

Status of Women in India: A Historical Analysis

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Abstract

The subject of empowerment of women assumes great significance in the present times. The question of empowerment of women is now on the international agenda. The empowerment of women can take place at a hierarchy of different levels-individual, household, community and societal. The Indian National Congress (1917) and Muslim League (1918) had supported the cause of franchise to women in India before independence. The Government of India Act, 1935 enabled all women over 21 years to exercise their franchise. In the post-independence era, the framers of the Constitution of India had provided equal status and positive protection to women. There are also other progressive legislations which protect gender justice and equity in India. The Directive Principles of State Policy and Fundamental Rights are the basis for making special provisions for the empowerment of women in India. The Government of India constituted Central Social Welfare Board in 1954 and State Governments constituted regional welfare boards to facilitate the empowerment of women in India. The Government of India also created Department for Women and Child Development in all States and Union Territories in order to facilitate effective implementation of programmes for the benefit of women. The State is required to play a crucial role in the empowerment of women by providing increased budgetary support and political representation (Heggade, 1984:09). The policy makers and planners should understand the social, economic, political and cultural dimensions of women's empowerment (Jhabwala, 1984:11). Women should be enabled to gain economic independence in order to enjoy the benefit of access to and control over production resources

Women Empowerment

The goal of empowerment of women cannot be achieved in the absence of political will, progressive legislations, women-specific development projects and allied supportive measures (Mason, 1986:17). Inadequate political representation, budgetary allocation, leadership opportunities and scientific evaluations are primarily responsible for the disempowerment of women (Beteille, 1986:04). The international and national stakeholders of empowerment of women can set right the imbalance.

Women basically require the economic independence which is the prerequisite to their overall empowerment (Azad, 1988:01). Indian women are lacking adequate political representation and budgetary allocations due to lack of organized struggle (Sarkar, 1989:23). Women are handicapped due to illiteracy; lack of training and the general socio-economic milieu (Joshi, 1990:12). The state is responsible for creating a healthy environment to develop the skill, entrepreneurship and personality of women through meaningful initiatives.

The women in the less developed countries suffered series of setbacks in terms of attainment of the goal of empowerment as compared to the women who lived in the developed countries (Everett, 1991:06). The development agencies, NGOs and media institutions are responsible for the attainment of the goal of economic empowerment of women (Keller and Mbewe, 1991:14). The women who were forward were less likely to be oppressed in India and other societies (Sen, 1993:24). The backward class leaders have

demanded the extension of political reservation to backward women to set things right in a caste oriented country like India.

Gender bias, uneven distribution of wealth, inadequate ownership of properties, poor educational status, ineffective implementation of legislations, lack of co-ordination between government and non-government agencies and insignificant women's associations are mainly responsible for the backwardness of women (Mahmud and Johnson, 1994:16). The policy makers and other stakeholders of empowerment of women have not lived up to the expectations of women (Heptulla, 1996:10). Women have negligible presence in terms of representation and participation in education, employment and political sectors.

A microscopic minority of women representing the upper class and upper caste has cornered the benefits of reservation in India. A great majority of women representing marginalized sections continue to remain at the receiving end politically and otherwise due to the existing social and economic orders (Guru, 1997:08). Adequate political reservation, developmental initiatives, educational benefits and social security measures are required to ensure the empowerment of women in India.

There has been a radical change in the movement for empowerment of women. The women's empowerment can positively influence the lives not only of women themselves but also of men, and of course, those of children. The political parties cannot remain indifferent towards women who constitute nearly 48.46 per cent of the electorate. They have to accept the principle of representation within their own parties and pave the way for the empowerment of women politically and otherwise (Fadia, 1997:07).

Most of these programmes have not been implemented properly due to lack of awareness, network development, community engagement, monitoring and evaluation. The state has failed to ensure integrated and sustainable empowerment of women in India because the policy makers and administrators hailed from the privileged sections of the society (Kapur, 2001:13). The existing legal mechanisms and developmental initiatives are inadequate and ineffective to achieve the goal of empowerment of women in India. There is a need for human touch for the women centric welfare programmes in the country.

