

Position and Need of Women Empowerment in India

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“There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only wing.”

Swami Vivekananda

1. Introduction

The status of women in India has been progressing subject to the changes in the legislature over the past few years. From ancient time to present the promotion of equality for women by many reformers has been eventful in India and is also believed that women enjoyed equal status with men in all walks of life. From the words of patanjali and Katayana is believed that women were educated in the early Vedic period. Rig Veda elucidate that women got married at matured age and were free to choose their husbands. Scriptures of Rig Veda and Upanishad mention the existence of women sages and seers in those periods. It is also known from the great Tamil Literature Silapathikham that Kannaki had instigated the king Pandian for justice. It is believed that women enjoyed equal status and rights even during the early Vedic period. Throughout the Vedic period women were given a status equal to men to participate in sacrificial rites, to undergo the investiture ceremony and to be man's equal in upholding 'dharma'. Vedic era has witnessed equal rights for women in the field of education, religion, politics, property and inheritance. However, later on approximately during 500 B. C, the status of women began to decline. Around sixth century, the practices of child marriages is believed to have started in India.

The position of women in the society gradually weakened during the medieval period. It was considered the worst period in the history. During this period society had become patriarchal and men women difference was evident. Man-Woman role was decided on the basis of sex. Women were consigned inside the four walls of home. Later on Sati, child marriage and on widow remarriages became part of social life in India. In some part of India, the Devadasi or the temple women were sexually exploited. Polygamy was widely practised especially among Hindu Kashatriya rules. Queen Durgavati ruled for fifteen years before she lost her life in a battle with Mughal emperor Akbar's general Asaf Khan in 1564. Chand Bibi defended Ahmednagar against the mightily Mughal forces of Akbar. Jahangir's wife Nure Jahan effectively wielded the imperial power and was recognized as the real force behind the Mughal throne Shivaji's mother, Jijabai was deputed queen regent, because of her ability as a warrior and administrator. In south India, many women administered villages, divisions, towns and heralded social and religious institutions. The Bhakti cult tried to restore women and questioned some of the forms of

oppression. Mirabai, a female saint poet was one of the most important personalities in Bhakti movement. Some other female saints include Akkama Devi, Rani Janabai, and Lal Dev Bhakti sects within Hinduism such as the Mahanubhab, Varkari and many other were principle movements within the Hindu fold to openly advocate social justice and equality between men and women. JahanAra Bagum and Princess Zebunnisa were well known poetesses and they also influenced the ruling administration. Gurus of Sikhs also preached the messages of equality between men and women by advocating assemblies.

During the modern period a number of social reformers felt the need to emancipate women and tried to establish a justified place for them in the family and society. The thinkers and social reformers realized that unless the condition of 50% of Indian population is improved Indian society cannot improve. In this era, the demographic factors, industrialization, organization and advancement of knowledge have brought about radical changes in the basic institution like family and are also affecting the economic security and social status of women. In the beginning the Britishers adopted passive "non-interference" policy towards personal status of Women. However, the impact of Western civilization through British rule gave an impetus to claim equal status and rights by the Indian women.

Sincere efforts were made by eminent scholars, judges and social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Ray, Dwarkanatha Tagore, Kesava Chandra Sen, Eshwara Chandra Vidyasagar, etc, to improve the status of Indian women. As a result of the efforts of the social reformers and public up surge some reformative laws like Hindu Widows remarriage Act 1856, the Abolition of sati Act, [1929] The Widow Remarriage [1858], Female infanticide Act, [1870], The civil Marriage Act [1873], the Married Women property Act [1874] The age consent Act [1881] the child Marriage Act [1992] were passed by the British Govt. the family and social status of Women also improved during the British period because of female education and raise in the age of Marriage. In 1946, the Hindu Women's Right of separate Residence and maintenance Act 1946 was passed. To improve the pathetic status of Widow, the Hindu Women Right of property Act was passed in the year 1937. Entrance of Dr. Anne Besant in the Indian political scene in the year 1914, marked the dawn for Women's resurgence. Gandhi ji call for Women's participation in the freedom struggle brought out the Indian Women from the seclusion in their houses. Many Women

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leaders emerged during the freedom struggle Sarojini Naidu, Durgabai Desh Mukh, Aruna Asaf Ali etc. are some of the prominent personalities to mention. The Government of India Act 1935 provided franchise and civil service under the crown for the women.

