



STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA, IN PROCESS OF EMPOWERMENT ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Srinivasa Gowda K N

Assistant Professor of History, Government First Grade College, KGF.

Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze the status of Women Empowerment in India and highlights the Issues and Challenges of Women Empowerment. Today the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century. But practically women empowerment is still an illusion of reality. We observe in our day to day life how women become victimized by various social evils. Women Empowerment is the vital instrument to expand women's ability to have resources and to make strategic life choices.

Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. The study is based on purely from secondary sources. The study reveals that women of India are relatively disempowered and they enjoy somewhat lower status than that of men in spite of many efforts undertaken by Government. It is found that acceptance of unequal gender norms by women are still prevailing in the society. The study concludes by an observation that access to Education, Employment and Change in Social Structure are only the enabling factors to Women Empowerment.

Keywords: *Women Empowerment, Education, Health, Socio-Economic Status. Status of Women in India through the Ages.*

I. Introduction

Women empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social, educational, gender or economic strength of individuals and communities of women. Women's empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables that include geographical location (urban / rural) educational status social status (caste and class) and age. Policies on Women's empowerment exist at the national, state and local (Panchayat) levels in many sectors, including health, education, economic opportunities, gender based violence and political participation. However there are significant gap between policy advancements and actual practice at the community level.

Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. Women empowerment involves the building up of a society, a political environment, wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure.

Women constitute almost 50% of the world's population but India has shown disproportionate sex ratio whereby female's population has been comparatively lower than males. As far as their social status is concerned, they are not treated as equal to men in all the places. In the Western societies, the women have got equal right and status with men in all walks of life. But gender disabilities and discriminations are found in India even today. The paradoxical situation has such that she was sometimes concerned as Goddess and at other times merely as slave.

II. Objectives of the Study

- To know the need of Women Empowerment.
- To assess the Awareness of Women Empowerment in India.
- To understand the status of women in India in process of Women Empowerment
- To Identify and understand issued and challenges in the process of Empowerment of Women.
- To offer useful Findings and Suggestions.

III. Methodology

The present study is based only on secondary data. The data were collected from books, journals, website and annual reports.

IV. Historical Background of Status of Women in India

The Constitution of the Republic of India ensures equality for women and men in every sphere of life and activity. Women in India have been given equality of opportunity in all matters relating to education, employment, and legal status, and they can aspire to grace the highest offices of the state. However ,this is indicative of the existing of women in the country.



Though legally and constitutionally all women have equal access to and right to venture in every walk of life, a vast majority of them are still illiterate and uneducated. This is a paradoxical situation which must be understood and seen in its historical perspective. The status of women and their activities can be divided into three main historical period, the ancient, the medieval and modern.

Women in India Ancient Period

From the available documentation, it is revealed that women enjoyed a fair amount of freedom and equality with men in the fields of education and religion during the Vedic period. In the Vedic period, women from higher sections of society were given equal rights in the field of religion, and they attained distinction in the realm of theological studies and philosophy. Distinguished women such as Gargi and Maitrayee are well-known names of this period who excelled as scholars in their own right. During the ancient period, there were icons such as Sita, Damayanti, Draupadi and three of the Panchkanyas, Ahilya, Tara, Mandodari, who are still remembered with great reverence in Indian society it was in the later period, approximately 500 BC, the status of women gradually declined with the Smritis and other religious texts giving diktats which adversely affected women's freedom and rights. With the rise of Brahminism and due to conflicting religious and social thoughts, the place of women remained subordinate and unsatisfactory. Buddhism and Jainism, however, contied to give a place of honor to women. Women were eligible for admission to the religious order in both Buddhism and Jainism. Bhikshuni sanghamitra was one of the main proponents of Buddhism of her time.

Women in India Medieval Period

With the coming of Muslim rule, medieval India witnessed enhanced dependency of women on men. The Islamic custom of Purdah (veiling of women) forced the public world to be separated from the private world, with women confined to the latter. Following its subjugation by the Muslims, and fearing adverse outcomes for its women, a large part of the Hindu India accepted the practice of veiling. Through this privatization, Indian women were forced to trade their mobility for safety. Repeated invasions by the Muslims further pushed the

Indian women towards inhuman "traditions" such as child marriage, the dowry system, purdah and sati (the immolation of the widow on the dead husband's pyre). The challenge of Islamic aggression also made Hindu India defensive and introverted causing a desperate return to orthodox Hindu beliefs and practices and further constraining the status of Indian women. Thus, during the medieval period, Indian women lost their earlier status and were at the lowest ebb.

However, women like Razia Begum rose to become a ruler, Chand Bibi, Tara Bai and Ahaliya Bai Holker, left their great imprints for their ruling capabilities. In Bhopal also, Begums or princesses ruled. With the advent of Islam, once again, women like Jahanara, Begum Mumtaz and Noor Jahan enjoyed respectable positions in the country. These remarkable ladies though strict Muslims, publicly administered justice with their faces covered by veils or burkas

Women in India Modern Period

In the modern period, the status of Indian women can be divided into two distinct periods, the British rule, i.e., Pre-Independent India and the Post- Independent India.

