

Women’s Emancipation and Empowerment in the Indian Setting

Seeret Omar Shah

*Ph.D Scholar, Department of Sociology University of Kashmir
E-mail: seeretomar@gmail.com*

Abstract—In India during Vedic period, women enjoyed a fair amount of personal freedom and equality with men in education, training and religious pursuits. They moved freely in society and participated equally in religious functions and ritual sacrifices. Though monogamy was the rule, widow-remarriage was permitted. Discrimination of women appeared on the scene only after the advent of Aryan era when women started losing their privileges and men started assuming superior positions in social, cultural and religious affairs. The practice of widow – remarriage went into oblivion and women lost their property rights. Eventually women assumed an inferior position and became targets of inhuman treatment and exploitation. They became symbols of disgrace, humiliation and ridicule. The inhuman practices of sati, child marriage and female infanticide became the order of the day. The situation did not change much thereafter. Exploitation and discrimination of women continues even in post independent India as also in other countries of the world. It is a social evil of universal dimensions. This paper discusses the plight of women due to gender discrimination and discusses the constitutional provisions and government policies aimed at empowering them.

1. INTRODUCTION

Women constitute one-half of the world’s population and one-third of the world’s official labour force. Without discarding their traditional roles and responsibilities at the domestic front, women have entered all fields of human activity at par with men and have dispelled the myth that they cannot deliver in the man’s world. They have demonstrated their prowess in several, fields including those that were once considered to belong exclusively to the male bastion. Today, women are finding immense scope for enlarging their participation in all fields and in all countries of the world. Their participation is evident in diverse areas of human activity. At the domestic front women have traditional responsibilities of attending to their families, serving their husbands, and caring and rearing their children. In the agriculture sector women constitute the largest workforce engaged in farming operations either as cultivators or as agricultural labour. They constitute the principal labour engaged in tea, coffee and rubber plantations. In the construction sector, women provide the cheapest and readily available workforce undertaking physical labour under trying situations. In the industrial sector, their contribution is quite significant, especially in pharmaceutical, handicraft and garment establishments. In the public health arena, they serve as traditional birth attendants to

deliver most of the in-labour women in remote rural areas of the country. Lately women are accepting increasingly important roles in entertainment sector besides working as scribes and journalists. The role of women in development is underestimated. If their paid and unpaid work is expressed in economic terms, their contribution to development exceeds that of men. Yet women continue to remain marginalized and segregated from the process of development.

Many uninformed people incorrectly attribute various social evils against women in Indian society to Hindu traditions. Right from Vedic times women were treasured and adored. The best example of this comes from Hindu mythology where Lakshmi is the Goddess of wealth and fortune, Saraswathi, the Goddess of learning, and Durga, the Goddess of power.

A famous Sanskrit sloka says, divinity dwells where women are honoured and respected and all actions are fruitless where women are not honoured. In fact, India is personified as Bharat Mata and its rivers bear female names such as Saraswati, Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari and Kaveri.

Somehow in modern times, the respect and veneration accorded to women in ancient times has gone missing and the disturbing trend of treating women as not equals has emerged. Though women have proved time and again that they are second to none in various fields discrimination against them continues even in post-independence India. It is reflected in more work load, low wages, poor health status, poor health care facilities, illiteracy and ignorance of women. Female foeticide has assumed epidemic proportions under the policy of liberalization of abortions. Prenatal diagnostic techniques were developed to detect genetic disorders or chromosomal abnormalities..., but it is now being misused to avoid the birth of female children. ¹ Declining male to female ratio in India bears testimony to this inhuman practice.

2. EMANCIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT

India's Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-12) has accepted women for the first time as not just equal citizens but as agents of economic and social growth. This approach to gender parity in the plan is based on the recognition that interventions in favour of women must be multi- pronged and must provide women with basic entitlements to address the reality of globalization and ensure an environment free from all forms of discriminations, discrepancies, deprivations and of violence against women. India has committed to facilitate the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and is a signatory to many International Conventions, including Convention for Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women because any developmental plan will be lop sided without the involvement of women who constitute half of the world population.