After Independence in 1947, Government of India went for socio, economic transformation of the country and the framers of the constitution realized the unequal status of women and assured that women should get equal rights. The fundamental rights enshrined in Article 14, 15 and 16 guarantees the principle of equality before law, equality of sexes and equal opportunities in all walks of life. Effective steps were taken to improve the status and position of Women by envisaging equality before law and equal protection of laws in the constitution of India. There were nearly 13 Women members in the constituent Assembly which framed the constitution of India. The constitution of India has brought the Indian Women in to a new era clothed with all rights which men do. Special protection (Annexure 1.1) is also given to Women under fundamental Rights Directive principles of state policy also enumerate certain directives towards emancipation of Women. The government also enunciated numerous measures over the years for improving the status of women through its various commissions committee, namely the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act 1956, and Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act 1956, were passed only for the benefit of women and to raise the status of women. The Dowry prohibition Act, 1961, Maternity Benefit Act in 1961, the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, the Medical Termination of pregnancy Act, 1971, the Prevention of Immoral Traffic Act, 1986, the Indecent Representation of Women [prohibition] Act, 1986, the Commission of Sati [prevention] Act, 1987, the insertion of sections 376 A to D and section 498A in the Indian penal code are some of the Legislative measures to ensure dignity and social status of Hindu women.

However, while these constitutional and legislative measures were adopted to guarantee the legal equality to women, in practice the full impact of these progressive laws is yet to be perceived. Only few Indian women derived benefit from the new reformative and protective laws. Despite of constitutional guarantees of equality of sexes, equality of opportunity, the women continued to be victim of exploitation and discrimination. Even after six decades of independence the birth of a female child is regarded a curse and financial liability by some families. The practice of female infanticide is prevalent in many parts of the country. Currently also in extreme cases, 'Amniocentesis' test as a scientific technique is misused to deduct sex of foetus and subsequently getting rid of it, if found female foeticide. Even today she is not sent to school. School enrolment ratio for women is only 46 per cent Child marriage is still widely practised in rural areas. The old custom of purchasing of groom continues to plague the lives of young brides. There has been a constant rise in dowry deaths and bride burning in the country. In recent years not a day passes without a news paper carrying reports of bride burning or suicide committed by women for lack of sufficient dowry as is evident from media, articles and statements. It is a daily affair that in domestic sphere, innocent wife is beaten and humiliated but

in society she is advised by her well wishers to keep her misery under wraps. The helpless victims of domestic crimes are crippled under the social pressure but the helpless investing authorities and judiciary just watch it like a silent spectator because they get no complaints, to ignite the jurisdiction of investigation. The Hindu succession Act, 1956 provides equal share to daughter in parental property by and large still goes to son.

The position of women and their status in any society is an index of its civilization. Women are to be considered as equal partners in the process of development but, because of centuries of exploitation and subjugation, Indian women have remained at the receiving end. They have not been actively involved in the mainstream of development even though they represent equal proportions of the population and labour force. Primarily women are the means of survival for their families, but are generally unrecognized and undervalued being placed at the bottom of the pile. Though there have been cases of women predominance in different societies, it has been evidenced that no society in the world ever provided or provides women equal status with men. Men and women have been performing different roles, but aspects such as cultural expression, work and mobility, education, health, family size, political expression and social awareness etc. have changed the role of women considerably over years. Even in the traditional society women participation in various fields has been necessitated a changing image of women. The role and status of women change according to different environment, depending upon the culture factors, structural variables, economic and social development process and influence the science, technology and modernization.

