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Socio-economic empowerment of women in India

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Abstract

The nature of women is different from men. Nature has made them different and differently. Women are different than men but not weaker at all and in a sense they are stronger than men. Women may be weaker than men physically; it is true to some extent because they don't have muscle power. But in another sense women are stronger than men as they have greater resistance power. If a man and women fall ill with a certain disease, man will get broken sooner than the woman. It is also witnessed that women fall ill less frequently than men do and they live longer than men in the whole world. After independence of India, provisions were made in the Constitution of India that give women equal protection of law and equal rights. The government of India and state government have also made policies, schemes and have taken a number of steps in order to empower women and in order to bring them at par with men. Their condition has improved to an extent due to these provisions and steps but still they are not as empowered as men. Their representation in Parliament and Legislative Assemblies of various states, Supreme Court of India and High Courts and Various key posts of government is quite low and disappointing. And there is a lot to do in this direction in order to ensure their empowerment in India. It is clear to understand that women in India are comparatively less empowered and they acquire an inferior and lower social status than a man.

Keywords: Women empowerment, socio-economic condition, disparity, constitutional provisions, causes of backwardness of women, gender equality, government action, social disparity, women reservation

Introduction

The First part of this paper deals with the introduction and the meaning of women empowerment and theoretical understanding thereof. The second part of the study is about the historical background of women empowerment and various constitutional and legal provisions for women empowerment, Hindu Code Bill (1948) and Women Reservation Bill (2008) with a brief appraisal of government actions in India. Third part of the study draws conclusions of the study. This research study makes an attempt to analyze the information about the state of women or the women empowerment in India based on the secondary data from various published material. The study also tries to find out various reasons of poor condition of women in India and the dissimilarities in their social, political, educational and economic status. This paper mentions various provisions also for bringing equality in the status of women and men mentioned in the Constitution of India and other steps taken by the government of India from time to time.

Meaning of Women Empowerment

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the first Law Minister of Government of India was of the opinion that - The development of any country should be estimated by the progress of the women lived in that country and he says- I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress women have achieved.

With the conception of power and control ideology, patriarchy and gender, we should be unambiguous about the notion of empowerment. Empowerment is defined as the process and its outcome whereby the less powerful gain larger access and control over material and knowledge (George 2014) ^[1]. The troubles and constraints faced by women are almost similar in developed and developing countries; it is meaningful to study the different approaches to women empowerment (George 2014) ^[1]. The condition of women is similar all over the world and has been a cause of concern because the development of a country cannot be in shape if the empowerment and development of women lag behind.

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The lopsided progress is not a healthy progress and is an ill-progress rather.

Women empowerment is a procedure in which women achieve larger share of power and control over resources. The Country Report of Government of India explains the meaning of Empowerment as means moving from a situation of imposed weakness to one of command and power (Kaith 2018) ^[5].

The Oxford English dictionary explains the meaning of empowerment as an act of empowering while the UNICEF defines as the access of women and the awareness about the causes of inequality and wellbeing and capacity to solve these problems and causes of disparity and inferior status (Kollapudi *et al.* 2015).

The notion and the concept of women empowerment for the first time mentioned in a women conference in 1985 while in India the concentration on the empowerment of women was given in the eighth five year plan (1992-97) which was given again push in the year 2001 through a national policy regarding development and empowerment of women (Kollapudi *et al.*, 2015).

The empowerment of women depends on a number of various factors that may be physical, material, immaterial, and based on the age, status, control, age and locality. And there is a number of schemes and policies and legal provisions at state level, national level and local level to bridge the gap between the status of men and women, but still the equality and empowerment of women is still a distant dream and the application of the provision is still not up to the mark (Duflo, 2011) ^[3]. UNDP (1990) Report says that without empowerment of women, overall growth of human beings is not viable. It again says that if development is not engendered, is endangered (Nayak *et al.*, 2018) ^[4].

Women Empowerment: Theoretical Understanding

The principles of gender equality are enshrined and explained in the Constitution of India and found in Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles and Fundamental Duties. The Constitution of India grants equality to women and empowers the States to implement procedures of affirmative action in support of women, as well (Nayak *et al.*, 2018) ^[4].

