

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Women have always been and always shall be an integral and essential part of society irrespective of the nature and form of society. The status of women in India has been eventful one, as it has seen many ups and downs. In Vedic era women were worshipped as goddesses. In the Muslim era and British regime they were treated as slaves. After independence women education became an acceptable part of society. Since Independence many social reformers namely Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu worked on changing the situation of women in the society. The constitution of India provided for equality between men and women. Any form of sex-based prejudice is outlawed. In fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State policy of constitution expressed desirability of providing equal chance to women in every field. In the present paper an attempt was made to analyze the status of women empowerment in India and it was concluded that Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient to achieve this goal. In order to eliminate gender discrimination and provide women the entire opportunity to make their own decisions and participate responsibly in society's social, political, and economic affairs, society must take the initiative.

Keywords: Women, Empowerment, Policies, Status, Vedic

INTRODUCTION

The word or term 'women' doesn't need any titular description. One may describe 'women' as an adult female in human race, a wife, a sister, a female sex. Women have always been an integral part of the society, irrespective of its nature. Women have remained cloistered and confined within the four walls of home and often dismissed as

second or weaker sex (Mittal, 1995). The reality withstanding they hardly get what is due to them. Women who constitute half of the humanity for centuries have been suppressed, oppressed and treated as subordinates not equal to men in various fields. They did not have voice in decision making in the family. We may think these are all past incidents but truth is such thoughts still exist in some parts of society even today.

We celebrate women's day now days, but it should not be celebrated only to celebrate women in our life but they should emphasize on their security and strong upbringing. They are not anymore limited to cooking and cleaning at home but we see women excelling in every field like journalism, teaching, politics and even in armed forces. Today is the era of women empowerment and empowering women actually means strengthening them to confront family, community, caste and biases working within the Government departments. This inevitable confrontation ensures their full participation in every aspect of social and national development. In political process women are nowhere near to being full and equal participation in public policy. Today Government is making efforts to promote girl child education and eradicating female feticide from the society. Many schemes have been launched ever since, but till they are executed at ground level with sincerity the results will take a long time. It is important that women should be given due respect to make the country prosper and that will not happen till both man and woman does not give proper respect and accept that status of women.

It is also important to note how most of the strata defines empowerment. It has been observed that most of the politicians, social activists and learned strata of society see empowerment as only answer to oppression, exploitation or injustice to women. Empowerment is not restricted to raising the voice for women subjected to oppression but providing opportunity, strengthening their voice, and giving them platform to express their ideas along with imparting responsibility and accountability for taking decisions and taking risks. This is only possible through lots of training, social networking and other unusual methods. From personal perspective empowerment is a feeling that triggers the emotional

energy to accomplish one's objective and from institutional perspective it is the process of setting the right environment and structure for an individual to achieve the desired goal.

While we discuss about definitions and processes to empower the woman, we also need to understand it requires change in mindset of whole generation. While new generation can be educated about the empowerment it is a tough task to change the thoughts and mindset of older generation who are responsible of making decisions in the society.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Mittal (1995) 'Women Power in India' describes the dual role of women in society. The imperative need is to provide equality on status, role and position keeping in view the constitutional directives. It is essential to make research in the status, position and role of women from historical, cultural and economic perspective.

Baral (1990) 'Gender Politics: A study of socio-economic condition and political participation of working women of Orissa' deals with the role and status of women before and after independence. He also describes the big disparity in the status of a single woman.

Taloh (2016) studied women and related laws in India. Also discussed the various types of violence against women and found that violence against women remains unreported. Fear and stigma often prevents women from reporting incidents of violence or seeking assistance. The author also described the various laws related with women issues. Patriarchal society has always considered woman as weaker section or inferior section of society.

Singh & Singh (2020) observed that there is urgent need of reassessing India's affirmative action's, giving fresh impetus on empowering girls and women not only through conventional education but also hand holding for skill acquisition and providing them with equitable economic opportunity with providing them with fitting medical and healthcare.