The backwardness of women in several aspects motivated the vested interests to exploit women and violate their human rights (Narayanan, 2002:18). There is a well established correlation between the degree of empowerment and extent of violation of human rights of women. The inter-linkages between the issues concerning the empowerment of women can be examined thoroughly to ensure gender justice and equity.

Women in India have not achieved commendable economic empowerment mainly due to lack of suitable networks, operations, resources and manpower (Venkatesh, 2006:27). The anti-poverty programmes are not beneficial to women at the grassroots level. The micro enterprises have not concentrated on the social and economic development of women in the country.

The present national level indications are also not encouraging for the future of political empowerment of women unless the pending constitution amendment bill providing one-third reservation of seats in Parliament and State legislatures is passed (Panda, 2006:20). The Election Commission has advised the political parties to mutually agree to field women candidates in the election to union and state legislatures. The commission had also warned that they will be derecognized if they failed to comply with the instruction.

Gender empowerment measure in India is not satisfactory (Rajan, 2009:21). The women's movements have not undertaken the long term and challenging task of transforming patriarchal values and attitudes for women's empowerment. The women should be encouraged to participate at the grassroots level development programmes and credit management activities for better economic empowerment.

Agriculture and allied industrial sectors have not contributed adequately for the empowerment of women in India (Khare, 2011:15). Women occupy a marginalized position in the rural society due to several socio-economic constraints created by the system (Thakur, 2012:26). A clear vision is required to facilitate the empowerment of women through constructive social and economic measures. Entrepreneurship development programmes can be organized exclusively for women on a priority basis.

Women's underrepresentation in the central and state legislatures undermines the democracy. Reservation of seats can enable a large majority of women overcome social resistance by asserting their political and legal rights and thereby open the way for social and economic equality (Rathnamma, 2013:22). The reservation should be viewed as a much needed impetus towards achieving the goal of empowerment of women politically and otherwise.

Women and other marginalized sections of society suffer multiple forms of discrimination in India. They remain largely marginalized, poor and socially excluded. Empowerment of women means enabling or arming them to function independently or authorization that is enduring to equip women with all attributes. The dehumanizing bondages of caste, class and gender are not eliminated and their rights to live with human dignity have to be restored (Bakshi, 2015:02). A new dawn of equality in the lives of Dalit women is the true dawn of freedom in India.

The role of women in different dimensions of sustainable development is inadequate. The place of women in society is also relegated to contributing minimally to the social development in the developing nations (Bayeh, 2016:03). The stakeholders of women empowerment have not ensured effective management and development of women's resources, their capabilities, interests, skills and potentialities which are of paramount importance in the new millennium.

The progress of women is equated with the progress of the nation. The Indian Government has introduced policies and procedures with the goal of sensitizing the higher education system, recognize gender equity and increasing the number of women enrolling for higher education. Higher education for women in India has witnessed an impressive growth over the years and the Government is pooling resources needed to promote female education at all levels (Packianathan et. al, 2016:19). Formulating and implementing stringent and powerful laws and policies have addressed the malice of gender discrimination of higher education in India.

Lack of strong movement and pro-active initiatives for women empowerment are primarily responsible for the disempowerment of women in India (Dutta and Bhakta, 2017:05). Absence of holistic and pro-active perspective on development interventions has impeded the progress of women (Srivastava, 2018:25). A national strategy for the security and progress of women can be designed and implemented in India. A transformative approach to the empowerment of women needs to be developed in India.

Conclusion

The constitutional provisions and protective measures should be promptly implemented in India to facilitate good governance and judicious development for the benefit of women in India. The fundamental rights of the women in Indian society should be protected to achieve the goals of Sarvodaya, Antyodaya, Gross National Happiness and other goals of development. The women are not adequately empowered in all walks of life due to lack of political will and social activism in India. The international organizations have also called upon the stakeholders of empowerment of women to implement series of affirmative programmes on humanitarian grounds. The stakeholders of women empowerment are required to ensure women networking development, women capital development and empowerment of the women which has become highly crucial in India.

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