

Women Empowerment: A Key to Attain Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Women are the mainstay of any civilization or culture. Without them no civilization can ever be raised. Women were held in high esteem during the Vedic period of Indian civilization. They were encouraged to study scriptures and were initiated into learning as they were regarded as the source of purity and perseverance. However, with the passage of time, the position and status of women gradually got downgraded because of many reasons; thereby adversely affecting the overall wellbeing and development of the society as a whole and women in particular.

In the modern time the idea of women empowerment emerged in the 1980s-90s for a radical action to bestow power on to the women so that they can exercise their rights and ensure equality with men. Although a few women held positions of authority in the recent past or are still in power, yet the position and condition of majority of women remains far from any satisfaction; especially in the developing world. India has launched many schemes for the upliftment of women; however, progress is rather slow as patriarchal mindset is deeply engrained in its culture; more so in Northern India. India thus, have a 'long way to go' to see its women exercising their "fundamental rights and enjoying freedom" at par with men; notwithstanding the facts that these rights have already been guaranteed by the 'Constitution of India'. Unless the country attains 'equality for women' and 'empower' them, it may not be possible to achieve 'social, cultural, economic, political and environmental' security that works as the foundation and forms the basis for achieving an "inclusive and sustainable development".

This paper proceeds to examine the causes for degradation of status and position of women in India and suggest how their empowerment can help the nation to achieve sustainable development. The study is based on the available literature including the grey material of civil society statements and the personal experience of the author.

Key Words: Women empowerment, rights, security, sustainable development.

Introduction

Women are the mainstay of any civilization or culture. Without them no civilization can ever be raised. Women were held in high esteem during the Vedic period of Indian civilization. They were encouraged to study scriptures and were initiated into learning as they were regarded as the source of purity and perseverance (Dr. AS Altekar, 1938). However, with the passage of time, the position and status of women gradually got downgraded because of many reasons; thereby adversely affecting the overall wellbeing and development of the society as a whole and women in particular.

In the modern time the idea of women empowerment emerged in the 1980s-90s for a radical action to bestow power on to the women so that they can exercise their rights and ensure equality with men(Cornwall, 2016). Although a few women held positions of authority in the recent past or are still in power, yet the position and condition of majority of women remains far from any satisfaction; especially in the developing world. This paper proceeds to examine the causes for degradation of status and position women in India and suggest how their empowerment can help the nation to achieve sustainable development. The study is based on the available literature including the grey material of civil society statements and the personal experience of the author.

Research Methodology

This paper proceeds to examine the causes for degradation of status and position of women in India and suggest how their empowerment can help the nation to achieve sustainable development. The methodology used is doctrinal in nature. The study is based on the available literature including the grey material of civil society statements and the personal experience of the author.

Historical Perspective

In India, during the Vedic period, women were encouraged to study scriptures and were initiated into learning as they were regarded as the source of purity and perseverance. They enjoyed equal rights as men and were self-reliant and independent. Vedas describe the women to be mothers, and naturally caring and therefore were expected to look after the house and raise children. They were also expected to assist their husbands in their endeavours. In addition to their domestic role, women were encouraged to seek knowledge through education. Some of the women excelled in the field of education and gained intellectualism and spiritual advancement (to name a few Maitrayi, Gargi, Ghosa, and Vak). Women were also responsible for upliftment of economic standard of their families by undertaking vocational works viz. spinning, weaving, needle work and allied activities. Remarriage of widows was permitted (Refer to the Funeral Hymns in Rig Veda)(by Govind Kumar Saxena et al., 2018).

In other civilizations i.e., Greece, Roman and Palestinian, the condition of women was worse. The women were considered inherently inferior to men. In Greece, they were treated merely like vegetables. The Roman law granted the husbands right over their wife's lives and limbs. In ancient Palestine women were treated as pieces of commodity to be bought and sold(Dr. AS Altekar, 1938). The position that women enjoyed in Hindu society was thus much higher than the aforesaid civilizations. Incidents of brides being sold or forcibly being carried away in marriages although had taken place, but such instances were condemned by the conscience society as unholy and unworthy. The practice of staking wife in gambling had also not died down as illustrated in 'Mahabharat' epic. However, the social conscience had already begun as given in the hymn in Rigveda (X, 34).

Although, boys were preferred over girls at birth during the Vedic period, yet the society educated the boys and girls without any discrimination. Education was regarded as very essential to secure a suitable marriage." It may be of interest to know that some of the hymns of the Rigveda were composed by the poetesses viz. Sikataa, Romasa, Lopamudra, Urvashi and others. Many of them followed the teaching career. Women were well respected and

concerned about and they enjoyed freedom to pursue any activity related to social and political life. The major disability that the women suffered related to the proprietary rights as they were not considered capable of defending their landed property against the hostile elements. Exception being marriage gifts and movable property. Widows were allowed to remarry.(Dr. AS Altekar, 1938)

During the Post-Vedic period, C 1500 to c 500 B. C. the status of women got adversely affected across all spectrums of life mainly due to social factors. With the exception of girls belong to the higher section of society, the practice of educating the girls started to decline. The commoners were to be taught by their close relatives viz father, mother, brothers, uncle etc. at home. As a result, the religious and cultural training was imparted to the rich and cultured families. Consequently, for the common women the right to perform Vedic rituals and sacrifices was curtailed.

