

A Research on Various Perspective of the Empowerment of Women at Present Indian Society

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Abstract – Women empowerment is a debatable subject. At earlier time they were getting equal status with men. But they had faced some difficulties during post-Vedic and epic ages. Many a time they were treated as slave. From early twenty century(national movement) their statuses have been changed slowly and gradually. In this regard, we my mentioned the name of the British people.

After then, independence of India, the constitutional makers and national leaders strongly demand equal social position of women with men. Today we have seen the women occupied the respectable positions in all walks of the fields. Yet, they have not absolutely free some discrimination and harassment of the society. A few number of women have been able to establish their potentialities. Therefore, each and every should be careful to promote the women statuses.

The present paper primarily deals with “empowerment of women” in India and throws light on particularly” agency approach”to measure women empowerment. Divided into three sections, this paper presents the illustration of modern approach to empowerment in Section-I; an overview of the efforts put in India for empowering women in Section-II and analyses the degree of achievement of empowerment by adopting some of the modern indicators in Section-III. This paper hinges fundamentally on secondary sources of data related to India, published by National Family Health Survey, National Sample Survey Organization and some of the research papers.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last five decades, the concept of women empowerment has undergone a sea change from welfare oriented approach to equity approach. It has been understood as the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. Empowerment particularly includes control over resources and ideology.

According to Sen and Batliwala (2000) it leads to a growing intrinsic capability greater self-confidence, and an inner transformation of one's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barrier. This view mainly emphasizes on two important aspects. Firstly, it is a power to achieve desired goals but not a power over others. Secondly, idea of empowerment is more applicable to those who are powerless- whether they are male or female, or group of individuals, class or caste.

Though concept of empowerment is not specific to women, yet it is unique in that and it cuts across all types of class and caste and also within families and households (Malhotra et al, 2002). Women empowerment is also defined as a change in the context of a women's life, which enables her increased capacity for leading a fulfilling human life. It gets reflected both in external qualities (viz. health, mobility, education and awareness, status in the family, participation in decision making, and also at the level of material security) and internal qualities (viz. self awareness and self confidence) [Human Development in South Asia (2000) as quoted by Mathew (2003)].

Women's empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables that include geographical location (urban/rural), educational status, social status (caste and class), and age. Policies on women's empowerment exist at the national, state, and local (Panchayat) levels in many sectors, including health, education, economic opportunities, gender-based violence, and political participation.

However, there are significant gaps between policy advancements and actual practice at the community level.

One key factor for the gap in implementation of laws and policies¹ to address discrimination, economic disadvantages, and violence against women at the community level is the largely patriarchal structure that governs the community and households in much of India. As such, women and girls have restricted mobility, access to education, access to health facilities, and lower decision-making power, and experience higher rates of violence. Political participation is also hindered at the Panchayat (local governing bodies) level and at the state and national levels, despite existing reservations for women.

The impact of the patriarchal structure can be seen in rural and urban India, although women's empowerment in rural India is much less visible than in urban areas. This is of particular concern, since much of India is rural despite the high rate of urbanization and expansion of cities. Rural women, as opposed to women in urban settings, face inequality at much higher rates, and in all spheres of life. Urban women and, in particular, urban educated women enjoy relatively higher access to economic opportunities, health and education, and experience less domestic violence. Women (both urban and rural) who have some level of education have higher decision-making power in the household and the community. Furthermore, the level of women's education also has a direct implication on maternal mortality rates, and nutrition and health indicators among children.

Among rural women, there are further divisions that hinder women's empowerment. The most notable ones are education levels and caste and class divisions. Women from lower castes (the scheduled castes, other backward castes, and tribal communities) are particularly vulnerable to maternal mortality and infant mortality. They are often unable to access health and educational services, lack decision-making power, and face higher levels of violence. Among women of lower caste and class, some level of education has shown to have a positive impact on women's empowerment indicators.

Social divisions among urban women also have a similar impact on empowerment indicators. Upper class and educated women have better access to health, education, and economic opportunities, whereas lower class, less educated women in urban settings enjoy these rights significantly less. Due to rapid urbanization and lack of economic opportunities in other parts of the country, cities also house sprawling slum areas. Slums are informal sprawls, and most times lack basic services such as clean water, sanitation, and health facilities. Additionally, slum dwellers mostly work in unorganized and informal sectors, making them vulnerable to raids by the state, abuse by employers, and other forms of insecurity. Women and children in slums are among the most

vulnerable to violence and abuse, and are deprived of their basic human rights.

As a result of a vibrant women's movement in the last 50 years, policies to advance human rights for women in India are substantial and forward-thinking, such as the Domestic Violence Act (2005), and the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution that provide reservations for women to enter politics at the Panchayat level. There are multiple national and state level governmental and non-governmental mechanisms such as the Women's Commission to advance these policies, and the implementation of these policies is decentralized to state and district-level authorities and organizations that include local non-governmental organizations.

