

Women Empowerment in India - A trajectory tracking the changing position of Indian women in modern times

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Abstract: Women directly or indirectly contribute significantly in the development of any nation. In recent times, globalization has transformed their life all over the world for the better. It has also provided them with several platforms for self expression and achieving greater autonomy, thereby leading to social and gender egalitarianism. Various reformative measures have been taken up by the government and civil society in the India to alleviate their status. While all countries are marching towards excellence, it is ironical that one half of the world's population, that is, women is still struggling for freedom for their dignity and survival. My paper is an attempt to grapple with the aforesaid issues and seek possible solutions to the menace of gender discrimination.

Keywords - Women empowerment, gender discrimination, globalization, egalitarianism

“It is impossible to think about the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is impossible for a bird to fly on only one wing. There is no hope for that family or country where there is no estimation of women, where they live in sadness. For this reason, they have to be raised first.” — Swami Vivekananda

“You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women.” — Jawaharlal Nehru

It is a universally accepted notion that women are not born but made through the process of social conditioning. Our country, India, exemplifies this oft-quoted idea by the feminist thinker, Simone de Beauvoir, in the best way possible. With the whole world celebrating and recognizing the major strides made by women and their successful foray into virtually every field of life, whether it be personal or professional, especially in today's age of globalization where umpteen radical social movements have alleviated her condition and participation in a patriarchally led world, it becomes imperative to analyze the position and space that Indian women occupy today. A researcher must also compare it to what it was sixty years ago when the country had just gained independence. With

women participating vigorously in nationalist freedom movements, to being relegated to the domestic household space for decades, to their resurgence as proficient multi-taskers today, Indian women have witnessed all of it. There have undoubtedly been innumerable debates about gender in India over the years. Several of such issues include women's position in a patriarchal and oppressive society, their education, healthcare, economic status, gender equality, and so on. What a scholar can perceptively conclude from such discussions is that women have always acquired a certain paradoxical status or position in our developing country, wherein insightful and provoking debates around the perpetually precarious condition of women in some parts of India cannot be brushed under the carpet. Although the progress and upliftment do not happen overnight, one can claim that the status of Indian women has radically changed since independence. Both the structural and cultural changes in Indian society have been successful in providing equality of opportunities to women in education, employment and political participation. With the help of these revolutionary changes, exploitation of women and gender discrimination has reduced considerably over the years. Further freedom to pursue their interest has ushered in a world of improved gender equality which calls for a fresh assessment of their empowerment over the years in a country that has always revered them as goddesses (*Shakti*) and has attempted to, and perhaps has been successful in assimilating them in the societal hegemonic power structures to a certain extent. My paper will be an attempt to address and highlight the redemptive aspects of Indian culture by tracing the modern history of women and their contribution to national development by taking into consideration their changing roles in society over time, especially during and post-independence.

Since independence, Indian women have made significant progress and yet they have had to struggle against umpteen social evils of the masculine forces that continue to prevail in the modern Indian society that persistently resists their real progress. It is indeed quite ironic that India, despite achieving several feats in space, having secured the status of first Asian country to complete its Mars space Mission in its maiden attempt, is unfortunately ranked at the 140th position among one fifty-six countries across the globe based on Gender Inequality

Index. India is one of the largest and most popular democracies in the world. Despite being an old nation, India is comparatively a younger nation-state that has a written constitution, one that contains the best features of the several constitutions of the world. The nation's journey of being a 'republic' began with its ideals of liberty, equality and justice, as espoused in the French revolution, hence fortifying the Indian women's security with the promises of survival, equality and gender justice. Their hope and aspiration of being equal citizens, however, remains unfulfilled to date. One must acknowledge that to achieve the status of a developed country, India needs to transform its colossal women force into an effective human resource which is possible only through the empowerment of women. Women empowerment can be defined as the complete emancipation of women from the vicious stranglehold of social, economical, political, caste and gender-based discrimination, thereby granting them the freedom to make life choices which translates into replacing patriarchy with parity and equality. Law can be cited as the primary and indispensable tool for women's empowerment and their better representation, which is also a must for social change. In accordance with the ideals espoused by our founding fathers for women empowerment, various social, economic and political provisions were incorporated within the Indian constitution to alleviate the condition of women in society. For instance, the Right to Equality under Article 14 guarantees equality before the law to all Indian women. Equal pay for equal work under Article 39 (d) firmly guards the economic rights of women, and maternity relief under Article 42 allows provisions to be made by the state for securing humane and just working conditions including maternity relief for women. Moreover, acts like the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence, Act 2005 and Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 also offer more effective protection of rights of women who are unfortunately victimized due to domestic violence.