As regards marriages, the age of the bride continued to be around 16/17 years and she had some say in the selection of her life partner. Divorce was permitted to the wife. Widows were allowed to remarry. However, women had ceased to attend public gatherings. Overall, the women continued to retain their freedom, respect and dignity. Practices like child marriage and Sati were non-existent.

From 500 B.C. to 500 A.D, the position of women in India continued to be on the downward swing considerably, mainly due to inter marriage between the two races viz. Aryan and Indigenous population. While the Aryan women followed the Vedic culture, the Indigenous women had no knowledge of Sanskrit. Therefore, these women were debarred from taking part in religious activities or rituals. The influential people who had married both Aryan and Indigenous women faced the dilemma of discrimination amongst his two wives. To resolve this issue, it was decided that all women be debarred from Vedic studies and religious duties. Another reason for deterioration in education of women could be attributed to the inability of women to pronounce the hymns correctly; as it was emphasized that the wrongly pronounced hymns could invite disastrous consequences-the fear factor.

Memorizing and narration of Vedic hymns need long period of training which an average woman could ill afford because of her other commitments or occupation in the house hold chorus. Secondly, the age fixed for girl's marriage was 16-17 years. By this time, she could only learn basics of Vedic rituals and sacrifices. To achieve proficiency in the subject, more time was needed which would involve her to remain un-married till the age of 22-24 years. This was not acceptable to the society as it was believed that "a man comes to this world with three-fold debt; the most important of which is debt to the manes, which could be liquidated only by the birth of a son." For this reason, people tended to marry their daughters early as soon as they reached the age of maturity; rather than waiting for another three to four years that may turn out to be problematic in selection of suitable groom for the girl. By about 500 A.D. the marriageable age of the girls was lowered to 12. This action combined with discontinuation of education of the girls can be attributed to be the main cause in lowering the position of women in the country. Early marriage denied girls an opportunity to learn and acquire higher education. Thus, they being young and inexperienced lost their voice in the settlement of their marriages and running of the house hold activities. Child marriage and illiteracy of girls became the general norm thereby losing their respect and status in the

family and society. It is painful to know that the wives were to revere their husbands as God – a moral wreck.

Another development during this period was that the marriages though considered religious sacrament, became irrevocable unions, but only for the women; husbands could discard their wives on a frivolous reason for not being sufficiently submissive. Women, on the other hand, could not take similar step and remarry; nor they could contest it, being illiterate and ignorant of their former status and privileges. Widows were not allowed to remarry, whereas men were allowed to remarry immediately after the death of first wife – a gross injustice. The disastrous step was reintroduction of the ‘Sati’ custom. Initially it was applicable to the warriors, but it soon spread to the other classes of society as it started to gain recognition as a great religious sacrifice. However, this view was vehemently objected to, by the nationalists, that helped in controlling its widespread, although for a short time. The only action of the society during this period that helped to raise the position of women, was in the area of proprietary rights of the widows. During the Vedic period, widows were allowed to remarry. Having taken away this right during this period, it became necessary to provide her the means for sustenance. Allowing her to continue to stay with her husband’s family was fraught with many adverse consequences. Hence it was decided that a portion of her husband’s property be given to her for sustenance for the rest of her life. Thus, the proprietary rights of the women came to be recognized. At the beginning of the Christian era, a school of jurists started advocating that the widow be recognized as an heir to her husband. This idea was vehemently opposed by the vested interest, but it slowly began to be accepted by the society.