The policy/practice gap in India cuts across all sectors and initiatives as a result of rampant corruption and lack of good governance practices. State-level governments claim a lack of resources, and the resources they do receive are highly susceptible to corruption. Financial corruption hinders the government's ability to invest in social capital, including initiatives to advance women's empowerment. Since the 1990's India has put in place processes and legislative acts such as the Right to Information Act (2005) for information disclosure to increase transparency and hold government officials accountable. Mistrust of political institutions and leaders remains high in the society with corruption and graft allegations often covering media headlines.

In addition to corruption and inadequate resources for implementation of initiatives at the community level, women's empowerment in India is negatively impacted by the pervasive discrimination of women in the family and the community. Discrimination against women in most parts of India (particularly the north) emerges from the social and religious construct of women's role and their status. As such, in many parts of India, women are considered to be less than men, occupying a lower status in the family and community, which consequentially restricts equal opportunity in women and girls' access to education, economic possibilities, and mobility.

Empowerment for women in India requires a crosscutting approach and one which addresses the diversity of social structures that govern women's lives. Identity politics in India is a very critical political instrument, which is both used and abused throughout political and social institutions. There are numerous social movements fighting for the rights of the marginalized, such as the Dalit rights movement, the tribal rights movement, etc. These movements have achieved many gains in assuring representation of the traditionally marginalized communities into mainstream society. Women's rights within these movements are largely unarticulated and thus reinforce inequalities within the very structures from which they are demanding inclusion. Empowerment approaches for women therefore is not only about

providing services, but also about recognizing their lived realities of multiple layers of discrimination that hinder their access to services.

Similarly, access to education for girls in some of the northern states like Uttar Pradesh and Punjab does not only rely on proximity of schools. Access to education is part of a larger structural concern, including the practice of son preference, which creates inherent discriminatory practices. Education initiatives therefore cannot rely solely on building educational infrastructure, but also need to address some of the root causes of discrimination against women and girls which affect the decisions made by parents.

Women's security, decision-making power, and mobility are three indicators for women's empowerment. In India, and more so for rural and less educated women, these three indicators are significantly low. Data from the NFHS-3 survey on women's decision-making power shows that only about one third of the women interviewed took decisions on their own regarding household issues and their health. Decision-making power among employed urban women was higher than among rural and less educated women. The survey also found that older married women had more decision-making power than the younger married women. Younger women and girls experience an additional layer of discrimination as a result of their age.

Data on women's mobility in India indicates the lack of choices women have, and that urban and educated women have more mobility choices than rural women. The data shows that about half the women interviewed had the freedom to go to the market or a health facility alone. Seventynine percent of urban women from the highest education brackets and only about 40 percent of rural women without education were allowed to go to the market alone.

Mobility restrictions for women are dependent upon how the family and community view women's rights. They also, however, are intrinsically dependent on the prevailing levels of violence against women in the household and the community. Abuse and violence towards women is predominantly perpetrated within the household, and marital violence is among the most accepted by both men and women. Wife beating, slapping, rape, dowry related deaths, feudal violence towards tribal and lower caste women, trafficking, sexual abuse, and street violence permeate the Indian social fabric, and create one of the most serious obstacles in achieving women's empowerment.

The gap in policy and practice in women's empowerment is most visible when it comes to the level and kinds of violence women face in India. Despite the policies, laws, and initiatives by civil society institutions, violence against women in India is widespread and the consequences for perpetrators rarely match the crime. Enforcement of laws and

sentencing of perpetrators are long and arduous processes, and the gaps in these processes are further widened by corruption.

WOMEN IN INDIA

Now the women in India enjoy a unique status of equality with the men as per constitutional and legal provision. But the Indian women have come a long way to achieve the present positions. First, gender inequality in India can be traced back to the historic days of Mahabharata when Draupadi was put on the dice by her husband as a commodity. History is a witness that women was made to dance both in private and public places to please the man. Secondly, in Indian society, a female was always dependent on male members of the family even last few years ago. Thirdly, a female was not allowed to speak with loud voice in the presence of elder members of her inlaws.

In the family, every fault had gone to her and responsible. Forth, as a widow her dependence on a male members of the family still more increase. In many social activities she is not permitted to mix with other members of the family. Other hand, she has very little share in political, social and economic life of the society.

The early twenty century, it was rise of the National Movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi who was in favor of removing all the disabilities of women. At the same time, Raja Ram Mohan Rai, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and various other social reformers laid stress on women's education, prevention of child marriage, withdrawals of evil practice of sati, removal of polygamy etc. The National Movement and various reform movements paved the way for their liberations from the social evils and religious taboos. In this context, we may write about the Act of Sati (abolish) 1829, Hindu Widow Remarriage Act' 1856, the Child Restriction Act, 1929, Women Property Right Act, 1937 etc.