Sobha (2021) Women's empowerment is fundamentally the process of improving the status of traditionally underprivileged women in society on the economic, social, and political fronts. It entails protecting them from all sorts of assault. Building a societal and political climate where women can live freely from the threat of oppression is a key component of women's empowerment. Nearly half of the world's population is made up of women, however India has a disproportionately low female population compared to its male population. There are some regions where they are not treated equally to males in terms of their social position. Women in Western nations enjoy the same rights and status as men in all spheres of life. However, discrimination and limitations based on gender continue to exist in India.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To know the status of women before Independence and after independence
2. To study the provisions for women incorporated under Indian Constitution.
3. To give suggestions to enhance the promptness of women empowerment

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the research work secondary sources have been used. In this study historical as well as analytical methods have been deployed. Historical method has been used to study the facts which led to the inclusion of women status in India. Analytical methods have been used to know the percentage of women share in India. The secondary sources comprise of information obtained from books, journals, newspapers and research articles.

DISCUSSION

PRE - INDEPENDENCE

The status of women in India has had many ups and downs, making it a tumultuous one. In any society, the status of woman invariable depends on the social traditions, norms and customs. The position of the woman in a particular society is one of the primary criteria to judge its culture and greatness. In Greek philosophy, the position of woman was very

pitiable. Plato held the woman inferior to man and natural companion is man only. According to Aristotle, women were considered as less complete, less courageous and made society, world over as man dominated. It was in Greek philosophy to treat woman as second grade citizen. During medieval period, Christianity had full control on politics and religion. Women never got a place of equality in the society. It is believed that woman is devil's gate and she destroys God's image in man.

Tennyson (1847) also says that woman is fit only for home life. 'Sword is for man and the needle for woman.' He further states that man is born to command and woman to obey those commands. Hinduism has undergone various phases reflecting various attitudes towards women. During the Vedic period, women occupied an important place in the society. According to Vedas all high avenues of learning appear to be wide open to women (Upadhaya, 1974). Vedas treated woman as Goddess. Females were as free as their male counterparts to take opportunities in society. Education was equally open for both the sexes as they both had to undergo the 'Upnayan sanskar' i.e. the rituals to undergo school education (Hagaragi, 2012). During the time of Atharveda the status of woman was equal to that of man in family affairs (Singh, 1936). During Upanishadic period there appear to be relative downfall in the position of women. The birth of girl was considered to be cause of suffering and hardship. Their right to choose bridegroom by themselves was curtailed. The privileges accorded to them were also curtailed to great extent. In the epic period, women were deprived of their Vedic privileges. The basic right to education was also taken away from them (Kapadia, 1966). In Smriti period women were considered as means of recreation and pleasure. Manu, a great scholar stated, 'woman is a low creature. It is the nature of women to seduce men in this world, and for that reason wise is never in the company of female'. A woman should never think of independence from the father, the husband or the son because by doing so she will make both the families comfortable.

In Buddhism the position of woman was also not so good. The saints were against the entry of the women in the Sangh. The Buddha does not seem to have had a very high opinion of women. No widow was expected to remain single in memory of her dead

husband. She could either marry or join the nunnery (Altekar, 1956). In Jainism, there is some faith and respect for woman as mother. Jains considered women as desirable and they married and multiplied. Some of them even thought very highly of women (Thomas, 1964). In Muslim age, woman status suffered a sharp decline. A Muslim woman cannot marry a non-Muslim, while Muslim male may marry not only Muslim women but also kithabias. Women were not allowed to enter in the mosque in the presence of men. In Sikhism the role of woman is different from that of other religions. Sikhism aims at removing blind traditions and dogmas. Dorothy Field remarks “The most notable social improvement was the emancipation of woman”. Many women found salvation through Guru’s teachings (Kaur, 2005). Guru Nanak pleaded for women’s complete rights. Sikhism preached the equality of human kind. This religion initiated a great struggle against the inequality and all other crimes meted out against women. Due to the impact of all Gurus’ teachings, the society began to see and realize the worth of women. Mata Bhag Kaur, Mata Sahib Kaur, to name a few took part in political activities and contributed a lot (Sikka, 1972).

