



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.1., 2017 (Jan-Mar.)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

SOCIAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN INDIA: ISSUES IN GENDER AND STATUS OF
WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims at charting out some basic elements in the problematic of Gender in governance and women empowerment. On the one hand it debates various issues related to development in the field of women empowerment and on the other hand various key issues regarding marginalization of the women and sometimes women in weaker sections. The paper presents some very important development in women empowerment in India in the recent decades and the outcome of those efforts. It also deals with qualitative and quantitative change in the status of women in India and brings various issues in development and empowerment at the level of legislative processes in India and thereby examining the execution of decisions on the part of the government in changing the situation of the Social Participation of women in India. Issues of class and weaker sections in the Social Participation theory are added to examine socialization of women and ameliorating gender discrimination.

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INTRODUCTION

The qualitative and interdependent character of the position of men and women in the society is rooted in the conditions of production and reproduction and is reinforced by the cultural, religious and ideological bases prevailing in the society. In other words, sex is the province of biology, i.e., fixed and unchangeable in qualities, while gender is the province of social science, i.e., qualities that are conditioned by social situation and interactions. These relations are not necessarily harmonious and non-conflicting, and may take different forms under different circumstances. The concept of gender distinguishes the biological-sexual differences between men and women from the culturally determined differences between them, and the role assigned to or undertaken by them in a society. This means that gender differences between men and women vary across countries and regions as well as over time within countries. The culturally determined roles of men and women are workable and can be changed and influenced through education, government policy, media images and opinion leaders. Women account for 586.47 million (48.5%) and men for 623.72 million (51.5%) as per 2011 census.

The development of the country, therefore, cannot afford to progress without a considerable extent of the betterment of women's socio-economic condition and status. The Indian Constitution safeguards the rights and privileges of this group, which is reflective of the national concern in this regard. 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. Article 15(3) empowers the State to make affirmative discrimination in favour of women and Article 16 provides for equality of opportunities in the matter of public appointments for all citizens. Article 51 A (e) imposes a Fundamental Duty on every citizen to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. To transform this *de jure* equality into a *de facto* one, many policies and programmes have been launched from time to time for the benefit of women such as Suppression of immoral Traffic in Women and Girls (1956), Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act (1986), Commission of Sati Prevention Act (1987), the National Commission for Women Act (1990), which have already been enacted. It is important to change the State policy outcome or the process that produces it. Dalit politics indicates that the acquisition of power to change their condition is being focussed more on change in policy outcome rather than the change in the social structure and process. Participation of weaker sections in administration and other decision-making bodies are important means to bring them into the mainstream of development.

It has been pointed out that the unitary category of women differentiated by class, race or nationality is not intellectually helpful in analysing the socio-political impact of women's groups in this area. One way of dealing with the problem is to divide women's groups between those which conceptualise their chief concerns around 'political' gender interests such as economic survival and those involved in 'strategic' gender interests associated with foremost objectives of equality (Haynes, 1997). To this effect, the Centre and the states, both were directed to adopt a special strategy of 'Women's Component Plan' (WCP) in which not less than 30 per cent of funds flow to women from all the general development sectors. A special provision was suggested to this effect. All women-related sectors viz., health, nutrition, education, labour, rural development, urban development, science and technology; and women and child development have achieved their targets to a considerable extent. During the Ninth Plan, special initiatives were taken for the employment and advancement of women like the launching of 'Swashakti', 'Sree Shakti Puraskar', Gender Budgeting, National Policy for Empowerment of Women, 'Swayamsidha' and 'Swadhar'. These initiatives have helped the women through setting up of self-reliant Self-help Groups and developing linkages with the lending institutions for ensuring women's access to credit facilities; making them aware and building confidence through the process of 'conscientisation' so that they can take their rightful place in the mainstream of the nation's socio-political scene; extending rehabilitation services in difficult situations and eliminating all forms of violence against women and the girl child. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has already reserved one-third of the seats for women in the panchayats. It needs to be kept in view that "Reservation is an ineffective tool for meeting social ends unless accompanied with effective training and inculcation of self-confidence among vulnerable sections of the society" (Baru, 2005).