Shettar (2015) ^[2] is of the opinion that the economic development and women empowerment depends on each other and there should be a constant efforts and policy implementation by the government to bring about women empowerment and equality between men and women.

The government of India has made a range of efforts to empower women. George (2014) ^[1] believed that the evidence regarding the impact on women's status and empowerment is mixed. He explained how the target of women empowerment can be achieved, and gave some measures to solve the problem. Hence, in this regard Political equal opportunity to all children without considering and regarding their birth place, castes and gender, etc. is necessary. It is not sufficient for the women empowerment to just give them right to vote only, there should be equal representation in various legislative assemblies and parliament. Without their equal political representation, their economic and non-economic progress cannot be equivalent to that of men (Kaith 2018) ^[5].

Nayak (2018) ^[4] analyses the condition of women empowerment in India with reflection of a variety of extents of it such as choice making, freedom of movement, financial

autonomy, political involvement, admittance to education, health, domestic cruelty etc. based on statistics and information from a mixture of sources.

Therefore, it is clear from the above-mentioned literature that there is a number of studies have already been conducted on the status and empowerment of women which mainly deals with the concept and meaning and measurement of women empowerment and their all-round development. The present research explains that women in India are less empowered and their backwardness is a result of the status and rights denied to women by ancient religious scriptures and practices.

History of Women Empowerment in India

From time immemorial, women in India are treated like a commodity of a second grade citizen lower than men who have few civic rights. The Hindu religious literature explains them equivalent to animals. In Ramayan, Tulsi Das writes about their status as- *Dhol, Ganwar, Shudra, Pashu, Naari; ye sab tadankeadhikari*. (<https://books.google.co.in>). Similar view were explained about women in Manu Smriti, the Hindu Code-Book of ancient period in India by which women were reduced to the status of animals and slaves (<http://nirmukta.com>). It is evident that our mothers, sisters, daughters and wives were harassed in India and their state is not good even today as they have to face problems and they remain at the mercy of men even today. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, was of the view that until and unless we challenge and disregard the Hindu Dharma-Shastras, nothing much can be changed (Kaith 2018) ^[5].

The Hindu Code Bill, 1948: The Hindu Code Bill was introduced in the year 1948 in Parliament of India and debated; there was a huge opposition against the Bill. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar tried his best to defend the Bill by pointing out the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity which are essential for a society and a civilized nation. The equality of rights and duties is essential for everyone. But the Hindu Code Bill was unable to become an Act because there was a strong opposition in then Parliament because the Bill was a threat to the patriarchy established in Indian society and intended to give equal rights to the women.

The Hindu Code Bill focused on

- Providing equal rights and status to Hindu Women.
- Removing disparities and inequalities of caste.
- Equal share of property to daughters and widows.
- Provision of maintenance to wife if she decided to live separately if husband have a "loathsome illness". (<https://www.2thepoint.in>)

The bill could not become an Act due to strong opposition in Parliament as it was considered as a threat to the Patriarchy established in Indian society. Hence, Dr. Ambedkar resigned as Law Minister. The incident shows how Parliament of India, represented by the people of India could not think it right to give equal rights to women (Kaith, 2018) ^[5].

Constitutional Provisions in India

The Constitution of India contains a range of provisions that provides for the similar and equal rights and protection to men and women some of the provisions are quoted as follows:

The Article 14 of the Constitution of India ensures equality before law and equal treatment of law to every citizen of India while Article 15 of the Constitution of India provides prohibition of any kind of discrimination based on sex, caste, colour, place of birth etc. and Article 15 (3) gives power to the State to make discrimination in favour of weaker sections of society (women and children).

The Article 16 of the Constitution on India provides for equal opportunity to all the citizens of India in the matter of public employment while Article 23 restricts human trafficking and in the form of forced labor. Article 39 empowers the States for offering equal pay and equal livelihood for equal work while Article 42 provides for good and humane condition of work and maternity relief for women. Article 51 of the Constitution of India makes provisions for Fundamental Duties for every citizen and restricts practices offensive for self-respect of women.

