



WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN CHANGING INDIA

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Abstract

In this article, author tends to analyse how women in Indian culture are portrayed? Furtherance to it article investigates what roles they are expected to play in family, workplace and in society? How they struggle to secure their positions in the society? This article also highlights the issues and challenges faced by women in different times in the history and what kinds of role models they became for society and nation. It is an attempt to understand feminism in Indian context. What kinds of contributions or roles, a nation like India expecting from women in present time, is core of this article. The author raised few questions in the context of roles of Indian women to preserve the cultural heritage of our nation. Article discusses the women's role as mothers in family and envisioning their empowerment in the context of empowerment of the nation.



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Introduction

In the present world, the status of women is changing rapidly. Now they are more awakened and educated than the previous century. With the expansion of education, women are holding many positions in occupation like education, health, judiciary, administration, politics, armed forces, and corporate world. one can say in every sector they have been working with lot of commitment, hard work and confidence. There are two fundamental questions which needs to be explored at this juncture. First question, how has it become possible? Or who make it possible for women to get these positions?

The second question is how women empowerment is visualized in Indian context with special reference to its rich cultural heritage? The later make us to think about the envisioning role of women in a wider changing social context specifically in the light of perspectives of women empowerment and their expected role in family, society and in the national development.

The reflection on the first question suggest that the question itself is quite complex in nature. There may be different perspectives of women empowerment and their roles in the society but in this paper author analysis on the basis of the literature available in the context of Indian women. Here, the objective is to explore the long and challenging journey which they have been moving on. By encountering different types of problems and difficulties, they struggled every time to lead their life, they set up ideals and standards before the society through their struggle and victories. It has always been expected form the coming generation to follow these ideal to fight against malicious practices of the society. They worked for their family, society and for nation. The women have always courage to argue, debate and prove themselves whenever they got chance or opportunities.

In ancient literature there are numerous instances when women proved their strength, commitments and boldness. They fought against the social evils, bad traditions with self-respect and dignity with in the social norms and ethical limitations which were expected to be followed by them, they protected their families, they took care of their children, and also they supported their husbands in decision making. There are so many examples of women who lead their families in unexpected circumstances and struggles (Kunti, Draupadi in in epic of Mahabharata). The great women in the history like Sita, Draupadi, and Satyawati who became the role models for many generations. In the literature it is strongly argued and believed that females have all masculine traits but man do not have all feminine traits.

Women's strong commitments, dedication, self-esteem and power of determination make them bold and strong. They struggled throughout their lifetime, they earned respect, they set standards for respectful life. They were worshiped as '*Devis*' or *goddess* not by women but by the men also. The Vedic literature largely directed social behaviour, belief system, influence our thinking models, control and decide code of conducts to be followed in the society. The roles of male and female as perceived in the *sanatna dharma* is complementary and supplementary to each other. We cannot imagine the existence of man without women in Indian culture. *Ardhanarishara*

is a representation of equal role of male and female in the society. Women were given lot of respect in the Vedic age. They were not objectified in the society but she has considered equally significant as men.

In Indian culture women performed significant role as mother, daughter, sister, wife and daughter-in-law etc. A woman has to play multiple roles in different times and different situations. Indian culture is directly influenced by Ancient Vedic literature, post-Vedic literature and epics (Mahabharata and Ramayana) and The goals of Indian culture are happiness of mind and soul. Family is treated as smallest unit and nation is treated as biggest unit. Lamp (Diya) is the symbol of light, *Kalasha* represent the respect for diety, tulasi and *shubh labh* is sign of prosperity. Festivals are the part of our culture. From Vedic period to modern period women have important place in all kind of religious ceremony. Without their participation no cultural and religious ceremony is celebrated. Women were given right to marriage to their choice, rights in properties, participation of women in political affairs, debates and wars, family decisions, independence etc.

The respect of women in medieval period declined because of security and many other social reasons. One of the reasons, was that India was attacked by different invaders times and again. The education of women badly affected in this period and some restrictions were imposed on them. They were discriminated in the society on the basis of class, caste and status. Other reason was the influence of other cultures (Mugul, Westren etc) over Indian culture. However, we can see the glory of feminism in India beside these restrictions and discriminating attitude of men against them. Many social reformers started working to improve the poor social life of women. They fought against discriminating customary practices and superstitions prevailed in Indian society, the females were continuously ignored in decision making and so many restrictions were imposed on them before independence. The issues like Sati-pratha, widow marriage, polygamy, child marriage, women's property rights and female educations were the prominent issues need to be addressed at that time. New leadership of women came into light and they have remarkable contribution in the freedom movement. Few famous women freedom fighters were Lakshambai, Sarojini Naidu, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Lakshmi Sahgal, Matangini Hazara, Sucheta Kriplani, Annie Besant, Kasturba Gandhi, Kamla Nehru, Uda Devi, Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya, Usha Mehta, Kanak Lata Barua, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Tara rani Srivastva, Savitibai Phule, Moolmati, Durgabai Deshmukh, Basanti Devi, Gulab Kaur, Mahadevi Verma, Asha lata Sen etc. were among

them, the contribution of women in the Indian history never be overlooked. That time, participation of women in the freedom revolution was continuously increasing. They were coming forward to take part in many social reforms. The participation of females in different socio- religious movements and freedom struggle, made it clear that they (females) have earned their respect (status) themselves and create their own space in politics, family and society.

