-independence period an evident change is visible.
- The instances in the primary texts, show that sati was a major patriarchal strategy, to ensure that no property or any inheritance of the deceased husband would go to his widow, although a part of the inheritance was allowed to the wife by the Vedic scriptures, as argued by Raja Ram Mohan Roy.
- Unlike in the other movements, there was a mass participation of women in Gandhi's Civil Disobedience movement, due to diverse factors: the awareness created by Gandhi's door-to-door method of education as described by Ray; the simple but effective planning of the movement by Gandhi facilitating the participation of women who were not well-educated. In fact satyagraha was based on inner strength and self-sacrifice which are qualities that were inculcated in women from their childhood, and therefore women were no longer stopped by their

menfolk from participating in the freedom struggle. Hence multitudes of women could freely participate during this time.

- As a result of the 1930s movement, the quality of self-denial in women, which was looked down upon by feminists, became the very reason for their participation in the freedom struggle and thereby their empowerment, since for the first time women crossed their threshold, broke their seclusion and participated in the struggle of their nation along with their male counterparts.
- In the freedom movement, empowerment of women came as a by-product. Nehru's auto-narrative showed that many men, like Nehru's father, were not very happy with women's participation, but they did not interfere or stop their womenfolk in view of the greater cause of Independence. This movement was not driven by the aim of women's empowerment, but the sole purpose of this movement was national freedom. However, it definitely impacted women's empowerment as it changed the outlook of society towards women. To be a representative group of the whole nation, it was essential that women too should be represented. Therefore, even the rigid doors of the Congress opened up to women. All these changes took women a step closer to their empowerment.
- In the light of Sarah Logwe's framework of empowerment, the nineteenth century reform movement focused more on Welfare of the society and to a limited extent on Conscientization of women towards their oppression. While, the emergence of women's organizations accentuated Conscientization, the struggle for freedom, particularly the Civil Disobedience movement in 1930, brought about mass Participation of women.
- In the Indian context, Conscientization and Participation preceded Access, since equal access to resources and opportunities for employment was legally gained only after Independence, but Conscientization and Participation were already prevalent in the pre-independence era, by means of the empowerment movements.

### **6.2.5 Chapter Five: Women Empowerment in India: Independence and After**

This chapter analyses the impact of Independence and Partition on the society, mainly on the condition and status of women in India. Women empowerment movements that took place in the post-independence era are studied along with the national and international events that occurred during this time, to examine their effect on women and their empowerment.

- Independence re-affirmed the equality of women. But on the other hand, due to Partition, women suffered untold miseries on mass scale. Traditionally considered as the emblem of the community's honour, women were the worst hit in the catastrophe. The auto-narratives of Padma Sachdev and Renuka Ray, provide evidence of the victimization of women during partition.
- The nomination of women like Renuka Ray to the Constituent Assembly, as a result of Gandhi's plea for wide representation in the Assembly, is a sign of progressive change in favour of women, after Independence.
- With the enactment of the Hindu code, personal areas were also reformed. Women now had right to inheritance and also to put end to an oppressive marriage. But this could be achieved only in 1956, almost after twenty-five years of a campaign, started much before Independence. Even after Independence, there were educated men, and political stalwarts like Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the President of the Constituent Assembly, who opposed the daughter's right to inheritance. This shows that the society after Independence was still apprehensive of treating women as an equal.
- New avenues opened up for women, with equal level of education for women and equal employment opportunities in different professions, as affirmed by Ray in her auto-narrative. However, it was mostly the elite, educated women, who benefited from the laws of equality. Those who were uneducated were hardly aware of these laws and opportunities. This shows the importance of Conscientization over Access or Participation.