In British regime women were looked down as “slave of slaves”. During that time many reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar fought for the upliftment of women status. Raja Ram Mohan Roy led to the abolition of sati practice under Governor General William Cavendish-Bentinck in 1829. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar took steps for the condition of widows which led to widow remarriage act of 1856 (Upadhaya, 1974). The All India Women’s education conference was held in Pune in 1927. At that time the freedom struggle was a people movement. Women in general were confined to their houses. In spite of those constraints a large number of women could be roused to jump to the freedom struggle against British rule (Baral, 1990). Dr. Annie Besant, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Sucheta Kriplani, Durgabai Deshmukh, Rani Jhansi, Captain Laxmi Sehgal took part in the freedom struggle. Sarojni Naidu, poet and a freedom fighter was the first Indian woman to become the President of Indian National Congress.

POST-INDEPENDENCE

Women's role for the development of our country is incredibly important. If we wish to make India a developed country, it is essential that each one around development of women should happen. The Constitution of India prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex and ensures equality to women along with them (Kaushik, 1993). The Fundamental Rights as guaranteed by Constitution tries to remove the inequalities which Indian women have suffered.

- Article 14 promises equality before law and equal protections by the laws.
- Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth and also provides that the state may make special provisions for women and children (Desai, 2001)
- Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity in public appointments
- Article 21 guarantees the right to personal life and personal liberty
- Article 23 prohibits traffic in human beings, beggar and other form of forced labour (Kaur, 2005)
- Article 32 guarantees the right to seek judicial remedy for violation of fundamental rights.
- Article 39 directs the state to adopt a policy of equal pay for equal work for both men and women.

Besides these Fundamental Rights, The Directive Principle of Indian Constitution under Article 51(A) also imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. The Indian Constitution provides Fundamental Rights to all citizens of India. The introduction of universal adult franchise has created favorable situations for women participation in politics. That is why a growing number of women were able to come to the forefront at various levels. Some of them were appointed as Governor and Chief Minister of the states. India had a woman Prime Minister from 1966 to 1977 and from 1980 to 1984. An Indian woman Vijay Laxmi acted as the president of General Assembly of UNO (Forbes, 1996). But

despite the legal fiction equal status of women with men, the position of women remained subordinate in reality.

VARIOUS LEGISLATIVE MEASURES FOR UPLIFTMENT OF WOMEN STATUS

Apart from these Constitution provisions, numerous laws were enacted, which attempted to give life to these provisions and make gender equality a reality.

The Immoral Traffic (prevention) Act 1956, The Dowry Prohibition Act 1961, Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act 1971, Equal Remuneration Act 1976, Child Marriage Restraint Act 1986, Representation of Women(prohibition) Act 1986, The Commission of Sati(prevention) Act 1987, Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technique(Regulation and Prevention of measures) Act 1994, The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001) (Chandra, 2011), The Domestic Violence against Women and Prevention Bill (2001), The Protection of Children from Sexual offenders Act 2012 (Taloh, 2016), The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006, The Protection of Women against Sexual Harassment at workplace 2007. The main aim of National policy is to bring about the advancement and empowerment of women. The laws implemented by the Government of India have direct and indirect bearing on the status of women. The Government has reviewed and amended these acts from time to time to take care of the interests of women in the changing situations and societal demands.

WELFARE SCHEMES

The government periodically implements a variety of welfare programmes to empower women.

- Training for Employment Programme 1987
- Mahila Samridhi Yojna 1993
- The Rashtriya Mahila Kosh 1992-93
- Indira Mahila Yojna 1995

- DWACRA plan 1997
- Balika Samriddhi Yojna 1997

On 12th July 2001, the Mahila Samridhi Yojna and Indira Mahila Yojna are merged into the integrated self-help group programmes i.e. Swayam Siddha. Despite various schemes launched by the Government and increase the status of few women, does not conclude the empowerment of women as a full. In addition to guaranteeing women's equality, the constitution gives the state the authority to enact laws that positively discriminate in favour of women.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIAN SOCIETY

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional and self-generating process which involves the advancement and empowerment of women in three fields; social, economic and political. Political power is that the strongest tool of empowerment. It enables the person to realize the required end. With the assistance of this power social and economic inequality and injustice shall be removed but this can be possible only when women participate actively in politics. The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act 1992, provided for regular election to PRIs, incorporated 11th Schedule in the Constitution with elaborate powers and made provision for reservation of seats as well as offices for SCs, OBs and Women.