After independence, India trying to give uniform civil code for all citizens irrespective of caste, creed, gender and religion. The constitution of India does provide equality, fraternity, freedom and non-discrimination. There are many laws and provisions related to women which need to be reviewed in the light of constitutional values enshrined in Indian constitution. Though some legal reforms have been made accordingly by the government whenever it is required. Still there is lot of reforms to be carried out.

Women Empowerment: Challenges and Concerns

The objective of this article is to explore the idea of empowerment of women in the changing world. In the present context it is important to understand the concept of empowerment. Chandra in his article “Women empowerment in India: Milestones and Challenges” clearly mentioned that empowerment is now increasingly seen as a process by which the one's without power gain greater control over their lives. This means control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology. He further clarifies that empowerment involves power to, power with and power within. Keeping in mind the above explanation of empowerment, it can be concluded that empowerment as a process of awareness and conscientization, of capacity building leading to greater participation, effective decision-making power and control leading to transformative action. This involves ability to get what one wants and to influence others on our concerns with reference to women’s power relation that has to be involved includes their lives at multiple levels, family, community, market and the state.

Martha Nassubala (2003) suggested list of capabilities that a woman draws is cross-cultural as necessary element of truly human functioning.

They include: 1. There should be worth living. 2. Bodily health – to make them able to have good health including reproductive health, to be adequately nourished, to have adequate shelter. 3. Bodily integrity – Being able to move freely from place to place, to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sex satisfaction

and for choice in matters of reproduction. 4. Senses, imagination and thought – Being able to use the sense, to imagine, think and reason in a truly human way including but not limited to literacy. Being able to use one's mind and imagination protected by freedom of expression. 5. Emotions – being able to have attachments, to love, to grieve to experience longing gratitude and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. 6. Practical Reason – Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about planning of one's lives protected by liberty of conscience. 7. Affiliation – Being able to live with and toward others to have social interactions, to have the capability of both justice and friendship. This would entail freedom of assembly and free speech. Having social bases for self-respect and non-humiliation, being protected against discrimination on the basis of race, sex sexual orientation religion caste or region. 8. Other species – Being able to concern with nature. 9. Play – being able to laugh, play and enjoy. 10. Control over one's environment. a) Political. b) Material. If in the present context, we are thinking for empowering the women, we must have to work on the interventions which enable them to work on these ten necessary elements of human functioning.

Empowerment of women is closely related to formal and informal sources of education. Late 19th century & 20th century reformers advocated women's education as a principal strategy to answer the 'women's question'. Many innovative efforts are accelerated after the NPE. Many initiatives towards the education have been taken by the Government of Indian time to time. The DPEP, SSA, RMSA and RUSA intervention of education proved helpful in improvising the educational status of women in India. There is marked improvement in girl's enrollment and steady decline in dropout rates. Education is a great tool of women empowerment, but the cultural heritage of country should be taken care in the education system. To prepare aware and responsible citizen should be taken care of.

The other foremost instrument for women empowerment is to provide them a space in political sphere. Women's political participation has been considered a major measure of women's empowerment. The 73rd & 74th Amendments (1993) to the constitution of India have provided some special powers to women that for reservation of seats (33%), whereas the report HRD as March 2002, shows that the legislatures with the highest percentage of women are, Sweden 42.7%, Denmark 38%, Finland 36% and Iceland 34.9%. In India 'The New Panchayati Raj' is the part of the effort to empower women at least at the village level. The participation in Legislative

assemblies and parliamentary assemblies should be increased. They proved their political intelligence, decision taking capabilities many times presently and also in the past. They have to come forward to take their share in political sphere.

By opening up of various kinds of professional opportunities to them, women have shown by the quality of their performance and achievement that the sedulously nurtured myth about their incapacity for certain types of work is just that—a myth, without any substance in it. Women of India are entering in the various professions like health, education, business, industry, armed and police forces, sports, media etc. As a professional, they are more successful and they proved themselves equally effective, energetic and competent. They tried to cope up with their home and work place nicely and effectively.

Women constitute almost 50% of the world's population but in India there is dis appropriate sex ratio where by female's population has been comparatively lower than males. The sex ratio can be improved by the strong participation and strong commitment of women. They can we educated about how the females foeticide impact the population and national sex ratio. There is need to stop female foeticide. The abortion of females is directly affecting the health and mental wellbeing. The both male and females are responsible for misappropriate sex ratio. We need to create real awareness in the society about importance of female population the society.