- The laws of equality and the enactment of the Hindu code, brought a kind of satisfaction in women and therefore the women's movements of this time face a lull period which is corroborated by the comments of Renuka Ray on the sudden halt in the activities of the AIWC after Independence.
- Three matters hugely impacted women's empowerment movements in those times: the report on the status of women in Indian, *Towards Equality*; the state of National Emergency from 1975-1977; and the International Women's Decade (1975-85).
- The women's movements in this era endeavoured to stress upon women-centric issues and also led campaigns against the practices such as dowry, domestic violence, and rape. Women's organizations, strove to bring these issues to the notice of the government. Yet, it took decades for suitable legislation to be enacted to curb these mounting problems and crimes.
- However, despite many shortfalls, many advancements in the status and improvement in the condition of women can be seen in the period after Independence. Increase in the literacy rate of women, increase in the number of economically independent women and the growing political representation of women, whereby women not only contested in elections at various levels, but also represented India in the United Nations, are evidence of the development and empowerment of women in India.

### **6.3 Overall Findings of the Study**

The overall findings of the study are as follows:

- It has been found that although auto-narratives may not always be purely factual, yet even the fictionalization that may occur in it, is based on the ideologies, attitudes and life experiences of the author. This reveals the dilemmas and even the suppressed desires of the author which are subtly represented in the auto-narrative. Hence, an auto-narrative does not only record the past of the author, but also the present ideas and attitudes of the author which alter and reinterpret the past memory while writing it in the present. This is found in many of the primary texts selected for the study, such as the auto-narratives of Indira Goswami and Padma Sachdev.
- It has been found that unlike men's auto-narratives, women's auto-narratives focus upon relationality rather than individuality, and as a consequence of this, a woman's auto-narrative becomes a collage of the lives of many women, particularly those who were in a close connection with the author. All of the selected women's auto-narratives for this study, may it be of Cornelia Sorabji, Baby Kamble, Lakshmibai Tilak, Padma Sachdev, Renuka Ray, Indira Goswami and to some extent even Kamala Das proves this, as each of them speak of other women: their mother, relatives, neighbours and even acquaintances and thereby reveal their life stories too. Hence, it can be said that relationality in a woman's auto-narrative leads to a kaleidoscopic view of the status of women in a society, since it tells the story of several women belonging to different classes, and times.
- On a deeper study of women's empowerment and women's auto-narratives, it has been found that the auto-narrative genre has a dual connection with women's empowerment: on one hand, auto-narratives become a medium of expression and resistance of women against patriarchy, whereby women empower themselves; on the other hand, empowered women use their auto-narratives as an expression of their empowered self. It also becomes a channel through which the suffering of other women are brought to light. Empowered women, like Sorabji and Ray, use this genre to comment upon the status of women in India and expose the oppressive

ploys of patriarchy. Moreover, the auto-narrative of an empowered woman poses a challenge to patriarchy by inspiring other women to resist and subvert patriarchy, through their own life example.

- The social ills, prevalent in the nineteenth century India, were the result of the patriarchal strategies used to ensure that women would always remain under the domination of men and would never dare to challenge patriarchy, or combat their own state of powerlessness. Girls were given away in marriage at a very young age, so that from childhood their minds would be moulded to be feminine – docile and submissive. After marriage, women were secluded from the rest of the world so that they would live forever in the darkness of ignorance, myths and superstitions, depending completely on their oppressors for everything and believing every word they said. Widowhood, and the norms that widows had to follow were harsh and inhuman, which only added to their helplessness, dependence and personal trauma. It was almost a punishment for those who were not fortunate enough to die before their husbands or with them, by committing sati. Thus, by trying to get rid of these social ills, reformists freed women from the life-long captivity and made them aware that this oppression had nothing to do with their fate or destiny.
- Although the education campaign only sought to educate women in domestic skills, it was still a very significant campaign as before that women received no knowledge or awareness even about issues such as personal hygiene, child bearing and so on, as affirmed by Cornelia Sorabji in her auto-narrative. Hence, this campaign, later supported by religious institutions such as the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, and Dev Samaj was the first to carry the light of knowledge, in the darkness of the zenanas or the andarmahals.
- While examining the impact of the women's empowerment movements on individual women, it was found that the familial background and the conservativeness or openness of the family played a significant role in the degree of empowerment achieved. For instance, while Cornelia Sorabji and Renuka Ray went far ahead of their times and were highly empowered, Lakshmibai Tilak who belonged to a conservative family, was not privileged with similar opportunities

and developed a sense of empowerment only much later in life. Likewise, the support and encouragement given by their husbands, help women to be more confident and attain a greater degree of empowerment as seen in the case of Renuka Ray.