In India, according to the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, one-third of the seats are reserved for women in all local bodies. Such a reformative provision was brought in to improve the effective participation of womenfolk in politics and elevate their social status in society. A deeply entrenched patriarchal society with deep-rooted stereotypes and socio-cultural values continues to affect the progress of women's empowerment in India. Despite the progressive vision of the Indian constitution, it has proved utterly inadequate in resolving or addressing the complexities of gender inequality. Thus, a truly egalitarian society with no place for gender superiority should be our goal. The agenda of the government reforms and policies must be to both identify and eliminate vicious societal forces that are all directed towards perpetuating the tradition of male dominance over

its female counterpart. In the present modern times, there is an increasing consciousness to recognize and promote women's autonomy, which gives them the confidence to realize their full potential. Their crucial role in the social, political and economic context needs to be assessed and recognized in the right earnest. Likewise, the forces that keep the women at the margins, away from the main scene must be vehemently countered. Women, who comprise one half of the world's population, have the potential to be effective change agents and significant contributors to the overall national development. Their status is directly related to whether or not they have certain participating rights as well as obligations in the administrative society. The significant indicators of the status of women in any society are equal political participation, representation and their effective share in the country's decision-making bodies. Hence, if women are not allowed to participate in the political process, it may result in policies reflecting and advocating only the male perception. Thus, at a practical level, it may inevitably lead to certain allocation of resources and potentially important decisions which may not be in the interest of one half of the population that is, women.

In pre-independence India, women had quite vociferously initiated a demand for voting rights as early as the year 1917. Much earlier than womenfolk in other parts of the world who secured their much needed voting rights, Indian women fought tooth and nail against colonialism, its evils as well as the patriarchal and traditional orthodoxies that existed in society then. Many women activists and suffragists including Margaret E. Cousins¹ had advocated the granting of the same suffrage rights for women as had been granted to men. In 1918, this just cause was further championed by Saraladevi Chaudharani² in her proposals that advocated women's rights before the Montague-Chelmsford reform team during British rule. Such arduous struggles initiated a long resistance of over three decades that culminated with India's independence when women secured their rights to vote akin to men.

In modern times, women have inevitably and increasingly become linked with the state. The ascent of the nuclear family and the progressive breakdown of the joint-family system as a consequence, have led to an overall

¹ The Indian - Irish poet, educationist, suffragist and theosophist established the All India Women's Conference in 1927.

² She was the founder of first women's organization in India, the Bharat Stree Mahamandal in Allahabad in 1910.

decline in the patriarchal control over women. The state has entered the private spheres which were once ruled by the patriarchal family. Henceforth, the state considers it as its duty to guard divorced or widowed women, make available employment to them, formulate certain progressive legislations to allow them to ask for alimony, seek a divorce, and so on. Consequently, women have a direct link and interface with the state more so now than ever before. Also, the Indian Constitution guarantees both men and women equal protection and rights. It was with the creation of the Indian Constitution that women's legal equality was established more fervidly. Subsequently, constitutional provisions and legislative securities led Indian women to leave the relative complacency of private life and cross the threshold, thereby entering both the elective and appointive public positions in unprecedented numbers.

India has had the great privilege of being under a female Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, for around twenty years and several women Chief Ministers and Governors at the state level as well, who have led the country with their exemplary work and leadership. The enthusiastic celebration of the Year of Empowerment of Women, the reservation of thirty three percent seats for women in the Panchayats (local government) and an offer for a similar reservation in the Parliament - these are some measure that have infused a new spirit and gave us more hopes for the betterment of women's condition. However, this proved to be a mere illusion, which camouflaged the obvious reality. As a general rule, the participation of women in politics has been extremely low which has sadly led to their exclusion from any real political power. Conventionally, often their role has been restricted to being political wives in electoral politics, party loyalists or merely voters. In actual political decision-making, their status has been quite inferior to that of their male counterparts. Only a very small section of women belonging to or supported by wealthy and influential families have been successful in entering the political mainstream.

