

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN : MYTH AND REALITY

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with various aspects of women empowerment including efforts made for it and the ground realities.

Key words :- Women Empowerment.

Women empowerment is a comprehensive and much debated issue and it is a dynamic process which enables women to realize their full uniqueness and power in all spheres of life. It consist of greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making to enable them to have greater ability to plan their lives, or have greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and free them from shackles imposed on them by custom, belief and practice The term empowerment is related to the poor, backward class people and women, particularly the women of disadvantaged group of people. Empowerment is related to the development of a group of people or the section of people in matter of education, health, nutrition and employment. Empowerment is also related to the participation of marginalized group of people including women in political bodies. A person is ably empowered if he or she attains considerable education and gets employment, plays vital role in decision making. In fact, empowerment is a process in which a person assumes an increased involvement in defining and promoting his own agenda for development in respect of social, economic and political matters.

So for as women empowerment is concerned it is about gaining autonomy and control over resources includes man) dimensions such as economic, social and political. In the empowerment process a women find time and space of their own and being to reexamine their lives critically and collectively. They enable women to look at old problems in new ways, analyze their environment and situation, recognize their strength, idler their self image, access new kinds of information and knowledge acquire new skills and knowledge and imitate action aimed at gaining greater control over resources of various kinds, in a wav. The term empowerment is often used to describe a process where by the powerless or disempowered people gain a greater share of control of resources and decision-making.

Efforts for Empowerment of Women

In India, from the ancient time the several efforts were taken to improve the social condition of women. In ancient India, women were given equal rights with men in all walks of life particularly education. Women had the freedom to remain single as well as freedom to choose their life partners. Women not only got the freedom to choose (heir lives but their identity is also recognized by the society. With the emergence of "Buddhism' the stains of women have improved. "Buddhism" not only opposed the caste-system but also gave respect lo thewomen's freedom. During "Bhakti" period the status of women was maintained .and they have given freedom to express themselves.' But later the status of women began to decline due to the various reasons, especially during Muslim rule women status was in lowest Position. Further, at the beginning of nineteenth century when British rule was established in India, some significant steps were taken to improve the status of women, hence several acts like, abolishen of Sati Pratha, Act of 1829. Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, etc. came into existence. In addition to this, a number of steps were also taken for promoting women education. The campaigns for the improvement and empowerment of women has been continued during national movement specially the role of Mahatma Gandhi was important in this regard.

After Independence the several constitutional, legislative as well as executive measures has taken up for the amelioration of sorry plight of the women in India. Provisions were made in Indian constitution to provide equal rights and opportunities of socio-economic development and betterment of living for women, for instance, Article-14 of the Indian constitution provides equality before law and equal protection of law. Article-15 provides for prohibition of discrimination on the ground of sex. while Article-23 provide for prohibition of traffic in human beings. Besides, the Directive Principle of State Policy enshrined in the constitution have a special bearing on the status and empowerment of women. Article-51 (A) of the Indian constitution lays down that it will be the duly of every citizen to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women The constitution guarantees political equality to women through the institution of adult franchise as well.

In addition to the constitutional provisions, the government has also tried to uplift the status of women through various legislative enactments such as the special Marriage Act. 1954, the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, the Hindu Succession Act, 1955, the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956, the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls, 1956, the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971, the Equal Remuneration Act. 1976. the comprehensive Family Court Act, 1984 etc. In this regard, many commendable initiatives in terms of administrative measures are also worth citing. These include the setting up of women and child

development departments at the union and state levels and "formation of National Commission for women in several states."¹

Many initiatives were also carried out in various Five Year Plans to maximize the participation of women in different development programmes. For the first time a chapter on "Women and Development" was included in the Sixth Five Year Plan, introducing women specific and related programmes which brings improvement in the socio-economic condition of women. Further, the

Sixth Five-Year Plan introduced a variety of development programmes specifically for women. Under the National Perspective Plan (N.P.P.) for women, (1988-2000) provision was made to maximize the participation of women in on going IRDP and other programmes introduced at providing self employment opportunities. During this plan, an Indira Manila Yojna: Manila Samridhi Yojna was introduced and a Rastriya Mahila Kosh (R.M.K..) established to encourage women to hold their own saving's accounts and funds for productive activities.⁶

In addition to these, women specific policies like National Policy on Education (1980) and National Health Policy (1983) and National Policy for Empowerment of women (2001) is adopted to advocates the welfare and development of women in the country. All these constitutional, legislative and administrative efforts were directed towards the social, economic and political empowerment of women in India. However, a major step towards the political empowerment of Indian women was needed. This great need is fulfilled in 1993 and ultimately the 73rd and 74th Amendments came into existence.