The Government of India has adopted the National policy for the empowerment of Women on (20th March 2001.) The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its preamble. Fundamental rights, fundamental duties, and directive principles. The constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women, with in the frame work of democratic polity, our laws, development policies, plans and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. From the fifth five year plans (1974-1978) onwards there has been a marked shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development. In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognized as central issues in determining the status of women. The National Commission for women was set up by an act of parliament in 1991 to safeguard the right and legal entitlements of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendment (1993) of the constitution provides women for 1/3 of representation in local bodies, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels.

The main objective of this policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women and to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and to ensure their active participation in all spheres of life and activities. The theme and issues covered by the policy include judicial system, economic empowerment of women, social empowerment including health, education, check of

violence against women, their participation in decision making etc. The policy provided prescription under each of the above and calls upon different departments and ministries for coverage of their resources and actions. The policy also stressed the importance of earmarking allocations under the women's components plans and priorities need for gender budgeting. In order to meet these goals the policy suggests, Legal judicial system will be made responsive and gender sensitized to women's need especially in domestic violence and personal assault. New laws will be enacted and existing laws reviewed to ensure that justice is quick and the punishment meted out to the culprits is commensurate with the severity of the offence.

The Government is implementing various programmes, for the empowerment of women at the grass root level through the process of mobilization, organization, and awareness generation which would enhance the self confidence of women with in the house-hold and communities, and empower them to access resources from various available and new sources. Women empowerment through provision of laws of equal remuneration, property rights, one third reservation of seats for women in political bodies and even free education to girl child are some of the efforts being undertaken to improve women's status. Similarly, enactment of positive discrimination to counter the handicaps of female biological responsibilities and thus equate male and female workers. These efforts to empower women would be subsumed under the prevalent gender ideology, to appropriate women's property right as their dowry; women's political reservation would consist of their spokespersonship for the existing patriarchal hierarchies and absorption of female labour in the unorganized sector while being excluded from the formal sector.

During the past sixty seven years the strategy for women's economic up-liftment has kept on changing from time to time, based upon the experienced gained. Since women comprise the majority (65%) of the population below the poverty line and are very after in situations of extreme poverty, given the harsh realities of infra household and social discrimination, micro economic policies and poverty eradication programmes will specifically addressed the needs and problems of such women. The Twelfth Plan will endeavour to increase women's employ ability in the formal sector as well as their asset base. It will improve the conditions of self employed women. Focus will be on women's work force participation particularly in secondary and tertiary sectors, ensuring decent work for them and reaching out to women in agriculture and manufacturing financial inclusion, and extending land and property rights to women. Legal rights in themselves are not sufficient to determine social behavior. The need to exercise these rights must emerge from the community itself. Women must first be aware of their situation, that they are socially deprived, discriminated against and face violence specific to gender. Once people are sensitized to women's condition and women came to the forefront to articulate their interests, evolve rules and exercise their rights, gender concerns will emerge and form part of our social interests.

Education is the most potent tool for socio- economic mobility and a key instrument for building an equitable and

just society. Indian state is obliged to provide for free and compulsory education for women and children as depicted in the constitution of India Article -15 (3), 45 and 46. 10.5 Lakh women were covered until the end of the eleventh plan; 36.74 percent SC, 16.33 percent ST, 27.47 percent OBC, 9.13 percent Muslim and only 10.38 percent are women from the general categories under- "Sarva- Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)" the number of women teachers, especially in rural schools and remote inaccessible areas will be increased by providing enable work conditions for women teacher including transportation facilities and housing providing hotel facilities and scholarships for girls as well reducing the gender gap in secondary and higher education will be a focus area. For improving nutrition and Health status of women and children, government's initiatives are encouraging so far. It is vital to emphasize on women's reproductive health to adopt a life cycle approach towards women's survival overall health and well being. The Twelfth five Year Plan recognizes the gender dimensions of health problems and seeks to address issues of women's survival and health through a life cycle approach of the various health schemes which have been initiated by the government such as "Janani Suraksha Yojna", "Jansankhya Sthirata Kosh" and equity implications of health insurance user fees and other activities under the NRHM (National Rural Health Mission) were undertaken.