During the period 500 A.D. to 1800 A.D., the position of women further improved as regards proprietary rights were concerned, otherwise her status continued to be on the downswing. Right of the widow to inherit share of husband’s property came to be recognized all over India by 1200 A.D. Scope of ‘Stridhana’ was further extended by the ‘Mitakshra’ school by including in it the property acquired by inheritance and partition. With the invasions by Muslims and Mughals in the eighth and eleventh centuries, the social, political, educational, economic and cultural lives of women in general and Hindu women in specific, got adversely affected. During the Mughal era i.e., till mid eighteenth century, besides the practice of child marriage and Sati; practices like ‘Purda’ system, polygamy, female feticide etc. were enforced. The country faced a pathetic and a humiliating situation. Although, the spiritual guides viz. Guru Nanak and Saint Kabir, and reformists viz. Chaitanya, Ram Das and many others preached equality for women; the progress was more on the religious freedom than on other aspects of women’s rights. Social freedom was restricted to marginal extent. Age for the marriage of girls was further lowered to 8/9 years. However, the ‘Kshatriyas’ maintained it at 14/15, but Sati custom became very common amongst them. Many ‘Kshatriyas’ women were offered jobs in Govt. offices for administrative duties and military exercises. This helped postponing their marriage to an advance age. Girls in the normal families grew in ignorance as no formal education was imparted to them. - their marriageable age being fixed at 10/11. Denial of education, child marriage, prohibition on widow remarriage, reintroduction of Sati custom etc. resulted into degradation of women’s status in the society and were being equated to ‘Sudras’ by a handful Pandits who were under the influence of theological theories. For the common public, however, women were symbol of purity, religiousness and spirituality. By the beginning of 19th Century about 99 percent women were illiterate in India.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the Britishers entered India and ruled till 14 Aug 1947. During their rule they banned many customs considered to be social evils viz. Sati, Child marriage etc. Remarriage of widows was encouraged and considered to be legitimate. The Britishers also declared 'female infanticide' to be treated as murder. Age of consent for marriage for girls was raised to 12 in 1891. Although, these 'Laws and Bills' were passed by the British Govt. their actual implementation was encouraged by reformists viz. Raja Rammohan Roy, Arya Samaj movement, Ishwar Vidyasagar, B. R. Ambedkar, and many others. Besides, legislations were also enacted to bring in reforms in the fields of marriage, adoption and inheritance. Following were enacted: -

- (a) Hindu Law of Inheritance 1929
- (b) Hindu Women's Right to Property Act 1937
- (c) Hindu Marriage Act

Women also contributed extensively to the Freedom movement. The oppressive economic and political policies adopted by the Britishers, helped Indian women (irrespective of cast and creed) to unite and stand up against inequality.

Analysis Pre-Independence Era

Study of 'Historic Perspective' clearly indicates that the principle of equality was the norm prevailing during the Vedic period. However, with the passage of time wherein the country faced difficult situations such as indigenous integration, foreign invasions, insecurity for girl child and women etc.; there was gradual degradation in the status and position of women. Consequently, men became the producers and family head, relegating women to household activities and raising children, thus, looking at them as recipient of aid and welfare- thereby marginalising and depriving them of their useful contributions in the development of society or the nation.

Post-Independence Period

On attaining independence in 1947, Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, India's first prime minister, after the swearing in ceremony, called upon the nation for "ending poverty, ignorance, disease and inequality in opportunities". Similarly, Mahatma Gandhi had stated "India will become independent in true sense only, when country's poorest do not suffer on account of poverty". To achieve these goals, India launched 'Five Year Plans' to promote development and eradicate poverty. Under these plans, progress in agriculture, industry and more recently in "income poverty reduction" has been made. However, the records appear to be mixed and open to debate.(United Nations Development Programme., 1997)

Evolving Concept of Women Empowerment

The term 'empowerment' was first coined by a Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire (1921-1997). The term was not gender specific. "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (1970) was developed by him so that the poor could be empowered, and contradictions between the "oppressors" and the "oppressed" are resolved. He emphasised the need to instil educational awakening so that the "oppressed" could liberate themselves from the shackles of oppressors.(Valoura, 1997). The concept of "empowerment of women" originated in 1985 at the 'Third World Conference on Women' held under the aegis of United Nations at Nairobi, during which empowerment was described as a "redistribution of social and economic powers and control

of resources in favour of women”.¹ According to the Oxford dictionary empower means “to give the subjects more control over their lives or the situation they are in.”² This broad narration of empower has been further analysed by various Socialists. Srilatha Batliwala defines power as having “two central aspects- control over resources (physical, human, intellectual, financial, and the self), and control over ideology (beliefs, values and attitudes). If power means control, then empowerment therefore is the process of gaining control” (Batliwala, 2007). Gita Sen however argues: “Empowerment is, first and foremost, about power; changing power relations in favour of those who previously exercised little power over their own lives.” She believes that ‘empowerment of women’ in India can take place if following essentials are achieved:

1. Government must enact Strong and clear policies taking into account women’s and girls’ situation.
2. Effective implementation of those policies.
3. Nobody else empowers women – Women empower themselves. (Prof. Amartya Sen, 1997)

Feminist scholars assert that one cannot bestow empowerment on others by design, but it calls for “recognizing inequalities in power, asserting the right to have rights and acting to press for and bring about structural change in favour of greater equality.”(Cornwall, 2016) The crux of ‘power and control’ theme related to this concept focuses “not on individual self-assertion, but on the structural basis of gender inequalities. With it comes a focus on collective action— ‘power with’—and the development of ‘power within’ and ‘power to’”(Rowlands, 1997). The idea being to highlight the complex reciprocal relationship between women’s ‘self-understanding’(Rowlands, 1997) and ‘capacity for self-expression’, and women’s access to and control over material resources.”(Sen, 2019)

The World Bank’s statement on women’s empowerment focuses mostly on assets and the creation of opportunities to get access to financial services.

