

Women Empowerment in India

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Abstract – Women are the building blocks of our society. Women constitute almost 50% of the world's population. The status of women in India has been subject to much great change over the past few millennia. From equal status with men in ancient times, through the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been quit eventful. In modern India, women have adorned high offices including that of the President, Prime Minister, Speaker of Lok Sabha and Leader of the Opposition, among others. But we have to give more importance to develop rural women empowerment. We put a special focus on empowering women and girls, because we believe they hold the key to long-lasting social change in communities. Empowering women must be a united approach, a cause that requires continued attention and stewardship by all. We need to augment our efforts for empowering women and enhance their progress. It is our moral, social and constitutional responsibility to ensure their progress by providing them with equal rights and opportunities. Today women with their smartness, grace and elegance have conquered the whole world. With their hard work and sincerity, they have excelled in each and every profession. Women are considered to be more honest, meticulous, and efficient and hence more and more companies prefer hiring women for better performance and result. Nobody ever thought of this before, to give preference to female job seekers.

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INTRODUCTION

Women constitute almost 50% of the world's population. The status of women in India has been subject to much great change over the past few millennia. From equal status with men in ancient times, through the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been quit eventful. In modern India, women have adorned high offices including that of the President, Prime Minister, Speaker of Lok Sabha and Leader of the Opposition, among others.

Women empowerment is a significant issue in our society and polity. Women in India now participate in all activities, such as education, politics, media art and culture, science technology and sports, etc. Indra Gandhi, who governed the country as Prime Minister of India for an aggregate period of fifteen years, was the world's longest serving woman Prime Minister.

The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women, equality, no discrimination by the state, equality of opportunity equal pay for equal work, etc. In addition, it allows special provisions to be made by state in favor of women and children and renounces practices, derogatory to the dignity of women and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for

securing just and human conditions of work and for maternity relief.

The 73rd Constitution Amendment act has made an effort to give some special powers to women in all the three tiers of Panchayat Raj. The rationale behind this amendment was that the social and economic status of women could not be improved much without political power. Women in the village as well as towns need to be given some political power. They should be given their share in the decision making process. The new Panchayat Raj is the part of the effort to empower women at least at the village level. As per the provisions of the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, one-third of the seats are reserved for women along with Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This is, indeed, a very bold step towards the empowerment of women. The provisions of the Act for women are in no way less than a revolution. Women who have been working in the fields as casual labourers, washing vessels at home, fetching water for drinking, cooking food for family members, are now legally permitted to share on par with the males, the village matters of decision-making.

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women for better performance and result. Nobody ever thought of this before, to give preference to female job seekers.

MEANING OF THE CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

The term 'empowerment of women' has become popular especially after 1980s. It refers to the process of strengthening the hands of women who have been suffering from various disabilities, inequalities and gender discrimination.

- The term "empowerment of women" refers to the process of providing power to woman to become free from the control of others, that is, to assume power to control her own life and to determine her own conditions.
- The term of "empowerment of women" could also be understood as the process of providing equal rights, opportunities, responsibilities and power positions to women so that they are able to play a role on par with men in society.

In the simplest of words it is basically the creation of an environment where women can make independent decisions on their personal development as well as shine as equals in society. Women want to be treated as equals so much so that if a woman rises to the top of her field it should be a commonplace occurrence that draws nothing more than a raised eyebrow at the gender. This can only happen if there is a channelized route for the empowerment of women. Thus it is no real surprise that women empowerment in India is a hotly discussed topic with no real solution looming in the horizon except to doubly redouble our efforts and continue to target the sources of all the violence and ill-will towards women.

THE BACKGROUND OF THE EMERGENCE OF THE CONCEPT

Historically, women have been regarded as constituting a weaker section. They have often been treated as "second grade citizens". They have been pictured and presented as "home-makers" who are good in household chores. This image of women has been changing everywhere. Extension of the voting right to women in Britain and America in the beginning of the 20th century brought about a series of changes in the status of women especially in the western world. Many of their disabilities and inequalities came to an end in due course. The quest for equality was pursued consistently by the Western women.

On the contrary, women of Asia and Africa were not able to secure equal status and opportunities even after 1950s. Women continued to suffer from one or

the other kind of disability. Their exploitation was also continued. They were given unequal treatment on the basis of sex. This development was termed as "gender discrimination". The United Nations also through its various meetings and pronouncements was giving call to its member-nations to remove as early as possible, the ugly practice of "gender discrimination".

