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## WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA: AN ASSESMENT OF GOVERNMENT'S POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES



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### Meaning

The English Language Dictionary does not contain the word “Empowerment” as such.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless the term is in wide currency in contemporary writings on socio-political problems. In the post-Second World War period, the third World countries became a subject of great concern to social scientists all over the World. Poverty exploitation & deprivation of a vast majority of people under foreign domination and their consequent pauperism and inhuman conditions came to limelight when they became independent. Their independent governments were born with the moral responsibility to bring about a socio-political and economic system to ensure justice, equality & freedom to people who had suffered for ages under imperial subjugation. All this provided a challenging task to the governments concerned, the world organizations like the United Nations and its specialized agencies, and a fascinating theme for social scientists to study, analyze and work out models to address them with a view to transforming the life system in the third world countries. Terms like ‘welfare’ and ‘development’ were widely used by the policy planners, political leaders and academics in connection with the dealing and treatment of the deprived and downtrodden and their upliftment. However, in recent years a more forceful word ‘empowerment’ has been coined and came into wide currency.

Etymologically ‘empowerment’ means investment with power or the process of giving power. The process also logically connotes the removal of the sources of unempowerment. Thus empowerment involves investigation of the causes of unempowerment too. Unless the causes of unempowerment are found out,

the process of empowerment cannot be appropriately under taken. Further, the concept of empowerment hinges on the meaning and concept of power. What is power? The concept of power has evoked a good deal of discussion in the writings of political Scientists and Sociologists like Hans J. Morgenthau, H.D. Lasswell, Robert A. Dahl and Max Weber.<sup>2</sup> Political Scientists consider power as the capacity to influence the mind and actions of others. Max Weber, the renowned Sociologists, also defines it as the ability to “make others do irrespective of their own wishes and interests.” One thing inherent in their definition of power by both Political Scientists and Sociologists, leaving aside the differences on the details of the concept, is the emphasis on the relational aspect of power. Power thus is not inherent but exists in relationships. It leads to the inference that “Power is created in relationships and hence power relationships are concomitant on changes in power possessors”.

### Evolution of the Concept

The term “empowerment” has taken on the form of a concept. This is because it has addressed to different groups and people of varied socio-cultural systems. Empowerment is in a sense in usage since the seventies of the last century connoting “in vest with authority or power which later assumed a socio-psychological dimension as an enabling factor. Some Scholars maintain that the concept of women’s empowerment in the present context emerged precisely through interaction between Feminism and popular education which developed in Latin America in the seventies of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> It intertwined Paulo Freiri’s concept of Conscientisation with Gramscian idea of participatory and democratic functioning of

institutions for creating a more equitable and non-exploitative social order. In the eighties Feminists observed that Women's conditions remained unchanged. Therefore, Women's empowerment replaced the earlier terms of Women's development in the mid nineties. Feminists incorporated gender subordination and the social construction of gender as fundamental to empowerment analysis. A distinction was made between the condition and position of Women as the development in the former kept the later almost unaltered. Maxine Molymix made a distinction between Women's short term practical needs from long term strategic needs. The process of empowerment has become broader by including both the categories with specific emphasis on change. The Third International Women's Conference in 1985 at Nairobi defined empowerment as a redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of Women.<sup>4</sup>In the burgeoning literature on empowerment in recent years there seems to be great variance as to its conceptual connotation. This is but natural as it is being applied in reference to multiple contents and varied kinds of people with bewildering socio-cultural and politico-economic differences.<sup>5</sup>