“Equal access to financial services, helping women build assets and professionalizing the care-giving sector can help accelerate progress in women’s economic empowerment”(Annual Report: The World Bank, 2017)

World Vision Organization defines ‘Women’s empowerment’ as “promoting women’s sense of self-worth, their ability to determine their own choices, and their right to influence social change for themselves and others.”(Malhotra & Schuler, 2002)

The above-mentioned definitions although are not absolute, yet these convey the essential components that will form the basis on which the ‘concept of women empowerment’ can be developed. Empowerment of women is multi-dimensional view point that needs to be discussed rationally by dynamic participation of intellectuals and statesmen. The aim should be to allow the women to express themselves freely and frankly without any inhibitions in

¹ World Conference on Women: UN Women, 1985, Available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/intergovernmental-support/world-conferences-on-women>

² Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English, Eighth edition, Oxford University Press, 498 (2010).

various forums, be at home, community, locality, society, or at the state, national and international levels. It should besides physical (nourishment, sanitation, sustenance, wellbeing etc.) factor, lay emphasis on the following points: -

- (a) Social, cultural, economic and political freedom.
- (b) Access to education and maternal health.
- (c) Economic empowerment.
- (d) Access to better jobs; ownership rights of assets i.e., land, housing etc.
- (e) Access to technology, finance, and insurance services.
- (f) Gender equality.

For implementation of these aspects, it would be necessary to formulate appropriate policies, enact laws, and create institutions to support and help women. However, for the change to be transformative, the basic issues responsible to cause poverty and generate gender inequality would need to be identified and addressed with maturity and sincerity. For a true transformation to occur, there needs to be a shift in consciousness that focuses on “transforming limiting normative beliefs and expectations that keep women locked into situations of subordination and dependency”. Women must learn to analyse themselves as women, citizens, mothers, daughters, sisters, and human beings. Transformative changes therefore, must come from within to achieve true empowerment which in turn will accelerate development.

In the ‘World Conference on Women’ held in Beijing in 1995, it was emphasised to achieve ‘gender equality’ in the 12 critical areas of immediate importance. The Declaration was adopted by 189 countries unanimously. The Declaration also spelled out the strategic objectives to be achieved with a view to attain gender equality. These are: “(a) Women and poverty, (b) Education and training of women, (c) Women and health, (d) Violence against women, (e) Women and armed conflict, (f) Women and the economy, (g) Women in power and decision-making, (h) Institutional mechanism for the advancement of women, (i) Human rights of women, (j) Women and the media, (k) Women and the environment, (l) The girl-child. It is aimed at securing equality of women with men in law and in practice.”(World Conferences on Women, 2021)

The Declaration basically calls for action by the world community to realise the value of women’s human rights and afford them opportunities to gain empowerment in economic, political and cultural fields. Casting in the ‘12 critical areas’ mentioned above, it implies eradicating poverty, enabling women to gain education, reproductive health and rights, employment to gain economic resources, political participation, immunity against domestic violence and media related issues.

Status of Women in India

The position and status enjoyed by women during the Vedic period, was equal to men. But it took a downward swing during the medieval period. Later, many reformers undertook campaigns to uplift their privileges, position and status. In 1848 A.D "Savitribai Phule" became the first woman educator. In the recent times, influential women have held top posts in the country to name a few: prime minister, president, speaker of Lok Sabha, members of

parliament, CEOs of banks and corporate sector, teaching, academics, media, business etc. Notwithstanding this, the commoners especially in rural area still continue to face discrimination and violence. Of late, women in India are gaining courage to be vocal and many of them are coming forward to tell their stories of woes, hardships and mal-treatment.³

Current Statistics

According to the National Statistical Office (NSO) survey of 23 Nov 2019, the female population of India is 48.4% against the male population of 51.6%. “The literacy rate of the adult male population is 80.95% whereas that of the female population is 62.84%. The literacy rate among those in the age group of seven years and above was recorded at 77.7 per cent during July 2017-June 2018 in the country. This rate was 73.5 per cent in rural and 87.7 percent in urban areas. Among females, 41.2 percent were currently attending, while 16.6 per cent never enrolled. Among males, 11 per cent never enrolled, while 46.2 per cent were currently attending. Among male students, nearly 95.5 per cent were pursuing general courses and 4.5 per cent were pursuing technical or professional courses. Among female students, nearly 96.9 per cent were pursuing general courses and 3.1 per cent were pursuing technical/professional courses.”⁴