Pre-Independence Period

The British Rule in the 18th century brought in some degree of political orderliness, but the social structure, customs and practices remained unchanged. It was mainly during the 19th century that the reform movement undertaken by enlightened thinkers and leaders of Indian society like Raja Rammohan Roy who understood the importance of women's participation that the status of Indian women started changing for the better. Though initially all the leaders were men, women gradually came into the scene and played their role not only in changing history but also the society as a whole, through their efforts in different areas of work such as education, politics and freedom movement. Mrs. Annie Besant, Dr. Sarojini Naidu, Kamladevi Chattopadhyay, Mrs. Nellie Sengupta, Durgabai Deshmukh and many others gave a change and betterment. Indian women actively participated in the freedom movement to highlight the importance of the elevation of the status of the Indian women which also had different thrusts. The founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885 and Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent movement not only led to the political emancipation but also was a step in the direction for social reconstruction. Women took equal initiative and participated in all types of struggle for national freedom, i.e., non-violent movement advocated by Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, as well.

Women's enthusiasm in participating in the armed revolution helped Netaji Subash Chandra Bose to set up the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army. Women's participation in the freedom movement was very extensive. Smt. Kasturba Gandhi, Madam Bhikaji Cama, Sarla Devi, Muthu Lakshmi Reddy, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kriplani, Durga Bai Deshmukh, Priti Lata Waddedar, Captain Lakshmi and Janaki Davar of INA, Jahanara Shahnawaz, Randhabai Subbarayan, etc.,



Post-Independence Period

In 1947, India won freedom from foreign rule. In 1949 a Constitution was drafted which gave equal rights and status to all Indian citizens. Independent India has seen various programmes for the uplift of women of all communities. Indian women have played an important role from the very beginning of Independence in different walks of life. Women have taken bold steps in all nation building activities, which started with education and have now blossomed into women's involvement in every activity of India. They have participated in all activities such as education, politics, media, art and culture, services sector, and technology.

V. Problems and Challenges of Women Empowerment in India

Issues and Problems

The main Problems that were faced by women in past days and still today up to some extent:

- Gender discrimination
- Lack of Education
- Female Infanticide
- Financial Constraints
- Family Responsibility
- Low Mobility
- Low ability to bear Risk
- Low need for achievement
- Dowry
- Marriage in same caste and child marriage (still existing)
- Atrocities on Women (Raped, Kicked, Killed, Subdued)

Challenges

There are several constraints that check the process of women empowerment in India. Social norms and family structure in developing countries like India, manifests and perpetuate the subordinate status of women. One of the norms is the continuing preference for a son over the birth of a girl child which is present in almost all societies and communities. The society is more biased in favor of male child in respect of education, nutrition and other opportunities. The root cause of this type of attitude lies in the belief that male child inherits the clan in India with an exception of Meghalaya. Women often internalize the traditional concept of their role as natural thus inflicting an injustice upon them. Poverty is the reality of life for the vast majority women in India. It is another factor that poses challenge in realizing women's empowerment.

There are several challenges that are plaguing the issues of women's right in India. Targeting these issues will directly benefit the empowerment of women in India

1. Gender Inequality
2. Lack of Education
3. Poverty on Illiteracy
4. Health and Safety
5. Professional Inequality
6. Morality and Inequality
7. Household Inequality

VI. Need for Women Empowerment

- a) Decision Making Power
- b) Freedom of Movement
- c) Access to Education
- d) Access to Employment
- e) Exposure to Media
- f) Domestic Violence
- g) Social Integration
- h) Change in Labour Patterns
- i) Providing Minimum Needs like Nutrition, Health, Sanitation, Housing
- j) Encouraging Women to develop in their fields.

VII. Findings and Suggestions

- Globalization, Liberalization and other Socio - Economic forces have given some respite to a large proportion of the population. However, there are still quite a few areas where women empowerment in India is largely lacking.



- There needs to be a sea – change in the mindset of the people in the country. Not just the women themselves, but the men have to wake up to a world that is moving towards equality and equity. It is better that this is embraced earlier than later for our own good.
- There are several Government programmes and NGOs in the Country, there is still a wide gap that exists between those under protection and those not.
- Poverty and illiteracy add to these complications, The Empowerment of Women begins with a guarantee of their health and safety.
- Empowerment of Women could only be achieved if their economic and social status is improved. This could be possible only by adopting definite social and economic policies with a view of total development of women and to make them realize that they have the potential to be strong human beings.
- In order to create a sustainable world, we must begin to Empower Women.

Suggestions

1. The first and foremost priority should be given to the education of women, which is the grassroots problem. Hence, education for women has to be paid special attention.
2. Awareness programmes need to be organized for creating awareness among women especially belonging to weaker sections about their rights.
3. Women should be allowed to work and should be provided enough safety and support to work. They should be provided with proper wages and work at par with men so that their status can be elevated in the society.
4. Strict implementation of Programmes and Acts should be there to curb the mal-practices prevalent in the society.

Conclusion

Through this research we have found that as the time changes women's rights also have undergone wide changes. Indian women have mastered anything and everything which a woman can dream of. But she still has to go a long way to achieve equal status in the minds of Indian men. With the changes in policies women's have become more powerful in various fields but crimes against women's have grown much with the increase in various rights of women's. Women are still treated, in some respects, in the same old way, yet the perception that Women are second to men has not been erased, Mushroom growth of crimes against Women have been seen, and also Women's own perception is responsible for changing but not respectful status of Women in INDIA still lots of new policies, and awareness is needed. Many new tribunals and public institutions are to be established to guarantee women effective protection against discrimination.

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