The Article 243 and its various sub-sections ensures that at least one third of the total seats must be reserved for women in the elections of local bodies of government i.e. Municipalities and Gram Panchayats and also reservation is provided for women belonging to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in the elections for chairpersons of these local bodies.

These provisions certainly indicate the steps taken by the government of India and legislatures which empower women in India. It is clear that there is a number of steps and provisions have been made since political independence of India in the year 1947. And as a result of these provisions the condition of women in India has certainly improved. The women are gaining employment and quality education and becoming independent economically and politically. (<http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in>)

Women Reservation Bill (2008)

The Women Reservation Bill was introduced in Parliament of India in the year 2008 by UPA government which was passed in Rajya Sabha but Lok Sabha did not have voting on it and consequently, the Bill lapsed. The bill, also known as 108th Constitution Amendment Bill, 2008, sought 33 percent seat reservation in Lok Sabha and in state legislative assemblies as well. Unfortunately, there is no attempt in this direction since the bill lapsed in Lok Sabha despite the fact that India ranked 148th in terms of women representation in executive government. As we have only 11.8 percent women MPs in Lok Sabha which is less than the global average of 22.8 percent (in June 2016) which shows a depressing state of women empowerment in decision making process.

A UNDP report titled, "Corruption, Accountability and Gender: Understanding the Connections", says that if there are more women representatives, there will be lesser corruption. The correlation between women empowerment through political representation and development may be observed in the Nordic countries of which Sweden accounting for 44.7 percent women in their legislature reflecting their national policy for being inclusive and gender sensitive. In Norway, there is a statutory mandate to have at least 40 percent of women on their boards in all public listed companies. The United Nations Women, has displayed research that reveals that women-led panchayats are better because they had 62 percent more drinking water projects than men-led panchayats. In India also, there are evidences that show better development where women are

involved. According to the Election commission of India, only one in every 10 MPs is a woman and this representation of have increased from 4.4 percent in 1951 to 11 percent in 2014 which is far below the global average of 23.4 percent. Following this rate it will take 180 years more to achieve gender balance in India. (<https://www.dailyo.in>)

Main Provisions of Women Reservation Bill (2008)

The Women's Reservation Bill, the Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill 2008 provides for –

1. The Bill provided for 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and legislative assemblies of all the states.
2. The allocation of such seats to be done by an authority approved by the Parliament of India.
3. Within the seats reserved for women, one third will be reserved for scheduled caste women and scheduled tribe women.
4. The reservation of seats will be on rotation basis in various constituencies of Lok Sabha and state/UT legislative assemblies.
5. This reservation will come to an end after 15 years of the beginning of implementation of this law.

Arguments against the Women Reservation Bill (2008)

Some of the arguments are extended that "women empowerment" is different than creating "powerful women" and reserving seats in Parliament and state legislature may not be a right solution if we have discriminatory attitude towards women. The following are the arguments against the bill-

- a. Providing reservation for women is a kind of denial of democratic rights on the basis of gender to all men in the constituency.
- b. The reservation of seats for women will also put a limit on the choice of voters who like to vote for a male candidate.
- c. Some are of the views that in a democratic country where 131 out of 543 Lok Sabha seats are already reserved for scheduled caste and scheduled tribe candidates, a further reservation of 33 percent seats for women may not be a true reflector of voters' choice.
- d. The bill provides that the 33 percent reservation for women will come to an end after a period of 15 years after its enactment. But it does not seem practical because once a reservation is provided, it becomes next to impossible to reduce or remove it.
- e. Instead of Women Reservation Bill, some arguments are given to making political parties nominate more women for their executive committees and ensuring reservation for women within parties. Countries like Canada, United Kingdom, France, Norway and Sweden etc. give reservation of seats to women within the political parties, not in parliament. One more alternate is given by some of the people that instead giving reservation to women in parliament, there may be an introduction of dual-member constituencies, which means that there will be two members in each constituency one being a woman. But the proper feasibility of these alternatives is also doubtful. (<https://www.thequint.com>).