Despite all this variance in approach and goal, the concept has assumed enduring importance in social research. Women empowerment is a buzzword in all societies, developed as well as developing.<sup>6</sup>The Human Development Report has incorporated this aspect to measure this comprehensive development of a Country. Governments are formulating and implementing policies to empower women through economic and political processes with a view to broadening the base of democracies and improving governance. Empowerment Programme in India India was partitioned on communal line at the time of its independence. However, more Muslims were left in India than those who moved to the new State of Pakistan. India continued to be a multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-racial nation. Its plurality is amazing. However, the caste-ridden social structure of India had has been such that several segments of its people are even now after half a century of its independence lagging behind socially, economically and politically. The dawn of democracy after independence anchored on equality of all without any distinction of caste, colour, race or gender put a moral burden on its polity to take special care of the weaker sections in order to enable them to be really equal with others. For this they needed

favoured treatment. This was well taken care of in framing the Constitution for free India. The main architect of the Constitution, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar while presenting the Constitution to the nation had aptly said that the polity envisaged was based on the principle of political equality but the Indian Society's ground reality was social inequality. Hence unless this contradiction was resolved, the goals set in the Constitution could not be realized. Provisions for special treatment of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and the scope for reservation for Other Backward Castes (socially and educationally backward) enshrined in the Constitution thus laid the foundation of the theory and policy of empowerment of marginalized communities in India. This policy has become broader and stronger over the years with rise of the lower class in politics and administration in India.

#### **Empowerment of Women**

Almost half the population of India are women. For ages, they remained, by and large, uneducated, exploited, neglected and deprived of any say in socio-political life of the Country. In course of the nationalist movement, especially after the entry of Gandhi in it, the women were encouraged to join hands with men. However, their involvement remained marginal. It was undoubtedly a historic decision on the part of the framers of the Indian Constitution that by a single stroke of pen they placed the Indian women on the same political pedestal with their male counterpart. It is really noteworthy in their connection that it took several years to the Western Countries to accord full political equality to women in their political systems. The mother of parliamentary Democracy, the United Kingdom, took hundreds of years to finally agree to give voting right to women in 1928. In the land of direct democracy i.e., Switzerland, women got this privilege as late as in their seventies. The French women got this in 1944. While hailing free India's political leaders for their enthusiasm and magnanimity to bestow full political equality to women, the women in India were still lagging so much behind that Constitutional guarantee of equality was hardly enough to bring about radical change in their status and role. Women, on account of their number, constitute overwhelmingly weak and marginalized segment of society. They deserve much better treatment than the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes for their upliftment since they include half of those categories also who were bestowed upon special

privileges. It was indeed unjust to womankind to have denied the special treatment through constitutional provisions. However, in recent years the government, probably as a face saving device and more so to please the enormous size of voters i.e., women, has embarked on a policy of empowerment of women. This was because the Constitutional equality was proving to be a feeble step to wake up women in India as was evident from the concerned studies and reports. Decades ago, the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women (India) had conceded that “the right of political equality has not enabled women to play their role as partners and constituents in the political process. Instead, these rights have helped to build an illusion of equality and power.” As such, Indian Parliament passed the National Commission for Women Act in 1990. Accordingly the National Commission for Women (NCW), a statutory body was constituted on 31<sup>st</sup> January, 1992 to participate in and advice on the progress and development of women under the Union and the State Government. Eversince the NCW has been functioning to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. Following the establishments of the NCW by the Government of India many State Governments founded such Commissions.<sup>7</sup> Moreover several other governmental bodies, NGOs and voluntary organizations related to the multiple pronged efforts for women empowerment have come up in recent years.

Their programmes, activities and achievements in the four major areas of women empowerment i.e., political, economic, social and educational are briefly discussed below for proper understanding of the state of women empowerment in India.

**(i) Political Empowerment** The degree of political empowerment of women is dependent on the extent of their involvement in shaping and sharing of power in the political system. That is to say, whether women in Indian politics are in a decision-making position in legislative bodies and administration in the Country? Right from the very inception of the Constitution, Women like men have been given full rights and opportunities in the governance of the Country. But this cannot be realized by mere declaration in the Constitution. During more than six decades of India’s independent political system, Women’s representation in Parliament and State Assemblies has never been more than 8 and 10 percent respectively. The percentage of women in administration including its all branches

is still abysmally low. The women are yet not fully equipped to bring about any remarkable improvement over this situation and they constitute to be one of the most powerless and marginalized sections of Indian Society. The traditional mentalities of a male-dominated culture in India do not encourage women to be an active participant in party politics and have their equitable share. This being so the government and the political leaders in India have also not made much sincere and serious efforts to do justice to this enormously large disadvantaged group i.e., women.