Despite the dynamic constitutional and statutory provisions the facts and figures provide an altogether grim scenario. In the age group of children 0-6 years has declined from 927 girls per thousand boys in 2001 to 914 girls per thousand boys in 2011. The declined especially disturbing as it is occurring inspite of a strong legal and policy framework and various government initiatives including cash, transfers and incentives schemes various media and messaging efforts. If not reversed it will alter demography erode gender justice social cohesion, and human development, sex ratio of birth has shown marginal improvement from 901 in 2005-07 to 905 in 2008-10. This is unacceptably low. Chhattisgarh has reported the highest sex ratio at birth (985) while Punjab has reported the lowest (832).

2. The Concept and Need of Women Empowerment

Empowerment is a multidimensional process, which should enable the individuals or a group of individuals to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. It consists of greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making to enable them to have greater ability to plan their lives, or have greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and free them from the shackles imposed on them by custom, belief and practices. Empowerment of women may also mean equal status to the women, opportunities and freedom to develop her. Empowering women socio- economically through increased awareness for their rights and duties as well as access to resources is a decisive step towards greater security for them.

Mikhail Gorbachow said, "The status of women is a barometer of the democratism of any state, an indicator of how human rights are respected in it" The concept of rural

women development was introduced at the international women's conference at Nairobi in 1985. The term empowerment was defined as "A distribution of a social power and control of resources in favour of women" The Global conference on women empowerment, 1998 highlights empowerment as the surest way of making women "partners in development". Empowering women is actually strengthening them to control family, community, caste, religious traditional practices, and biases working with in government departments, authoritarian ideologies and powerful patriarchal interests. Empowerment covers aspects such as women's control over material and intellectual resources. On the basis of the above definition empowerment includes equal access to opportunities for using society's resources, prohibition of gender discrimination in and through practice of freedom from violence and freedom of choice in matters relating to one's life. The barriers to women's empowerment are manifested in various ways in terms of deep-rooted ideologies of gender bias and discrimination of women to the private domestic realm, restrictions on their mobility poor access to health services nutrition, education and employment and exclusion from the public and political sphere continue to taunt women across the country. The Government in different plan document enunciated the policies advocating women's issues. According to dictionary of education "Empowerment means recognizing power inequalities and seeking to reduce them by working together" Thus empowerment is a process, by which women gain greater control over material and intellectual resources which will assist them to increase their self reliance, and enhance them to assert their independent rights, and challenges the ideology of patriarchy and the gender based discrimination against women. This will also enable them to organize themselves to assert their autonomy to make decision and choices, ultimately eliminate their own subordination in all institutions and structures of society.

The programme of action 1992 has comprehensively given the below mentioned parameters of empowerment of women:

- 1) Enhancing self esteem and self confidence of women.
- 2) Building a positive image of women by recognizing their contribution to the society Politically and economically.
- 3) Developing in them an ability to think critically.
- 4) Fostering decision making and action through collective process.
- 5) Enabling women to make informed choices in areas like education, employment and health especially reproductive health.
- 6) Provide information, knowledge and skill for economic independence.
- 7) Enhancing access to legal literacy and information related to their rights and entitlements in the society with a view to enhance their participation on an equal footing in all areas.

Empowerment is a term widely used in the context of 'development' Empowerment in nutshell is a way of defining, challenging and overcoming barriers in one's life through the individual increases her ability to shape her life and environment.

