

“Women Empowerment in the Context of Feminism & Ecofeminism”-A Rational Approach

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Abstract: *The Indian Constitution conceptually includes justice and equality as salient features towards welfare of the society. Women are considered to be the pillars of a community as they contribute an integral part in social, political, cultural and economic position in the present generation. The main reason for obstruction in empowerment of women in India can be justified as a lack of educational facilities along with the denial of basic human rights as well as political power since later Vedic period, which gradually percolated through the forthcoming centuries. The term “Empowerment” signify needs and right dimensions, which can be elaborated as translation of one’s needs into rights. The sense of empowerment essentially differs in Indian and Western cultures in as much as the latter culture predominantly depends on technological advancements, where as the former depends mostly upon domestic and agricultural support to the family. In spite of this fact, they are often deprived of any economic productivity. This inequality and gender biasness needs to be justified from feminist and ecofeminist approaches. Francoise d’Eaubonne introduced the term “Ecofeminism” in her book de Feminism ou da Nort. Ecofeminism originated in post modernism period. It links exploitation and domination of women with nature and argues for liberation of both. In the aspect of ecofeminism, women are affected by world environmental system.*

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Indian constitution believes in justice and equality for all categories of people. Democratic values depend on justice and equal rights of men and women. Democratic countries face the challenges of discrepancy between rich and poor, men and women. In order to enhance democratic values, decentralisation of power is mandatory. This becomes possible when gender inequalities and power are eradicated from the society. It not only requires meaningful participation of poor people, women of different religious groups in social, political and economical activity programmes but measures taken by Government and NGO’s for women in India as well as third world countries.

The term ‘Empowerment’ means upliftment of any group or communities’ social, economical, cultural and political status. In a word, empowerment covers all spheres of life. State and non-government organisations should provide equal opportunities to all categories of people of the society. Hence ‘Empowerment’ can be translated as “needs” and “right dimensions”. Material resources are to be provided to fulfil the needs and rights of deprived and oppressed women. This empowerment process should be implemented in micro and macro levels. In macro level, state and other organisations frame the policies of opportunities for the materialisation of empowerment. Individual skills, demands and their socio-economic perspectives are not reflected in those macro level, institutional policies. Empowerment policies should include individual problems to be satisfied at micro levels so that the potentialities and capabilities of individual woman can be considered and implemented accordingly. Of late, there are so many projects and policies that are launched to empower women, irrespective of caste, race and religion. Empowerment should have its true meaning from a global perspective.

Women of 21st century have taken a prestigious role in various aspects of socio-economic and political part of day to day life. Joti Sekhon has mentioned that in ‘Action India’, which is an empowerment programme initiated since 1974. The main purpose of this programme was “to enable the poor

to demand their rights as citizens, and collectively struggle against the exploitation and injustice inherent in a class, caste and society”. They started to overlook the supply of the fundamental amenities like water supply, electricity service etc. After that, Action India women started to form autonomous group of women. These groups began to produce crochet products and sold it directly to the market without any intervention of broker. Gradually they started health awareness and basic education programmes. Action India Women group empowered women by giving training to girls and women from beasties. They emphasized upon women’s health programme. Women’s health largely depends upon socio-economic condition of the family. In lower middle class groups, women mostly suffer from malnutrition and related diseases due to poor livelihood. They are not conscious about their rights and basic needs. Action Women movement empowered women by creating health awareness. Often women are abused by their male partners and they face domestic violence in various ways. Through these various awareness projects, women were made more conscious regarding control of their reproductive health by having a healthy relationship with their husband. Action women group also supplied necessary herbal medicines and diagnostic help if they needed. These groups also emphasized on single woman, single mother’s problem, their economic independence and legal protection. As women are not often conscious about various interpretation of laws, they are also confined in different religious norms. So women’s laws and social changes were formed to protect their rights. They introduced Mahila Panchayets which looked after or sought out the conflict of family problems y resolving it socially. Where women faced domestic violence, they provided legal advice and support and made them conscious about women’s rights.

Mahila Panchayets faced various types of problems like poverty, abuse, divorce, bigamy, child custody etc. Mostly, Panchayets successfully resolved the cases and organised programmes against child marriage, sexual abuse etc. Women who belonged to lower middle class or slum

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dwellers, engaged themselves in domestic help, small construction labour, small vendors etc. "Women's Economic Activity for Empowerment" was launched by Action India Women Movement. Under this project, loan was granted for self-employment of single women. This scheme enhanced the economic empowerment of women and provided an opportunity to enhance their productive skill or capabilities. So they were able to play an important part in their families and live a prestigious life. In our society, single women who are divorced or are widows, do not live alone. They usually live with their children, parents and brothers. They have to perform family responsibilities inspite of all obstacles and repay their loan by doing all economic activities gracefully. Hence Action India Women Empowerment Programme empowered women from socio-economic, legal and political perspectives. It is considered as a micro level project as because Action India women workers did their campaign door to door, realising each individuals problem and resolving them accordingly.