Much applauded governmental measure to have 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India which provide for reservation of seats (atleast one third) in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women was taken after four and half decades of India’s independence. Nobody can deny the importance of these amendments which, of late, have completely changed the political scenario at the grassroots level. Initially hesitant, the rural women now are politically awakened and their confidence in asserting and playing their new roles is amazing.

This is undoubtedly bound to revolutionize the participant of women in national politics in the coming years. But the question is why such a step was not taken earlier. Does not this smack of our reluctance to encourage women to share power fully with men in the mainstream politics? Moreover, why were only one third reservation of seats conceded to the women in the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments? Why not 50 percent? Are not women merely 50 percent of our total population? Women are indeed not welcome to the arena of politics like men. This betrays our boastful adherence to the principle of constitutional equality between men and women. Our latest constitutional measure to enhance the course of women empowerment leads support to this contention. The proposed 84<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act of 1998 reserving 33 percent seats in Parliament and State legislatures for women has been hanging fire and no final decision on it in near future is in sight. Political partners are sidetracking the issues on one pretext or the other. Here also why not the proposed amendment contains 50 percent reservation instead of 33 percent only. That would have been just and sensible. One may suggest that if agreement on constitutional amendment is not possible, it should be accepted as a norm by all political parties in the country to nominate 50 percent candidates of their party for all elections. Argument against it on the ground that such

a huge number of competent women would not be available for fighting elections is not sustainable. For, keeping in view the, competence of men who contest and win various elections, the women of similar, if not better, capability will never be lacking.

On the political empowerment of women in India it is often maintained that the conditions in the Western developed democracies are no better than ours. On the other hand, India seems to have a better record. We had a lady Prime Minister (Smt. Indira Gandhi) for more than a decade. Even now the ruling coalition supremo of the country is a lady (Smt. Sonia Gandhi). She declines Prime Ministership and instead opted to be Prime Minister-maker. She is a political leader of highest stature not only of the Country, but one of the leading women political personalities in the World. Moreover, the highest political post in the Country i.e. the President is presently occupied also by a lady (Smt. Pratibha Patil). In addition, several states have had Women Chief Ministers. This is certainly a startling contrast to the fact that on of the oldest and the strongest democracies in the World i.e. the United States of America never had a lady President in merely 250 years of her democratic experience. The records of other Western Countries are similarly dismal in this field as compared to ours.

Should this be a ground to allow things to go slow in the direction of Women empowerment in India? Certainly not. We must be consistent in our efforts in this field keeping our earlier record in mind. The Western democracies took hundreds of years to give voting rights to their women but we in India did it right from the dawn of democracy in our country. The future of India depends on how enthusiastically we allow our women to be active and major participants in our polity.

(ii) Economic, Social and Educational Empowerment

The economic conditions of women not only in India but all over the World are miserable. The UN Report tells us that Women comprise half of the World's population, perform about two-thirds of its works and receive only one tenth of its income and own less than one-hundredth of World's property.<sup>8</sup> Economic deprivation is thus the greatest stumbling block to women's assertive role in the society. The great Greek Philosopher Aristotle had rightly emphasized that property is the externalization of human personality. In many societies, the ownership of property, even that of basic assets, such as homes and lands, tends to be asymmetrically divided between men and women.