REASONS BEHIND THE NEED FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

In a nation like India the need for the empowerment of women is justified on account of the factors like the following:

- **Education or Literacy:** among other countries of the world, India has the highest number of illiterate people. As per the 2011 Census report, 82.14% men are literate while only 65.46% women are found to be so. In the rural areas, the level of illiteracy is still higher. Illiteracy is the biggest weakness of women. Giving them education means empowering them to enjoy the benefits of development which in turn enables them to contribute further to the national progress.
- **Health Problem of Women:** Poor health on the part of women has also added to their weakness. Women consume less food and work more. They are shy of complaining about their ill health. They prefer to suffer silently than to approach a medical practitioner for obtaining medical assistance. This is mostly true in the case of a large majority of rural women. Surveys and studies have revealed that traditional importance shown towards the male children is also one of the reasons for neglecting the health of female children. Women are found to be maintaining relatively good health in the regions wherever the rate of female literacy is higher. Kerala provides here the best example. Thus from the health point of view also, womenfolk who are found to be weaker, are to be made stronger.
- **Economic Exigencies of Women:** Indian women are economically weak in two aspects: (1) the per capita income of the Indians is quite low and a large number of families are under the tight grip of poverty. This economic distress naturally affects women who are a part and parcel of the family, (2) Since property law in this country were not in favour of women for hundreds years, women do not seem to be possessing property of their own. Even the working women who get some income give it to the custody of their men folk who take

decisions to spend it. Economic dependence of women on men still continues. This dependence weakens them economically. Thus, women require economic power to stand on their own legs on par with men.

- **Atrocities against Women:** Women constitute the weaker sex. This fact is also borne by the number of crimes and atrocities committed against them. There are cases of rapes, kidnapping of girls, dowry harassments, molestation, sexual harassments, abuse of women, incestuous sex relations and so on. Women in all walks of life are discriminated against by men. They become the victims of atrocities in the number of ways. They require empowerment of all kinds in order to protect themselves against all types of atrocities and to preserve their purity and dignity.

SHIFT IN THE EMPHASIS FROM WOMEN'S "WELFARE" TO "DEVELOPMENT"

Due to the efforts of the UNO the issue of empowerment of women became an international issue. The UN declared the **Year 1975 as the International women's Year**. Further, the U.N. Declaration of 1975 compelled the national government to shift their emphasis on women's programmes from welfare to development. The Declaration prescribed for the all-round development of women.

WOMEN'S WORLD CONGRESS INSISTENCE ON EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

In continuation of the UNO Declaration of 1975, the **"Third Women's World Congress"** was held at **Nairobi** in 1985. A document released on this occasion recommended efforts towards empowerment of women. "In this document, the question of women political participation was highlighted and it was recommended that 35% of the total seats should be reserved for women. It was also recommended that some posts should be reserved for women at the block and village level bureaucracy. On the economic front, a number of income generating schemes were introduced for women. In addition to that provisions were also made to certain proportion of women as beneficiaries in all the developmental schemes like the IRDP, JRY, TRYCEM, and so on".

The Fourth World Conference on women was held in Beijing in 1995 in which representatives from 189 nations including India had taken part. The Conference recognized some 12 serious areas such as women and poverty, health, economic position, media and rights, environment, girl child, human rights and women, institutional arrangement for women's development, women in decision- taking

process, education and training for job, etc. in order to strengthen women. The Conference unanimously passed a resolution on "gender equality".

Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly was also convened in the year 2000 in New York to assess the progress of the programmes held in the direction of establishing gender equality. The topic of the conference was "women 2000: Equality, Development and Peace for the 21st Century". Only the NGOs had to take part in it. The basic purpose of the conference was to convince the member nations regarding the need for empowering women and to take appropriate step in that direction.

THE INDIAN RESPONSE TOWARDS THE CONFERENCE ISSUE

On the basis of the proceedings of the world conference on women, the Government of India prepared a National Document concerning the development of women. The document lays down various strategies for women's development. The Government also declared the year **2001 as the "Year of Women's Empowerment"**.

NOTABLE INDIAN WOMEN

Politics: Smt. Pratibha Devisingh Patil was the first female President. Indira Gandhi was the first female Prime Minister. Sarojini Naidu was the first woman to become the governor of a state in India. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was the first female Indian Cabinet Minister. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit was the first woman Minister in India. Mamata Banerjee, J. Jayalalithaa, Shiela Dikshit and Mayawati was the first time four female CMs.

Through the Panchayat Raj institutions, over a million women have actively entered political life in India. As per the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, all local elected bodies reserve one-third of their seats for women. Although the percentages of women in various levels of political activity have risen considerably, women are still under-represented in governance and decision-making positions.

Education: Savitribai Phule was a social reformer. Along with her husband, Mahatma Jotiba Phule, she played an important role in improving women's rights in India during British Rule. Savitribai was the first female teacher of the first women's school in India and also considered to be the pioneer of modern Marathi poetry. In 1852 she opened a school for untouchable caste girls.

