

Empowerment of Women and Role of State in India

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Abstract

Empowerment of women is a critical issue of our times that has engaged the attention of policy planners, social reforms, and academicians all over the world. Yet, it is only in India that glaring and brutal gang rapes occur frequently in a state that was headed by a woman Chief Minister. Gender discrimination is the least of worries for women in India¹, known otherwise as the fourth most dangerous country in the world for women. Other instances of violence against women has an astonishing and grim variety to it – with acid throwing, domestic violence stemming out of dowry, rape, harassment and an assortment of others.

Keywords: Women Empowerment; Role of State; Legal System

The term 'Empowerment' means to give power or an authority to a person or group of persons². Women empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of women. It often involves the empowered developing confidence in their own capacities. 'Empowerment of women' connects control over or vesting in them, what since long has been denied to them in the name of security of the home and well-being of the family. The process includes challenging existing power relations and gaining greater control over material assets and intellectual resources. The aim realises their full identity and powers in all sphere of life. In Indian Society, the status of women has been considerably ambiguous. On one hand, in some sacred texts, they have been exalted while in some other religious writings and folklore, they are believed to be fickle,

¹ Women Empowerment by R.L. Panigrahy, Dasarath Bhuyan, First Published-2006, Published by Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi.

² Women's Empowerment, Issues, Challenges, and Strategies: A Source Book, Hajira Kumar, Jaimon Varghese, published by Regency Publication, New Delhi, 01-Jan-2005

fragile, vain and thoughtless³. The two images are contradictory. The tilt in the accepted stereotypes is towards the negative and paints a derogatory picture. Due to the Patriarchial system, a woman becomes just a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother with no identity of her own.

Very low value is placed on a woman's life and this has reduced the chance for girls to be born at all. Female foeticide, in our society, has increased to dangerous proportions⁴. Even when a female child is born, she is not given much chance to survive. Malnutrition, lack of medical attention, early marriage and frequent child births are her lot.

The low value on female life leads to the neglect of their education. A large number of girls are still not receiving primary education. Poverty, discriminating social norms and need for small girls to assist in economic activities and household chores are some factors behind it. Education of a male child receives priority as the norms of society ascribe domestic role exclusively for girls⁵. Lack of adequate number of

separate/ all girls' schools, women teachers and absences of schools in rural areas in particular are some of the factors which reinforce the parental resistance to girl's education.

The work that women perform is not considered as productive. The invisibility of women's work is our important contributory factor for their inferior status⁶. They are considered primarily as domestic 'workers' and only as supplementary earners in the labour market. Even when they work outside, they are given lower wages as compared to men. They are mainly concentrated in the primary sector and in unskilled marginal work.

Violence against women is another major issue. It can take the form of wife battering, female foeticide and infanticide. Dowry violence is widely prevalent but has largely remained un-reported and hence ignored. Millions of Indian women, by and large, have grown to accept violence from their husbands. Even the women from middle and upper middle class are not averse to it. Feminine tolerance of male violence is a cause of major worry.

Portrayal of women in media and formation of gender-based identities also contributes towards the problem. There is tendency to sensationalise the issues related to women. But the concern for problems of women is lacking. The values

³ Changing Status and Role of Women in Indian Society-C. Chakrapani, S. Vijaya Kumar, M.D. Publications Pvt. Ltd., 01-Jan-1994

⁴ Disappearing Daughters: The Tragedy of Female Foeticide- Gita Aravamudan Penguin Books India, 2007

⁵ Girl Child in India- Gita Aravamudan, Penguin Books India, 2007, S. N. Tripathy, Sripremananda Pradhan-Discovery Publishing House, 01-Jan-2003

⁶ Women And Empowerment, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, Pullai, J.K. (1995)

perpetuated by the media in general tend to view women as helpless, docile, orthodox, vulnerable and predominantly as sex objects.

In their home and community, they have not much say in decision making. At the political level, participation of women in decision-making processes is very low. The large masses of women continue to have lack of representatives who are committed to remove their special problems⁷.

Efforts to improve the lot of women and empower them will require awareness building, capacity building and organizing women so that unequal relationships can be changed and they get a increased decision making power in their homes, in their community and greater participation in politics. The basic needs of women have to be addressed and specific policies for the welfare of women have to be made. They should be given equality of access to resources like educational opportunities, land and credit. They have to be made aware of the fact that they are being discriminated. If they have a say in the decision making in the family as well as in the community and the state, we might come to a stage when women have gender equality.

What has been the role of state in trying to improve the lot of women and empower them in India?

⁷ Understanding the Indian Women Today: Problems and Challenges, Indian Publishers distributors, Delhi, Ruhela, Saryu (ed) (1999)

The Constitution clearly spells the measures for gender equality and protection of women. Article 14 provides for the equal rights to all in political, economic and social affairs. Article 15 prohibits any discrimination. Article 16 and 39 provide for equal opportunity, as well as, for equal pay for equal work, irrespective of sex. Article 42 directs the government to make working conditions humane. Fundamental duties call upon the citizens to adopt practices that uphold the dignity of women. Amendment 73rd and 74th gave atleast one-third reservation to women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Municipalities⁸.

