

Empowerment of Women in India

Dr. Leena Sarkar

Abstract

Women empowerment means emancipation of women from the vicious grips of social, economical, political, caste and gender-based discrimination. It means granting women the freedom to make life choices. Women empowerment does not mean replacing patriarchy with parity. Empowerment of women is to make them independent in all aspects from mind, thought, rights, decisions etc. by leaving all the social and family limitations. In the Indian society, women faced several problems since ages. The women in India were subject to suffer from forced widowhood, child marriage, female infanticide, illiteracy, restrictions on widow remarriages, polygamy, concubine, sati and number of social evils which were supported by so called religious traditions. The question of improving the position of women had been at the heart of the social reforms movement from the first quarter of the 19th century when Raja Rammohan Roy started his questioning of social orthodoxy. Later on, lots of efforts were made for the emancipation of women by reformers like Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Mahatma Jotiba Phule, Pandita Ramabai, Ramabai Ranade. After Independence, government started securing legal and constitutional rights for women.

Keywords:

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1. Introduction

Position of women in Indian society differed from period to period and age to age. Although it was quite satisfactory in the Rig Vedic period, it considerably transformed in the latter period and made her subservient. As a matter of fact, the position of women mainly depends upon the two important elements in the society. The first is the social philosophy and the second the social institutions developed in the passage of time. The social philosophy initiates a particular level of the culture and the general outlook of the society; these elements help in determining the position of women. In addition to these, the social institutions have come up as family, marriage, provisions of Hindu law and the religion, which have never indicated a liberal outlook towards women. These institutions created several problems in the life of women.

2. Efforts towards Emancipation of Women

It is said that the gradual deterioration in the status of the women began during the Smriti period. In society women could not have an independent status and became entirely dependent on the men in socio-economic matters. With the passage of time, women became victims of various social evils such as female infanticide, seclusion and dowry. They were denied education. These social evils and the low status of women continued since the ancient period. Due to the impact of western education and the educated Indians such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayananda Saraswati and other social reformers, an attempt was made to liberate women from the shackles of ancient social disabilities through the socio-religious reform movements. The

Brahmo Samajists sought to bring women into new roles through schools and prayer meetings. Swami Vivekananda was arguing that women could become a powerful regenerative force. Dayananda encouraged female education and condemned all evil customs. M.G. Ranade, Malabari, D.K. Karve tried to educate young widows and made them teachers in girl's schools. R.V.R. Naidu opposed the Devdasi system while Pantulu worked for marriage reforms. Ishwar Chandra Vidysagar supported the female education and advocated the widow remarriage. Although, the widow remarriage act was passed in 1856, the status of women was not changed and never received the approval of the society.

3. Women in National Movement

Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the national movement became a mass movement since 1920. The participation of women in the national movement made a steady progress from the non-cooperation movement to the Quit India movement in 1942. During these mass movements, the women shouldered the responsibilities with running their homes, to contribute to the might of the freedom struggle as they marched on the streets, shouted slogans, picketed shops of foreign goods and liquor, faced police lathi charge and bullets. Due to Gandhiji's appeal the Indian women fought shoulder to shoulder with men in the freedom struggle of India, which enhanced their status and brought to the front several issues related to women. The national movement was the first forum where the women participated in public life, to acquire rights and positions hitherto denied to them. They showed their capability as Socialist, Communist and Militant revolutionaries. They also fought under the leadership of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose for the liberation of our country from the British rule. Many women participated in the national movement. In 1889, ten women attended the Indian National Congress session. In 1890, Swarnakumari Ghosal, a novelist and Kadambiri Ganguly, the first women in the British Empire to receive BA and the India's first lady doctor attended as delegates. Saraladevi, Muthulakshmi Reddy and Amrit Kaur followed Gandhi in the movement. Sarojini Naidu, Goshiben Naoriji and Avantikabai Gokhale were attached to Rashtriya Stree Sangha. Urmila Devi, Shanti Das and Bimal Protiba Devi in Bengal and Smt. S. Ambujammal, Krishnabai Rau and Rukmani Lakshmi pathy from south were ahead in the movement. Due to this participation of women, changes started taking place in the society and administration. The first major change was a legislation passed in 1937, the Hindu Women's property Act. It applied uniformly to all Hindus. When a husband died leaving property, the widow would be entitled to the same share as the sons in the property. In the case of joint family property, she would be entitled to the same interests in the property as her husband had, including the right to demand partition.

4. Indian Women in Transition

The Indian National Movement began to change the condition of women in the country. This change enabled women to demand the trappings of modern life, education, health care, protective legislations, civil and political rights within the framework of a social feminist ideology that constructed women more psychologically different than man. Indian women, who sacrificed for her husband and family in the past, the same habit of sacrifice now valorized the women worthy for all rights in the country.

