
EMPOWERMENT OF INDIAN WOMEN IN 21ST CENTURY: A MERE ILLUSION

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Abstract: One of the major concerns India still facing is the status of women in the society. India gained independence 27 years back but the question remains, do Indian women gained independence? They are still in one or the other means sidelined or taken for granted. The patriarchal notion is so embedded in the society that it seems to be the ultimate truth. The social taboos had stuck women to be what they are capable of. So the women issue needs special attention and concern for the equal and the better world in proper manner. The paper focuses on the status of women from the Dharma shastras to the 21st century, and different means and efforts taken for empowering women's position. The paper further explains the grounded reality of women's position in the purview of gender. Finally the paper explains the measures required to empower the status of women in the society, for the just world.

Keywords: Empowerment, Gender, Patriarchy, Women.

Introduction: India, since time immemorial had honoured women in the form of goddesses but at the same time another women is being exploited, deprived of their legitimate birth rights to education, freedom, property and what not. Intellectuals, scholars, researchers, politicians and statesmen in different centuries talked about discrimination of women and the ways of uplifting them. It has always been propagated that the home, society or the state at large where women is respected, has always been flourished. Manu says, "where women are respected, there the gods delight and where they are not, there all works and efforts come to naught" (Abhedananda, 2000:143). But till today women are being raped and beaten more in the closed door than in the public. Such a strange thing really took place in India and still going on.

Women Empowerment: The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) Agenda 21 mentions women's advancement and empowerment in decision-making, including women's participation in national and international ecosystem management and

control of environment degradation as a key area for sustainable development (Wee and Heyzer, 1995: 7).

Efforts for women empowerment: Historically in India, power has always been personified in feminine gender whether it is Durga, Kali, Bharavi or Laxmi (Hindu context). Women had hold higher position in a society but their status started getting deteriorated from the medieval period (Nelasco, 2010:8). It was during the Dharmashastras that the status of women completely deteriorated. Women led a life of total subjugation and had virtually lost all hopes of emancipation. The empowering of women began during the colonisation period. The Britishers along with Indian reformers raised their voice to eliminate brutal practices against woman, which had placed them at the marginalized position in the society such as: female infanticide, child marriage, enforced widowhood and sati. Reformist organizations likes, Brahmo Samaj founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1828, the Arya Samaj set up by Dayanand Saraswati in 1875, and Ramakrishna Mission created by Vivekananda in 1897 and individual male reformers like Eshwarchandra Vidyasagar, Ramakrishna Paramahans, Keshab Chandra Sen, Maharishi Kare, Mahadev Ranade and Gopal Krishna Gokhale led the fight against women's oppression by condemning such practices as polygamy, early marriage, enforced widowhood and by advocating female literacy. Women do also played important role in the freedom struggle. Mahatma Gandhi gave importance to women and incorporated them in struggle process. For Gandhi, women were not mere toys or dolls in the hands of men neither their competitors. According to Gandhi, "Intellectually, mentally and spiritually women is equivalent to a male and she can participate in every activity." In his speeches and writings, Gandhi said that in many matters, especially those of tolerance, patience and sacrifice, the Indian women is superior to the male (Barman, 2013). India gained its importance in 15th August 1947 and constitution came into force on 26th January 1950, operates as the fundamental law in India.

Giving recognition of women's' participation in freedom struggle of the country, the principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its preamble, fundamental rights, fundamental duties and directive principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women but also empowers the state to adopt measures, a position; indiscriminate in favour of women. Within the framework of democratic polity, our laws, developmental policies, plans and

programmes are aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. Article 14 talks about right to equality before law and equal protection of law, Article 15 -No discrimination against any citizen in the name of sex, etc., Article 15(3) empowers the state to make 'any special provision for women and children', even in violation of the fundamental obligation of non discrimination among citizens, inter alia of sex, Article 16(1)-guarantees 'equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state', Article 16(2) forbids discrimination 'in respect of any employment of office under the state' on the grounds only of 'religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any one of them'. Directive Principles of State Policy also brings forwards the points concerning women position in the society. These include:

- a. Article 39 (a) 'All citizens (men and women) equally have the right to an adequate means of livelihood'
- b. Article 39(d) 'equal pay for equal work for both men and women'
- c. Article 39(e) 'health and strength of workers – men, women and children of underage are not abused'
- d. Article 42 'provision for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief'

India has also ratified various international conventions and national conventions were formed to secure rights of women. Important reforms were made such as Hindu Marriage Act, Hindu Succession Act, Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, Dowry Prohibition Act, Maternity Benefit Act etc. The Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) came up with the concept of rescuing and uplifting women from the social evil grounded in the society. Till today women are trying to understand their position in the society.

Grounded Reality: Positive aspect for women empowerment is that women have become increasingly aware of sexual inequalities in every sphere of life and are seeking ways to fight them. Holistically there has been growth in the women's position but the growth is too slow to match with the era or changing world. Social taboos are still present in the society. The difference is only that the ways or methods of subordination are different but the crux of domination is still the same. In spite of remarkable changes or initiatives taken in bringing up the issue, pain and suffering of women forefront and the ways to curtail it through Constitutional remedies, policies, plans, programmes, the situational

reality on the status of women in India is very different. There is still a distinct reality of deprivation and degradation. Till today women are considered as commodities, so are subjected to inhuman exploitation and discrimination in all spheres of life from being from the mother womb till they reach to grave. The sex differences are gendered and it's so inherited in the society that everyday women suffer a lot.