After independence of India, the constitution makers and the national leaders recognized the equal social position of women with men. The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 has determined the age for marriage, provided for monogamy and guardianship of the mother and permitted the dissolution of marriage under specific circumstances.

Under the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956, an unmarried women, widow or divorcee of sound mind can also take child in adoption. Similarly, the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 says that any person who gives, takes, or abets the giving or taking of dowry shall be punished with imprisonment, which may extend to six months or fine up to Rs.5000/ or with both. The Constitution of India guarantees equality of sexes and in fact grants special favors to women. These can be found in three articles of the

constitution. Article 14 says that the government shall not deny to any person equality before law or equal protection of the law. Article 15 declares that government shall not discriminate against any citizen on the ground of sex. Article 15 (3) makes a special provision enabling the state to make affirmative discriminations in favor of women. Article 42 directs the state to make provision for ensuring just and human conditions of work and maternity relief. Above all, the constitution regards a fundamental duty on every citizen through Articles 15 (A), (E) to renounce the practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

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.

The government of India has ratified various international conventions and human rights instruments committing to secure equal rights to women. These are CEDAW (1993), the Mexico Plan of Action (1975), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), the Beijing Declaration as well as the platform for Action (1995) and other such instruments. The year of 2001 was observed as the year of women's empowerment. During the year, a landmark document has been adopted, 'the National Policy for the empowerment of women.' For the beneficiaries of the women, the government has been adopted different schemes and programs i.e. the National Credit Fund for Women (1993), Food and Nutrition Board (FNB), Information and Mass Education (IME) etc.

The most positive development last few years 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 Panchayat members, out of this women members is 8, 38, 244 (40.48%), while total Panchayat members is 1, 09, 324, out of this women members is 47, 455, (40.41%) and total Zila Parishad members is 11, 708, out of this women members is 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 established businessmen etc.

The most notable amongst these are Mrs. Pratiba Devi Singh Patil, Shila Dixit, Mayawati, Sonia Gandhi, Binda Karat, Nazma Heptulla, Indira Nuyee (Pepsi-co), BJP leader Susma Soraj, railway minister Mamtaz Begum, 'Narmada Bachao' leader Medhapatekar, Indian Iron Woman, EX-prime minister Indira Gandhi etc. Women are also involving in human development issues of child rearing, education, health, and gender parity. Many of them have gone into the making and marketing of a range of cottage products-pickles, tailoring, embroidery etc. The economic empowerment of women is being regarded these days as a sine-quonon of progress for a country; hence, the issue of economic empowerment of women is of paramount importance to political thinkers, social thinkers and reformers.

APPROACHES TO EMPOWERMENT

We know well that in general terms, the position of women in society is still low compared to their counterparts. Particularly in developing countries women have to face "the glass ceiling". The major reason being the discrimination between man and woman on the basis of sex has created various types of gender biases. Hence, efforts were made to remove discrimination against females and to establish equality has become the part of the global movement emphasized in all the four World Conferences on Women including the Beijing Conference in 1995. The World Bank has identified empowerment as one of the key constituent elements of poverty reduction and as a primary development assistance goal. The promotion of women's empowerment as a development goal is based on the dual argument that social justice is an important aspect of human welfare. The Policy Research Report of the World Bank has also identified gender equality both as a development objective and as a means to promote growth, reduce poverty and promote better governance. Beijing Declaration (1995) presented women's empowerment as a key strategy for development and stated that "women's full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision making process and access to power are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace. Another line of thought in development literature has promoted "social inclusion" in the institutions as the key pathway to empowerment of individuals and capitalism top-down approaches to development and/or poverty itself are seen as sources of disempowerment. This process of social inclusion was viewed as a process that removes the institutional barriers and the enhancement of incentives to increase the access of diverse individuals and groups to assets and development opportunities (Beteta

Hanny,2006). The growth of civil society and participatory development methods at both macro and micro levels of society were also proposed as the mechanisms by which empowerment could take place. This approach to empowerment focuses on State and Civil Society institutions and interpersonal gender dynamics within the household as a part of the equation of social exclusion and in need of directed efforts at change.