Women in IAS, IFS and IPS: Dr. Kiran Bedi was the first police officer (in the cadre of IPS) in the world to enter the police service. Kanchan C.

Bhattacharya has been the first to become the woman DGP.

Military Forces: Gertrude Ali Ram was the first woman major General of the Indian Army.

Judiciary: Fathima Bibi of Kerala became the first woman judge in the Supreme Court.

Science & Technology: Women like Dr. Kalpana Chavla have achieved great heights in the most challenging fields such as aeronautical engineering and spacecraft.

Sports: although in general the women's sports scenario in India is not very good, some Indian women have made notable achievements in the field. Some famous female sportspersons in Indian include P.T. Usha (athletics), J.J. Shobha (athletics), Kunjarani Devi (weightlifting), Diana Edulji (cricket), Saina Nehwal (badminton), Koneru Hampi (chess), and Sania Mirza (tennis). Female Olympic medalists from India include weightlifter Karnam Malleswari (bronze, 2000), Saina Nehwal (bronze, 2012), and boxer Mary Kom (bronze, 2012).

Literature: Many women writers are prominent in India literature as poets and the story writers, such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Surayya, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, and Anita Desai, Sarojini Naidu is called the nightingale of India. Arundhati Roy won the Booker Prize for her novel *The God of Small Things*.

Art and entertainment: Singer and vocalists as M.S. Subbulakshmi, Gangubai Hangal, Lata Mangeshkar, Asha Bhosle and others are widely revered in India. Anjolie Ela Menon is a famous painter.

Government Servants: Indian Railway: Surekha Yadav, Samata Kumari, Preeti Kumari, C.V. Thilagavathi, S.Satyavathi, Matrubhoomi- MMTS Ladies Special Driver, Mumtaz Kazi.

Corporate world: Indu Jain, Heading Bennett Coleman, India's biggest media house, has been even reached billionaire status. Kiran Mazumdar Shaw started one of India's first biotech companies, Biocon. Lalita Gupta and Kalpana Morparia, both were the only businesswomen in India who ran India's second-largest bank, ICICI Bank. Anu Aga turned around an ailing company, the engineering firm Thermax Group. Simone Tata built one of the first indigenous cosmetic brands, Lakme, now a unit of Hindustan Lever. Priya Paul became the president of Apeejay Surrendra Group at the age of 24, when her father was assassinated in 1990. Sulajja Firadia Motwani, managing director of Kinetic Motors and CA. Naina Lal Kidwai is an Indian businesswomen, she is the Group General Manager and Country Head of the HBSC Group in India.

Women's struggle for Reforms: Though women of India are not at par with her counterpart in Western world but she is struggling hard to mark in men's world. We can count on certain names from the British India where women put the example of extraordinary bravery which even men might not be able to show. Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi was the one such woman. She was the one who put even British rulers to shame with her extraordinary feats in battle. She fought for her kingdom, which Dalhousie, British Governor General, had unlawfully annexed. She was in a true sense the leader of uprising of 1857.

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AND "THE 73rd CONSTITUTION AMENDMENT ACT, 1993"

"The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act 1993" was undertaken mainly to give constitutional status to the "The Panchayat Raj System" and to introduce it in India on a uniform basis. Another purpose behind the Act was to assure the empowerment of women.

The framers of the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act believed that "social and economic status of women could not be improved much without political power. The females in the village need to be given some political power. They should have their share in the decision made about the development of their villages. The new Panchayat Raj is a part of the effort to empower the women at least at the village level".

One-Third Reservation of Seats for Women: The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act has made an effort to give some special powers to women in all the three tiers of Panchayat Raj. As per this Act, 1/3 of the seats are reserved for women in addition to the reservation for SCs and STs. It was, indeed, a very bold step towards the empowerment of women. Rural women who have been working as farm labourers, cleaning the utensils, washing clothes, sweeping the court-yard, fetching drinking water from a distance, cooking food and serving the same to all, laboring in the fields, etc., are now able to exercise some amount of political power on par with men. They now have the role to play in matters of decision making that affect village affairs. "The provisions of Act for the women are in no way less than a revolution".

A BRIEF ASSESSMENT OF 73rd CONSTITUTION AMENDMENT ACT

The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act came into force in April, 1993. The Act has not brought about miraculous changes as expected. Though it has created some awareness among women it suffers from many drawbacks. Some of them may be noted as below.

Illiteracy: Since female literacy rate is poor in our villages, female members at different tiers of

Panchayat Raj are not able to assert themselves. On the contrary, they are forced to work according to the wishes of the male members.

