

National Policies in Context of Women Empowerment in India

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ABSTRACT

The subject of empowering women has becoming a burning issue all over the world, including India. Since last few decades women empowerment and women equality with men is a universal issue. Women empowerment refers the increment and improvement of women participation in all – economic, social and political decisions making process and to make them confident towards their rights. The main objective of this paper is to discuss about various policies of India's Governments towards women empowerment. The paper is based on secondary data collected from various journals and government publications. In India half of the population consists of women. The contribution of women plays an important role in the socio-economic development of the country. The government of India as well as various state governments have taken various measures and are continuing in their endeavors to raise the status of women in the society. The constitutional obligations and different plans, programmes and policies have laid emphasis on women empowerment to make them active participants in the process of developments. Measures taken by the government of India include the establishment of the national commission for women (NCW), Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK), launching of Indira Mahila Yojana (IMY), Balika Samridhthi Yojana (BSY), and Rural Women Development and Empowerment Projects(RWDEP) to ensure women empowerment in India. It however appears that on this front the situation of women is far from the satisfaction level. Hence the government's policies towards women empowerment should be more effective and result -oriented and there is a need for comprehensive and holistic policy for women empowerment.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Policies and Projects.

INTRODUCTION

The subject of empowering women has becoming a burning issue all over the world, including INDIA. Since last few decades women empowerment and women equality with men is a universal issue. In India half of the population consists of women. The contribution of women plays an important role in the socio-economic development of the country. The government of India as well as various state governments have taken various measures and are continuing in their endeavour to raise the status of women in the society. The constitutional obligations and different plans, programmes and policies have laid emphasis on women empowerment to make them active participants in the process of development.

Empowerment: Concept and Its Meaning:

Empowerment can be viewed as means of creating a social environment in which one can make decisions and make choices either individually or collectively for social transformation. As per the United national Development Fund for women (UNIFEM) the term women's empowerment means:

- Acquiring knowledge and understanding of gender relations and the ways in which these relations may be changed
- Developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure changes and the right to control one's life.

Thus women empowerment refers increasing and improving the participation of women in all spheres- social, economic and political.

Objectives:

The main objective of this paper is to discuss about major policies of India's Governments towards women empowerment.

METHODOLOGY

The current paper is based on secondary data collected from various government publications like ministry of health and family Welfare in India, ministry of Women and Child Development in India etc.

GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

a) Reservations

The Government of India has made structural provisions to uplift the socio- economic condition of the Scheduled Caste, through a policy of reservations or protective discrimination. Protective discrimination is an affirmative state action (Lal, 1986) that promotes Sanskritisation process among the Scheduled Castes. Scheduled Caste person changes his or her customs, ritual ideology and way of life in the direction of higher castes (Guru, 1986). Protective discriminations have three components: 1) political reservation (articles 330 and 332), which consists in reservation of 18% of seats for Scheduled Castes in legislative Assemblies and Panchayats; 2) Educational reservations [articles 15(4)] and 29 that require state and union territories to reserve for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes 20 percent of all seats in educational and technical institutions; and 3 percent job reservations [articles 16 (4), 320 (4)] and 333 requiring 15 percent and 7 percent position to be reserved for them at all levels in government and public sector undertaking (Shah, 1986). Reservations prevent total injustice promotes social mobility and leads to class-consciousness among the Scheduled Castes besides guaranteeing a minimum share (Khan, 1994).

The policy of reservations has helped mostly those who are now in the higher income groups; but only less than 5 percent in rural areas got jobs through reservations (Selvanathan, 1989). Data from Tamil Nadu show that the Scheduled Castes Hindus are somewhat better represented in the higher occupational categories compared to the Scheduled Castes Christians. This might be because of the reservations policy that benefits Hindus and not Christian Scheduled Castes (Balakrishnan, 1993). Unfortunately, implementation of reservation policies has so far not been fully satisfactory (Vijayendre & Pradeep, 1982). Scheduled Castes are conscious of the ineffectiveness of the policies of protective discrimination of the government, since the advance of Scheduled Castes is often blocked by stubborn social forces. The civil rights enforcement cell that is expected to look into the non-implementation of reservations and economic deprivations of the Scheduled Castes is more a laughing stock than a helpful agency as it has no power to investigate and proceeds further (Khan, 1993).