5. Legal Provisions

The Constitution promised complete equality to women. Women got the right to vote along with men without any qualification of education, property or income. The Preamble to the Constitution of India, promises to secure to all citizens; justice, social, economic and political and equality of status and opportunity.

Keeping in tune with the provisions in the Constitution several labour laws were passed ensuring equal pay for equal work for both men and women, maternity benefits, crèches and separate sanitary facilities for women workers.

6. Hindu Code Bill

The Hindu code Bill was largely the creation of Dr. Ambedkar. This bill raised the age of consent and marriage, upheld monogamy, gave women the right to divorce, maintenance and inheritance and treated dowry as Stridhan or women property. But due to strong opposition of congress leaders, bill was postponed. After 1952, Pandit Nehru passed four separate acts : The Hindu Marriage Act, The Hindu Succession Act, The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act.

7. Political Rights to Women

The 64th Constitution Amendment Bill was passed in 1992. The Act provided that at least one-third of the total seats shall be reserved for women of whom one-third shall be from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Thus, the women at all level became part and parcel of the decision making bodies.

Mrs. Indira Gandhi, ex-Prime Minister of India, regularly sent women abroad as ambassadors, representatives to the United Nations and to international conferences, to celebrate the women's international year. There were many programmes organized to publicize women's achievements.

Indian women can vote and stand for election to all provincial and central bodies. But their involvement falls short of the equality promised by the constitution in comparison with other countries of the world. Indian women held consistently 4-5 percent seats in the Lok Sabha until the 1980s and in the Rajya Sabha; women have held the seats between 7 and 10 percent.

8. The Self – Employed Women’s Association (SEWA)

The Self Employed Women’s Association of Ahmedabad was started in 1972. It has a membership of over two lakh women in the country. It is a trade union, which organized women working in the informal sector as head loaders, rag pickers, junk dealers, vegetable vendors, bamboo workers and handcart pullers. It also provides a credit and savings bank, training programs, social security schemes and production and marketing co-operatives. The SEWA bank has been providing the credit to the needy and has had a much better record of repayment than other commercial banks. The SEWA has been organizing training programmes to improve production of bamboo products, painting, and embroidery and has established marketing co-operatives to avoid exploitation by middlemen. It has drawn attention to the unorganized sector in the development process.

9. Shramik Sanghatana

Shramik Sanghatana among the Bhil tribals of Dhule district in Maharashtra arose in the early 1970’s, in response to attempted land grabs by the Gujar caste. The Sanghatana forced the government to cancel transfer of tribal lands and demanded enforcement of minimum wages. The Sanghatana established village level committees of tribal agricultural labourers. The Sanghatana also organized the tribal women, and held its first training camp for women in 1973.

10. Mahila Dakshata Samiti

A number of women’s organizations such as the Mahila Dakshata Samiti, run by Pramila Dandavate, who was an advocate of dowry law amendment, and Saheli of Delhi had been in the forefront in fighting against the evils of the dowry system. A bill to amend the Dowry Prohibition Act was demanded in order to strengthen the law against perpetrators of dowry-related crimes, which was passed in 1984.

11. Women and Different Movements

Indian women had been playing their role as peasant, tribals, farmers, trade union and environment movements on specifically women issues. In Uttarakhand, in the hill areas of the Uttar Pradesh, women participated in large numbers in the environmental protection programme under the leadership of Sunderlal Bahuguna Known as the Chipco movement. The movement to amend the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 was another case where women’s organizations had been able to mobilize public opinion in favor of greater justice for women. Indian women had been gradually empowered in various fields of national life. They have been marching ahead in education, politics, social work, culture, literature, fine art and performing arts. Indian women at the end of the twentieth century would argue that they still have to a long way to go to attain gender justice. It is important to temper the interpretation of the present with an appreciation of the enormous sacrifices Indian women have made to bring about change. It is true that women’s education and political action have altered India’s social and political landscape. Women have moved from being objects of legislation to initiators. For many women the family no longer exercises total control over their destinies. A general awakening has begun and it can’t be permanently suppressed by men as usual.

12. Conclusion

There had been steady empowerment of women in different fields of national life since independence. Women have been marching ahead in all field including the areas which were not open for them in the past. However, compared to their number, the women who have been empowered are not enough. Moreover, there are still several long term problems in the life of women such as illiteracy, inequality, unemployment, underemployment and many others. It is true that women’s education and political activism have altered India’s social and political landscape. A general awakening has begun and it can’t be permanently suppressed by men as they did in the past.

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