

Women Empowerment in India: A Sociological Perspective

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Abstract: *Women have generally been looked down upon with disdainful contempt. All sorts of strictures have been inflicted upon them, reducing their status to a mere play thing or a slave of man's whims, a mere chattel to be dumb driven. They have been confined to the hearth and home. The orthodox male-oriented society in India has still not been able to adjust itself to the fresh wave of women's liberation. But today the time have changed, the Indian woman has cast off her age-old shackles of serfdom and male domination. She has come to her own and started scaling the ladders of social advance with proud dignity. But the status of women suffered a setback in the Brahmanic age. In the muslim rule, women completely lost their glory, they were relegated into the background, cutoff from the mainstreams of life.*

Keywords: Women Consciousness, Male Oriented Society, Women Status, Educational Empowerment, Life Skills, Women Liberation

I. INTRODUCTION

The origins of the concept of empowerment go back to the civil rights in the USA in the 1960. Since the mid-1980s the term empowerment has become popular in the field of development, especially in reference to women. In grassroots programs and policy debates alike, empowerment has virtually replaced terms such as welfare, upliftment, community participation, and poverty alleviation to describe the goal of development and intervention. Women constitute almost 50% of the world's population but India has shown disproportionate sex ratio whereby female's population has been comparatively lower than males. As far as their social status is concerned, they are not treated as equal to men in all the places. Even today gender disabilities and discriminations are found in India.

Historical Background of Women Empowerment in India

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. Rigved & Upanishads mention several names of women sages and seers notably Gargi & Maitrey. Later the status of women began to deteriorate approximately from 500 B.C., the situation worsened with invasion of Mughals and later on by European invaders. 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 Indian Women got voting right much before USA and some other European countries.

Empowerment of Women in India

The concept of empowerment flows from the power. It is vesting where it does not exist or exist inadequately. Empowerment of women would mean equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have positive esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and they should be able to participate in development activities. The empowered women should be able to participate in the process of decision making. In India, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD- 1985) and the National Commission for Women (NCW) have been worked to safeguard the rights and legal entitlement of women. The 73rd & 74th Amendments (1993) to the constitution of India have provided some special powers to women that for reservation of seats (33%), whereas the report HRD as March 2002 shows that the legislatures with the highest percentage of women are Sweden 42.7%, Denmark 38%, Finland 36%

and Iceland 34.9%. In India ‘‘The New Panchayati Raj’’ is the part of the effort to empower women at least at the village level.

Last few years the most positive development has been the growing involvement of women in the Panchayati Raj institutions. There are many elected women representatives at the village council level. At present all over India, there are total 20, 56, 882 lacs village panchayat members, out of this women members are 8,38,244 (40.48%), while total Anchalik panchayat members are 1,09,324, out of this women members are 47, 455, (40.41%) and total Zilla parishad members are 11, 708, out of this women members are 4, 923 (42.05%). At the central and state levels too women are progressively making a difference. Today we have seen women chief ministers, women president, different political parties leader, well establish businessmen etc.

Different Levels of Empowerment

In line with most theorists on empowerment the one has to view empowerment as taking place on different levels and that change on all levels is necessary if the empowerment of women is really to occur. We have to relate empowerment at three levels: empowerment on the individual, group, and societal/ community- level and the interaction between these.

The individual level deals with individual women’s abilities to take control over their lives, their perceptions about their own value and abilities, their abilities to identify a goal and work towards this goal. The group level deals with the collective action and sense of agency that woman experience together, in a group. The societal level deals with the permissiveness of the political and social climate, the societal norms and the public discourse on what is possible and impossible for women to do, how women should behave etc.

Steps Undertaken in India for 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 favour of women.

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. 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. States have also taken various measures for empowerment of women.

Social Empowerment of Women

Under the social empowerment of women steps needs to be taken to improve the health status of women, reduce maternal mortality especially in the areas which do not have good medical facilities. A programme for checking the spread of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV / AIDS and infections / communicable diseases like T.B. needs to be launched. Women face high risk of malnutrition hence focussed 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.

Awareness programmes need to be organised for creating awareness among women especially belonging to weaker sections about their rights. Government has to be vigilant for ensuring that there is no discrimination against the girl child and her rights are protected. The social stigma like child marriage, Female feticide, child abuse and child prostitution must be eradicated immediately.

Education and Empowerment

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 dropout rate of girls and corrective measures should be taken to check the dropout rates.

Role of NGO's in Women Empowerment-

Governmental Organizations are formal agencies working for the empowerment of women. But this work requires multidimensional approach and hence a large number of voluntary organizations / NGO's have gained increased attention in the field from grass – root level to national & international level. Their role is so impressive because they work with missionary zeal and commitment. 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.

II. 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. Efforts by the Govt. are on to ensure gender equality but 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.

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