



2. Women Empowerment in Modern India

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For centuries women were not treated equal to men in many ways. They were not allowed to own property, they did not have a Share in the property of their parents, they had no voting rights, and they had no freedom to choose their work or job and so on. Gender inequality has been part and parcel of an accepted male-dominated Indian society throughout history. Women were expected to be bound to the house, while men went out and worked. This division of labor was one of the major reasons why certain evils like 'Sati Pratha', 'PardahSystem', 'Child Marriage', 'Dowry System', etc. took birth in our society. The traditional Indian mentality assumes that the place of women is mainly concentrated to the household activities like kitchen work and upbringing of the children. There is systematic discrimination against women economically, socially, politically and culturally more so, in India. These discriminations & disabilities are practiced at all levels day in & day out.

Women Empowerment is the ability of women to exercise full control over their actions. This means control over material assets, intellectual resources and even over their ideologies. It involves, at the psychological level, women's ability to assert them which has, so far, been constricted by the 'gender roles' assigned to them especially in a culture like India which resists changes.

This essay throws light upon the different challenges that are faced by Indian Women and why there is still need for their empowerment. It will also focus on the efforts made by Government for empowerment of women.



Introduction

“There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing,” said Swami Vivekananda. But through centuries, societies in the world over have been trying to fly on only one wing, denying women their rightful place.

The origins of the concept of empowerment go back to the civil rights movement in the USA in the 1960. It has since then been interpreted differently and filled with new meanings and is today used in such different sectors as business, social work, development discourse and by advocates of very different political agendas. The different definitions of empowerment range between defining it as a largely individual process of taking control of and responsibility for one’s life and situation, and defining it as a political process of granting human rights and social justice to disadvantaged groups of people.

The empowerment of women is located within the discourse and agenda of gender equality and is increasingly being taken in the agendas of international development organizations, perhaps more as a means to achieve gender equality than as an end in itself.

The status of Women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millenniums. In early Vedic period Women enjoyed equal status with men. Rig-Veda & Upanishads mention several names of women sages and seers notably Gargi & Maitri. However later, the status of women began to deteriorate approximately from 500 B.C., the situation worsened with invasion of Mughal and later on by European invaders. Some reformatory movements by Guru Nanak, Jainism, Raja Ram Mohan Rai, Ishwarchandra Vidya Sagar, Pandita Rama Bai and others did give some relief. It is not that British didn’t do any thing for improving the condition of women. Some laws were enacted such an “Abolition of practice of Sati”, Widow Remarriage Act 1856 etc. The real change came after independence. Constitution of India guarantees equality to women (Article 14). There are other articles too which ensure rights of women e.g. no discrimination by the state [Article 15 (1)] equality of opportunity (Article 16) etc. Feminist activism picked up momentum in



India during later 1970's. Later on many groups and NGO's have been working for the Empowerment of women. We are proud that in India Women got voting right much before USA and some other European countries.

After Independence the Constitution of India guarantees equality to women by introducing (Article 14, 15 (1) and 16) which ensure rights of women that is no discrimination by the State, equality of opportunity etc. Not only the above mentioned Articles but also during the 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India provided for reservation of seats (at least one-third) in the local bodies of Panchayati Raj Institutions and Municipalities for women. Another Constitutional Amendment (84th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1998) reserving 33 per cent seats in Parliament and State Legislatures is in the pipeline. But even after 66 years of our independence, women are still one of the most powerless and marginalized sections of Indian society. The 2001 Census shows that the sex ratio for India is 933, which is

among the lowest in the world. Percentage of female literacy is 54 per cent against male literacy of 75 per cent. Women's representation in Parliament and in the State Assemblies has never gone beyond 8 and 10 per cent respectively. Most of the working women remain outside the organized sector. Mere 2.5 percent women are administrators and managers. Violence and atrocities against women are on the rise. Gender discrimination is the major problem, which the Indian women face in the present day society.

One concurrent example of gender discrimination is glass-ceiling effect. The term "glass ceiling" is used to describe an invisible barrier where women are deprived of opportunities at all levels of employment and are discriminated only because they are women. No doubt women have the potential to achieve an equal footing with men. But, it is the social practices and male attitudes that are making an effective and invisible barrier preventing women from rising above a certain point. One consequence of sex stereotypes is that women's achievements tend to be devalued or attributed to lack of effort rather than ability or skill, and therefore this stereotype has the potential to reduce



the organizational awards that they deserve to receive. Men are taught to apologize for their weaknesses but women for their strengths.

Need for women empowerment in India:

Human development encompasses elements that contribute critical issues of gender and development. The dignity and culture of a society can be detected from the status of women in that society. According to Rameshwari Pandya (2008) Empowerment has become the key solution to many social problems. Empowerment of women is empowerment of family/household and in turn development of a nation of a country. Empowerment of women leads to benefit not only to the individual woman and to women groups, but also to the families and community as a whole through collective action for development.