Women can not be empowered unless they are provided proper representation in the political system. Realising this fact, the Parliament passed the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the constitution in 1992 and ratified in 1993. This has been the latest legislative efforts in the series of efforts towards women empowerment. In fact, it was an attempt to achieve the social empowerment of women through the political empowerment. Through these acts an efforts has been made to politically empower the women of the rural and urban areas respectively. These amendments were declared as revolutionary steps in the direction of social and political upliftment of women. These amendments made the provision of not less than one-third reservation to women among the elected representatives of the local governments. The reservations have been provided for women not only at the level of members but not less than one-third of the chairpersons of these bodies are to be women.

These amendments, for the first time, provide guarantee of representation in local bodies to the women. Such a drastic measure is intended for three fold purposes

- 1) Political empowerment of women.

- 2) Removal of isolation of women in the village political system.
- 3) Hanging the quality of village leadership.

The idea behind it was that at the grass root level a new leadership would emerge, which is expected to administer the financial resources effectively and would provide initiative and constructive thinking in village administration and its development. Thus, the 73rd and 74th amendments can be considered as a landmark in the history of empowerment of women in India.

Ground Realities of Women Empowerment

Though several constitutional, legislative and executive measures has been iakea towards the social, economic and political empowerment of women, which certainly helped them to change their lives. Now today the socio-economic and political status of women has not remain the same as it was earlier. However lamentably the results of the various efforts have not been satisfactory. Still, the over all status of women has not improved and has, infact, even declined, besides some significant and crucial gains. Hence, it is necessary to examine and verily whether the various measures has able to empower the women or not, The following are the major weakness in the path of women empowerment:

- 1) The major drawback in the path of women empowerment is their unequal status in the male dominating society. Whatever the issues may be either birth or marriage of daughter, health, education, occupation, property or any other special thing, women are never brought into the scenes and they are always neglected by the male persons. Hence, their position becomes weak in the society.
- 2) The another reason for women subordination is the culture of Indian society, which never permits women to raise her voice infront of her father, husband or other male person. Right from the birth restrictions are drawn in every stage of their development. So from the early stage of their development they arc made dependent upon others. This dependency hesitate them to think and act independently which ultimately affects their socio-economic and political empowerment.
- 3) Literacy, low level of education and lack of awareness among a large segment of women, has made meaningless the various provisions of empowerment. Despite the several efforts for expansion of women education, majority is still either illiterate or less educated. According to the census of 2000-2001 the female literacy rate was only 54.16 % which is less than the expectation. Due to this, majority is still unaware about their rights and various governmental policies and programmes. Hence, the larger portion of women population is untouched from the empowerment.

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- 4) Despite receiving constant attention of both planners and policy makers, the majority of women still suffer from drastic inequalities. Still there are 80 percent women, who are victims of rape, violence (including domestic violence), kidnapping, etc. Survey reports prove that after every 7" minutes, women becomes (he victims in the society through, bride burning, violence, rape and kidnapping. Thus, in a such society where the violence against women has become a common phenomena, it is worthless to talk about the social empowerment of women.
- 5) The various social evils, like Dowry system, child-marriage. Sati Pratha and Untouchability are the other harriers which is preventing the women from the empowerment.
- 6) The present political scenario of India is also not in favour of women empowerment. Though the constitution has given equal political rights to the women to take part in the political affairs, but due to the criminalization of polities and corrupt practices in costly election, the women have isolated themselves from the various political affairs. Hence, (he quality and quantity of political participation by women had declined considerably. This trend is against the political empowerment of women.
- 7) Poverty and unemployment are the major factor which prevents women towards participating in decision making process. It is. therefore without improving the economic position of women, the aim of empowerment of women can not be achieved.
- 8) Through the constitution of India has politically empowered (he women at grass root level through 73" amendments, by providing reservation to women in the Panchayati Raj institution. But the experience of Panchayal Raj bodies have proved that the most of women are incapable to utilize their political power independently. Hence, the provisions of reservation of women in grass root politics have become worthless and -again the domination of males prevailed in the panchayats.

Thus, the positions of women empowerment in India, is very disappointing. The several constitutional, legislative, executive and other provisions of socio-economic and political empowerment of women, seems to be more a myth than a reality. To this end, it is not merely sufficient to make a provisions for women empowerment but the serious efforts are simultaneously required at the social and economic fronts. There is a great need to bring a change in the altitude of the rural life, particularly of the male segment, regarding the role of the women. There is need to empower .women to enhance their quality of participation. This can be achieved through training besides of course the literacy educational programs, A special attention needs to be paid I.) the grass-root women, who are the real victims of male

dominated society. To improve the economic position of women, a good training to (hem in various programs of employment is highly required. Unless, they arc provided with proper and adequate employment opportunities, the aim of empowerment of women cannot be achieved. Moreover, (he social evils must needs to be curbed in the absence of which socio economic and political empowerment of women would remain a distant dream.

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