These statistics indicate that women in India are on the threshold of growth, their attitude taking a positive turn towards self-development which in turn will enable them to play a big role in furtherance of societal and national development. However, the obverse is dreadful as violence against women has been on the rise during the Covid 19 lockdown period. According to “the National Commission for Women (NCW), it received 23,722 complaints of crimes committed against women in 2020, the highest in the last six years. Of the 23,722 complaints, 7,708 complaints were received under the right to live with dignity clause. This clause takes into account the emotional abuse of women. NCW Chairperson Rekha Sharma attributed these crimes to the economic insecurity, increased stress levels, anxiety, financial worry, and lack of other such emotional support from parents/family’s side”. She further highlights that “The machinery under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act had not been identified as an essential service during the lockdown period. Hence, protection officers and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) were not able to visit households of victims and police officers being at the frontline to tackle Covid-19, were overstretched to help victims effectively.”(Government of India, 2018)

The report further states that “After the right to live with dignity and without domestic violence, the third highest number of complaints have been of harassment of married women or dowry harassment at 3,784 followed by that of molestation at 1,679. According to the data, 1,276 complaints of police apathy towards women and 704 complaints of cybercrime were received by the commission. As many as 1,234 complaints of rape and attempt to rape were received while 376 complaints of sexual harassment were received by the commission in 2020”.

³ Stories available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/india-metoo-women-rights/a-56785203>.

⁴ 77.7% literacy rate among those above 7 years of age during July 2017 to June 2018: NSO Survey, Nov 23, 2019, Available at: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/indicators/77-7-literacy-rate-among-those-above-7-yrs-of-age-during-july-2017-to-june-2018-nso-survey/articleshow>.

Legal Support for Women Empowerment

‘The Constitution of India’ guarantees all persons,

- (a) Article,14 - Equality and Equal Protection,
- (b) Article 15(1) - No discrimination to be done against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex.
- (c) Article 15(3) - State can make any special provision for women and children.
- (d) Article 16 - Equality of Opportunity in matters of public employment and prevents the State from any sort of discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any of them.
- (e) Article 23 - It explicitly prohibits and criminalises human trafficking and forced labour.
- (f) Article 39(D) -Equal pay for equal work for both men and women
- (g) Article 39 (f) – bringing up children in a healthy manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity and that childhood and youth are protected against exploitation, moral and material abandonment
- (h) Article 42 - Provision for just and humane conditions of work and maternity.
- (i) Maternity Benefit Act of 1961.

In 2001, The Govt. with the specific objective to ‘eliminate discrimination against women’ in all forms, launched a national policy for empowering the women, by strengthening the legal system. In 2013, following the Nirbhaya rape case ‘The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013’ was enacted to deal with offences related to “Sexual Harassment”, “Acid Attack” (Secs 326A and 326B), “Voyeurism” and “Stalking”. Further Sec. 370 (IPC) dealing with trafficking of minors, has been reinforced by including sub section (A) covering both exploited minors as well as majors. Exploitation of minors will attract punishment from five to seven years and fine; while exploiters of majors would get three to five years and fine. Other laws on protection of women in vogue are: -

- (a) Sati was abolished in December 1829.
- (b) The Hindu law of Inheritance (Amendment) Act, 1929
- (c) The Hindu Women's Rights to Property Act, 1937
- (d) The Special Marriage Act, 1954- allows civil marriage for people of India and all Indian nationals in foreign countries, irrespective of religion or faith followed by either party.
- (e) Hindu marriage Act 1955 - allows Hindus in any form irrespective of caste or creed or amongst any person who is bound under this Act. Under this law, marriage is considered lawful only if the groom has attained the age of 21 years and bride the age of 18 years at the time of marriage.
- (f) Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act 2005 – deals with women’s right to parental property.
- (g) Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act of 1956 – enunciates legal process of adoption by a Hindu adult, and "maintenance" related issues to various family members.
- (h) The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act 1956 – amended twice in 1978 and 1986. It has made the act more gender-neutral. The Act aims to stop immoral trafficking and prostitution in India.

- (i) Dowry Prohibition Act 1961- abolishes giving or taking of dowry.
- (j) The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act 1971, legalises termination of pregnancy if necessitated due to physical (including domestic violence) or mental ill-health.
- (l) The Family Courts Act, 1984- permits convening of Family Courts in order to (i) promote conciliation (ii) secure speedy settlement of disputes; related to marriage, family affairs and for matters connected therewith.
- (m) Indecent depiction of Women (Prohibition) Act 1986- prohibits the vulgar presentation of women, in that “no one will produce, sell, let to hire, distribute, circulate or send by post any book, pamphlet, paper, slide, film, writing, drawing, painting, photograph, representation or figure which contains indecent representation of women in any form.”
- (n) Recently the Government of India has taken a decision to raise the legal age of marriage of Girls from 18 years to 21 years. If this idea is translated into law, it would help to protect and empower the women.