In this contemporary world, women need to gain the same amount of power that men have. In India, women are still facing different obstacles in male-dominated cultures. The things are related to women's status and their future. The worth of civilization can be arbitrated by the place given to women in the society. In India women are still victim of abuse and violent crimes. According to a global survey conducted by Thomson Reuters, India is the fourth most dangerous country in the world and worst country for women to live in amongst G20 countries. There is stalking, harassment in educational institutes and at work place & outright trafficking and forced prostitution. There were 56,000 maternal deaths in 2010-UN Population Fund 12 million girl-children were aborted in India in the last 3 decades-an estimate. There was 7.1% increase in crime against India in 2010-11 – N.C.R.B. Hence there is a need for upliftment of women socially, economically, politically simultaneously in a comprehensive manner to undo this vicious cycle & vice like grip in which women in India have been entrapped badly. The female literacy rate is also lower than the male literacy rate. The ground reality is deprivation, degradation and exploitation of women specially women from rural areas and those belonging to deprived sectors of the society.



Even after childhood, extreme poverty and deep biases against women create a remorseless cycle of discrimination that keeps girls from living up to their full potential. It also leaves them vulnerable to severe physical and emotional abuse. But the threat is more severe for girls and women who live in societies where women's rights mean practically nothing. Mothers who lack their own rights can offer little protection to their daughters from male relatives and other authority figures. The frequency of rape and violent attacks against women is alarming.

In spite of the various measures taken up by the government after Independence and even during British rule the Women haven't been fully empowered. We may be proud of women in India occupying highest offices of President, Prime Minister, Lok Sabha Speaker, Leader of the Opposition or women occupying highest positions in the Corporate Sector but the fact remains that we still witness dowry deaths, domestic violence and exploitation of women. The female foeticide is not an uncommon phenomenon. The male female ratio though improved over last few years is still far from satisfactory. It is 940 women per 1000 men for India in some states it is as much lower as 877. In spite of reservation being granted to women in Panchayats elections after 73rd and 74th Constitution amendment, in many Panchayats the male Chauvinism does not allow them to function independently.

Challenges before woman in India:

There are several challenges that are plaguing the issues of women's right in India. Targeting these issues will directly benefit the empowerment of women in India

Education- While the country has grown from leaps and bounds since its independence where education is concerned, the gap between women and men is severe. While 82.14% of adult men are educated, only 65.46% of adult women are known to be literate in India. Not only is an illiterate woman at the mercy of her husband or father, she also does not know that this is not the way of life for women across the world. Additionally, the norms of culture that state that the man of the family is the be-all and end-all of family decisions is slowly spoiling the society of the country. The gender



bias is in higher education, specialized professional trainings which hit women very hard in employment & attaining top leadership in any field.

Poverty- Poverty is considered the greatest threat to peace in the world, and eradication of poverty should be a national goal as important as the eradication of illiteracy. Due to abject poverty, women are exploited as domestic helps and wives whose incomes are usurped by the man of the house. Additionally, sex slaves are a direct outcome of poverty,

Mortality Inequality- Due to gender bias in health & nutrition there is unusually high mortality rate in women reducing their population further especially in Asia, Africa & China.

Professional Inequality - This inequality is practiced in employment & promotions. Women face countless handicaps in male customized & dominated environs in Govt. Offices and private enterprises.

Health & Safety- The health and safety concern of women are paramount for the wellbeing of a country, and is an important factor in gauging the empowerment of women in a country. However there are alarming concerns where maternal healthcare is concerned. In its 2009 report, UNICEF came up with shocking figures on the status of new mothers in India. The maternal mortality report of India stands at 301 per 1000, with as many as 78,000 women in India dying of childbirth complications in that year. Today, due to the burgeoning population of the country, that number is sure to have multiplied considerably. While there are several programmes that have been set into motion by the Government and several NGOs in the country, there is still a wide gap that exists between those under protection and those not.

Household Inequality- Household relations show gender bias in infinitesimally small but significant manners all across the globe, more so, in India e.g. sharing burden of housework, childcare & menial works by so called “division of work” which absolves men of all work



in the house. Working women, if they have to accept the job, have to do double-shift for home chores & childcare also. This they resent & call it not “division of work” but are “accumulation of work” for women.

Steps taken in India for the women empowerment

The Constitution Framers were very much conscious of the problem of women empowerment hence they ensured that the Principle of Gender Equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental duties and Directive Principles. The various articles mentioned in the earlier paragraph are meant for ensuring gender equality. Moreover the Constitution also empowers the states to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women. The real impetus for this movement was gained when under the Prime minister-ship of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, a scheme known as Indira Mahila Yojana was launched. UNDP also incorporated issues of women upliftment as Primary objective. Various Schemes were later on launched for the empowerment of women such as Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Mahila Samridhi Yojana, Self help groups at Panchayat level and many more. The establishment of National Women’s Commission and State Women’s Commissions were important milestones in the direction of Women Empowerment in India.