'ENGENDERING' DEVELOPMENT

The issue of 'gender' has been a late entrant in social studies. The shift in policy approaches towards women, from 'welfare' to 'equity' to 'anti-poverty', as categorised by Buvinic and Greevey (1983), to two other approaches, which have been categorised as 'efficiency' and 'empowerment' has mirrored the general trends in Third World development policies. The equity approach, it has been observed, recognises that women are active participants in the development process. This approach meets strategic gender needs and links development with equity. As such, the approaches aim at a redistribution of power (Ostergaard, 1997). The empowerment approach recognises the triple role of women and views the works of women's organisations and likeminded groups as a key element of change. It champions the use of a 'bottom up' approach to raise women's consciousness so that they can, if need be, challenge their status in society. It works on practical gender needs to build a support base in order to address strategic gender concerns. In order to ensure

maximum women's participation in the various schemes launched by the central and state governments, women must be adequately empowered.

Other effective measures will be to focus on essential obstetric care through early registration of pregnancy and screening of all pregnant women at least thrice during this period in order to: detect risk factors, identify and manage high risk mothers, ensure appropriate management of anaemia and hypertension disorders, and provide for referral care of 'at risk mothers' to ensure safe delivery. This is a part of the UN's Millennium Development Goals, which have been accepted by the Government of India. Health and nutritional status of women are critically linked to each other. The traditional practices are biased with regard to supply of nutritional values between males and females. As a result, nutritional deprivations are seen amongst women and girls. This group faces deficiencies and diseases during the critical stages of infancy, early childhood, adolescence and motherhood, Thus, special efforts need to be made to tackle both micro-and macro-nutrient deficiencies, especially amongst pregnant and lactating women. It may be supported by necessary health service like health checkups, immunisation, and health and nutrition education. Education for Women Hillary Clinton in her speech on 'Status of Women around the World' stated that "As long as discrimination and inequities remain so common place around the world, as long as girls and women are valued less, fed less, fed last, overworked, underpaid, not schooled and subjected to violence in and out of their homes, the potential of human family to create a peaceful, prosperous world will not be realised" (UN 4th World Congress, 1995). This is true of the status of women even in India.

SOCIAL PARTICIPATION AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN

The study of social participation has long been a concern of sociologists. Initially, social participation was seen by some as a dimension of social status, that is, as an indicator of the degree to which individuals had status conferred on them by their peer participation. It has also been seen as a means of self-fulfillment. Another meaning of social participation is connected with voluntary action'. Four types of voluntary associations have been talked about. Voluntary associations have been considered the bulwark of Pluralism in mass societies, catalysts for community integration, agents of political socialisation, and promoters of social change. Participation in voluntary groups has been seen to correlate with socio-economic status, race and ethnicity, self-esteem and other socio-psychological traits. The concept of participation is in many ways a central concern of sociology and other social sciences (See: Joseph, 1970). Social participation means mobilisation of the entire society or community for its own development. It is possible if individuals, local organisations and social institutions fully participate. Ideally, active or true participation means that the people should be aware of their problems. They should be in a position to identify their needs and to a certain extent also try to solve them. Society or people must be involved at the planning level and should prioritise the needs as per available resources. Their involvement in implementation of plans is also pertinent. Social participation is a human act, based on mutual faith built upon the attitudes and beliefs of the people. It is a process in which every individual takes part for the development of his/her own society in his/her capacity. This helps the people to understand their environment better and gives them enough motivation to handle their common issues. They become agents of their own development instead of merely being passive beneficiaries' of the governmental schemes. Social participation can be improved if the government aims to respect the community's indigenous contribution with regard to their knowledge, skills and potential and encourage project initiators to become facilitators and mediators of development and assist in bringing about society/community based initiatives, and challenge practices that hinder people and ideals. It can be helped through promoting co-decision making in identifying needs, setting goals and formulating policies and avoiding selective participatory proactive approach. To inform the people about both the expected success and failure of the schemes and to motivate participants to believe in the spirit of values viz., solidarity, conformity, compassion, respect, human dignity, and collective unity are some very effective ways of social participation

Utilising optimally the potential of the society/community without any exploitation and empowering the society/community to share the fruits of development equitably needs techniques like Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) that promote participation in development and management of programmes. PRA is a label

given to a growing family of participatory approaches and methods that emphasize local knowledge and enable local people to make their own appraisal, analysis and plans. PRA uses group animation and exercises to facilitate information-sharing, analyses and action among the stakeholders. The purpose of PRA is to enable development practitioners, government officials, and local people to work together to plan context-based programmes (World Bank Source Book, 2005).