All these laws enacted for women are either protectionist and patriarchal oriented, or else the women are not able to exercise their legal rights in meaningful ways. Educating the women specially belonging to the rural/ backward areas can help in instilling confidence amongst the female population to know about their legal rights and exercise them for the benefit of the family/community or society as a whole.

Financial Empowerment

World Bank has emphasized the importance of giving women equal opportunities to participate in financial services, help them ‘create assets’ and professionalize the ‘care-giving sector’ so that their empowerment in economic sector can be achieved at a faster pace (Annual Report: The World Bank, 2017). In the developing world, women facing discrimination and/or living under the shadow of patriarchy find themselves at a disadvantage to lift themselves out of poverty. Such women therefore, are compelled to work in low wage jobs and are denied access to quality jobs appropriate to their qualifications and standards.

Women need to be empowered so that they can build better means of livelihoods, earn more income, create businesses which in turn will generate more jobs and boost local economies. With this improved financial security, other aspects of women’s lives shall also improve. They can contribute towards personal and family healthcare, children upbringing, their education, and above all lead a purposeful and dignified life; thus, raising the overall living standard of the family, community and the society and not the least ‘gender equality’. By entering into the markets and exercising control over resources, women will gain control on not only their lives, time and bodies, but shall also contribute in the decision-making process at all levels starting from domestic to international level.(Kabeer, n.d.)

UN Member States in 2015, “adopted 17 Goals, as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in order to improve the lives and prospects of everyone”, everywhere on the planet earth. A period of 15 years has been set to achieve these goals.(Kabeer, n.d.) Empowered women’s active participation in the economy would close the gender gap and

help to achieve the laid-out agenda⁵. It will also help to end “poverty (Goal 1), food security (Goal 2), ensuring health (Goal 3), achieve gender equality (Goal 5), promote full and productive employment and decent work (Goal 8), and reducing inequality (Goal 10)”. By achieving ‘greater gender equality’, countries will be able to increase their economic productivity and ensure better cohesiveness in the functioning of various economic institutions, thereby setting a stage for the future generations to be launched on the path to progress (Sen, 2019).

Defining poverty the World Bank states, “Poverty is pronounced deprivation in well-being and comprises many dimensions. It includes low incomes and the inability to acquire the basic goods and services necessary for survival with dignity. Poverty also encompasses low levels of health and education, poor access to clean water and sanitation, inadequate physical security, lack of voice, and insufficient capacity and opportunity to better one’s life”.

In India, poverty alleviation programmes were launched in the form ‘Five Year Plans’ starting from 1951. A total of eleven ‘Five Year Plans’ were executed ending in 2012. The results of these plans remain questionable as far as poverty alleviation is concerned. Presently the following plans designed to uplift the living standard of the poor people are operative: -

- (a) National Urban Livelihood Mission (2013)
- (b) Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana 2014
- (c) Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana 2015
- (d) Saansad Aadarsh Gram Yojana (SAGY) 2014
- (e) Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana 2015
- (f) Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana 2015
- (g) National Maternity Benefit Scheme 2016
- (h) Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) 2016
- (i) Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) 2016
- (j) Solar Charkha Mission 2018
- (k) National Nutrition Mission (NNM), Poshan Abhiyan 2018
- (l) Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-Dhan (PM-SYM) 2019
- (m) Prime Minister Street Vendor’s Atma Nirbhar Nidhi – PM SVanidhi 2020

Besides the aforesaid plans, the Govt. has been providing free rations to 800 Crore poor people of the country during the pandemic period of Covid 19.

⁵ UN Secretary General’s High-Level Panel on Women’s Economic Empowerment, Leave No One Behind: A Call to Action for Gender Equality and Women’s Economic Empowerment. Available at: <https://www.empowerwomen.org/media/files/un%20women/empowerwomen/resources/hlp%20briefs/unhlp%20full%20report.pdf?la=en>

Planning Commission of India defining how the level of poverty can be estimated states: “the level of poverty in a country can be estimated based on the consumer expenditure surveys that are conducted by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) under the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation”.⁶

However, ‘Pew Research Centre’, based on the World Bank data, has estimated that “the number of poor in India (with income of \$2 per day or less in purchasing power parity) has more than doubled to 134 million from 60 million in just a year due to the pandemic-induced recession”.

Role of Education

Education helps a person to develop his/her mental faculties which empower him /her with reasoning abilities, that is essential to build capacity to question. Women thus, if educated will be able to reason out and reform their lives, gain access to education, information and knowledge, and be able to compete against men. It will further help them to attain economic empowerment, ability to analyse the surrounding environment, gain self-confidence, and be able to raise their voice in society and public.