3. Empowerment Implies

- A state of mind and attitude of a person. An empowered woman has a positive self image and takes an active part in decision making related to herself, her family and the community.
- Greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making and greater ability to overcome restrictions and constraints imposed by customs, beliefs and practices.
- Self confidence and understanding of the importance of human values, rights and privileges, conducive for a more dignified and satisfactory way of life.
- Empowerment is an active process enabling women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life. Empowerment of women is a critical factor in the eradication of poverty. Women's participation in income generating activities would increase their status and decision making power. If a woman is economically a parasite, she can never claim an equal status with men. The poverty cannot be tackled without providing opportunities of productive employment to women Researchers conducted in India confirm that even where there is a male earner, women's earning form a major part of the income of poor households. Moreover, women contribute a large share of what they earn to basic family maintenance than men. Increase in women's income translates more directly in to better child health, nutrition and family well being. Women's participation in labour force also brings about changes in awareness and attitudes which may have long term benefits such as adoption of small family norms, reduction in birth rates and mortality rates.

Women's empowerment can only be achieved only through meeting the gender needs and interests. Education which is the most dynamic factor of development is the only tool for realizing empowerment. It is also a productive investment. It brings about conscientisation which helps individuals to perceive, interpret, criticize and finally transform their environment.

Women are partner in development. They can play a more positive and active role in development if they are given relevant education and training. They need to be enabled to use improved technology in their daily activities. The NPE has rightly envisaged that the national education system should play a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women through the following action strategies:

- Building a positive self image.
- Developing ability to think critically.
- Building up group cohesion and fostering decision making.
- Ensuring equal participation in the process of bringing about social change and
- Providing the information, knowledge and skill for economic independence.

Empowerment literally means "to invest with power" In the context of women's empowerment the term has come to denote women's increased control over their own lives,

bodies and environments “in literature, women empowerment emphasizes on women’s decision making role, their economic self-reliance and their legal rights to equal treatment, inheritance and protection against all forms of discrimination, in addition to the elimination of barriers to their access of resources such as education, health and information”

4. Need of Women Empowerment

Empowerment is a continuous process for realizing the ideal of equality, human liberation and freedom for all. Women’s empowerment thus, implies equality of opportunity and equity between the genders, ethnic groups, social classes and age groups strengthening of life chances, collective participation in different of life, cultural, social, political, and economic, development process and decision making etc.

Yojana, (2008) the need for women empowerment was felt in India long back. Mahatma Gandhi had announced at the Second round table Conference that his aim was to establish a political society in India in which there would be no distinction between people of high and low classes and in which women would enjoy the same rights as men. The need for women’s empowerment was discussed by Rao and Rao in following three levels:

1) At the level of individual women and her household:

- Participation in crucial decision- making processes.
- Extent of sharing of domestic work by men.
- Extent of which a woman takes control of her reproduces functions and decides on family size.
- Extent to which a women is able to decide what income she has earned will be channeled to
- Feeling and expression of pride and value in her work.
- Self confidence and self esteem and
- Ability to prevent violence.

2) At the community and /or organizational Level

- Existence of women’s organization
- Allocation of funds to women and women’s projects
- Increased number of women leaders at village levels
- Involvement of women in the design, development and application of technology.
- Participation in community programs, productive enterprises, political and arts.
- Involvement of women in nontraditional task
- Increased training programs for women and
- Exercising her legal rights when necessary

3) At the national level

- Awareness of her social and political rights
- Integration of women in the general national developmental plan.
- Existence of women’s networks and publications.
- Extent to which women are officially visible and recognized.
- The degree to which the media take need of women’s issues.

Last but not least it can be concluded that Empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, greater decision making power and control of the transformative action. It strengthens their innate ability through acquiring edge power and experience. Political empowerment of women representatives, problems, issues and changes confronted by party member. For more than a decade, the term empowerment has been widely used in relation to women today, one read this term much more often than term like ‘women’s welfare’ ‘upliftment’ ‘development’ or ‘awareness raising’ However, in spite of the growing popularity and wide spread usage of the term, there is little conceptual clarity about what exactly empowerment means, and even less about what the empowerment of women implies in social, economic and political terms. Researches on empowerment show that the word empowerment has simply been substituted to describe the same strategies and activities which were earlier called ‘integrated rural development’ ‘community participation’ conscientization etc.