Action India Women foundation started Nani Sabalas and Choti Sabalas. The main purpose of these projects was to protest child marriage and empower child education. They provided many informal child education programmes and encouraged them to take technical fields like sewing or to explore various cultural potentialities. This organisation was able to conceive the flat outcome of early marriage to parents and grandparents. In 1997, they started considering India Government policies and different Institutional projects to empower women. These policies and projects are macro level as because they are applicable to all categories of women. Empowerment means improvement of all status of society like the lower caste, tribal women and women from different religious background. India government has schematised various plans and programs for the participation of women in grass root political organisations like panchayat, village council etc and to create a self employed group.

The term empowerment needs to be justified from a feministic and eco feministic perspective. The word 'Feminism' stands for socio-economic justice for women and also represents gender equality and liberation. The term also signifies that they should be treated as human being and not only as women and their rights need to be justified as human rights. Feminism emphasizes active participation and various activities including economic independence. It means that women must have their choice about their lifestyle and reproductive potentialities. Actually feminism is an approach to deal with the challenges faced by woman in her everyday life. Women are not conscious about their health, primary needs and rights. They often have to face domestic violence and get fewer wages than males, being unaware about their feminist resource. Even Government, police do not have a prominent role and sufficient legal provision against domestic violence. Nowadays, there are several organisations and NGOs who are arranging shelter for battered women, women who are tortured or abused. These organisations are trying to create job opportunities for these women along with legal advice and protection. Its not a theory which wants to create a man hating society. Feminism does not stand for a narrow minded perspective. On the contrary, it virtually speaks for gender equality, socio-economic aspects as well

as political justice for all section of women. Feminist approach highlights the discrepancy between a boy and a girl child, which initiates from a family that is the primary unit of the society. It's a call for a change of the psychological mindset of youth and society as well as the state to consider women as human being and provide them equal status and opportunities to reveal their potentialities. Feminism is not a theory, but it's practical aspect is pertinent to build a sustainable society.

Ecofeminist approach conjoined the environmental crisis and women movement. Eco-feminism brings together elements of feminist and green movement, while at the same time, offers a challenge to both. "It takes from the green movement the concern about the impact of human activities on the non human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gender inways that subordinates exploit and oppress women".(Mellor et.al 1997). Ecological imbalance and environmental crisis affects women mostly as because they are close to nature than men. Mellor considered that environmental crisis affected women more than men. Collard and Contrucci highlighted women's capabilities to bear children, hence they are related to nature. Eco-feminism may be conceptualised from two different perspectives known as spiritual ecofeminism and material ecofeminism. According to spiritual ecofeminism, male dominated society created ecological imbalance. Male oriented structure of a society is the fundamental reason of women exploitation, on the contrary the concept of material approach viewed that women have to bear a lot of work load than men. This perspective viewed ecofeminism as women oppression culturally and historically. Both of these versions of ecofeminism turns into essentialism. Knapp thought that ecofeminism encourage the difference between men and women which leads to women's subordination and labelled them as women. This theory believes in dualistic difference between sex and gender. Feminism believes in economic independence as well as their participation in various social and political organisation. In this context, ecofeminist approach is something different, as this theory emphasize upon nature and women's close connection and they categorised this connection historically, conceptually and epistemologically from eight different perspectives.

The domination of women and nature has its roots in patriarchal structure of the society. This structure started with the invasion of Indo-European countries. The original structure of the society was matrilineal. Griffin, Plumwood and other philosophers thought that ancient Greek rationalistic philosophy is also responsible for the patriarchal structure of the society. Conceptual explanation of ecofeminism has reflected in value dualism. Post modernists suggested that all spheres of knowledge were dominated by "reason". Accordingly, mind, male, reason, human being has prestigious position or higher value than body, female, emotion and nature. This format of clearcut distinction between two concepts formed patriarchal structure. Jhuma Chakraborty suggested that post modernists opposed this format of top down discrimination. They have argued against the domination of mind, human, reasons, male. They questioned about the two valued concepts. This patriarchal structure of the society maintains and justifies their domination and exploitation of nature and women

simultaneously. This conceptual framework formed an idea of supremacy.