Gender: The gender differences are often mistaken with sex differences. The differences in the power relations between male and female further resulted into the differences between masculinity and femininity. The sex refers to the physical and physiological differences between male and female whereas the gender differences denotes the differences between "man" and "woman" from the societal lens, meaning, gender is socially constructed term based on the differences between masculinity and femininity. Gender is social and cultural structure that defines what is to be a "man" and what it means to be a "woman" in a given society and cultural setting. Gender also explains the differences between men and women with respect to their problems, needs, priorities and proposal for solutions, participation and access over resources and opportunities for development, political participation, etc. An often inequality in gender increases the risk of acts of violence by men against women from the private sphere to the public sphere.

The genders stereotypes are hidden in such a way that people tend to behave accordingly and if some tries to behave differently the society sanction them to behave accordingly. For instance, a girl child are rarely given a car or a gun to play with, on the other hand the baby boy are not allowed to cry, as they are said to be acting like a girl. There are lots stereo typing that are associated with men and women and wants them to behave the same, for instance characteristics like active, self confident, analytical, physically strong, good at numbers and problem solving, etc are associated with men and pretty, soft voice, gentle, understanding, caring, warmly, good at house hold things, sacrificing are often related with women.

Gender and its stereo typing are so imbedded in the society and it still continues to remain and seems like the man and woman are prescribed to behave accordingly. The pattern of the society makes "men" so strong and powerful on the one hand and the "women" as very feasible and weak. The man seems to be protector and woman seems to get protected. The hierarchical nature of the society keeps man at the top and woman below,

led exploitation and discrimination of women.

Illusion of women empowerment: Women are being brutalized, commodified, materialised and subjected to inhuman exploitation and discrimination in almost all parts of the world, there lies the difference in variation and degree of differentiation. Seeing Global Gender Gap Index[1]2013, India has been ranked 101 among 136 countries in the world with increase in position from 105th in 2012 (World Economic Forum, 2013). The index shows the growth in the position of women in the 2013 as compared to that of 2012 but at the same time 2012-13 is the same year where the cruelty towards women was the major subject of discussion worldwide. For instance, Manipal case, June 2013; Nirbhaya case December 2012, etc. The NCRB said the number of rapes in the country rose by 35.2 percent to 33,707 in 2013 - with Delhi reporting 1,441 rapes in 2013 - making it the city with the highest number of rapes and confirming its reputation as India's "rape capital", India's biggest city and business capital Mumbai, known for being more women-friendly, recorded 391 rapes last year, while IT hub Bangalore registered 80 rapes. (Ndtv, Press Trust of India, July 8, 2014), Rape cases reported in Tamil Nadu until November 853 (State Crime Records Bureau, The Hindu by S. Mohammed Rohith Jan 5, 2014). So, the question remains do Indian women is empowering or is just a mere illusion?

It has always been said that women in 21st century works in hand in hand with their counterparts. They are not only the home makers but also contributes in the economy of the family, but most of the working women are facing the problem of sexual harassment at work place. In one place women are given privileges to work as they desire but in other place women are harassed and molested.

The human rights scenario in the country continues to be dismal and depressing. 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment acts have provided access to women in the decision making process at the grass-root level but their representation in the Parliament and state legislatures is woefully poor. In reality women representatives are ornamental in nature and political consciousness is found lacking among them. They are affected by the caste and class divisions, feudal attitudes, patriarchal nature of the family and village-social, environmental, ethnic, religious separatism.

In 1985, a separate department of Women and Child Development was set up. In the Sixth Five Year plan, a separate chapter on Women and

Development was included. The government had started and implemented major programmes like Support to Training-cum-Employment for Women (STEP), Mahilakosh, Womens Development Corporation, etc. However, efforts of the state have not proved fruitful in the rural and urban areas. For example, sex determination of foetus still continues in all the rural regions of the country despite the enforcement of legislation on Pre-natal Diagnostic Technique (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, which was passed in 1994.

There are various crimes which women have faced in the past and still facing it, includes eve teasing, sexual assault, domestic violence, stalking, forced prostitution, trafficking, forced abortion, domestic violence, acid attacks, rape, molestation, dowry deaths, and many more vicious crimes.

Conclusion: The issue of women empowerment in India really needs to be taken care. India really needs empowered women practically. There still needs to ratify mistakes in the steps taken in empowering women. Firstly, women should understand their position in the society and power within themselves and fight against the social evils that are taking place in the society against them; they must oppose this sex determination of foetus, eve-teasing, bride burning, child marriage, exploitation in the offices, lower wages for labour etc. Until and unless they understand their own situation and take step fight their own battle, no one will. Secondly, women from all walks of life must unite and must give priority to their education, growth and the prosperity of their families. Thirdly proper education should be imparted because sole empowerment of women can be met only if they are given proper education, they will understand their position in the society, understand their rights and liberties that have been guaranteed with, that help them to plan and run their life accordingly and can claim their basic human entitlements. Fourthly many awareness programmes at state, region and village level should be initiated by the governmental and nongovernmental organisation for the upliftment of women. Fifthly women's health should always be given priority because it's an important element in the empowerment of women, so government should take women's health into consideration and scheme should be implemented accordingly. Sixthly, value work should be provided to women because women always end up doing unpaid and underpaid work. Seventhly, most of the women are deprived of the resources available, check balances should be done by the government at all level for the proper implementation of resources.

Eighthly, safety of women is the major subject of concern for the women of the 21st century, it should be dealt with more alert and more strong actions against the criminals and with delicacy with the victims, more preventive measure also need to adopt to curtail down the rate of crime which is ingoing in the society, more female officers and constables should accept in the police department so that they are able to deal with the female victims of our society and handle the situation properly. Ninthly, major problems still prevalent in the 21st century includes, female infanticide, female torture, dowry must be banned in the country. Lastly, strong legislation must be framed and pass so that the status of women in society is brought to a respectable level.

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