- Similarly, education and economic independence was found to be an essential criteria for empowerment. This is seen in Padma Sachdev and Indira Goswami's auto-narratives and holds true for both the eras under study.
- In the post-independence era, many signs of progress in the status and condition of women can be seen. Women's education and employment has been on the rise, with more women being financially independent. All the writers taken under study were educated and economically independent. Similarly, political representation of women is also seen during this time. Renuka Ray, records that many women contested for elections. She herself had contested for the first elections but did not win it. However, she won the second round of elections. She also writes of women who represented India in international conferences and forums.
- In comparing the status of women in the pre-independence era to that in the post-independence era, it can be seen that there was great improvement in the latter era. During this time, not only has the awareness among women increased, but also the level of resistance to oppression and injustice had greatly amplified. This has been a consequence of the progressive thinking which permeated through education and the rise in confidence by way of economic independence and spurt in empowerment due to political representation. During the post-independence era, more and more women were empowered, as empowerment was provided by education, guaranteed by law, and was also promoted by society.
- In a comparative study of the primary texts, it is found that the texts belonging to the years after Independence have a larger focus on self, personal life and inner struggles than those belonging to the pre-independence period. Auto-narratives like those of Indira Goswami and Kamala Das lay greater emphasis on their private struggles in life. Although Goswami does write about the society in which she lived,

her autobiography records more about her personal life, her marriage, and widowhood. Similarly in Das' auto-narrative the focus is on her personal life, relationships, her bohemian view and opinions, and most of all her individuality. Her sense of self-confidence and empowerment allows her to divulge her private experiences and vent her non-conformist views candidly in her auto-narrative. This change in the mode of writing possibly points towards the growth of individuality in women which coincides with the rise of intellectual and economic independence in Indian women during that era.

- In a close study of the women empowerment movements and the primary texts belonging to the pre-independence era, it has been found that although the three women's empowerment movements, during this time, have resulted in a positive change in the status and condition of women in India, women were not empowered to the desired extent. Perhaps this was because, even towards Independence, a considerable change in the society's outlook towards women was not seen. This is particularly found in the perception of men towards women, more so in their negative reaction against the demands made for reform in personal laws. This state of affairs continues even after Independence, as can be seen when Ray observes that most men in the constituent assembly were against the daughters rights to inheritance. Therefore, although women reached great heights in the public domain, within the home they still lacked the right to decision making and control over their own lives and bodies.
- The enactment of Fundamental rights and other egalitarian legislation did not impact women to the desired extant, due to the lack of proper implementation of laws and widespread ignorance among women and men in the early years of Independence. A gradual change could be seen in the alteration of society's outlook towards women as the level of education increased among women in the later years. The increase in the number of women contesting in elections both at Centre and State levels, which resulted in women, their needs and concerns being represented in the Indian political system, stands as evidence to the slow but evident growth

and empowerment of women in India. Thus, it would be utterly incorrect to say that women in India are not empowered at all.

- Tracing the progress in the condition of women right from the nineteenth century, where a widow had no right to live, to widow re-marriage, education of women, intellectual and economic independence, to women standing as representatives of the masses of Indian women in the Government of India, and women representing their country in the United Nations and other international forums, a great and massive change is visible. Women in India have been considerably empowered compared to their counterparts half a century ago. But going a step further, it is important to question what the extent of this empowerment is and whether all women are equally empowered.

Unfortunately, even today patriarchal ideologies continue to manifest themselves, though perhaps not as strongly and as widely, as they did before. There are many women who still lack empowerment, who are still dependent on their male counterparts. For complete empowerment, enlightenment through education, economic independence and political empowerment is very essential. A combination of all these ensures empowerment as seen in the case of empowered women such as Cornelia Sorabji and Renuka Ray.

However, what changes the status and condition of women today is the widespread awareness of women's rights and the support of laws and women's organizations that assist and encourage women to be independent and empower themselves. There are several women's self-help groups, NGO's and organizations, working even in contemporary times to help women to be self-sufficient and to assert their rights.