Further, education, vocational training and re-skilling the women in ‘life courses’ with a view to keep pace with the changing technologies that affect jobs, are critical to their development, health and wellbeing, and growth. Increased employment for women offers leadership opportunities for women, that would help to show increased effectiveness and growth to the companies/institutions as well. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP India) also runs projects to provide training and skills in various vocational fields in order to make young women proficient in the chosen field, and be able to meet the challenges in the future.⁷

In India, under the Right to Education Act (RTE) 2009 and Article 21 of the Constitution, children in the age group 6 - 14 have fundamental right to be educated. Schemes viz. ‘Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan’ was launched to overcome major barriers like “access and inclusion.” Consequently, there was increase in admissions both at primary and upper primary levels. Schemes viz. ‘Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan’ and ‘National Scheme of Incentives to Girls for Secondary Education’, provides scholarships, subsidies and incentives to the girl students for secondary education. Scheme ‘Beti Bachao Beti Padhao’ launched in 2014, is designed to give further impetus to the education for girls. However, it is noticed with concern that participation at the ‘secondary and higher secondary’ levels is not at the desired level of satisfaction. Reasons for this can be attributed to the regional and social group disparities.

As regards the minorities in India, they have been exempted from the RTE 2009 under Article 15 (5) plus additional power of state under Article 21A of the Constitution of India. National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR)’ in a recent survey report states “the largest number of out-of-school children – at 1.1 crore – belonged to the Muslim

⁶ Poverty Alleviation- Programmes and Policies <https://byjus.com/free-ias-prep/policies-and-programmes-towards-poverty-alleviation/>.

⁷ UNDP, India.

community and 74 per cent of students studying in Christian missionary schools do not belong to the minority community”.⁸

Further, many schools have registered themselves as minority institutions, simply because they don't have to implement RTE Act 2009. A report by NCPCR states that only 8.76 per cent of a total 4,81,91,351 children from minority communities, aged between 5 and 15, attend schools.⁹

This raises a basic question - “Can Article 30 of The Constitution, that bestows upon the minorities, the right to open their own institutions for cultural, linguistic and religious protection, override Article 21(A) of The Constitution, that protects a child's fundamental right to education?” Obviously, it cannot. It should therefore, be logical to bring all such institutions under the umbrella of RTE Act 2009. Such an action will go a long way to impart education to the minorities as well thereby, bringing them into the main stream.

The report further states that: -

“The minority schools, in particular madarasas, have become “ghettos of underprivileged students languishing in backwardness”. The Commission has said that students in madarasas which do not offer a secular course along with religious studies – such as the sciences – have fallen behind and feel a sense of alienation and “inferiority” when they leave school.”

A word about the skill development courses, these courses face many challenges. Considered with the formal education system which is not designed to impart skill development, the youth cannot enter the workforce, thereby, placing them at a position of disadvantage. They thus, become a vulnerable section of the society which is then open to exploitation. The girls/women of this vulnerable section further lack social and community support that becomes a barrier in their economic upliftment.

Another report by NCPCR (2018) reveals that about “39. 4 percent of the adolescent girls in the age group of 15 to 18 years are not attending any educational institution as against the boys whose percentage is about 35 percent. 57% girls drop-out upon reaching the 11th grade”. Main reason cited for this situation is the distance to school. The report further states, “For every hundred elementary schools (classes I to VIII) in rural India, there were only fourteen offering secondary (classes IX-X) and only six offering higher secondary grades (classes XI-XII)”.

Gender Equality

United Nations Millennium Declaration among other aspects, declares: “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for the equal rights of all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion and international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural or humanitarian character” with a view to establish a ‘just and lasting peace’ in the world.

⁸ The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) report on assessing minority schools in the country available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/minority-schools-ncpcr-rte-7449456/>.

⁹ Minority Institutions and RTE: NCPCR Survey, Aug 2021, Available at <https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/minority-institutions-and-rte-ncpcr-survey>.

It identified “six guiding values i.e., freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility”. By promoting gender equality and empowering the women, one can ‘eradicate poverty & hunger, and fight against disease’ which in turn, would act as a precursor to development and help in maintaining its sustainability. Nation therefore, should institute suitable legislative and legal actions to create a healthy environment of equality and competitiveness.

In India, biased perspective i.e., patriarchy has not been rooted out as yet and it forms a major stumbling block in the path of achieving equality. Majority of the population prefers a male child over a girl child at birth – hence female infanticide. Dowry system, which makes daughters “an unaffordable economic burden”, is another reason for female infanticide. A study conducted by the “Central Statistics Office under the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India- Children in India 2012- A Statistical Appraisal,” reveals that “nearly three million girls were ‘missing’ in 2011 compared to 2001 due to female infanticide”. According to the report, “female child population in the age group of 0-6 years was 78.83 million in 2001 which declined to 75.84 million in 2011. During the period, 1991-2011, the child sex ratio (0-6 years) declined from 945 to 914, whereas the overall sex ratio showed an improvement from 927 to 940”. Thus, the ‘burden of traditions, culture, customs, and honour’ rests on the ‘shoulders of women’ and the male folk dominates. This is visible even in some of the literate or educated families and the political fraternity. The case in point is- resistance being offered by some political parties in passing of “Women Reservation Bill” in the ‘Lok Sabha’.