Institutional Mechanism has been created for Women Empowerment Programme. Action for implementation of this policy entailed measures to eradicate illiteracy among women. Coupled with efforts towards adult and non-formal education has helped to increase the female literacy from 7.93% in 1951 to 65.46% in 2011. National literacy mission was another step towards eradication of illiteracy in the age group of 15-35 years of age. Removal of illiteracy will lead to opening of other avenues of development and expansion of economic opportunities.

⁸ 'Transformative Politics Dimensions of Women's Participation in Panchayati Raj'. Indian Journal of Gender Studies. Vol-5 (No.-1), Jan-June 1998. Sharma, Kumnd (1998)

Economic self-reliance and independence is a key to empowerment. Government programmes for due development of women began as early as in 1954, but actual participation of women in mainstream economic activities began only in 1974 with the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India. Actions taken to Empower Women:

- 1) Setting up of National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in informal sectors.
- 2) Formulation of National Perspective Plan for Women.
- 3) Support to Employment Programmes for Women.
- 4) Network of State Level Women's Development
- 5) Swayamsidha Programme

National Policy on Empowerment of Women (2001) Government announced National Policy for the empowerment of the women in 2001, which lays down certain objectives and specific prescriptions to achieve these objectives. Formulation of this policy is an important step as it tries to make the legal and judicial system more responsive and gender sensitive to women's need. It talks of reorientation of the developmental programmes, so that they are female friendly. It seeks to strengthen the old credit mechanism and create new ones, so that women can have

access to credit. As 46% of women are still illiterate, it calls for special measures to universalize education, eradicate illiteracy and creates a gender sensitive education system and develops vocational and technical skills of women. It also talks of providing a comprehensive and quality of health care for women. Year 2001 was declared as year for Women Empowerment.

As far as specific measures are concerned, special programmes to provide education have been taken. National Policy of Education (1986) talks about education as an agent of basic change in the status of women. Capacity building of rural and poor women could take place. It also identifies the sections like electronics, information technology, agro industry and textiles where women can play a larger role. After declaring the year 2001 as Women's Empowerment Year, with a focus on achieving the vision in the new century, of a Nation, where women are equal partners with men, many schemes like 'Swashakti' and 'Stree Shakti' for women's empowerment 'Swayam Sidha' a micro credit programme, 'Balika Samrudhi Yojana' for the girl child, 'Swadhar' for widows, destitute women, women prisoners and migrant women, were launched.

Indian State has also made many laws to tackle various social ills that women have to face. The Dowry Prohibition Act has been in force for four decades. They have been given the right to inherit their father's property.

Pre Natal Diagnostic Test was passed in 1996, so that female foeticide could be checked. Government has also enacted protection of women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 and the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013 was enacted by the Parliament of India to make the laws related to crime against women more stringent and deterrent.

Though efforts have been made to address the problems faced by women both in cities and rural areas, but when it comes to their empowerment in strategic areas like participation in decision making process, not much has been done⁹. Women are discouraged from participation in political activity with the result that their presence in Politics is negligible. Not that they lack administration acumen or are deficient in any manner in political abilities or legislative skills. Despite their low percentage in Parliament and state legislatures, they have discharged their duties with as much commitment and dedication as their male colleagues. After the 73rd and 74th amendment, Indian women at the grass root level proved that they can emerge as leaders and fighters provided opportunity is made available to them. They face multiple challenges and with passage of time, are better able to handle various problems that crop up off and on. Inspite of all this, their representation in national and State legislatures have

never even touched ten percent mark. The efforts to give them one third representation in parliament and State legislature have come to a naught, so far¹⁰.

Women's Resonance Bill or the Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill, which proposes to reserve 33 percent of all seats in the Lower House of Parliament of India, the Lok Sabha and in all State Legislative Assemblies for women has not yet been approved by the outgoing Lok Sabha.

There is an urgent need for empowerment of women both politically and administratively by providing the thirty three percent reservations for women in legislatures and jobs in government and in Public Sector Undertakings, so that they can play an effective role in decision making process. Unless women are encouraged to participate effectively in body politics, through empowerment, sustainability of composite development of the country shall remain a distant dream. Also, there is need for a change in the social attitudes. The biases against women are too deeply entrenched in the Indian Society to be overcome by state policy in a short period of time. The process of empowerment of women has to emphasise on development of all aspects

⁹ Women's development: Problems and Prospects, APH Publishing Corporation, New Delhi. Aleem, Shamur (ed)-(1996)

¹⁰Some Strategic efforts Towards the Sashi -2000 Empowerment of Women, University News, Vol. 40 (No.-V), Feb-2002. Vashistha K.C. and Malik Some Strategic efforts Towards the Sashi -2000

of her life but it can't be done without the active help of all the sections of society.

We have a long way to go, but we will get there someday. We shall overcome.

- (5) Vashistha K.C. and Malik Sashi (2002). Some Strategic efforts Towards the Empowerment of Women, University News, Vol. 40 (No.-V), Feb-2002.

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