Thus Sen has rightly pointed out that "the absence of claims to property cannot only reduce the voice of women, it can also make it harder for women to enter and flourish in commercial, economic and social activities."<sup>9</sup> In her pain staking research Bina Agrawal has correctly highlighted the disempowering effects of landless women in many societies.<sup>10</sup> Almost the entire women folk in the rural areas in the country who are overworked either as labourers or housewives are absolutely propertyless. Their earnings go to their husbands or families on which they do not have any effective say in spending. They have no saving or property to fall back upon in case of physical helplessness. The fast break up of the joint family and also loosening of the family bond relegate the old and physically helpless women to the point of starvation and begging. Hence there is immense need to do something to make the women folk economically secure. For this both the government's measures and the change in social outlook for their future is to be revisited. Here Constitutional provisions are no guarantee to improve the situation.

For instance Article 14 confers equal rights and opportunities on men and women in the political, economic and social spheres. Article 15 prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of sex, religion, race, caste etc and Article 15(3) empowers the State to make affirmative discrimination in favour of women. Similarly Article 16 provides for equality of opportunities in the matter of public appointments for all citizens, Article 39 stipulates that the State shall direct its policy towards providing men and women equally the right to means of livelihood and equal pay for equal work, Article 42 directs the State to make provisions for ensuring just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief; and Article 51(4)(e) imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.<sup>11</sup> To make this de jure equality into a de facto one, many policies and programmes were put into action from time to time, besides enacting and enforcing special legislations, in favour of women. Development of women has been receiving attention of the Government right from the very First Plan (1951-56). But the same has been treated as a subject of welfare and dubbed together with the Welfare of the disadvantaged groups like destitute, disabled, aged etc. The Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB), set up in 1953, acts as an Apex Body at National level to promote Voluntary action at

various levels especially at the grassroots, to take up welfare related activities for women and children. The Second to Fifth Plans (1956-79) continued to reflect the very same welfare approach, besides giving priority to women's education, and launching measures to improve maternal and child health services.<sup>12</sup>

The shift in approach from welfare to development of women could take place in the Sixth Plan (1980-85). Accordingly, the Sixth Plan adopted a multidisciplinary approach with a special thrust on the three core sectors of health, education and employment. In the Seventh Plan (1985-90) the developmental programmes continued with the major objective of raising their economic status and bringing them into the mainstream of national development. A significant step in this direction was to promote the Beneficiary Oriented Schemes in various developmental sectors which extended direct benefits to women. The Eighth Plan (1992-1997) with human development as its major focus, played a very important role in the development of women. It promised to ensure that benefits of development from different sectors do not bypass women and enable them to function as equal partners and participants in the development process.<sup>13</sup>

The Ninth Plan (1997-2002) made significant changes in the conceptual, strategy planning for women. Firstly, 'empowerment of women' became one of the nine primary objectives of the Ninth Plan. To this effect, the approach of the Plan was to create an enabling environment where women could freely exercise their rights both within and outside home as equal partners along with men. Secondly, the Plan attempted "convergence of existing Services" available in both women-specific and women-related sectors. To this effect, it directs both the centre and the states to adopt a special strategy of "Women Component Plan" (WCP) through which no less than 30 percent of funds/benefits flow to women from all the general development sectors. To ensure that other general development sectors do not by-pass women and benefits from these sectors continue to flow to them, a special mechanism of monitoring the 27 BOS for women was put into action in 1986 at the instance of the PMO. The same continued to be an effective instrument till today.<sup>14</sup> The Mahila Samakhya Scheme was launched in 1989 to translate the goals of the National Policy on Education into a concrete programme for education and empowerment of women in rural areas. The programme is currently implemented in over 9000

villages in 60 districts spread over 10 states. The programme has enabled women's collectives to address the larger socio-cultural issues that have traditionally inhibited the participation of women and girls in the educational system.