The health conditions of women in India are not very good. Under nutrition is one of the major problems which badly affect the health of women it also affect the natal and post-natal stage of child development. The obesity, Anemia are some health issues related to women need to be addressed. The health facilities for women have been increased by the governments time to time, but still need to provide health facilities in rural India.

Domestic Violence is another issue need to be addressed, extent of violence in rural areas is higher than as in urban areas. It is also observed that the extent of violence is not lessened by age. The questions regarding crimes against women are most entrenched, as most of them are committed within the family NCRB records that the highest percentage of crime against women is torture (37.7%) followed by Moleslation (22.4%), Rape (11.8%), Kidnapping (8.8%) and immoral traffic (3.7%). (Nayak, P and Mahanta, B. 2006). Incidents of honour killings are often threats to women's functioning and their emotional development is severely blighted. In caste ridden society women are most vulnerable. Government has started many initiatives for the safety

of women but the lack of awareness among women lead to such violence. Women should be empowered to fight against the violence themselves by knowing the acts and policy provisions for them.

Harassment of women is another problem which is very common at workplace now. There are so many cases of rape, kidnapping of girl, dowry harassment, and so on. There is need to strengthen the women so that they can come forward to fight against such oppression and crime. Government of India started many helpline numbers and established women protection cells everywhere in India for the safety and protection of women. The women helpline number (all India) for women in distress is 1091, for domestic abused women is 181, and for police support is 100. The complaints made by women directly registered on the national web portal and immediately responded. Government also constituted the National and state commissions for women to address their issues. There are so many non-governmental organizations working in the area of women empowerment. Under the legal service authority act female victims have the right to get free legal aid and help. They have the right not to be arrested at night and file zero complaint FIR. For work place harassment they can file complaint at Shebox.nic.in

These Acts and Policy should be included in the curriculum at school education and at higher education level. The rural women should be given education and orientation through the support of Social and Justice women empowerment department. Restriction on women's mobility, complete child care responsibility ideology of female seclusion, vulnerability to abuse, low access to information and mass media, low literacy, assumption that women's supplementary and confinement to largely manual untrained tasks lead to women's poor access to income. In case of reform, it is often argued that economic reforms have had a differential gender impact but there are further complexities. The reforms have meant more openness in trade regime and progressive decontrol of domestic production sector. There seems a steady withdrawal of state presence from the production sector arguing that this would promote greater efficiency and accountability.

Women constitute a unique resource of nation, if needs recognition that, women are the builders and molders of nation's destiny. In rural areas, women perform a major part of agriculture activities like breaking chunks of earth, manuring, weeding, transplanting, harvesting and threshing. 60-70 % of agriculture work is done by the females. They are busy in domestication (care) of diary meals and small industries like pottery, rope and basket making, food processing and hand loom weaving.

It is clear from the discussion that the burden shared by women for the socio-economic development in two ways or in two-fold, one in domestic work and other on the economic front. The domestic works and family care are still not considered as vocation or service of part of GDP. This contribution of females is always overlooked by the male counterpart because no wages are given to them. But if you hire the labour for agriculture and servants/aaya for domestic work then the expenditures for the said services can be calculated.

Women Empowerment: Envisioned role of women in Changing world with special reference to India

The second question which author raised in this article cannot be answered without considering the previous discussion and the studies of feminism in India. The feminism in India is quite different from the Western world. Let us try to understand this by application of literature. A feminist approach is, of course, by no means confined to literature but subsumes many areas of knowledge and experience. In its application to literature, a feminist approach has usually meant either, or both, of two things:

- 1) a re-examination through creative literature of the role and status of woman in society and a new way of portraying woman in creative literature which does justice to her identity as an individual;
- 2) A re-interpretation and revaluation of literary texts, old and new, from a woman-centered point of view is needed.

Remarkably, whereas in American literature and in many European literature feminism has expressed itself in both these modes, in Indian literature feminism has for the most part remained confined to creative literature, and has not led to a sustained and comprehensive re-interpretation of literary texts from a new critical feminist stance. Many modern Indian writers have continued to project and sustain traditional values and to extol old roles and models in their presentation of women. There is a need to represent a complete spectrum of gender. In the present society there is need to consider all the aspects of the gender by not ignoring the cultural heritage of the society, so there is need to develop critical approach to understand gender with special reference to India. Since, India has its own rich cultural heritage but in the age of globalization there is need to review the model of progress, education system, participation of its citizen irrespective of gender, class and religion in the progress of society. Diverse belief system, diversity in religious and cultural

values, irrespective of all these diverse components still there is unity in diversity in country like ours. The concerns of women in the diverse society are very complex and difficult to understand. Several complex and interactive factors have brought about the changed perception of the role of women in society. In the present society we need to consider women as social, legal, and psychological category. Both male and female can represent masculinity and femininity in different situation of life.