The increasing conferences and forums on feminism and women's empowerment regionally, nationally and internationally underlines the change in societal attitude and ways that are gradually growing more sensitive towards women-centric issues. The sheer impact of public opinion and pressure on the system was witnessed during the agitation in the Nirbhaya case and the enactment of Sexual Harassment

of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013. Despite this there is still need to ensure the safety and security of women across classes, regions and status. But the positive side is that public awareness is huge.

Hence, although there is still room for progress and empowerment of women throughout India, the positive and visible changes in the Indian society and in the status of women, over the years from the nineteenth century to present times shows that the women empowerment movements in the eras taken under study have largely impacted women and have boosted their empowerment.

#### **6.4 Revisiting the Hypotheses**

The study on women's empowerment in India began with a two-fold hypotheses in mind which was stated in Chapter One. The **first assumption** states that: the empowerment of women in India is relative to the introduction and development of policy of Education, social reform, and attainment of political autonomy by India. Extending the privilege of getting education to women and their mass participation in the freedom struggle might have acted as a catalyst to women's empowerment.

This assumption has been proved right in this study, particularly in the light of the discussions made in Chapter Four which examined the impact of three developments on women and their empowerment in India: the social reform movement in the nineteenth century; the campaign of women education that began then and continued in the twentieth century; and, the national freedom struggle.

In this study it was found that as a consequence of these movements in the pre-independence era, women were not only made aware of their powerless condition but also of the fact that it had nothing to do with destiny or religion. More importantly, they were awakened to their own needs and potentials. Education gave women the ability to think on their own and not to be controlled by the patriarchal ideology, nor to be unduly swayed by the myths and falsities which had held women captive for a long time, causing them to internalize patriarchal norms and practices. Education allowed women scope for intellectual empowerment.

The freedom struggle urged common women to step out of their threshold and participate in the national cause. Moreover, the Civil Disobedience movement provided them the opportunity to participate in a manner which neither required great education nor experience. In fact, the burning desire for freedom made the patriarchal society more flexible towards women. So much so, that although women's active participation was not really agreeable to many of their male counterparts, they did not stop their women from joining in. Hence, it can be definitely maintained that all these movements definitely impacted women collectively and individually and furthered their chances of empowerment.

The **second assumption** of this study was that: there is a visibly marked change in the status and the degree of empowerment in women in the pre-independence and post-independence India, which can be explained by way of rational arguments and factual illustrations through a study of this kind.

The Independence of India, the fundamental rights granted by the Constitution and allied laws enacted by the Indian Government from time to time ensured gender equality and the growing women's organizations, made more women aware of their rights and assisted them to fight for their privileges and needs. Even the national and international events that took place after Independence positively impacted women and their empowerment. Hence, today there is definitely a huge positive change in the outlook of the Indian society towards women.

Further, there is a visible improvement in women's condition and a large spurt is seen in their status over the centuries. While in the nineteenth century, it was very difficult to think of women living their lives independently and being economically self-sufficient, during the twentieth century, particularly after Independence, there have been a large number of educated and semi-educated women across the class divide working in diverse professions (often away from home) and at different positions, being the bread-winners of the family.

Today, women enjoy 33% reservation in political institutions at the grass-root level. Several Indian women have joined politics and made a career as politicians, representing women and their concerns. Others have come forward to join the Administrative and

Defence Services, hazardous professions, conventionally the male-domain-occupations and are making a success of their careers. Again, large segments of uneducated and working class women are benefitting from independent incomes and comparatively a much-better life, than their sisters before Independence. These are significant markers of change.

Moreover, many of these notable changes, though not all, are very much visible through the auto-narratives chosen for the study. Where most of the women written about in the auto-narratives belonging to the pre-independence era were powerless and emotionally as well as economically dependent on their menfolk, ironically their menfolk themselves were their oppressors. This can be clearly seen in the case of Lakshmibai Tilak, her mother and mother-in-law or even the Purdahnashins and the widows in Sorabji's auto-narrative.