Besides, a long tradition of oppression and servitude makes it difficult for the Scheduled Castes to developed in a short time the confidence they required for the total utilization of the benefits provide by the government (Beteill, 1969). Subharao (1982) suggests that while reservation policy is a must, it should not impair telnet and excellence. One of the consequences of reservations, however, is that they will accentuate the alienation of Scheduled Castes, they will continue to be a separate category to enjoy the benefits of reservations and thus remains unintegrated with the mainstream of the society (Sinha, 1986).

b) Concessions

To enable the Scheduled Castes to secure professional jobs, a number of concessions are given to them: some of these are, relaxation in age, payable fee, standard of suitability, experience and qualification (Brochure, 1988), Chitnis (1986) suggests that social class considerations and vested interests seem to operate imperceptibly in the manner in which requirement for the several occupational positions available in society are defined. Requirements are not defined purely in terms of knowledge or skill required. Expectations regarding "suitable" manners, bearing, behaviour, values, style of life, and functioning are subtly involved in such a manner that the nexus between social class/family background and occupational placement is retained. Hence, one of the relaxations of rules for jobs is that Scheduled Castes be interviewed separately to ensure that they are not judged in comparison with other general candidates (Rozika, 1982).

Unfortunately, the bureaucrats are generally unhelpful to the Scheduled Castes (Khan, 1979). They do not implement the various welfare programs (Kakade, 1990). The programmes or schemes, designed for the Scheduled Caste, are formulated at the top (central and state government levels) and so local needs are generally overlooked. Such an approach leads to failure of reaching the objective. What is needed is area specific programs (Parashar, 1995). If Scheduled Castes have not taken much advantage of these schemes, it is because of the ineffective role of village officials, who neither make the scheme known to them nor help them in the cumbersome procedures (Khan, 1979). Another reason for the slow development of Scheduled Castes is that the special programs meant for their development tent to be formulated in an ad hoc manner (Report, 1983). According to Nautiyal and Sharma (1979), some of the serious pitfalls regarding the quantum and utilisation of financial assistance to Scheduled Castes are: 1) inadequate financial or material assistance; 2) delay in grants of stipends or scholarships; 3) poor hostel facilities for students; 4) misutilisation of financial assistance by students; 5) cumbersome and bureaucratic procedures followed to grant financial assistance; and 6) lack of awareness on the part of Scheduled Castes of benefits meant for them.

c) Social legislation

Constitution of India has made special provisions for the welfare of women. Article 50 of the Constitution provides special status and protection of women and to this extent equates them with those who belong to the deprived section of society. The directive principle of state policy (article 39) provides equal pay for equal work irrespective of their sex. Article 243 and article 243(1) provide various laws passed for the protection and safeguard of women and their rights like Hindu marriage and Divorce Act, 1955. Hindu Succession Act 1956, Hindu Guardianship Act 1956, Dowry Prohibition Act 1961, Maternity Benefit Act 1961, Equal Remuneration Act 1976, Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act, 1999 and Domestic Violence Bill 2000.

The various laws were enacted to raise the social status of women have failed to remove social prejudices and social inequalities. In India, laws are violated with impunity without fear of any deterrent action or social disapproval. Everyday we read in the newspaper about dowry deaths, rape, abduction, trafficking of women, sexual harassment at work place and eve testing in buses and streets. Pattern of crime rates of 1999 over 1998 shows a slight drop in dowry deaths from 6975 to 6696, but much of these cases go unreported (NCRB 1998-99). Half the number of women in India is killed in their bedrooms or one woman is killed every 102 minutes in the name of dowry. In India, 6000-dowry murders are committed each year. This really exists even though the dowry prohibition act has been in existence for 41 years and there are virtually no arrests under the act.

In recent year, there has been an alarming rise in atrocities against women in India. On an average there are more than 15000 rapes every year in India and the conviction rate below 30 percent. National Crime Research Bureau figures indicate that the incidence of rape has increased: from 15330 in 1997 to 16496 in 2000. The data reveals that 20 percent were mostly in the age group of 16 to 25 years and 10 percent were minor girls below 15 years of age. A study conducted among men and women in Jullandhar district of Punjab in north India reports that about 75 percent of women reported being beaten frequently by their husbands; and likewise about 75 percent men reported beating their wives (Jahan, 1994).