Ministry for women and child Development

The Ministry for Women & Child Development was established as a department of the Ministry of Human Resource Development in the year 1985 to drive the holistic development of women and children in the country. In 2006 this department was given the status of a Ministry, with the powers to formulate plans, policies and programmes; enacts/ amends legislation, guiding and coordinating the efforts of both governmental and non-governmental organizations working in the field of Women and Child Development. It delivers such initiatives such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) which is a package of services such as supplementary nutrition,



health check-ups and immunization. As mentioned earlier, the empowerment of women begins with their safety and health and this Ministry is committed to providing them.

National Commission for Women

The National Commission for Women is a Department within the Ministry of Women and Child Development. It was set up exclusively to help women via the Constitution – by reviewing Legal and Constitutional safeguards for women, recommending remedial legislative measures, by facilitating quick redressal of grievances and by advising the Government of India on all policy matters affecting women. The website allows for online submission of complaints and fast redressal exclusively for women. Additionally it is also a good resource of information for women and the Commission is committed to helping out women in need.

National Policy for Women Empowerment

The National Policy for the Empowerment of women (2001) was an important step taken by the Government of the time for accelerating the pace of women empowerment. The policy was aimed at ensuring women empowerment through positive economic and social policies for the full development of women, So that they could realize their full potential. The policy assured equal access to women to health care, quality education, participation and decision making in Social, Political and Economical life of the nation. The National Policy also aims at strengthening legal system for eliminating discrimination against Women. It also visualizes strengthening partnership with Civil Society, particularly Women's organizations.

Swayamsidha Programme

The Ministry is also implementing the Swayamsidha programme – an integrated scheme for the empowerment of women at a total cost of Rs. 116.30 Crores. Core to this programme will be the establishment of women's self-help groups which will empower women to have increased access to



all kinds of resources that they are denied, in addition to increasing their awareness and skills. This programme will benefit about 9, 30,000 women with the setting up of 53,000 self-help groups, 26,500 village societies and 650 block societies.

STEP

A programme of Support to Training-cum-Employment for Women (STEP) was launched in 1987 to strengthen and improve the skills for employment opportunities for women below the poverty line, in traditional sectors of agriculture, small animal husbandry, dairying, fisheries, handlooms, handicrafts, cottage and village industries, sericulture, social forestry and wasteland development where women are employed on a large scale. The scheme was essentially designed for the marginalized and asset-fewer women, female-headed households and other poor women.

Role of NGO's

Governmental Organizations are formal agencies working for the empowerment of women. Non-governmental organizations are playing a significant role in the empowerment of disadvantaged women. Just a few years after Independence, the Government set up the Central Social Welfare Board, an apex body of the voluntary sector that aids more than 10,000 NGOs across the country, helping women stand on their own through such programmes as socio-economic programme, vocational training and other similar programmes.

The working style of NGO's is open, transparent and personal. So, they are more effective in this direction. They organize seminars, conferences and workshops for the awakening of the masses. Their mass appeal – style contributes to a better understanding of women's rights and of the means to ensure the enjoyment of those rights and the elimination of discrimination. They prepare urban and rural uneducated women for self – employment, which is vital for the economic empowerment of the women. In short, all these programs and functions of NGO's contribute towards the realization of sustainable community development and hence women empowerment.



Suggestions

Empowerment of women could only be achieved if their economic and social status is improved. This could be possible only by adopting definite social and economic policies with a view of total development of women and to make them realize that they have the potential to be strong human beings.

- The first and foremost priority should be given to the education of women, which is the grassroots problem. According to Mahatma Gandhi, “If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate an entire family.” Education is a powerful tool of social transformation. Hence, education for Women has to be paid special attention. Greater access for women to education must be ensured in the educational system. Gender sensitivity must be developed. A watch has to be kept on drop out rate of girls and corrective measures should be taken to check the drop out rates.
- Steps should be taken to improve the health status of women, reduce maternal mortality especially in the areas which do not have good medical facilities. Women face high risk of malnutrition hence focused attention would have to be given to meet the nutritional needs of women at all stages of their life cycle. The problem in the country is serious about the women belonging to disadvantaged groups. They are the most exploited lot. The Social activist should keep a vigil on the atrocities committed on women belonging to weaker sections and help them to fight the legal battle for obtaining justice. Schemes need to be introduced for helping women who are victims of marital violence, who are deserted and those engaged in sex professions. Awareness programmes need to be organized for creating awareness among women especially belonging to weaker sections about their rights.



- Women should be allowed to work and should be provided enough safety and support to work. Through economic empowerment women's emancipation could be realized. They should be provided with proper wages and work at par with men so that their status can be elevated in society.
- Strict implementation of programs and acts should be there to curb the mal-practices prevalent in the society. Strict measures should be taken for the implementation of Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques Act 1994, which prohibits any prenatal diagnostic techniques and sex selective abortions. Dowry prohibition acts and other legislations pertaining to woman emancipation must be implemented strictly.

Conclusion

The Empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century not only at national level but also at the international level. Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient to achieve this goal. Society must take initiative to create a climate in which there is no gender discrimination and Women have full opportunities of Self decision making and participating in the Social, Political and Economic life of the Country with a sense of equality. To conclude, there is an urgent need for a sustained, comprehensive effort at all levels to attack this problem of gender bias from all sides in a focused manner.

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