Socio-economic Development of Women in India

Some of the Steps taken recently for women socio-economic development:

1. Mahila E-haat

This is a digital platform for helping and encouraging women economic growth through entrepreneurship for making them independent. This includes women Self help Groups and Non Governmental Organisations for showing their product and services under the 'Digital India' initiative.

2. Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao

This campaign was aimed to reduce and eradicate foeticide of females and spreading social awareness for the schemes and programs of the government for the social and economic welfare of women in India. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the Ministry of Human Resource Development launched and initiated a movement 'Save the Girl Child' on January 22, 2015 with an initial funding of Rs.100 crore.

3. One Stop Centre Scheme "Sakhi"

These centres have been established in various regions and districts in India with the Nirbhaya Fund on April 01, 2015 onwards, to provide various helps like police desk, shelter and medical and legal services to the girls and women victims of violence under one roof and with a 24 hour helpline.

4. Working Women Hostels

This is a scheme to provide a safe and convenient environment and shelter to the working women with day-care facility for their children in all the possible regions where the employment exists for women.

5. Nari Shakti Puruskars

The Nari Shakti Puruskars were also given to those women and institutions that have made distinguished services for the cause of women, especially for those who belong to any backward and marginalised social group. The national level awards are presented by the President of India every year on the International women's Day at Rastrapati Bhavan, New Delhi to encourage the women and institutions working in this direction.

<https://www.goodreturns.in/classroom/2018/02/7-indian-government-schemes-women-empowerment-680804.html>

Appraisal of Government Actions to Empower Women in India

There are provisions in the Constitution of India, there is awareness in people, there are laws to save and protect women and the government of India has also taken various steps for the empowerment of women, yet the situation has not improved much which is supported by the statistic which says that in 2012, women acquired only eight out of 74 ministerial posts as far as union council of ministers is concerned. And there were only two women judges in the Supreme Court of India and the number of women judges in the High Courts of various states was also quite low.

The Census (2011) of India reveals the educational disparity of men and women and poor performance of women on an average. The male literacy rate 82.14% and female literacy rate was 65.46%. which explains that female literacy rate progress is low till now. The state of women is worse in states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh where the disparity loomed large (Shettar 2015)^[2].

India ranks 148 out of 193 UN member nations as far as

representation of women in parliament is concerned. India lags behind its neighboring countries like Pakistan (20.7%), Bangladesh (20.3%) and Nepal (29.9%), according to a Geneva-based Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). The need of affirmative action to improve women representation was felt by UN Women in 2017. (<https://www.hindustantimes.com>)

Conclusions

"We shall see better days soon and our progress will be greatly accelerated if male education is persuaded side by side with female education." Dr. B. R. Ambedkar After independence of India, provisions were made in the Constitution that gives them protection and equal rights, the government of India and state governments have also made policies, schemes and have taken a number of steps in order to empower women and in order to bring them at par with men. Their condition has improved to an extent due to these provisions but still they are not as empowered as men and their representation in Parliament and Legislative Assemblies of various states, Supreme Court of India and High Courts and Various key posts of government is quite low and disappointing. And there is a lot to do in this direction in order to ensure their empowerment in India. Therefore, it is clear to understand that women in India are comparatively less empowered and they acquire an inferiority and lower social status than men (Nayak *et al.* 2018)^[4].

In India, like in any other country, the condition of women is comparatively not good. They have to be dependent on men for various economic and non-economic matters. Their place in the society is considered lower than men. They are vulnerable and subject to various kinds of harassment and maltreatment. The main causes of their backwardness and powerlessness is the socio-religious norms and practices that consider them a second grade citizen and deny them equal opportunity and equal status in the society.

Education is the right weapon to break the chains of social slavery and which will enlighten the oppressed masses to come and gain social-economic betterment and political liberty- Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

"I strongly believe in the movements run by women. If they are truly taken in to confidence, they may change the present picture of society which is very miserable."- Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (<https://feminisminindia.com>)

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