Indian women, particularly in the medieval era, had faced many challenges and hurdles in their way to emancipation even in their private life but this was transformed over time by the vigorous campaigns from the reformers and attendant activities that led to the promotion of equal rights and fall of violence rate against them. It is believed that the situation of women in any society reflects its index of cultural and spiritual attainment. In today's world, women struggle to pursue respectable careers to survive like men. Economic empowerment, improved life, improved health, dignity and honour, justice, choice of profession and alleviation of poverty are the major concerns. However, women continue to face grave challenges that have led to the establishment of numerous women empowerment groups to fight social injustices that

inhibit women's prosperity. Such campaigns primarily focus on combating the issues of illiteracy, sexual harassment etc. Lately, the country has witnessed a more focused campaign against women violence and gender discrimination intended at enlightening women and educating them towards their rights. It is crucial for women to achieve a better consciousness of their rights. Indian women have held some of the top positions in the country including that of the presidency. And yet, they continue to face atrocities and aggression in cases such as discrimination at workplace, rape, forced prostitution, dowry killings and other such brutalities. According to a report by Thomas Reuters, India was among the topmost dangerous countries for women in the G20 group of nations. This is the primary reason why putting an end to violence against women in the country has become one of the government's major concerns and goals over the last few years.

Education is indeed one of the most important and indispensable tools for women empowerment. Social activist Nelson Mandela had once rightfully asserted that education is indeed the most powerful weapon that man can utilize to transform the world. Hence, it is vital for every country to nurture and protect their women and young talent with the right education so that it emerges as an economically independent, intellectually tenacious and developed nation. It is often said that humans are born in the world of nature and necessity, but they must, however, be reborn into the world of spirit and freedom. Only a good basic, as well as higher education, can liberate mankind from its mental slavery and enlighten minds with a true sense of purpose and progressive social vision to achieve the desired heights. The acknowledgement of its significance gave precedence to the Right to Education in India wherein primary education has been made free and compulsory for all children up to the age of fourteen years, which also happens to be a fundamental right laid down in the Constitution and has been accorded the same legal status as the Right to Life as provided under Constitution's Article 21A. Women's education plays an indispensable role in the social and economic growth of any country. It has been an oft-repeated slogan that the world might be ageing but India has youth on its side owing to its rich and vibrant population.

The potential of one half of the Indian youth, however, needs to be tapped or used appropriately to bring out the best in them to make it constructive to the nation's developmental process. The modern technological age is characterized by tough competition in every sphere of life. Globalization, commercialization and liberalization of the economy have certainly eased our way of life. However, they have also posed several new challenges. To deal with them, a strong and fortified foundation of progressive

education in the country that promotes critical, intellectual and practical along with a visionary thought process in its youth, especially women is a must. Change and transformation does not necessarily assure progress but progress implacably requires change.³ The economic condition of any country depends largely on the educational standards of its populace. It is the root of all modernization and human development as it promotes mobilization, equality and encourages people to participate in various developmental activities. It renders people skilled in their jobs and increases their productive efficiency manifold times. In the grand narrative of development in the globalized times, we cannot overlook the bleak situation of the rural women/girls living in remote parts of the country who still do not have access to basic primary education. Thoughtful and effective initiatives/reforms by both the government and non-governmental organizations are required to provide the same to bring in a sense of gender and social egalitarianism. The highlighting and promotion of the education of the girl child would translate into education for the entire family. Gender sensitivity and sensitization, cultural diversity and vocational education should be promoted further to inculcate practical values in the youth of today. In that, the use of technology should be made practically, judiciously and wisely to ensure a skill-based and gender-sensitive learning which works towards removing gender discrimination at workplaces, be it in the form of sexual harassment or gender gap or even the glass ceiling effect.

The rapid pace of economic development has certainly amplified the demand for an educated and productive female labour force, in all sectors in the country. This phenomenon has undeniably given ample economic power in the hands of women for which they were earlier totally dependent on men only. With the achievement of economic independence, women have been making their mark in several fields like literature, arts, journalism, sports, politics and the business world, thereby offering them greater financial security. The process of empowerment of women socially, economically, educationally, politically and legally is going to be a cumbersome task to undertake. Hence, right and concentrated efforts focused in the correct direction are a must for accomplishing the herculean task of liberating women from all forms of social evils. It is solely through the creation of awareness among women and society at large, that women's empowerment can be truly realized and India in order to make our nation great with a grand vision, as had been envisioned by our first prime minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. In various ways, Indian women have

³ Quote by Henry Steele Commager, a 20th century American historian.

been held back by decades-long prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination that has restricted their educational and professional opportunities. However, a paradigm shift is underway as our country becomes a grand presence in the global economy. Women's steady gain of access to education and jobs in the much coveted fields like finance and technology has paved way for their greater economic independence. Such transformation is expected to speed up rapidly over the next few decade, thereby offering women a pivotal role in the development of the Indian economy. In addition to enhancing the quality of life for numerous women, this evolution would also usher in momentous and innovative investment opportunities across a range of fields. As more women join the workforce, household income is bound to increase as the consumption patterns will also inevitably witness a significant change. For instance, demand for superior quality health care will see a jump as families would have the greater financial capital to pay for it. Likewise, the requirement for financial services will rise as higher-earning women folk seek more financial autonomy in the form of personal loans, credit cards, savings account and so on.