It gives an opportunity to empower the women to actively participate in the decision making process in villages. Despite the 73rd and 74th Amendment 1993 giving 33% reservation to women, very few of them came forward and accept the challenges. Out of which only 2% were the commoners. In spite of 33 percent reservation of women in Panchayati Raj nearly 31 percent seats are occupied by the women that too who are either relatives of MLAs or former leaders (Nagaraj, 2011). Even if a woman is elected to a local body she still remains a puppet of her husband or organization. In reality it is not the elected woman who takes decision on her own but it is her husband or father who remains the real decision maker. If we analyze the status of women in India we see the pathetic situation. Around 70% women in India are victim of domestic violence. A crime is

committed against women every 3 minutes. Every 29 minutes someone is raped somewhere, every 25 minutes a molestation takes place. Every 40 minutes a woman is kidnapped. According to the United Nations, sex ratio is defined as the number of males per 100 females. Sex ratio of India is 108 males per 100 females in 2020. It means that India has 924 females per 1000 males. India has 48.04% female population compared to 51.96% male population. Amnesty International has recognized that Indian women are regularly raped in jail cells. Even a UNO report has pointed out that India has the highest number of custodial rape by men in position of power. During 17th Lok Sabha had 78 women parliamentarians. But equal participation is still far away. There are 8000 plus candidates that contested the Lok Sabha election, of which only 700 were women. Seventy eight of these women have been elected to the Parliament, a slight increase from 2014 polls. Earlier this number was Sixty two. The proportion of women representatives in the Parliament, which is abysmally low at 14.36%, is in stark contrast to India's population, which is 48% female according to the most recent census.

WOMEN EMPOWERED?

Looking and analyzing all the laws and acts do we really see the women are empowered? It would be wrong to say that these laws did not help but the level we wanted them to achieve is still not up to the mark. Domestic violence still on increase, rapes, molestation and kidnappings still exist. We need to see beyond laws and acts. Respect for woman and their security should be of prime concern. More than laws the execution of laws should be strict. Offenders should be given rigorous punishment which should send a strict and clear message to all strata of people. Even a small offence against women should be strictly punished. Every senior position should have woman reservation. It should be taught from very early age that having a female superior should not be an ego concern. What we have not achieved in last seventy years cannot be achieved overnight but a serious consideration should be done in finding what could not be achieved, why it could not be achieved? Making new laws without finding flaws and not being serious about execution would meet the same results as earlier.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following measures can be taken into consideration for further action agenda on measuring women's empowerment:

- Women should not be used only as votes but to help bring about change to the present political structure.
- Women should build the confidence in themselves to achieve the goal of empowerment be it social, economic and political.
- Each and every woman has a potential in her. Woman should be motivated to bring their personalities. There is essential to develop enthusiasm among the woman leader.
- Government and Political parties should encourage woman's participation in Politics and Law making.
- Non-Government organizations also can play an important role in creating awareness among the women. To bring social awareness, women organizations should work more actively.
- Setting up of special cells in the Government for the co-ordination of implementation of the plans made for women by different ministries.
- Woman's cell in police stations, Mahilla courts, Legal Aid centers be strengthened and expanded to eliminate violence.
- There is need to take appropriate steps for providing women and girls access to education, health, equal opportunities for participation in social and political sector.
- Men should realize the power of women and women should also realize their power too on what they can do for themselves and nation.
- Gender equality should be base for development process.
- Equal access to participation and decision making of women in social political life of the nation
- The abolition of all forms of violence, including discrimination, against women and young girls.

- Illiteracy creates a barrier to the realization of the constitutional goals of justice and Equality of status and opportunity between men and women. It is essential that women should enjoy the similar rights and responsibilities along with their male counterparts.
- Educational Institutions must include gender sensitivity instructions to their curriculum.

We have talked much about women empowerment but how shall it be achieved? Empowering women actually means strengthening them to confront family, community, caste and biases working within the Government departments. In political process women are nowhere near to being full and equal participation in public policy. Today Government is making efforts to promote girl child education and eradicating female feticide from the society. Many schemes have been launched ever since, but till they are executed at ground level with sincerity the results will take a long time. It is important that women should be given due respect to make the country prosper and that will not happen till both man and woman does not give proper respect and accept that status of women.

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