This representation of women needs to be reexamined in present context and keeping in mind the expected roles of women specifically in diverse country like India. A critical insight is required to think about the concerns of women in different context of culture and religion. There have been many reforms carried out after independence to empower the women which we have already discussed in this article. The process of social reforms is a never ending and a continuous process. The image of women in our Indian society is not similar as portrayed in western society. It may be any of the religious beliefs of Indian community, they placed women in higher positions. Although, there is diversity in our culture and societal belief system but our entire culture has its own universal set of values which suits to the need of our entire population. This is the reason, there is unity in diversity.

There are different elements or factors which play significant role in the development of a child. The most important and very practical element of our society is care perspective, and mother's care has its own significance. She has a very prominent role to play for the growth and development of their children. As we discussed in this paper that the females' population of our country have their diverse problems but their participation in the society is almost equal to their male counterpart. As a result of many social reforms and legal provisions made for women in our country, they are becoming more independent, enjoying more freedom, now entering in almost in all professions, one important observation to understand that they are also establishing themselves in successful manners. We can see, influences of western culture on our young generations and they are overlooking the values and standards of our cultural heritage. Something is found missing in our generation. Joint families are breaking into nuclear families. The crime rate is continuously increasing. The incidents like rape cases, kidnapping and other forms of violence some time make us so nervous and distressed and such incidents raises many questions in the mind of every citizen that Why is it happening? Who are responsible for all these incidents? Who will take this

responsibility to make citizen better and sensitive human being for a democratic nation? Can we start this process from our own family? Is there any cultural heritage which can guide us?

All our country population whether mothers, fathers, (author does not want to use the word parents, intention is clear, mothers have *mamtva*- power of love and care), teachers (Education system), leaders (Administrative, Political, Social Workers, Religious and many more) should have to think about above these questions. We all have to save our culture and nation. To build a strong nation we need to prepare our generation to respect and follow our cultural legacy. Without (*sanskaras*) values we can never become good human beings. The mothers can play a dominant role to prepare our generation. The women's empowerment means Mothers' empowerment which implies Nation's empowerment.

Conclusion

In this article author approached the answer of these two questions by using the learning of FDP, literature available, social transformation models as suggested by the speakers of the program, rights and policy perspectives model made for their empowerment. Women have proved themselves with hard work, passion, and commitment in multiple roles as mother, daughter, wife and as professional in different sectors, they handle their duties and responsibilities with due care and positive attitude. Some time she is supported by her family members may be father, may be brother, husband or mothers, but most of the times or occasions she feels challenged, isolated and fought herself to lead her role. In Vedas, she has been portrayed as '*Shakti*' powerful identity because she has "*srijan shakti*" power to give birth. Due to these virtues, she has been portrayed as Shakti, Durga, Aditi, Sachi, Vaka etc.

The notion of feminism in India is very conservative and cautious than western world, probably because criticism has largely remained the domain of academics. Due to this reason feminism remains one of the most significant developments in modern Indian feminism. Today we have noticed in different Acts and Schemes of the central government as well as state government to empower the women of India. But still they are discriminated and marginalized at every level of the society whether it is social participation, political participation, economic participation, access to education, and also reproductive healthcare. Still the rate of literacy among men is higher than women (in India is found to be 82.14% whereas it is only 64.46% among women). Thus, expansion of education among women is only the mean to empower them.

The violence against women is another issue need to be addressed. Government of India started many helpline numbers and established women protection cells everywhere in India for the safety and protection of women. But many of rural women not have the knowledge about the system established by the Government.

Government also constituted the National and state commissions for women to address their issues. There are so many non-governmental organizations working in the area of women empowerment. Under the legal service authority act female victims have the right to get free legal aid and help.

The discussion in the article make our understanding that the empowerment of women can be done by make them economically sound and independent and this can be done through providing them opportunities of employment, considering their home assignments as a part of economy, motivating rural women to start their own self-help groups, prepare local products and this practice should be supported by the government to provide space for the marketing of the products prepared by these women. To make women self-reliant, to raise their positive esteem their participation in developmental activities should be ensured. Participation of women in decision making enable them to face any difficult situation. Women in PRIs have their significant contribution.

Although, the Ministry of Education , Ministry of Social Justice and the National Commission for Women (NCW) have been working since a long time to empower the women in India. The women empowerment can be possible only when they come forward, raise their voices and try to self-empower themselves. Empowered mothers can only understand the significance of education, she can en-culture her children with rich values (*Sanskara*) of humanity and raise the conscious level of their children, by this we can raise the conscious level of the society. Empowered mothers can create the empowered nation.

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