The emancipation of women is significant mainly because of the sheer size of the Indian populace. India inhabits 662 million women, or over 17% of the global total. India is home to above 170 million girls below the age of fifteen which is about one-fifth of the worldwide figures. Certain studies have estimated that if women were to attain the same workforce participation rate as their male counterparts, India's gross domestic product (GDP) would rise by over twenty-seven per cent. However, we must bear in mind that progress toward equality will be a gradual process even as hurdles are overcome one by one. Of course, such an aspired progress will not happen overnight or in haste, and so sincere efforts are required. Throughout the rich Indian history, the status and reputation of women in society has been quite mixed. In certain ways, women have always held distinguished positions of authority, both in Indian mythology and in real life. For instance, the mythological Gods of wealth, learning and power have been women and are all worshipped with great reverence and vigour.⁴ Indian mythology is filled with references to queens who embodied courage, pluck and wisdom altogether.

⁴ They are referred to by names of Goddess Saraswati, Goddess Durga, Parvati and Goddess Kali in reverence.

In today's globalized world too, India has produced some of the world's most eminent and powerful female leaders even in the corporate world. In the past few decades, quite a number of the major financial institutions, both in the private and public sectors have been led by female CEOs, evidence of women's growing autonomy and growth, with figures that are globally unprecedented. Such eminent positions were not simply inherited through mere nepotism or social connections, but by dint of their sheer talent and perseverance. These women climbed up the corporate ladder even in sectors that were dominated by men, or the so called alpha males. However, we have to acknowledge the continual hardships that women continue to face in their day to day life despite all the efforts and address the same. Women's participation in the workforce remains close to a dismal 30 per cent.⁵ The literacy rate for Indian women is only approximately 66 per cent, versus over 82 per cent for men. This unfavourable gender ratio crops up partially due to the age-old patriarchal customs, consequent societal conditioning including false beliefs about the pressures of raising daughters. Although illegal in nature, the observance of dowry system remains quite popularly accepted and widespread in the country. For families that live below the poverty line, such expenses can be financially crippling or even impossible to bear. And yet as we witness the changed role of women in the modern world, their lives have improved as attitudes alter and educational opportunities improve gradually. Fortunately, quite a number of these backward orthodox attitudes are being brought down for the good. In fact, a paradigm shift can be seen drawing near as the changes in perception and treatment of women in India gain true momentum. A steadily growing access to education is helping Indian women gain newfound power and respect in all fields of life, thereby securing them greater autonomy. Undoubtedly, educational reforms would prove to be the single greatest driver of transformation for young girls and women over the next few decades, thereby narrowing and eventually perhaps even eliminating the disconcerting gender gaps in both literacy and workplace participation.

Since education entails more than opening up new career choices, it is enabling women better insights into the globalized world at large, hence provoking awareness of their rights and also instilling courage and indomitable will in them to live as autonomous beings, as their male counterparts. Such long-overdue uplifting changes are gradually providing women near, if not fully, equal opportunities of growth and autonomy in all sectors. One instance could be the women's appropriation of more jobs

⁵ This compares with around 51 percent for women world-wide and approx 81 percent for Indian men.

than ever in the white-collar managerial or technically authoritative positions of power. It is evident that women in the present world are breaking the glass ceiling and are far more creative, informed and self-assured than were in the past ages. Such optimistic patterns extend beyond people who dwell in urban spaces with affluence, a fact that is highly encouraging. Gradually such buoyant changes will become more prevalent across the entire Indian society to raise the living standard for all the womenfolk.

As a scholar, the more I examine the changing position of women in Indian society, the more I feel convinced that a monumental change to bridge gender discrimination is underway. The position of women in Indian society has been evolving rapidly over the past decades and fortifying itself. The rate of change has accelerated noticeably in the present modern times, clearly heralded by several women entrepreneurs and strong female change-makers. Over the next decade, such optimistic facts and figures will vastly improve the lives of millions of women, propel the much needed change and would inevitably have profound positive social and economic effects. It has been rightly pointed out by the former secretary-general of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, that there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women.

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