Government has passed legislation to curb the misuse of amniocentesis techniques (1975) for sex selection and abortion of female fetuses. In 1971 there were 930 females for every 1000 males. A decade later this figure had increased to 934, but by 2001, instead of continuing to rise, the ratio dropped to 933, lower than the 1971 figure. The sex ratio is one of the lowest in the world. Desai Sonalda (1994) reports that there are posters in Mumbai advertising sex-determination tests that read, "it is better to pay 500 rupees now than 50000 rupees (in dowry) later." There is a cultural and religious bias against women. A man cannot attain „Moksha“ unless he has a son to light his pyre. Even the woman who espouses feminism chooses to abort a female child in her womb. The woman herself has internalized social bias against a female child and in favour of male child. Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PNDT) (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994 that came into force on January 1, 1996 has failed to check aborting of female foetus. The PNDT clinics are flourishing in cities and towns. Mobiles clinics are also functional in the field.

A South Indian woman working for Haryana Urban Development Authority (HUDA) office. A local man approached her and said "Sister, could you find a girl for my son?", and continued "you bring one from your state". She was curious. "Why from my state, why not someone from here?", "There are no girls here, we have been searching for a bride for him but can't find one". He was downcast.

When she visited another Haryanvi family recently, the daughter in the family was at home. She had a newborn baby girl. The father told her if it were a son they would have celebrated as the old saying goes, "Chhore pe baje thali, chhori thekere phoren" which means "announce the birth of a son by beating of brass plates but at the birth of daughter break earthen pots". The man continued, with pride in his custom, that at the time of marriage a bride is blessed by saying "Ashta putra sowbhagyavati bhavet" which means, "may you be blessed with eight sons". Once conception takes place, mantras from Atharva, one of the four most sacred books of Hinduism, are prescribed for chanting so that if the foetus is female it is transformed in to a male. The Indian psychic is still frozen with the notion of having male children.

It seems parents are mostly obsessed with the birth of boys. One son is a cause for joy, while two are seen as a lifetime celebration, the traditional thinking being that if one dies, at least the other will live to take care of the parents. In the bargain, women who give birth to girls are looked down. Most often the girl child is considered an economic loss as her marriage and dowry crush her family under huge burden of debts.

Despite the Constitutional provisions and a host of legislations enacted to protect women the ground reality is distressing. Misuse sex-determination tests and the termination of pregnancy in the event of female foetus give an indication of the despicable behavior pattern.

The fact is that women's exploitation is a reality and gender justice is fragile myth. Unless there is recognition of her rights by her counter part, her basic rights, gender justice would only her be a "lip service" with no tangible results.

Fight for justice by women or cry for gender equality is not a fight against men. It is a fight against traditions that have chained them – a fight against attitude that is ingrained in the society; it is a fight against proverbial Lakshman Rekha, which is different for men and women.

In India, Indian Penal Code sections 354 (Criminal assault of women to outrage women's modesty) and 509 (word, gesture or act intended to insult the modesty of woman) provide relief to victims of sexual harassment. Still, with the interpretation largely left to the discretion of the police officer, women groups have since the early 1980's voiced their protest against the malice. The Protection of Women Against Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Bill 2007 is designed to defend women against sexual abuse.

Women activists have been critical of this because of its provision that calls for punishing the women who seek the procedure. These women may be under pressure to bear a male child.

A 1976 amendment to child marriage restraint act raise the minimum legal age for marriage from 15 to 18 for young women and from 18 to 21 for young men. However, in many rural communities, illegal child marriage age still common. In some rural areas, nearly half the girls between 10 to 14 years are married. Because there is pressure on women to prove fertility conceiving as soon as possible after marriage, adolescent marriage is synonymous with adolescent child bearing; roughly 10-15 percent of all birth takes place to women in their teens.

GOVERNMENT ENACTMENTS

The National Commission for Women has in the last few years introduced several new bills in the parliament from time to time towards eradication of many social evils. Some of the significant enactments are mentioned here.

The Hindu Widow Re-Marriage Act of 1856

In the traditions at Hindu society there was a ban on widow remarriage – it was one of the most important evils from which women in the traditional Hindu society suffered a lot. This act allowed widow to remarry and section 5 of this Act ensured her to enjoy all the rights, which a married woman did.

The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929

The practice of child marriage was another social evil from which women in traditional Hindu society suffered a lot. Age at marriage for girls was 9 or 10 and after passing this act the minimum marriageable age of women was fixed to 15 years. Later this age was increased up to 18 years.

The Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1937

In the traditional society women had no property rights. In the eyes of law she was a minor or ward. This act recognized a widow of a deceased person as a surviving personality with the same right as his in the joint property. Thus, through this Act women in the Hindu society received the property right to a limited extent.

The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955

This Act has recognized the equal rights of men and women in the matters of marriage and divorce. Under the provision of this Act either the man or woman can present a petition in a court of law for divorce, wife has got equal right to divorce husband.

The Hindu Succession Act of 1956

This Act recognized an equal right for women in the matter of inheritance of property. She can inherit the property of her father along with her brothers. She can also sell or mortgage the inherited property or use it for herself. For the first time absolute ownership was conferred to a woman through this Act.

The suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act of 1956-57

This Act aims to deal with the problem of prostitution and to promote the welfare of fallen women. Main objectives of this Act are to reduce the scope of prostitution and to reform prostitution under this Act. Every state is expected to set up protective home and to appoint women police and women social workers. In protective homes these fallen women will be given training in tailoring, toy and basket making and other crafts so that they may earn for their maintenance in proper way.

The Dowry Prohibition Act 1961

The main objective of this Act is to abolish giving and taking dowry at the time of marriage. The term dowry refers to a valuable property or thing, which is determined by the parties to a marriage for a marriage. The practice of dowry had produced very bad effects. Dowry system, dowry cases have not been reduced. Still this Act makes some effort in bringing social change.

The above mentioned are the important legislations, which brought an upward trend in the status of women in India.

CONCLUSION

Thanks to the international agencies such as UN, women empowerment is the key slogan of the 90s and of the new millennium. Empowerment of women means....

- Acquiring knowledge and understand of gender relations and the ways in which these relations may be changed.
- Developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life.
- Gaining the ability to generate choices and exercise bargaining power.
- Developing the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change, to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

The concept of empowerment of women means psychological sense of personal control in the persons, domestic, social and political realms. It is a process by which one is authorized to think, act and control resources in an autonomous way.

The most critical component of women's empowerment is found to be education. It leads to improved economic growth, low fertility rate, health and sanitation and an awareness of factors that disempowered women. Work participation rate and political participation also grows in women's education.

The expansion of the market economy and industrialization and globalization brought increased inequalities, resulting in lose of livelihoods, erosion of natural resources and with it decreased women's access to water, fuel, fodder and traditional survival resources. It also brought new forms of exploitation-displacement, tourism, sex trade and retrenchment to mention a few. Women are being pushed into less productive sectors. Increased pressure on rural resources accelerated migration to urban areas in search of livelihood. People from backward regions, tribal communities, disadvantaged castes and the displaced communities were being pushed against the wall. Women in such countries shouldered the brunt and this phenomenon was labelled „feminization of poverty.

Women's health is an important component of women's empowerment. However the accumulated research evidences show that the achievement levels in providing better health care and safe motherhood for women, especially for rural women, are not at expected levels. In India, the highest number of deaths in the age group of 16 to 25 is recorded among women. Anaemia is one of the most commonly found deficiency among the women and it is also mentioned by several studies that they are often not too healthy when they bear the first child and none of them are physically ready to bear a second child. A pathetic reality is that nearly 88 percent of the pregnant women (1985-95) reported to be anaemic. World Health Organization figures also show that the lifetime risk of dying from pregnancy or child-birth-related causes is one in twenty in some developing countries, compared to one in ten thousand in some industrialized countries. About one in five of these deaths stem from unsafe abortions.

Work participation empowers women. However the condition of women in India is more miserable than the rest of the world in almost every field of social life. They are paid half of three-quarters of the money while their male counterparts earn for the same job. India is predominantly agricultural country. Women do more than half of the total agricultural work. But their work is not valued. On an average a woman works 15 to 16 hours a day unpaid at home and underpaid outside.

Among strategies for women empowerment, Government policies such as 73 and 74th amendment of Indian Constitution, Reservation policies, concessions, social legislation and enactment of certain acts were found be very important. However, the effect of such strategies failed to reach the target due to various bureaucratic and systemic failures. In this regard, the SHG approach towards women empowerment is found to be highly promising and effective. In the next chapter, we shall discuss in detail how SHGs mediate economic empowerment of women.



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