Non-Availability of Women: it is very difficult to find out adequate number of females to work as members of the Panchayat Raj Committee. Either we will have to make a compromise with less qualified and totally ignorant women or be content with inadequate number of women.

Corrupt Leadership and Bureaucracy: Our leadership is highly selfish and our bureaucracy is totally corrupt. In this situation, it is very difficult for the women to work and to achieve progress.

Bias towards Elites and Middle Class: The Act focuses its attention on women and weaker sections of the society no doubt. Women who are better off in one way or another alone can take the proper benefit of this Act. It means the creamy layer of the disadvantaged groups would corner most of the benefits of the Act. As a result, the weakest of the weak, the poorest of the poor would continue to suffer in the pattern of the Panchayat Raj also.

WHAT STEPS ARE BEING TAKEN TO EMPOWER WOMEN IN INDIA?

Women are the building blocks of our society. A big nation like India which consists of more than 50 crores women cannot afford the role of women in the national development. It is in this context the process of empowerment of women has assumed importance.

Women cannot be empowered in a magical manner. It is not an automatic or a spontaneous process but requires deliberate and consistent efforts. It is through the combined and co-ordinated efforts of the Government, people and the women the task can be fulfilled. Women cannot be effectively empowered by statutory provisions or governmental efforts alone. "Women are empowered through women emancipation movement, education, communication, media, political parties and general awakening".

Women must be made strong for a stronger society and she should come at par with men. To promote gender equality and to empower women in India, the United Nations Development Programme created Millennium Development Goals (MDG). Out of eight goals, the third MDG is constituted for India. Target was to achieve gender equality in primary and secondary education by 2005 but India failed to achieve the said target. Next target is to eliminate gender disparity in all levels of education by 2015. This is still a big challenge.

Certain changes have also been made in the Constitution of India. Woman has been given the right to divorce under certain circumstances in the modified Hindu Marriage Act. Daughter of the family

has been provided with the right in the property of her parents under the Hindu Succession Act.

In 1985 government took a step for the overall development of women and children by creating the department of the Ministry for Women and Child Development under the Ministry of Human Resource Development. In 2006 this department was upgraded to the status of a Ministry. The Sexual Harassment of women at Work Place Act, 2013 was enacted by the Ministry. It also brought in a unique law- the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012. It launched several schemes for the welfare of women and children such as the Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGSEAG), Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana (IGMSY) and the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme etc.

Within the Ministry of Women and Child Development is the department of the National Commission for Women. The objective of setting this department was to help women through the Constitution.

Various socio-economic and political factors facilitate the empowerment of women. Among them the following may be noted:

- **Acknowledging Women's Rights:** Society should recognize that like men, women are also entitled to equal rights.
- **Freedom to Take Decisions and Make Choices:** Women should have freedom to decide whether to marry or not to marry, and after marriage, the freedom to decide as to how many children that they should have, and so on.
- **Access to Education and Employment:** Women can become stronger only with educational and economic power. Mere expectations cannot help. Conditions must be created in such a way that women get easy access to education and later on become employed. Sufficient economic freedom is a must for women to lessen their dependence on men.
- **Opportunities for Political Participation:** If women's voice is to carry more weight they must be given political power. They must be free to take part in the administrative process.

The process of empowerment of women belonging to weaker sections will definitely have multiplying effects on society. For example, when a woman in the village gets elected as member of the Gram Panchayat Samithi, she becomes automatically powerful in the family, kin group and village. She is listened to by the people for she has the power to

take a decision and she can do and undo certain things in the village, and so on. For example, she can expand the facilities of the village school and raise it to higher standard, she can get a bore well and a water tank for the village, she may fetch for the village a community hall, a reading room, and so on. She is not, of course, everything. But by becoming the member of the Gram Samithi, she can definitely influence the decisions of the Samithi.

CONCLUSION

Women constitute almost 50% of the world's population. Women are the building block of our society. The status of women in India has been subject to much great change over the past few millennia. As today women are equal with men. But we have to give more importance to develop rural women empowerment. We put a special focus on empowering women and girls, because we believe they hold the key to long-lasting social change in communities. Empowering women must be a united approach, a cause that requires continued attention and stewardship by all. We need to augment our efforts for empowering women and enhance their progress. It is our moral, social and constitutional responsibility to ensure their progress by providing them with equal rights and opportunities. Today women with their smartness, grace and elegance have conquered the whole world. With their hard work and sincerity, they have excelled in each and every profession. Women are considered to be more honest, meticulous, and efficient and hence more and more companies prefer hiring women for better performance and result. Nobody ever thought of this before, to give preference to female job seekers.

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