The First National Agricultural Policy (July 2000) seeks to mainstream gender concerns in agriculture. It promises to initiate appropriate structural, functional and institutional measures to empower women, build their capabilities and improve their access to inputs, technology and other farming resources. Under both the Oilseeds Production Programme, which covers 408 Districts, and the National Pulses Development Project which covers 350 districts, preference was given to women farmers while extending the benefits under various components of these programmes. The scheme of women in Agriculture was approved for implementation during the Ninth Plan in one district each in 15 states. About 415 viable groups of women farmers were constituted and 7200 farm women were trained. A total of 1603 village based training camps and 78 Link worker's training camps were successfully organized. Extension support was provided to the enrolled farm women through 4971 Result Demonstrations, 66 Study Tours and 27 Mahila Goshthis. A Supplementary Credit System in the form of Self-Help-Groups (SHGs) addresses the problems and aspirations of the poor women. By March 2000 nearly 2 million rural poor families were accessing financial services from the formal banking system through SHGs. About 84 percent of these groups are exclusive women's groups.

Similarly, under the scheme of Assistance to Women's Cooperatives (1993-1994), a total number of 850 women's Co-operatives were benefited during the Ninth Plan. The Support for Training and Employment Programme launched in 1987 provides a comprehensive package of upgradation of skills through training, extension inputs and market linkages to poor and assetless women in the traditional sectors of agriculture, dairy farming, handicrafts, handlooms, animal husbandry and fisheries. Since the inception of this programme, about 6.1 Lakh women have been covered under 133 projects in 19 states. The Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK), since its registration in 1993, has established its credentials as the premier micro-credit agency with its focus on women and their economic empowerment through the provision of credit to poor and assetless women in the informal sector. The

Government has done a good job in aware generation and gender sensitization. The Ninth Plan attached great importance to efforts that trigger changes in societal attitudes towards women and the girl child. An integrated media campaign, which projects a positive image of both women and the girl child is the most important component of the Government's Communication strategy. To sensitize the enforcement machinery, a countrywide gender sensitization programme was launched in 1991 in collaboration with UN Development Fund for Women, New Delhi. Besides the Awareness Generation Project for Rural Poor Women aims to identify the needs of these women and generate awareness amongst them about their rights and handling of social issues.

Needless to say that the aforesaid developmental policies, plans and programmes implemented over the last few decades have brought forth a perceptible improvement in socio-economic and educational status of women. (i) The demographic imbalance between women and men is being reduced. The sex ratio has registered a very marginal improvement from 927 in 1991 to 933 in 2001. (ii) The expectation of life at birth in respect of females has increased from 55.7 years in 1981 to 65.3 in 2001. (iii) The effective mean age at marriage for females has increased from 18.3 years in 1981 to 19.5 years in 1991. (iv) The 2001 census shows that the absolute number of female illiterates has come down from 200.07 million in 1991 to 189.6 million in 2001. (v) The Gross Enrolment Ratio for girls both at primary and middle levels have increased from 64.1 in 1980-1981 to 85.2 in 1999-2000 and 28.6 to 49.7 during the same period respectively. (vi) The number of Women

in higher education has increased from 1.32 million in 1990-1991 to 3 million in 1999-2000. (vii) The female work participation rate has increased from 19.7 percent in 1981 to 25.7 percent in 2001. (viii) Women's employment in the public sector has recorded an increase from 1.5 million in 1981 to 208 million in 1999. The representation of women in government rose from 11 to 14.6 percent between 1981 and 1997. (ix) The representation of women in decision making levels through the premier services viz., IAS & IPS has increased from 5.4 percent in 1987 to 7.6 percent in 2000. (x) The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments in 1993 have brought forth a definite impact on the participation of women in terms of absolute numbers in grass root democratic institutions and local bodies. Of the 475 Zila Parishads in the country, 158 are being chaired by Women. At the block level out of 51000 members of Block Samities, 17000 are women. In addition, nearly one-third of the Mayors Municipalities are Women. (xi) Although the member of women in Parliament has increased from 59 in 1988 to 70 in 2001, their share continues to be very low. (xii) The number of women in Central Council of Ministers continues to remain extremely low. However, the supreme command of the government at the centre presently lies in women viz. Smt. Sonia Gandhi.<sup>15</sup> True the Man-Woman equality Scenario as shown by the above mentioned data is not impressive. But it is encouraging to note that the efforts to improve the conditions pertaining to all round development of women are being made with all sincerity and seriousness.

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