SOCIAL PARTICIPATION: ISSUES OF GENDER

For creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for the development of women to enable them to realise their full potential, and providing equal access to participation and decision-making in socio-political spheres, health care, education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, occupational health and safety, as well as social security, it is highly imperative to Change the societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women. Building partnerships with civil society, especially women's organisations, corporate and private sectors.

One of the most effective ways of promoting women's control over their environment, and their effective right of political participation, is to promote women's literacy in the country. As per one observation, women who can seek employment outside the home have more resources in protecting their bodily integrity from assaults than within it (Nussbaum, 2001).

Vocationalisation of secondary education in terms of vocational training for women is another important aspect of women's empowerment that needs to be prioritised. The existing network between regional vocational training centres and Women's Industrial Training Institutes and Women's Wings with General Industrial Training Institutes with residential facilities must be extended to all states, districts and blocks. Efforts for the rehabilitation of sex workers, women/girls offered to temples, women/girls in social and moral danger, destitute/young/ elderly widows, single women in difficult circumstances, displaced women and women affected by natural calamities etc., help women in Social Participation. Media is another powerful instrument for bringing about change. It can be used for extending support for programmes on mass awareness, and producing quality information and knowledge material related to women. Empowerment and information go hand in hand. Without information, no development can take firm roots. Media must be used to portray positive images of women that are consistent with human dignity and respect. Media could play a better role in sensitising people on gender issues by preventing derogatory, demeaning and degrading projection of women in the media.

The ongoing process of liberalisation may harm the tribals. To protect them from its adverse effects, their habitat, resource base, and intellectual property rights, especially of medicinal plants, methods of cultivation, traditional knowledge, conservation, collection, utilisation and processing techniques, as well as the skills acquired through the generations need to be taken into cognisance. The globalisation scenario and the changes that have been ushered in as a result may intensify the vulnerability of the weaker sections. The impact of urbanisation, modernisation and industrialisation in India could affect these vulnerable sections adversely, and this has to be kept in view in order to address this problem in the right perspective. It now includes multi-collaborative approach, affirmative action, social security and a barrier-free environment for empowering the disabled, who are appropriately called 'differently abled' as per the contemporary terminology. A multi-pronged strategy is needed to assimilate this group into the mainstream. It includes promotion of people's awareness, officials' sensitisation, involvement of the NGOs and support of the government through various schemes and monetary help. A consistent effort is needed to rehabilitate the group with full support of the community. NGOs can help in a big way in motivating

CONCLUSION

The inclusion of issues pertaining to 'gender', 'environment' and 'human rights' is a recent development in the discipline and field of social sciences especially public administration. The literature in the area has now started taking strong note of issues on 'engendering' administration and protecting the 'rights' of the disadvantaged sections by the administration. The women, weaker sections and environment are certainly very crucial aspects of a development process. Various measures have been taken till now to improve the

situation. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments have had a direct impact on making the women more participative in the issues of rural governance. As a result, women have become more aware, conscious and confident.

However, to bring the women on an equal footing with men, among other measures, there is a need to create an enabling environment through positive economic and social policies, providing them equal access to participation and decision-making in socio-political spheres, health care, education, social security; changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women in policy-making; and building partnerships with civil society, especially women's organisations, corporate and private sectors. The issue of weaker sections needs to be addressed by making the general people aware about their problems. The proper use of media and other social means, conscientisation of the vulnerable groups towards their rights and privileges, and sensitisation of the Concerned officials through specialised training can be of a great help in this direction. The issue of environment is also pertinent. A concern has already been voiced from several quarters over the impact of the economic measures that could adversely affect the state of environment. Fears are that in the opening up of the economy to foreign investment, there could occur a migration of polluting industries and material from the developed to the developing countries. This could get aggravated by certain policy decisions where economic growth rates and foreign exchange earnings receive higher priority over the implementation of the environmental laws. The environment as a vital issue is a national resource too. It is not only an important constituent but also the basis of national development. India lags far behind on this front.

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