However, in the auto-narratives belonging to the post-independence era, there were several women who were intellectually enlightened, economically independent and who resisted oppression directly and fearlessly. This is seen in the auto-narratives of Padma Sachdev, Indira Goswami and Kamala Das. Although these women authors themselves had to struggle to be empowered and fight oppression, they had legal support and the opportunity and education to be self-sufficient which furthered their empowerment and their chances of subverting oppression and injustice. Thus, there is a vast change and a progress in the degree of empowerment achieved by women in the pre-independence and post-independence period. Hence, these findings reiterate the hypotheses stated in the beginning of the study and confirm it.

## **6.5 Suggestions for Further Research**

This study was undertaken with a focus on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries India. However, it would be interesting to take up a study of women's empowerment in the twenty-first century and the phenomenal movements and monumental events that have impacted women in the present era.

The work undertaken on this research topic has opened up access to new and emerging theories and conceptions which study the oppression of women in connection with other

fields of knowledge such as the theory of ecofeminism, theory of trauma, lesbianism, and so on. Some of those highlight how nature bears a similar brunt of the domination of men just like women, and how feminization of poverty studies the economic issue of poverty and its impact on women, while arguing that women are the worst affected in these conditions. These issues among many others could also be taken up for further research.

## **6.6 Relevance of this Study**

A deep curiosity, anguish and concern about women and their struggle against constant victimization and domination even in modern times, led to this study of women empowerment, to understand and trace the growth and development of women and their status in India. This study began with the presumption that women must have been empowered to some extent and this empowerment was connected to several factors such as education, participation, equality rights and so on.

However, in the course of this study it was comprehended that along with every progressive step towards reform and women's empowerment, came many obstacles and the rise of regressive ideologies, thereby making it difficult to exactly measure the degree of women's empowerment. At every point of time a combat between progressive thinking and regressive thinking is visible in India. At some points such as the freedom struggle, progressive thinking and a greater national cause won over regressive and conservative ideologies. Whereas, at other junctures such as the reform in personal areas, the conservative minds were able to put a hold to the enactment of the Hindu Code Bill for a long time. However, it is pertinent to note that with the increase in awareness and education of women through organizations and movements headed by enlightened men and women, the society gradually became more progressive.

Even in contemporary times, the existence of conservative patriarchal ideologies cannot be evaded. There are people of both genders, who continue to follow patriarchal ideology, practice discriminatory norms and subscribe to male-superiority myths. However, the need to magnify the struggle for women's empowerment and help them to fully understand their potentials is greatly felt. Many national and international organizations have risen to

address this need, and not only deliberate on the issue of women's empowerment but further act upon it.

Today, a sensitivity towards women's issues and concerns has been developed. It has been made mandatory by Law to implement gender parity as well as to promote gender sensitivity in Educational and Government institutions and in the private sector. Media has become very sensitive towards women's rights and protective of their individuality. Law has provided a strong backing to women's fight for justice. Governmental and non-Governmental organizations are trying to plug the loopholes of exploitation and oppression, despite the constant obstacles from regressive ideologies and conservative forces.

Use of technology is being made at various administrative levels to ensure that women get the financial and other benefits, which are their due, directly – without any male/other interventions. Self-help groups have been started by Governmental and non-Governmental organizations to make women from weaker/marginal sections self-reliant. Tremendous support in terms of scholarships and freeships are provided to young women across the board to empower them through education, and this has shown remarkable results. All this shows the change in the society's outlook towards women.

Even in present times, the struggle to empower all women from within continues steadily, and marvellous changes in attitudes and ideologies are seen. This significantly, points towards the relevance of the present study in its modest contribution to women's empowerment. After all, women's empowerment is not a thing of the past but a living struggle that continues to reverberate even today.

Moreover, the concept of empowerment of women is not merely an academic or literary notion but something much beyond the theoretical realm of probability – it is an objective, a reality and an attainable target towards which an egalitarian society ceaselessly endeavours. It is expected that the present study has done its bit to further the course of this endeavour in its own way by modestly contributing to the history, progress and perception of women's empowerment in India.