In an effort to bring in equality in the country, the Govt. of India introduced “Women's Reservation Bill” in the Lok Sabha on September 12, 1996. The Bill calls for granting reservation to women (33 per cent of seats) in both ‘Lok Sabha’ and ‘state legislative’ assemblies. However, some vested interests have shown resistance to the Bill and it waits for their political conscience to awaken up. Notwithstanding this position, ‘73 and 74 Constitutional amendments were passed by Lok Sabha’ enabling local bodies to reserve 1/3 of the seats for women through the Panchayat Raj system. This would help the women to raise their voice in decision making at local levels and their effective participation in political affairs would help in achieving parity with men.

Recently on 18 Aug 21, The Supreme Court of India has passed an interim judgement allowing women to appear in National Defence Academy (NDA) exam to ensure gender equality. Based on this ruling the Govt. of India has agreed to allow women to appear for NDA exams for entry into Armed Forces. Besides, girls will also be eligible for admission to all male schools viz. Rastriya Indian Military College (RIMC), Sanik schools etc., the main feeder institutions to groom students for entry to NDA and Defence Forces.

Land Rights of Women is another important issue that needs to be resolved at priority. In India, women’s participation in agricultural activities is substantial. According to the International Humanitarian Group ‘OXFAM’ - “nearly 75% of the full-time workers on Indian farms are women, who produce 60% to 80% of the country's food”. Yet they are

denied equal share in landed property thereby lowering socio-economic status vis-à-vis men.¹⁰

Although the Constitution of India does not discriminate any person on the basis of gender for his/her fundamental rights, yet, discrimination exists in “ceiling and inheritance” provisions. Their origin lies in Ninth Schedule and it impinges directly upon women's legal and economic status. These discrepancies exist in land reform and inheritance laws.

In the Northern States i.e., J & K, Himachal, Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh (UP), inheritance of land follows ‘male lineal descendants’ pattern. ‘Widows and daughters’ become eligible to inherit only in the absence of male legal descendant (s). In U P Sec. 171 of the ‘Zamindari Abolition Act’ debar female child/ children from inheritance of agricultural land. Basically, in most of the Northern states’ ‘gender’ bias exists. On the other hand, most of the Southern States viz. Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, and Karnataka have reviewed and incorporated amendments in the ‘Hindu Succession Act, 1956’ with a view to resolve issues related to women’s right to property that includes land. However, some anomalies still exist as only daughters are treated as coparceners. Other female heirs are excluded. India therefore, needs to amend laws related to ‘Inheritance of Agricultural Land’ in order to ensure gender equality.

Conclusion

In Indian history, Vedic period was the golden period for the women. Thereafter, the women suffered and became increasingly dependable when handling any extraordinary situation. The gender discrimination that existed for such a very long time has thus, impacted women’s behaviour and outlook, and has made them submissive. Women therefore, ought to have rights and capacity to withstand and ward off difficulties coming in their way of life.

Women in rural India, although, are not so well educated and are dependent on their husbands to support them financially; and despite the fact that they are subjected to physical and mental torture, yet, they demand equal status in the family, apart from basic amenities and freedom. They still continue to fight patriarchy and gender inequality. To get rid of this menace, there is a need to offer them opportunities at par with men in the job market with a view to make them financially independent.

Social vindictiveness is another issue that can’t be extinguished without exacting laws and their effective implementation. A focused approach that could have impact in empowering the women would revolve around financial independence, entrepreneurship, dignified work and inclusive values including moral values. The tendency to minimize the women in various fields i.e., social, financial, political and domestic fields must be curbed ruthlessly. (Chapter I RESOLUTIONS ADOPTED BY THE CONFERENCE Resolution 1 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, n.d.)

India has launched many schemes for the upliftment of women; however, progress is rather slow as patriarchal mindset is deeply engrained in its culture; more so in Northern India. India thus, have a ‘long way to go’ to see its women exercising their “fundamental rights and enjoying freedom” at par with men; notwithstanding the facts that these rights have already

¹⁰ Krishna Rao, E. (2012) “Role Of Women In Agriculture: A Micro Level Study”, *Journal of Global Economy*, 2(2), pp. 109–120. doi: 10.1956/jge.v2i2.207.

been guaranteed by the ‘Constitution of India’(Nazneen et al., 2019). Unless the country attains ‘equality for women’ and ‘empower’ them, it may not be possible to achieve ‘social, cultural, economic, political and environmental’ security that works as the foundation and forms the basis for achieving an “inclusive and sustainable development”(Htun & Weldon, 2010).

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