There is another aspect of conceptual framework. Cheney, Sallen and other thinkers focussed on socio-psychological factors which conjoined women to nature rather than man. In this context, Sallen said that “paradigms that are uncritically oriented to the dominant western masculine forms of experiencing the world : the analytic, non-related, delightfully called objective or scientific approaches”. The closed connection between women and nature may be visualised empirically. Vandana Shiva, Sallah, Caldecott propagated this empirical connection, as because women and their children are badly affected by different pollutants. Food, medicines, water are not adequately provided to pregnant women, although they have to bear huge responsibilities and contribute a lot to their families. Another aspect of patriarchal structure is tremendous misuse of animals for hunting, farming and meat eating etc. The motto of ecofeminism is to form a society which is not gender biased and considers women and nature as their complimentary part of life.

Eco feminism is often coined as highlighting the worship of goddess and they considered women as prakriti (the mother of the world). They argued against the degradation of women in literature, movies, art and every other spheres of life. Patrick Murphy advocated the ecofeministic claim and said that “a two-pronged rape and domination of the earth and the women living on it”. This theory advocates against the language that describes women and nature by using such “fertile soil”, “virgin timber”.

Now what is the relation between ecofeminism and deep ecology? Arne Naess advocated for deep ecology. He recognised ecofeminist movement as shallow ecology, which basically considered problems with non human entities. They discussed particular issues in global warming, the death of birds etc and they tried to provide their solution. Deep ecologists thought that men are integral part of nature, hence they do not believe in dualism between men and nature. It maintains that nature has its intrinsic value. They advocated for tremendous misuse of natural resources and unwanted interference of human beings and nature. They said that the individuals awareness is a pertinent factor to change social structure and the misuse of nature. But they ignored patriarched structure of the society and economic, political discrimination as an obstruction of eco-socio structural movement. Deep ecologists are criticized by ecofeminist thoughts as because they ignored patriarchal structure of the society and the facts that nature and women are interlinked with each other. Ecofeminist approach is environmental crisis interconnected with oppression of women. Christine J. Cuomo has cited the difference between deep ecology and eco feminism. “The differences between the two are not superficial and they mark serious differences concerning the basics of ethics, contextualisation of ethical issues and the interrelationship of ethical issues seeming confined to the human sphere with those (deep ecology) that obviously involve non human entities”. Ecofeminism has some fundamental characteristics which was considered by Jhuma Chakraborty in her Essay “Development, Nature and Women”. The basic tenets of ecofeminism is nature and

women’s close relation to argue against the patriarchal structure of our society. They questioned against essentialism and considered pluralism as their method of analysis. They wanted to formulate an appropriate theory, language and practice, which are integral part of each other. The motto of political movement is to establish peace among human and non-human being and their method is non-violence. Victoria Dawn considered ecofeminism as a method of glorifying women. Davion thought ecofeminism does not include feministic perspective of feministic knowledge.

Ecofeministic Movement

Ecofeminism is not a theory, it needs a practical application. In order to materialise ecofeminist concepts, campaigns, policies and movement are required. One of the famous movement is Indian Chipko Movement which was held in 1970. Farmers were protesting against deforestation and they wanted to convince the necessity of local plants. At that time, forest vegetation was converted into commercial eucalyptus, as a result ecological imbalance was initiated. Chipko movement was dominated by females and it represented the symbolic meaning of ecofeminism. According to Vandana Shiva, this movement was not only an environmental movement but it also had social and political impact. This movement was also an example of non-violence movement inspired by Gandhian political ideology. Chipko Movement was an ecofeminist movement and it revealed that patriarchy is not appropriate in Indian culture. Indian women mostly played an important role in domestic and agricultural field. Hence modernised and industrialisation oriented development programme has negatively affected women in third world countries. Women and environment were neglected by these modernisation schemes. As a result of it, year 1975 was declared as international year of woman. Rio de Janeiro conference, held in 1992 approved ‘chapter 24’ and ‘agenda 21’. This agenda recognised the necessity of women’s economic independence and other requirements like health care, education etc. Actually this agenda did not provide a paradigm structure of development, it signified that if women do not play a pertinent role in development process, then the process would not become sustainable. The active and distinctive role of women in social, political and economic institutions enhanced the concept of empowerment of women. This principles were reflected in Agenda 21 and Chapter 24. Those motto were labelled as ‘Global action for women towards sustainable and equitable development’. Hence sustainable development requires to combat with ecological crisis as well as women empowerment process. Eco feministic approach highlighted socio-economic supremacy of men in our patriarched society and showed its concern about women’s distinguished role to prevent degradation of environment and natural resources.

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