The Modern Approach: In recent years the concept of “empowerment” was modified to include “the power in plural form as “powers”. This “powers” approach was picked up by several feminist bodies and development NGOs which have argued that empowerment process should be broken down in four levels of power – power over, power to, power with and power within. A revised definition of poverty during the reforms period brought out a new dimension of empowerment. Haschemi and Schuler (1993) have identified six dimensions of empowerment based on activities of women identified as important for their day-to-day functioning. The concept “Poverty” was also redefined as “lack of real opportunity” and ultimately a matter of “capability deprivation”. Hence, it was argued that the basic objective of development was the “expansion of human capabilities”. It was also argued that expansion of human capabilities empowers the people and facilitates the reduction of social and economic inequalities. Attempts were made to separate the gender and economic components of empowerment by combining the models of empowerment proposed by Kabeer (1999) and England (2000)/ Kabeer (1999) identified three main elements of empowerment: The first one is the preconditions of empowerment which include economic as well as human and social resources. The second one is “achievements”. Gender norms and economic resources must act as preconditions to exercise the power that positively affects the demographic outcomes. (Social Opportunities) and also to have an independent influence on these “achievements”. Malhotra et.al.(2002) used the definition of empowerment suggested by Kabeer (1999) and argued that empowerment is “the expansion of people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them”. To be precise, it could said that to be “empowered” means “to exercise more power than other women in the same context”.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT PERSPECTIVE

The term empowerment pre-supposes primacy of power over other dimensions. We speak of women’s sharing of political power and participation in government. An important issue related to women’s empowerment is the reservation of seats for them in the state legislature and union parliament. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act 1992 has provided 33 percent seats for women in Panchayats and municipal bodies.

Though the experience of the Indian Panchayat Raj Institutions, one million women have actively entered political life in India. Since the creation of the quota system, local women-the vast majority of the illiterates and poor- have come to occupy as much as 43 percent of seats-spurring the election of increasing numbers of women at the district, provincial and national level. Since the onset of PRI, the percentages of women in various levels of political activity have risen from 4-5 percent to 25-40 percent.

According to an Indian writer and activist Devaki Jain, “the positive discrimination of Panchayat Raj Institutions has initiated a momentum of change. Women’s entry into local government in such large numbers often more than the required 33 percent, and their success in campaigning, including the defeat of male candidates, has shattered the myth that women are not interested in politics, and have no time to meetings or to undertake all the other work that is required in political party processes. Panchayat Raj Institutions reminds us of central truth: power is not something people give away, it has to be negotiated, and some time wrested from the powerful.” says Noeleen Heyzer, executive director of UNIFEM, “this is one of best innovations in grass-roots democracy in the world” (Women’s Link, Jul. to Sept., 2003, p. 30). Seats in local bodies have been reserved for women for their active participation in decision-making, but the parliament has so far failed to provide a similar representation to women. Ugly scenes were witnessed over tabling the women’s reservation bill that has brought the grim truth into sharper focus that Indian society continues to be male dominated and male hegemony is still the dominated reality. In India, the participation of women in politics has actually been declined since the days of freedom movement (10%). It reached a high of 8 percent in 1984 elections. This figure has not crossed since then.

The account of measures taken for women’s empowerment in India clearly shows that there is a deep concern in the country to uplift their social and economic conditions, so that they may plan an active role in the task of national developments. Government is not serious for the political participation of women; the data shows that they are lagging behind in political sphere.

THE NATIONAL POLICY FOR EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

The Government of India has declared 2001 as Women’s Empowerment year. The national policy of empowerment of women has set certain clear-cut goals and objectives. The policy aims at upliftment, development and empowerment in socio-economic and politico-cultural aspects, by creating in them awareness on various issues in relation to their empowerment.

The following are the specific objectives of National Policies particularly of rural folk on Empowerment of women in India.

- i. Creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for full development of women to enable them to realize their full potential.
- ii. The de-jure and de-facto enjoyments of all human rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all political, economic, social, cultural and civil spheres.
- iii. Equal access to participation and decision making of women in social political and economic life of the nation.
- iv. Equal access to women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public life etc.,
- v. Strengthening legal systems aimed at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.
- vi. Changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women.
- vii. Ministering a gender perspective in the development process.
- viii. Elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child.
- ix. Building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women's organizations.

The National policy for empowerment of women envisaged introduction of a gender perspective in the budgeting process as an operational strategy. A few laws and legislations are enforced strictly for effective and proper implementation of this policy.

CONCLUSION

Various indicators of women empowerment are analyzed using the data from various sources while discussing women's present status in India. The main emphasis is given to the indicators like women's household decision making power, financial autonomy, freedom of movement, women's acceptance of unequal gender roles, exposure to media, access to education, women's experience of domestic violence etc. Women's political participation is also analyzed by using indicators like percentage of women voters and women MPs. After analyzing the data it is found that household decision making power and freedom of

movement of women vary considerably with age, education and employment.

Work participation empowers women. However the condition of women in India is more miserable than the rest of the world in almost every field of social life. They are paid half of three-quarters of the money while their male counterparts earn for the same job. India is predominantly agricultural country. Women do more than half of the total agricultural work. But their work is not valued. On an average a woman works 15 to 16 hours a day unpaid at home and underpaid outside.

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