There is provision for emancipation and empowerment of women in the Directive Principles of State Policy. The socialist principles of the policy provide that: (a) the state shall direct its policy towards securing the citizens, men and women, equal rights to an adequate means of livelihood; (b) there shall be equal pay for equal work for both men and women; (c) the health and strength of workers, men and women and the tender age of children must not be abused; (d) the state shall make provisions for securing just and human conditions of work and for maternity relief.

In the international arena several world conferences on women have been organized which revolved around the need to recognize their just and legitimate demand of being recognized as different but equal individuals.

The fourth world conference on women held in Beijing in 1995,² emphasized that:

- Women have equal rights as men, which are basically human rights.
- Women should have equal opportunities and access to resources. There should be equal sharing of responsibility for the family by men and women. A harmonious partnership between them is critical to their well-being and that of their families.
- Inclusion of women in social and economic development and their equal access to resources, including land, credit, science and technology, vocational training, information, communication and markets, are considered essential for the advancement and empowerment of women and girls.
- All necessary measures should be taken to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and the girl child.
- Women have the right to control all aspects of their health, in particular their own fertility. This is basic to their empowerment.
- Men should be encouraged to participate fully in all actions towards equality.
- All forms of violence against women and girls should be prevented and eliminated.
- To achieve all these, it is essential to implement and monitor, with full participation of women, policies and programmes that are gender sensitive and that will foster the empowerment and advancement of women.

The National Policy for Empowerment of Women, 2001 lays practical guidelines for social and economic empowerment of women. It lays stress on the education of women, especially those belonging to weaker classes. It lays stress on training of women in traditional sectors of agriculture, horticulture, poultry keeping, animal husbandry and pisciculture. It emphasizes training in modern sectors of industrial enterprises, information technology and electronics. It provides for facilities for women entrepreneurs. It emphasizes the need for appropriate health care of women focusing on nutrition, personal hygiene and sanitation. It endorses the rights of the girl child, denounces violence against women, and highlights the urgency for addressing specific needs of women in distress. It upholds the need for protecting the rights of the girl child and recommends banning of child abuse, child marriage, child prostitution, female foeticide and female infanticide.

In one of the most important steps for the empowerment of women, the Indian government gave constitutional status to village-level councils or Panchayati Raj institutions and reserved 33% of the seats in Panchayats for women.³ This, has been made possible through the Constitution 73rd and 74th Amendment Bills. According to the 73rd Amendment, "not less than one third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to SCs and STs) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat shall be reserved for women.

This provision provided a great incentive to women to come forward and increasingly participate in self-governance.

3. CONCLUSION

Emancipation and empowerment of women in social, political, economic and cultural affairs of communities can contribute significantly to their socio-economic development. In the area of public health, women's emancipation can promote health and welfare of communities by direct as well as indirect means.

Direct benefits of emancipation flow when empowerment encourages women to demand health care as a matter of right and participate actively in all the health care activities. Emancipated women decide their own fertility pattern and avail of timely and appropriate maternal and family welfare services. Such initiatives by women can curb the uncontrolled fertility problem in this country as also the evil of rising illegal abortions and the avoidable maternal morbidity and mortality connected therewith. In the industrial sector direct benefits accrue when emancipated women demand various maternal and child health related facilities within factory environment, including the provision of crèches for uninterrupted breast feeding of babies; and when they claim maternity benefit to which they are rightfully entitled.

The indirect benefits of emancipation of women flow from economic welfare of families to which emancipated female members contribute through their earnings. Such families can devote greater attention to their nutrition, education, housing and disposal needs and thereby contribute to elevate the health status of communities in general. A study in India shows a link between women's earnings and family development, and several studies demonstrate the effect of maternal education on the family in social, political and economic development.

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